

MEETING: 09/12/2024

REF: 25059

ASSESSMENT CATEGORY: Bridging Divides - Anchor Programme

Disability Law Service	Adv: Nat Jordan
Amount requested: £750,000	Base: Lambeth
{Revised amount requested: £995,430}	Benefit: London-wide
Amount recommended: £995,400	

Purpose of grant request: Disability Law Service will use core funding to add organisational capacity to expand its second-tier activities and drive broader systems change.

The Applicant

Founded in 1975, Disability Law Service (DLS, registered charity no. 280805) is a disabled-led charity. Its vision is to work towards an equitable and accessible society where the rights of Disabled people, their carers and families are upheld, and discrimination is eliminated. It engages in both frontline and second-tier work, all informed by first-hand lived experience. Through providing legal advice (including on employment, community care, housing and welfare benefits), training, mentoring, and policy work. It aims to increase access to legal services for Disabled people, educate and empower Disabled people to understand and exercise their legal rights, place those with lived experience at the forefront of shaping policy and practice, and build capacity in the Disabled people's sector to advocate for systemic changes to improve the lives of disabled people. As a Deaf & Disabled People's Organisation (DDPO), at least 75% of its Trustees and 50% of its staff are Deaf or Disabled people. DLS adheres to the social model of disability.

Background and detail of proposal

DLS envisions a fair and accessible legal system where Disabled individuals have seamless access to support, know their rights, and can navigate legal processes with minimal assistance. This future system will be proactive rather than reactive, addressing issues before they escalate. DLS aims to see integrated support, where legal services, public institutions, and community care organisations work together to address the root causes of inequality and prevent injustices. In this future, local authorities, housing providers, and employers uphold disability rights and collaborate to empower Disabled people. DLS intends to build a network of empowered Disabled individuals and advocacy groups that work collectively to influence policy from the ground up, ensuring systemic change is driven by those it directly affects, where Disabled people are not just recipients of support but active participants in shaping the policies and services that impact their lives.

In this request, DLS seek core costs which would cover the salaries of a three days per week Partnerships and Systems Change Manager, and a two days per week solicitor who will deliver training. Currently, nearly all of its second-tier work is not directly funded. If approved, this funding would provide dedicated core staff capacity to oversee its capacity building provision and coordinate cross-sector collaboration.

Through providing training designed to help other organisations understand the law, DLS equips the wider sector to address systemic issues through addressing gaps in expert knowledge in navigating key areas of law in the legal system and asserting

rights and entitlements. It equips organisations to advocate for policy changes and provide high quality services, while improving their understanding of intersecting aspects of disability law and how to apply this to their policy and research work. Despite the challenges in the sector and operationally, DLS annually provides bespoke training to over 30 civil society organisations in disability law and the Equality Act 2010. The benefit to those organisations has been that they are more empowered to support clients and, with a rights-based understanding, inform campaigns and advocate for systemic change.

DLS faces high demand for training and support but as a provider of both frontline and second-tier support, the same staff have until now handled both. Increasing demand for advice risks diverting resources away from its second-tier activities. Funding for the trainer/solicitor role will be used, therefore, to provide training to other DDPOs directly or, when appropriate, provide backfill to other solicitors providing direct legal advice to enable them to dedicate more time to provide training in their particular areas of expertise, with a net result of a more sustainable and comprehensive training offer.

The Partnerships and Systems Change Manager will coordinate training ensuring a minimum level of training hours is maintained, whilst keeping an overview of changing legislation, as frequent changes in disability law require continuous updates to training materials and legal resources, and developing bespoke resources for a variety of organisations requires time and expertise. Further, this role will enable more effective communication and collaboration across the sector to identify and coordinate joint policy initiatives. Without a dedicated role working to these priorities previously, navigating different organisational priorities and timelines has been complex. This role will also be responsible for the improvements to measuring the impact of training, follow-up support and mentoring.

Notably, DLS has, in collaboration with other organisations, achieved policy successes which demonstrate its effectiveness at connecting its frontline support, second-tier work, and influence of power holders and wider systems. For example, its Autism PLUS report highlighted unlawful restrictions on the rights of disabled children with autism to social care needs assessments, originally identified through the frontline work of its Community Care team. Further research with other collaborating organisations to understand the extent of the issue informed the report, which directly resulted in 31 local authorities changing their policies. Other examples include the introduction of private member's bills in Parliament about the impact of Coronavirus Act easements affecting Disabled people, driving change through Judicial Reviews and high-profile victories in the European Court of Human Rights.

DLS is based in London. Although it has a national reach, the roles under consideration have a specific London remit, working specifically with London-based DDPOs.

London's Disability sector

Disabled people's access to justice includes barriers in Community Care (e.g. reduced services, eligibility barriers), housing (e.g. shortages of accessible housing which limits Disabled people's ability to live independently), employment (e.g.

workplace discrimination, un- and under-employment due to systemic barriers in the job market), welfare benefits (e.g. complex application processes, frequent reassessments and inadequate benefits), discrimination, and public law (e.g. inequality in access to justice and the complexity and cost of engaging in legal processes).

DLS is a DDPO, an organisation run or controlled by Disabled people which has an explicit commitment to the social model of disability and promoting and advancing the human rights of disabled people. It is part of a network of other such organisations who benefit from the expertise of lived experience and can share knowledge and peer support to build resilience, skills, participation and community capacity, and have greater reach to disabled people who are otherwise unable to access mainstream services. DDPOs have a proven track record in creating social change and providing empowering support services to Disabled People. DLS specifically has a demonstrable success in partnering with other key DDPOs and key relationships regionally and nationally that they can leverage to promote wider influence.

Despite this, the broader context within which they operate has worsened conditions for the lives of Deaf and Disabled People. The financial crash, followed by over a decade of austerity, has eroded many of the gains of the Disabled People's movements. Statutory relationships with local authorities have become increasingly transactional and even hostile; funding is short term and project-based resulting in repeat and difficult to manage applications. Providing adequate support for staff and trustees with impairments to access work is increasingly difficult, never mind providing the continuous professional development to retain skills in the sector. DDPOs can also be isolated from one another: whilst there is need to work together as part of a wider rights movement, they require the resource to do so. These issues are parallel to those in the broader advice sector, including those around recruitment, retention, and skills development, and the significant reduction of legal aid since 2012, as well as other sources of funding.

DLS's role as an infrastructure organisation operating in both these arenas (advice and the Disabled people's sector) gives it a unique vantage point to collate evidence and work cross-sector to enforce the rights and entitlements of its communities and effect change.

Financial Information

Year end as at 31 March	2023 Signed Accounts £	2024 Draft £	2025 Budget £
Income & expenditure:			
Income	849,602	816,550	934,566
Expenditure	(716,166)	(836,246)	(892,748)
Surplus/(deficit)	133,436	(19,696)	41,818
Reserves:			
Total restricted	10,019	61,751	100,822
Total unrestricted	383,497	312,069	314,817
Total reserves	393,516	373,820	415,639
Of which: free unrestricted	221,538	150,110	152,858
Reserves policy target	238,722	278,749	297,583
Free reserves over/(under) target	(17,184)	(128,639)	(144,725)

DLS's financial performance has been relatively stable across a number of years, with income and expenditure steadily increasing. However, a deficit in 2024 has had an impact on its liquid reserves level held, resulting in an increased gap relative to its target of holding four months' equivalent of budgeted expenditure. It is forecasting a small increase to its total free reserves in 2025, with 95% of income confirmed, but remains short of its reserves target, forecasting to hold roughly the equivalent of two months' total expenditure in 2025. Income realised for 2025 is likely to be higher than in the forecast shared as other, as yet unsecured, opportunities for income in the current financial year are being explored. It has a renewed fundraising strategy and investment in additional specialist fundraising support, which is aimed at building its reserves levels over the next few years. This will be through an increase in applying for unrestricted and core funding and individual fundraisers in the shorter term, and a longer-term intention to diversify income, for example through increasing its income from corporate partners.

In addition to free reserves held, the charity has a significant separate designated Work in Progress (WIP) fund (2023: £157k). This supports future cashflow based on work performed where they are awaiting receipt of payment – when received designated amounts could be released to free reserves. Though there is a risk that some of these funds are not recovered, DLS include a precautionary provision within the fund for bad debt in case it does not achieve full recovery. However, DLS finds it rarely is challenged in legal aid billing and typically has high recovery rates, with processes to ensure claims are made efficiently.

Funding History

Current core funding under Bridging Divides ends in March 2025. Its Propel grant (co-funded with LLST) is due to end October 2025, though it is under consideration for a 12-month extension grant by CBF. There is no duplication of costs or activities between this proposal and its Propel funded activities.

ID	Type	Meeting Date	Decision
25910	Propel	N/A	A Propel extension grant is under assessment

20097	Propel	26/04/2023	£150,000 over two years (£63,500; £85,500) towards the salaries of two FT trainee solicitors and associated project costs (Propel)
15411	Bridging Divides	20/01/2020	£100,000 over five years (£30,000; £25,000; £20,000; £15,000; £10,000) towards core costs.

The Recommendation

During the assessment process, DLS and the assessor worked together on a revised budget to reflect the true costs of the work. Therefore, the below recommendation reflects this revised budget over nine years.

£995,400 over nine years (£97,000; £100,800; £103,800; £108,000; £110,100; £113,400; £118,000; £120,300; £124,000) in core funding for DLS' London-specific second tier and systems change work, including a Systems Change and Partnerships Manager (3 dpw), Solicitor/Trainer (2 dpw) and related costs