

## **COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE LEVY NEIGHBOURHOOD FUND**

**Ascension Trust (ref. 27115)**

**Amount requested: £220,000**

**Amount recommended: £212,365**

**Purpose of grant request: To help address the tragic loss of life, particularly from suicide, from City of London Bridges.**

**Type of cost: Revenue**

**Ward(s) benefitting: All wards**

**Neighbourhood Area(s) benefitting: None**

### **The Applicant**

The Ascension Trust (AT) is a charitable company limited by guarantee (charity no. 1127204 and company no. 06751712). AT is a Christian inter-denominational organisation with a passion to empower individuals to work together within their local community and nation, to contribute positively to society and to improve the quality of life of the disadvantaged and vulnerable. AT runs a number of projects including Street Pastors, Response Pastors, School and College Pastors, Rail Pastors, 60/40 Youth Project, The Synergy Network, Five2Medics/The AT Beacon Project, Bridge Watch and Overseas Mission. Through Bridge Watch, AT works with a number of agencies including the RNLI, the Port of London Authority, the Police, the Fire Brigade, the Maritime & Coastguarding Agency and the City of London Corporation to provide services through volunteers who patrol the Thames bridges where there have been frequent suicides with a view to seeking to prevent these happening.

### **Background and detail of proposal**

AT submitted a revised budget requesting £212,365 across five years to support its Bridge Watch (BW) programme, training and coordinating volunteers to patrol the City of London's 4 bridges to support people who are at risk of suicide by entering the water. Funding will contribute to the Programme Lead's salary costs and Administrator's salary costs, as well as contributing to volunteer training, volunteer uniform and management costs.

The issue of suicide is not decreasing in numbers, in 2023, the Office for National Statistics recorded the highest rates in over two decades. Research from Leeds University in 2023 determined that London's bridges constitute the second highest drowning cluster in the country after Beachy Head. The two latest City of London Public Health suicide audits conclude that most suicide incidents in the Square Mile involve non-residents who travel into the area to use its bridges meaning prevention is difficult. An estimated 135 people are affected when someone takes their own life including those who may witness the event.

BW started in 2019 and is a suicide prevention initiative developed in response to the number of suicides and suicide attempts occurring on the City of London bridges. In line with suicide prevention best practice, it was realised there was a need for patrols to provide human interaction for these individuals. Interaction would aim to reduce the number of incidences. BW was launched in March 2023 through funding from City Bridge Foundation (CBF), a full-time Programme Lead was hired in July 2023. Volunteers were recruited and trained, with the first bridge patrol commencing on 4<sup>th</sup> December 2023. BW currently have 56 volunteers and between 14-30 hours of patrol a week. 23 suicidal people have been stopped from entering the water and there have been 86 interactions since December 2023. BW is working to have patrols operating throughout the week. On average, 30 people drown in the Thames each year, with most of these cases, the cause of death being suicide.

BW provides a physical presence of trained and skilled volunteers who support individuals who may be indicating intent to enter the river Thames, primarily, but not solely, for the purpose of suicide. The BW volunteer role involves responding to a variety of complex topics, such as suicide ideation, intoxication, and mental health issues, as well as more general encounters with the public. Volunteers identify people at risk and engage in empathetic listening, providing support, signposting and connecting to appropriate resources, including alerting emergency services if needed to achieve the most appropriate possible 'safe for now' for somebody suffering mental distress.

Volunteers undergo compulsory training through Zero Suicide Alliance and The Listening Place, who equip volunteers with information regarding suicide risk factors, warning signs, signposting information, active non-judgemental listening, risks to life on the Thames. This is additional to the training the AT provides regarding roles and responsibilities which includes safeguarding, support and wellbeing and BW training scenarios. Additional optional training is also available from the RNLI (Royal National Lifeboat Institution) and NHS England MECC (Make Every Contact Count).

As part of the project funded by CBF, PHIRST Fusion (Public Health Intervention Responsive Studies Teams) evaluated BW, conducting interviews with volunteers and key professional stakeholders. Key findings were to enhance volunteer training, develop volunteer recruitment and retention. CILNF funding will support the recommendations from this evaluation enabling BW's Programme Lead to continue working with partner organisations to further develop training for new volunteers and providing further training for existing volunteers to refresh their knowledge and understanding as well as increasing the numbers of experienced volunteers to complete the two-day ASIST (Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training) course. The BW Lead will also continue working with partners and organisations to train and upskill volunteers and ensure these opportunities are available to all volunteers.

Outcomes will include the reduction of persons that 'come to notice' that go on to enter the water as well as a reduction in the number of 'custodial' interventions that are required, a reduction in the use of section 136 and an increase in the number of people who seek help and support through effective signposting and liaison. Funding will support the recruitment of new volunteers, training 25 new volunteers a year across five years, enabling an increase in the number of patrols and increasing the

coverage of the Bridges to 100 hours of patrol per month. Funding will enable volunteer onboarding and effective training to support them to conduct patrols on and around the bridges of London and engage with people whose behaviour indicates they may be contemplating a suicide attempt, as well as providing annual refresher training. BW will utilise data to identify potential and specific groups at risk of suicide from the bridges and develop specific strategies through training and to identify specific risk periods to inform coverage of the bridges.

Despite AT being a Christian organisation, the purpose of BW is not to proselytize to vulnerable people, volunteers can be of any faith or none.

### Value for Money

AW's Bridge Watch programme is of significant social value for the community. BW also provides an important service that reduces the burden on vital emergency services including the RNLI, London Ambulance Service, London Fire Brigade and City of London Police.

### Financial Information

AT's income is derived from donations and legacies, charitable activities and other trading activities. AT's income has gradually increased over the past five years, with income at £966.8k (2024), the organisation is forecast to steadily continue this trend of growth. This project has been funded for the last two years by City Bridge Foundation, awarding £167,700 over two years to support BW, funding the coordinator role. AT has a reserves policy of 12 months of expenditure, but AT's free unrestricted reserves are currently sitting well below this. Holding 12 months expenditure as reserves is high for the sector and therefore the level actually held is not considered a concern in comparison to wider sector reserves levels. AT is working towards its reserves target through careful expenditure management, increasing regular donor income, and expanding its corporate and church giving base. Alongside this, AT continues to explore strategic partnerships and innovative fundraising campaigns. Part of the Programme Lead's role will be to identify and secure additional funding streams to support the initiative's sustainability across the five-year period. Funding for 2026 has been secured through some of the Business Improvement Districts with the intention of strengthening this partnership as well as securing donations from a number of other organisations in the City. AT has also secured some longer-term funding from the Port of London Authority and the Fishmongers' Company.

Year end as at 31 December	2024 Signed Accounts £	2025 Forecast £	2026 Budget £
<b>Income &amp; expenditure:</b>			
Income	966,826	925,230	1,055,561
Expenditure	(995,790)	(915,600)	(998,919)
<b>Surplus/(deficit)</b>	<b>(28,964)</b>	<b>9,630</b>	<b>56,642</b>
<b>Reserves:</b>			
Total restricted	438,562	438,480	447,879
Total unrestricted	478,140	487,852	535,095
<b>Total reserves</b>	<b>916,702</b>	<b>926,332</b>	<b>982,974</b>
Of which: free unrestricted	247,117	256,829	304,072
Reserves policy target	995,790	915,600	998,919
Free reserves over/(under) target	(748,673)	(658,771)	(694,847)

### **Recommendation**

BW is exceptionally well-positioned to deliver this work, having utilised funding through CBF to establish and develop a volunteer programme to patrol the bridges. Despite people travelling to the bridges from across London/UK, these suicide incidents have a negative impact on the wider community, especially City workers and City residents who may witness incidents when near the bridges. The project will therefore create benefit for City communities in line with CILNF criteria. The Bridge Watch programme meets the CILNF priority to address the needs of people disabled people through poor mental health who are visiting the bridges with suicide ideation and will also prevent the wider negative impact on City workers and City residents who may encounter the incidents. Funding will enable BW to develop the work it has been delivering, providing a more well-rounded volunteer offering that will ensure a wider Bridge patrol offering will be available to support and assist “at risk” people and provide “safe for now” interventions. Funding is recommended as follows:

**£212,365 (£40,000; £41,200; £42,436; £43,709; £45,020) across 5 years to support Bridge Watch – training volunteers to patrol and provide support to those who may be seeking to end their life on COL Bridges.**