

MEETING: 24/11/2016

Ref: 13533

ASSESSMENT CATEGORY - Reducing Poverty

South West London Law Centres

Adv: Shegufta Rahman

Base: Croydon

Amount requested: £177,300

**Benefit: Several South West
London Boroughs**

Amount recommended: £165,900

The Charity

South West London Law Centres (SWLLC) formed by a merger of four law centres in 2004, covering multiple South West London boroughs. The organisation operates as a community based legal practice, working to relieve poverty, suffering and distress for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable members of society. The support on offer ranges from free legal advice through to representation in social welfare law at court. SWLLC operates out of four offices in Croydon, Wandsworth, Kingston and Merton.

The Application

In 2015/16, the charity reported 80 day-time volunteers and 420 evening pro-bono lawyers supported a total of 4,447 beneficiaries through its free clinics. The role of volunteers is at the heart of the organisation's overarching aim to empower clients by encouraging them to take better steps to resolve problems themselves, with support and follow-up from advisors. SWLLC is seeking funding for a new Client Services Support Worker (CSSW) to lead on developing the volunteer base, freeing up the time of the Client Services Manager (CSM) who currently provides this support. The funding requested will enable the charity to improve volunteer retention and support processes, as well as allowing for organisational growth to meet increasing demand.

The Recommendation

The charity has grown into a significant pro-bono clinic service in London, delivering 15 free clinics across five sites every week, and specialist legal casework on a range of issues including housing, debt and welfare rights. In 2015/16 it provided emergency housing representation across Croydon, Wandsworth and Kingston county courts, helping 1,681 beneficiaries to defend themselves against possession/home evictions. The amount recommended is lower than that requested as your usual level of funding is for one full time equivalent post.

£165,900 over three years (£54,800, £55,300, £55,800) towards a full-time Client Services Support Worker and associated project costs.

Funding History

None

Background and detail of proposal

SWLLC works to support beneficiaries to address legal problems in the early stages to prevent them from becoming bigger, more complex issues, which can be damaging for the individual, but also costly to taxpayers. The pro-bono advice clinics are an opportunity for beneficiaries to seek legal redress, empower them with new knowledge of the law and their rights, as well as increasing their confidence and capacity to approach legal problems. The provision of information, advice and guidance empowers people to make better choices about their lives and supports better decision making in public services. Often the charity advises individuals that

they do not have a case to take forward and freeing them to move on and direct their attention more productively.

The organisation reports that in 2015, 61% of beneficiaries approached them for support on housing, employment and family issues. However, a significantly high proportion of these individuals also faced financial and debt issues that were linked to the initial request for support. By helping more vulnerable people to understand, manage and overcome challenging issues such as housing eviction, or debt relief orders, they are able to remain out of or emerge from poverty, helping them to cope better with often precarious circumstances. The delivery of this support is wholly reliant on the support of volunteers, both in the day and evening clinics, coming from pro-bono law firms and from within the local communities.

By creating a new CSSW role to manage the volunteers day to day, and thereby freeing up the time of the CSM, the charity will be able to focus on planning and delivering a new 'supporter' scheme which will seek to develop new income generation areas, build volunteer support for specialist areas, and consider new ways in which SWLLC can continue to attract and develop long-term volunteering. Consulting across its network of volunteers, the charity is well-positioned to develop existing resources (database and skillsets) and consider suitable delivery options.

Financial Information

Forecast income in the current year is £1,360,800 of which £1,335,800 (98%) is confirmed as at November 2016. The organisation's actual reserves policy is to hold three months of unrestricted expenditure, which in 2015/16 would have been £239,000, giving them a surplus of c£41,000 against the target.

The charity recognises the need to secure funding given its on-going deficit position due to funding cuts and changes to legal aid terms. It has been working on a number of initiatives with a view to operating at a surplus. This includes planned cost reductions, diversifying a funding base away from legal aid and developing and restructuring (aided by a grant from the Local Sustainability Fund). The development/restructuring assessment includes review of communications, case management systems, chargeable services and an overall business case review.

Year end at 31 March	2014/15 Audited	2015/16 Audited	2016/17 Budget
	£	£	£
Income and Expenditure			
Income	1,119,879	1,204,740	1,360,800
Expenditure	1,246,896	1,228,945	1,342,648
Unrestricted Funds Surplus / (Deficit)	(128,753)	(16,617)	(116,908)
Restricted Funds Surplus / (Deficit)	1,736	(7,588)	135,060
Total Surplus / (Deficit)	(127,017)	(24,205)	18,152
Surplus / (Deficit) as a % of turnover	(11.3%)	(2%)	1.3%
Cost of Generating funds (% of income)	69,182 (6.2%)	60,411 (5%)	63,316 (4.6%)
Free unrestricted reserves			
Unrestricted free reserves held at Year End	322,376	280,109	163,201
How many months' worth of expenditure	3.1	2.74	1.46
Reserves Policy target	311,724	307,236	335,661
How many months' worth of expenditure	3	3	3
Free reserves over/(under) target	10,652	(27,128)	(172,460)