



## Belfast City Council

<b>Report to:</b>	Strategic Policy and Resources Committee
<b>Subject:</b>	<b>Belfast Tribunal Representation Service: Request for financial support from the Advice Consortia</b>
<b>Date:</b>	22 February 2013
<b>Reporting Officer:</b>	John McGrillen, Director of Development, ext 3470
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	Catherine Taggart, Community Development Manager, ext 3525

<b>1.0</b>	<b>Relevant Background Information</b>
1.1	Belfast City Council is a major funder of Advice & Information Services via a consortium model based on geographical providers. This approach to funding and advice delivery was established in 2005/06 and involves over 20 organisations which include both Citizens' Advice Bureau and Independent Advice providers. Essential criteria for receiving BCC Advice funding are that organisations need to give generalist advice and be associated to Citizens Advice or Advice N.I. Any requests for BCC funding from specialist advice providers are signposted to the relevant Government Department.
1.2	The current ongoing economic downturn and resultant uncertainty facing many households has resulted in an increase in the numbers of people accessing the services of advice agencies particularly, but not exclusively, in relation to debt and money advice services. The advice sector is experiencing difficulties in responding to this increased demand.
1.3	The BCC administered total financial support for Advice Services in Belfast last year was £825,619. This allowed the sector to process 191,085 enquiries of which over 26,569 were debt related. Monitoring returns demonstrate the funds levered an additional £41,947,284 in claimed benefits.
1.4	In line with the Welfare Reform – Notion of Motion passed by Council on 1 <sup>st</sup> November 2012, officers have been working with the advice providers to identify potential funding sources to support a citywide Tribunal Service. The advice sector developed and submitted a 2 year programme which the Development Committee considered at their meeting on 20 <sup>th</sup> November 2012. This meeting agreed in principle to seek to resource the programme from an in-year reallocation of funds as part of the Quarter 3 finance report.

2.0	Key Issues
2.1	Representatives from the 5 Advice consortia are seeking BCC support to resource their proposal to deliver a Tribunal/Appeals Service across the city that clients can avail of at any BCC funded advice service.
2.2	This Belfast Tribunal Representation Service would represent clients who wish to appeal SSA decisions on benefits including Employment Support Allowance, Disability Living Allowance, Personal Independent Payment, Universal Credit and any other SSA benefit. This service would enable clients to challenge decisions, assisting them through the process and representing them at hearings.
2.3	<p>Since the introduction of Employment Support Allowance (ESA) in 2011, the need for tribunal representation has steadily increased, as the number of claimants being disallowed benefit has grown, due to continuous changes to benefit criteria and constant periodic reviews of ESA claimants by ATOS, a commercial medical support service.</p> <p>The advice consortia network indicates that this trend is likely to accelerate with the introduction of Welfare Reform, which represents the most significant change to the benefit system since the foundation of the Welfare State.</p>
2.4	At present, advice services across the city are stretched, with advisors not only having to accommodate increasing numbers of clients, but also dealing with more complex cases, which are more time consuming because of the need to more actively monitor and progress claims on behalf of clients, and secure supporting evidence to submit with those claims.
2.5	The 5 consortia have therefore developed an outline programme for a citywide response which is attached at Appendix 1. While this proposal outlines a 2 year service plan with an anticipated start date of June 2013 and a total cost of £426,209.60, the consortia have also identified associated set up costs of £11,250.
2.6	<p>The Development Committee agreed to resource the start up costs from additional in year grant received from DSD under the Community Support Plan. These costs include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establishment of the Belfast Advice Group, lead partner identified, initial set up and recruitment, all taking place between January/March 2013, with staff recruited, agreement around referral processes, and familiarisation of staff with workload, protocols and generalist services.</li> <li>• Meet with the Appeal Service, SSA and other agencies that would positively contribute to delivering a citywide tribunal service.</li> <li>• Promotion and launch of service across Belfast.</li> </ul>
2.7	The proposed programme to establish a city wide Tribunal Representative service will see the five area consortia come together to establish a Belfast Advice Group, comprising of a representative from each consortium. This group will be the mechanism to develop this service; it will nominate a lead partner as employer to oversee the administration of finances. Phase I would see the constitution of the group, establishing a terms of reference with clear objectives, decision making processes and roles/responsibilities. This work is underway.
2.8	Stage 2 of the proposal has an overall estimated cost of £426,210 and seeks to employ 5 Tribunal Representatives inclusive of 2 existing posts as both posts do

	not have funding beyond March 2013. One of the posts would be a Senior Tribunal Representative, overseeing the daily operational side of the service, providing a support and mentoring service to the tribunal representatives.
2.9	Officers have communicated the request for BCC financial support to DSD officials in the Voluntary & Community Unit. We are awaiting indication is there is any opportunity for DSD support.

<b>3.0</b>	<b>Resource Implications</b>
3.1	With the exception of the set up costs, no additional external funding has been identified to date. The proposal has therefore an overall estimated funding shortfall of £426,210 for a 2 year period.
3.2	Given the quarter 3 forecast revenue outturn position reported to this committee, the funding shortfall of £426,210 could be made available from in year revenue resources. However it must be noted that these resources are non-recurring and that there is no provision within the rate based budgets for additional expenditure after the 2 year period.
3.3	It is therefore extremely important that if the funding proposal is approved by the committee, that the basis of the funding is clearly communicated to the groups in the letter of offer i.e. that the funding is non recurrent and is only for a 2 year period
3.4	Given that the expenditure is for a 2 year period, any approved funding would be held in a specified reserve and released to the groups on an annual basis should it be established that alternative other funding streams have been unsuccessful.
3.5	There are no additional officer resources required as any related allocation of resources will be administered within our current service grant programme.

<b>4.0</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
4.1	That funding of £426,210 be approved to support the Belfast Tribunal Representation Service with the funds being retained in a specified reserve and released to the consortium on an as needs basis by the Director of Finance and Resources.
4.2	That it is clearly communicated to the consortium that the approved funds are being provided on a non recurring basis to cover the two year period and that there is no provision with the council finances for future funding of the initiative.

<b>5.0</b>	<b>Decision Tracking</b>
Should the funding be approved, the Director of Finance and Resources will advise the consortium of the decision and that the funding is non recurrent.	

<b>6.0</b>	<b>Documents Attached</b>
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Appendix 1: Draft outline Belfast Tribunal Representation Service	
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