



Ballynafeigh Community Development Association

283 Ormeau Road, Belfast BT7 3GG

General Enquiries Tel: 028 9049 1161

Email: recpetion@bcda.net



www.bcda.net

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20th January 2025

Mr. David Sales,

Director, Neighbourhood Services,

Belfast City Council

Subject: Urgent Request for 2025/26 Funding for the Belfast Citywide Tribunal Service

Dear Mr. Sales,

I am writing to request funding for the Belfast Citywide Tribunal Service (BCTS). While we appreciate the complexities surrounding resourcing of the service and the uncertainties regarding DfC funding, we must express our concern regarding the future of BCTS funding.

It is particularly difficult to find ourselves in a position where, once again, we are forced to seek urgent funding just three months before the end of the current project. This is despite previous discussions indicating that funding for BCTS would become part of the Council's recurring funding arrangements, reflecting its critical importance to the residents of Belfast and its alignment with the Council's anti-poverty strategy.

We would respectfully ask that the council consider financially supporting the service taking the following points into consideration;

Supporting Belfast Residents

The BCTS provides an irreplaceable safety net for Belfast's most vulnerable residents:

- The service ensures individuals facing complex tribunal processes can access the benefits and support they are entitled to, which is often the difference between financial stability and destitution.
- With increasing demand due to the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, the need for this service has never been greater.

Supporting Advice Providers

The BCTS underpins the work of generalist advice providers across Belfast. Should the service close, the implications for generalist advice services would be profound:

Increased Caseloads: Generalist advice services would face a dramatic increase in demand for tribunal representation, a specialised area that many advisors are not trained or resourced to manage.

Resource Diversion: Advisors would need to divert time and resources from preventative advice and early intervention work to support tribunal cases, leaving other vital services under-resourced and residents waiting longer for help.

Loss of Specialist Expertise: BCTS staff possess unique expertise in tribunal representation, which is essential for navigating complex legal and procedural requirements. The absence of this service would leave advice providers without a critical resource, resulting in reduced success rates for clients and potentially exacerbating poverty levels.

Community Impact: Vulnerable residents, including those with disabilities, mental health issues, and chronic illnesses, would be disproportionately affected, as they often rely on BCTS to secure vital financial support.

Alignment with Council's Anti-Poverty Strategy

The BCTS directly contributes to the goals outlined in Belfast City Council's anti-poverty strategy:

- It addresses income inequality and ensures vulnerable residents can access the financial support they are legally entitled to.
- The service actively prevents poverty-related issues, such as homelessness and food insecurity, by reducing financial distress for those it supports.

Impact of Redundancy on Ligoniel Improvement Association

The lack of funding for 2025/26 will have devastating consequences for Ligoniel Improvement Association (LIA) and its staff:

- The cessation of BCTS would result in immediate redundancies for highly skilled staff who have dedicated their expertise to tribunal representation.
- The Council's refusal to permit LIA to include redundancy arrangements in the management fees, coupled with the expectation that these costs would come from organisational reserves, has placed us in a precarious financial position.
- At this time, it is not clear whether LIA will have sufficient reserves to cover redundancy costs, leaving both the organisation and its staff in significant uncertainty.
- This approach not only risks seriously destabilising LIA but also undermines our ability to deliver critical community services in the future.

Our Request for 2025/26 Funding

To ensure the continued delivery of this critical service, we respectfully request that Belfast City Council allocate £242,000 for the 2025/26 financial year. This funding is essential to:

- Maintain the current levels of service delivery, ensuring residents and advice providers continue to receive the support they rely on.
- Prevent redundancies and retain the expertise required to effectively manage complex tribunal cases.
- Reinforce the Council's anti-poverty strategy by delivering tangible outcomes that reduce poverty and improve financial stability for Belfast residents.

We urge the Council to reconsider its decision not to fund the BCTS, particularly in light of the findings and commitments outlined in the William's report on advice services. Additionally, we are committed to resolving any issues related to the 2022/23 funding to ensure this does not impede future funding arrangements.

We are more than willing to provide further information or meet with relevant stakeholders to discuss this urgent matter. The continued support of the Council is essential to maintaining a lifeline for Belfast's most vulnerable residents, and we hope to work collaboratively to secure the future of the BCTS.

Thank you for your attention to this pressing issue.

Yours Faithfully



Gerry Tubritt

Chairperson
Belfast Advice Group
Ballynafeigh Community Development Association
283 Ormeau Road
Belfast
BT7 3GG
Telephone: 02890491161
Email: gerry.tubritt@bcda.net

