

Paying for bid-writing – guidance sheet

Forum CIO is a voluntary and community sector membership charity offering support, advice and information. We operate across Yorkshire and the Humber and offer funding and governance advice, training, and evaluation support to a wide range of civil society organisations, from residents' associations to national charities.

Like many similar charities, we want to build the capacity and skills of VCSE organisations to fund their work. This includes providing training sessions on writing good grant applications and tenders, and offering a 'critical friend' service to read through applications before they are submitted and give feedback.

We also recognise that some organisations choose to pay for grant-writing and tender-writing services, particularly for things like large capital projects. Using our experience of providing Sector Support services, we have written this guidance sheet for groups that are considering paying an individual or agency to undertake bid-writing on their behalf.

We are also aware that some groups and organisations have experienced bad practice from professional bid-writers who do not operate to high standards. We therefore encourage you to read this guidance to minimise the risk of a poor experience.

Using a professional bid-writer

The decision to pay someone to write a funding application or tender on your behalf should be taken with care. Consider the following:

- Are there any alternatives? Could a member of staff or volunteer go on a training course or seek support from their local umbrella/support organisation?
- Do you have sufficient resources/unrestricted funding to pay someone? Very few grant-funders allow you to pay a bid-writer out of the fund they are applying for
- Have your committee/trustees/directors agreed? Depending on your governance processes, they may need to make the final decision, in discussion with staff if necessary
- Do you want a specific bid written or more generic fundraising support? It may be appropriate and more cost-effective for some organisations to take on a full or part-time fundraiser
- If it is for a specific fund, does the funder have a view or policy on the use of professional bid-writers?

Choosing a professional bid-writer

Some individuals and companies that offer bid-writing will openly advertise their services to the voluntary sector. Others work through 'word of mouth' and contacts. If you have decided to pay someone to write an application, consider the following:

- Does the individual or agency provide references, specifically people that you can contact to ask about their experience of working with the bid-writer?
- Do they have a website, LinkedIn page or other source where you can see a list of their skills and track record?
- Are any of your contacts able to recommend someone they have used and had a good experience with?
- Local infrastructure charities like Forum *may* offer bid-writing as a charged-for service, or may be able to suggest people you can speak to – speak to your local provider

What to ask in advance

Before you make any decisions, arrange a telephone chat or meeting with any potential bid-writers. They should be prepared to have an initial conversation without charging you a fee. You should check the following information with each candidate:

Charging and fees

- What fees do they charge – for example is it a set fee, a daily rate or a fee related to the amount that is being applied for? What if it's a two-stage bid?
- If they charge a daily rate, are they prepared to quote you in advance for the amount of days they expect the bid-writing to take, and to stick to that quote?
- When do they require payment and in what stages?
- Do they charge a fee even if the bid is unsuccessful?

2

Note that 'no win, no fee' may sound attractive, but you shouldn't necessarily write off bid-writers that charge a fee regardless of success. It may mean they value their work and take it seriously, and if you have ownership of the bid afterwards you can use the material to apply for other funds.

Do beware of bid-writers that say they will pay themselves, if successful, out of the fund they are applying to. They may tell you it is acceptable to put a line into the budget for something like 'organisational costs', 'contingency costs' or 'fundraising costs'. If you receive a grant, you will need to be able to account for everything you spend money on, and very few grant funders see paying a professional bid-writer as an acceptable/eligible cost.

Also, very few funders will allow you to draw down funding for something you had already committed to or spent money on, and an upfront fee for a bid-writer would be included in this.

You should therefore ensure that you know what the likely fee will be, understand when it will become payable, and have unrestricted funds in your account (e.g. not funds that must be spent on specific things or projects) to pay for it.

Track record

- What experience do they have and what is their success rate?
- Do they show a wider knowledge of funding, for example if you have suggested a specific funder, can they suggest other funds you could also apply to?
- Are they willing to share references from people you can contact?

Working together

- How will the bid-writer work with you and communicate with you throughout the process? Will they send you drafts to check, or just a final bid?
- How do they make sure bids are specific and tailored to your organisation and the fund you are applying to?
- What information do they say they will need from you?
- Will they send you the final bid so that you can read, check and submit it?

What funders think

Some funders specifically prohibit paying for professional bid-writers and mention it in the application, for example the National Lottery Community Fund 'Awards for All' programme.

We work with a wide range of local, regional and national funders and have spoken to them about their views on this issue. Using this information, we suggest you consider the following:

3

- Most funders agree that passion and first-hand knowledge of the issues are far more important in an application than using 'the right words' or perfect spelling
- Some funders say they 'can always tell' if a bid has been written by a professional and it can be off-putting
- Feedback from local/regional funders suggests that some professional bid-writers use almost the same wording for multiple bids into the same fund, e.g. they sell their services to 10 different groups and then copy and paste, only changing a few details. This nearly always leads to rejection
- Check if the funder mentions using professional bid-writers anywhere in their guidance – most don't refer to it, but if they do specifically say they discourage it, then take that into account
- Even if the funder does not discourage bids from professional bid-writers, they are still extremely unlikely to allow you to pay the fee from the grant fund

This applies mainly to grant funders. Paying for tender-writing is not usually viewed in the same way, and commissioners are unlikely to express a view on the issue.

Working with a professional bid-writer

A bid-writer should never promise that you can hand everything over to them and leave them to it. To write a bid specific to your project and organisation, they will need to ask questions and communicate regularly during the bid-writing process –

which also means it may not be a significant time-saver for you. Also consider the following:

- Put a simple written agreement in place and get both parties to sign it – it should cover anything you have agreed verbally such as fees, communication methods, opportunities for feedback and who the bid belongs to
- Good bid-writers will always share information with you as and when requested. The draft bids and final bid should belong to you, not the bid-writer, unless you have agreed otherwise
- You can and should give feedback if you don't think the draft bid explains the project or your work, or if it feels too vague
- It is unlikely that the bid-writer will input into the budget part of the bid as they will not know what your project will cost, although they may be able to tell you what other similar projects cost from their experience and help you with adding up and entering data into a table
- If you have asked your bid-writer to apply to a range of funds, make sure they supply you with a list of exactly what has been applied for and when - they should check in advance before making an application

Top tips

- If the funder likes your application and wants to speak to you in person or on the phone, you will need to do this yourself – this is why it is essential that you know the contents of the bid in detail before it is sent in!
- Don't ignore your instincts – if you are unhappy with the bid-writer's work don't just hope for the best, say something
- If you are not sure about anything in this guidance, for example the difference between grant applications and tenders, or restricted and unrestricted income, speak to your local infrastructure support charity
- There are no magical words or phrases that you can use in bids that will automatically increase your chances of success. Even people that find it hard to express what their project is about in writing can learn how to put good applications together. You should always consider how you can build the skills of your own staff/volunteers for the longer term, even if that is done alongside using professional bid-writers in the short term.

If you have read this factsheet and found it helpful, please tell us!

Updated June 2023