

housing strategy and services communications strategy

2014-15

HOUSING STRATEGY & SERVICES
CHIEF EXECUTIVES



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1. Introduction

This Communications Strategy sets out how the Housing Strategy and Services Group will keep our key target audiences informed about the services we deliver, our progress and performance.

This Strategy will examine how we will communicate with our key audiences, how we will adopt an integrated approach to internal and external communications, and what sources people can use to access information and advice about the services that the Group provides.

It is important that we adhere to strict communication standards whenever we communicate with our stakeholders, overall we will make clear our commitment to ensure information is:

- Effective, accurate and up-to-date;
- Never knowingly misleading;
- Written in plain, clear English with jargon kept to a minimum;
- Accessible and inclusive – we always need to consider the needs of people with a disability, as well as gender, age, ethnicity, religious belief and sexual orientation;
- Developed with the involvement of stakeholders;
- Cost-effective;
- Monitored and evaluated for effectiveness.

1.1 Why we need to communicate

The Group is bound by legislation specified in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2006, which places a statutory duty on all local authorities to provide Housing Information and Advice to all who require it. Similarly, the Group are required under the Council's Corporate Plan to "*perform effectively in communicating and engaging with the Borders Communities*"; each department of the Council has a responsibility to incorporate this aim into their Business Plan.

This statement has been developed to coincide and facilitate other key strategies and plans, including: The Council's Single Outcome Agreement, SBC Corporate Communications Strategy 2012-15, Finance and Service Plan 2013-14, Employment Support Strategy, Local Housing Strategy 2012-17, the Homelessness Services Delivery Plan, and the Homelessness Services Service User Involvement Strategy.

The responsibility of updating and implementing this statement lies with the Housing Strategy Development Assistant (HSDA).

2. Housing Strategy and Service Group

Four individual teams make up the Housing Strategy and Services Group; all four teams are located at Paton Street, Galashiels:

2.1 Housing Strategy Team (HST)

The HST are responsible for co-ordinating housing information and advice between internal partners. In order to achieve this, HST are required to conduct housing research along a broad spectrum and are responsible for the implementation of Private Landlord Registration. As a Strategic Housing Authority, the HST is responsible for the development and implementation of the Local Housing Strategy and related strategies and/or Action Plans.

2.2 Homelessness Services (HOM)

HOM is responsible for ensuring that Scottish Borders Council meets its obligations to homeless applicants applying under the terms of the Housing (Scotland) Act, 1987, as amended. HOM is a multi disciplinary team consisting of a range of housing professionals who have the remit of preventing homelessness in the Borders, providing appropriate services where homelessness cannot be prevented, and ensuring that those facing the prospect of homelessness are given the assistance necessary to identify appropriate housing options.

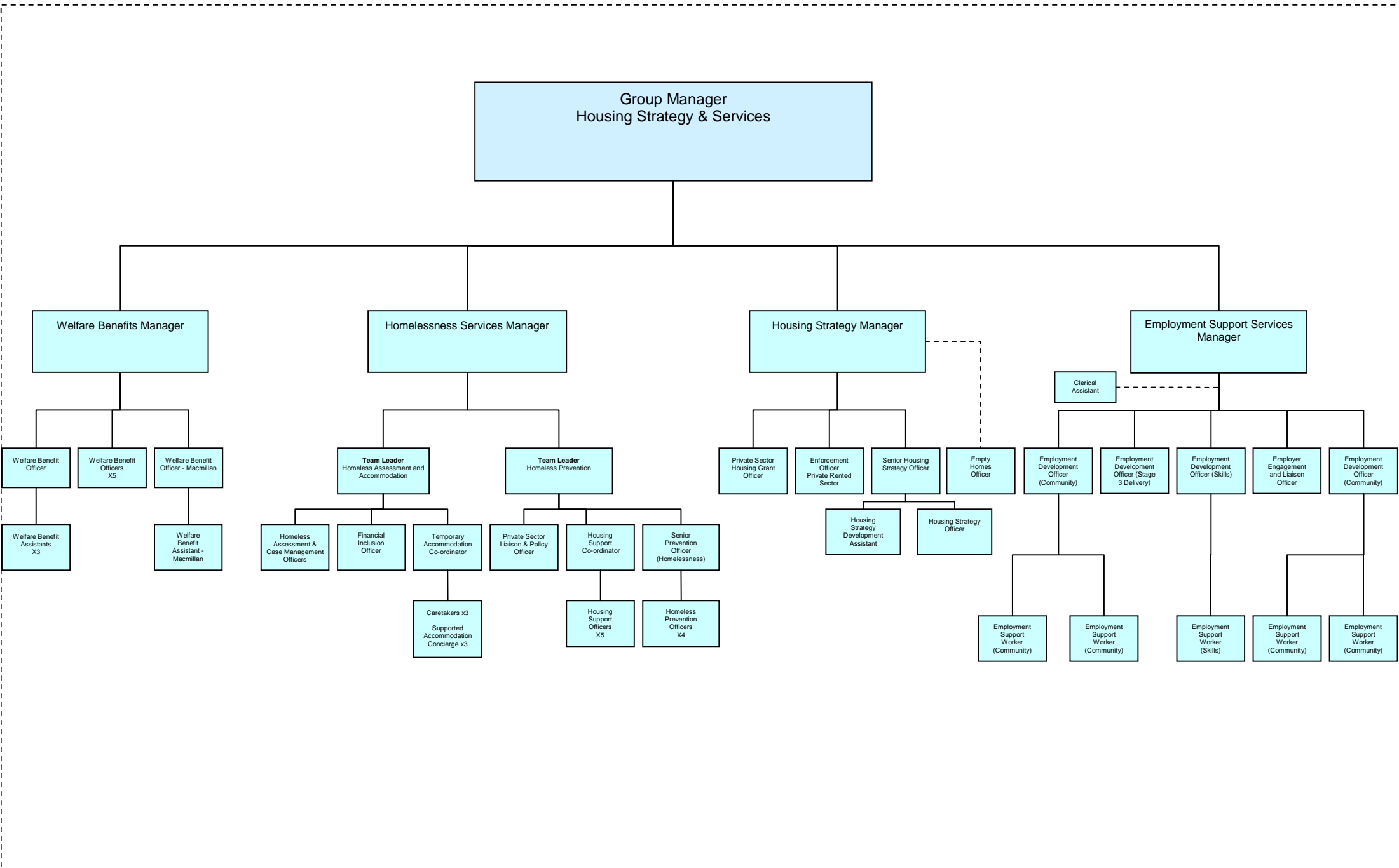
2.3 Employment Support Services (ESS)

Following on from executive approval in February 2012, the corporate Employment Support Service was established within Scottish Borders Council in April 2013, to improve the performance of the Council in relation to providing supported employment and working towards a workforce more representative of the general population. The ESS is an outcome focussed service which supports disadvantaged people to find and sustain paid employment, working in partnership with organisations such as Skills Development Scotland, Borders College and the Scottish Association of Mental Health (SAMHS).

2.4 Welfare Benefits Service (WBS)

The primary aim of WBS is to maximise the take up of Social Security Benefits and Tax Credits by the citizens of the Scottish Borders. The team works closely with a number of internal departments and the WBS Service Manager is an integral member of the Welfare Reform Working Group. WBS also engage in partnership working with the Department of Work and Pensions Visiting Service and have a contract with Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) to provide general benefits advice and debt advice to WBS Service Users.

Figure One: Composition of the Housing Strategy and Services Group



3. Our relationship with the Communications and Marketing Team

3.1 The role of the Communications and Marketing Team

The Corporate Communications Department was restructured in June 2013 to form the Communications and Marketing Hub. The Hub is the primary point of contact for all of the Council's communications needs, with the principal aim of maintaining the corporate brand identity and protecting the reputation of the Council through the central management of all communications and marketing activity. The hub promotes brand awareness through:

- Internal and external communications
- Media relations
- Digital media
- Graphic design
- Printing solutions
- The team's own conduct and expertise.

This includes support for day-to-day activities as well as during emergency incidents. Any work relating to the following activities must be directed through the Communications and Marketing Team:

- Communications and marketing plans/campaigns out of which may result in any of the activities below:-
- Press releases, media events and press enquiries about the Council;
- Support with developing website and intranet content;
- Co-ordination and management of corporate social media channels – Facebook, Twitter, YouTube etc;
- All digital media work - webcasts, digital signage, videos, photography;
- Design/Print - all design work for any leaflets/booklets/publicity materials (no staff should be creating or sourcing their own);
- Support with writing/editing copy for various communication channels;
- Collating copy for corporate publications – SBConnect, SBScene, SBUpdate;
- Support for internal communication activities;
- Providing templates for a variety of internal newsletters/staff briefings/PowerPoint's as part of the corporate brand toolkit;
- Advice for councillors on communications related issues.

3.2 The Role of the Housing Strategy Development Assistant (HSDA)

The HSDA co-ordinates all communications activities for the Housing Strategy and Services Group with the exception of media or press releases, which will be dealt with directly by designated

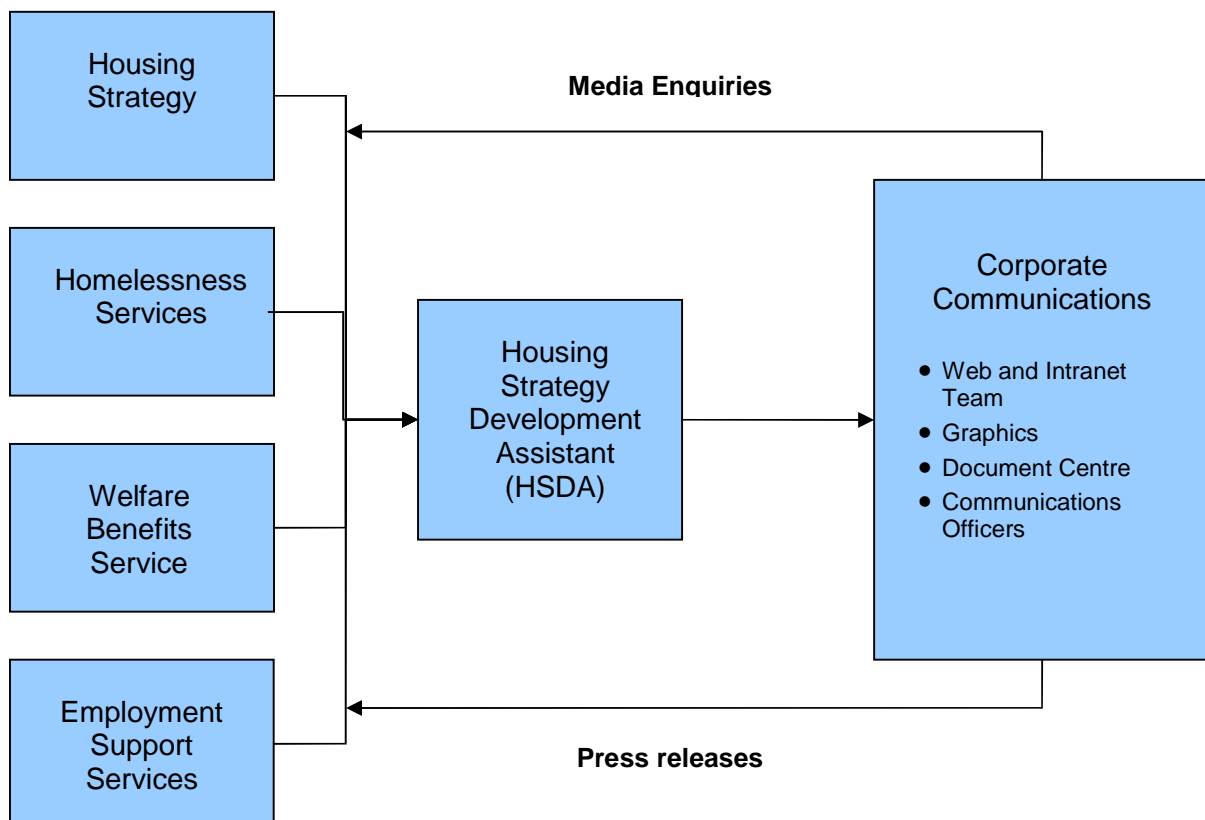
Communications and Marketing Team officers. All enquiries from within the Housing Strategy and Services Group relating to the following must be sent to the HSDA initially:

- All enquires relating to website content, including social media content;
- Printed material such as leaflets, posters, newsletters and factsheets;
- Graphics for front-covers of strategies and reports;
- Power-point presentations which need corporate branding.

The HSDA will then liaise with the Communications and Marketing Team to ensure that any work which needs actioned follows the correct protocols.

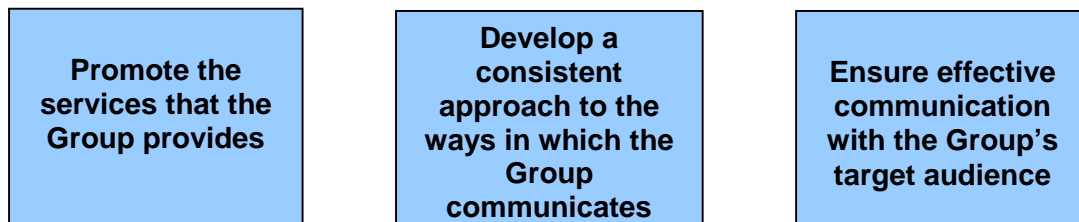
Documents that have been sent to the Communications and Marketing Team will always be sent back to the HSDA for approval before publication or print - the HSDA will then send the final documents to the relevant Service Manager or nominated individual for signing-off before anything is sent to the Document Centre and/or published on the website. This ensures that all information is accurate and follows national standards.

Figure Two: HST & Services Communications workflow



4. Key Communications Objectives

The Housing Strategy and Services Group have three key communication objectives:



4.1 Promote the services that the Group provides

According to the Scottish Borders Council 2013 Household Survey Research Report, 69% of respondents stated that they '*knew a lot or a bit about the services provided by the Council*'. Therefore, in order to raise the profile of the Council's services as a whole, and align with objectives set out in the Single Outcome Agreement, it is vital that the Group continues to promote the services that we provide. This is especially relevant in the current economical context, whereby a projected £38,148,326 loss to the Scottish Borders is expected over 2010-15 as a result of legislative changes under Welfare Reform.¹ It is therefore essential that as a Group we make information as accessible and robust as possible, enabling our target audience to contact individual teams' where necessary.

Similarly, we need to advertise the role that the recently restructured Homelessness Service provides, as well as informing stakeholders about the remit of the newly evolved Employment Support Service. The Homelessness Team was comprehensively restructured in April 2011, with an increased emphasis on a housing options approach to tackling homelessness and the creation of a new Homelessness Prevention team. This was so successful that in July 2011, the Service was able to remove the 'priority need' test for people applying for assistance under the homelessness legislation, thereby becoming one of the first local authorities to meet the Scottish Government's target of removing the 'priority need' test completely by the end of 2012. The Employment Support Service has only recently joined the Group; therefore published information detailing the vision and functions of this service is an important communications objective.

4.2 Develop a consistent approach to the ways in which the Group communicates

As explained in Section 3, the council ensures a consistent approach to corporate branding via the Communications and Marketing Team, with the Communications and Marketing Hub acting as the central point for all the Council's communication needs and thus preventing any inconsistency taking place across the Council. The Communications and Marketing Hub also ensures that there

¹ <http://www.scottishpovertyforum.org.uk/PCE2v3.pdf>

is a corporate overview provided to any work, enabling the team to assess how it links to the Council's corporate plan/priorities.

The HSDA provides further consistency for the Housing Strategy and Services Group by providing a single contact for all the Group's communication requirements.

Legislation such as the Data Protection Act 1998 and Standards specified in the Scottish National Standards for Information and Advice Providers provide further consistency for the Group, as we are bound by strict protocols as to how we communicate with our stakeholders.

4.3 Ensure effective communication with the Group's target audience

In order to meet this objective, it is important that:

- People know what Housing Services are available; where and how they can be accessed and what level of service response they can expect.
- People, and all external partners, are able to express their views on the level of service provided.
- Each Service provides both the Group and all external service partners with a better understanding of how their work contributes to the provision of Housing Information and Advice within Scottish Borders.
- The Group ensures that the community is aware of the services provided and the research, information and advice provided by the group whilst helping to meet the needs of Scottish Borders residents.

The corporate website has become one of the Council's main communication channels and has the potential to reach a mass audience across the area. Statistics show that almost 80% of the UK population now has access to the internet, however, according to the SBC 2013 Household Survey Research Report, the number of people with internet access in the Scottish Borders is significantly lower than this national statistic; with just under half of respondents stating that they had internet access on a mobile device such as a laptop, mobile phone, smart phone or tablet and 43% advising they had internet access via a home computer. Similarly, the quality and availability of Broadband service in the area is an issue; 36% of respondents to the Household Survey Research Report said that the quality of the broadband service was excellent or good, a further 40% rated it fair and 24% rated the broadband service poor or very poor. These statistics continue to pose challenges for the Housing Strategy and Services Group, as external agencies place an increasing reliance on internet usage. This is specifically relevant in relation to changes to the benefit system under Welfare Reform, which determines that most benefit claimants will need to apply for Universal Credit online and manage their claim through an online account. It is therefore important that the corporate website is seen as the most reliable source of accurate information available

about the Council services and what we do, and is useful in signposting our service-users to relevant online resources.

4.4 Delivering our messages

To deliver our key messages to the specified target audiences the most effective methods of communication available will be utilised. This includes, but is not limited to:

- **Traditional media** – this media includes print newspapers and their online equivalents, radio and local and national television. It should be stressed that the Communications and Marketing Team are responsible for all press releases, media enquiries and press enquiries relating to the Council, however, the HST and Services Group are responsible for informing the Communications and Marketing Team of identified ‘good news’ stories and required advice, information and advertisement.
- **Digital communication** – the housing section of the corporate website is updated and maintained by the Housing Strategy Development Assistant (HSDA). The HSDA is the only JADU user within the Group and all enquiries for website content should be passed to the HSDA directly. The use of Social Media is encouraged and SBC has a profile with Twitter, Facebook, Youtube and Flickr to advertise and promote council services. All requests for the utility of social media must go through a Web and Intranet Officer, both of whom are based within the Communications and Marketing Team. The HSDA and Senior Housing Strategy Officer have read-only access to the above mentioned social media sites.
- **Face-to-Face meetings** – presentations, forums, training days and focus groups are regularly held for stakeholders, and are important outlets for promoting the services that the Group provides.
- **Printed material** - this can include leaflets, annual reports, strategies, posters, flyers, displays and information sheets. The Housing Strategy Team leads on the majority of strategic reports, liaising with service managers and nominated individuals as and when required. All printed marketing material is required to be sent to one of the Graphic Designers within the Communications and Marketing Team for corporate branding.
- **Public consultations** - these are carried out via events, online questionnaires, printed reports or other appropriate channels.

4.5 Monitoring our progress/effectiveness

In order to ensure that we are communicating effectively with our target audience, we monitor and report our progress in different ways, including:

- Collating monthly communication statistics; including the number of incoming calls to each service (except ESS whereby calls are directed to the switchboard at HQ) and the number of

incoming emails. The HST team is also able to record how many visitors the Housing pages of the corporate website receive by utilising 'Google Analytics' – this is a very useful tool in ensuring effective communication, as webpages and hyperlinks can be amended accordingly. A recent survey carried out by Sitemorse determined that Scottish Borders Council had the best local authority website in Scotland, and the third best out of all 429 local authorities across the UK². Sitemorse looked at a mixture of criteria including the usability, accessibility, reliability and performance of all Council websites when carrying out this survey.

- Conducting public consultations across a wide spectrum of research and strategies.
- Considering feedback from various questionnaires and surveys on specific topics, key contacts and opinion formers.
- Conducting face-to-face meetings with service users – this can occur via forums, working groups or training events.
- Evaluating events we run and producing summary reports.

² <http://www.sitemorse.com/survey/report-table.html?rt=953&v=blobs%20>

5. Target Audience

5.1 Our key stakeholders

The Group has a wide and diverse range of audiences, all with varying, and sometimes complex, interests in the performance of our services. The communication channels used by the Group cover a broad spectrum of activity and will continue to further diversify with improvements and greater access to digital technology.

The following groups are the main stakeholders for our Communications Strategy – this list is not exhaustive and there may be other stakeholders who have reason to need information from the council at some point:

Figure Three: Our key stakeholders



Table One below provides further clarity as to who our target audiences are, and demonstrates some of the communication methods used to ensure effective interaction with individual stakeholders.

Table One: Target Audience Specifications

Target Audience	How we communicate with Audience
Residents	<p>Extended efforts are undertaken to communicate with the residents of the Scottish Borders through targeted publications such as the Local Housing Strategy and Finance and Delivery Service Plan. Robust and accessible information is also published on the corporate website and relevant social media outlets.</p> <p>Freedom of Information Requests are handled centrally by the Information Team and dealt with according to legislation specified in the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002.</p>
Service Users	<p>All three frontline Services in the Group; WBS, ESS and HOM, issue service-user feedback surveys upon closure of individual cases. Service User feedback is regularly monitored and analysed to ensure that the Group is adhering to best practise standards.</p> <p>If a member of the public wishes to make a complaint, they can do so by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Going online and using the online complaint form; • Telephoning the service concerned; • In person at any contact centre or library contact centre; • Contact their local Councillor; • Writing directly to the service concerned. <p>Details about how to make a complaint are clearly detailed on the corporate website.</p> <p>All published material is available in alternative languages, on tape or in large print so as to ensure that the Group engages with service users who have additional needs, or those whose first language is not English. Translation services can also be provided for face-to-face meetings.</p>
Elected Members of Scottish Borders Council	<p>It is important to keep Elected Members abreast of our services, progress and performance to allow them to communicate to the wider political audience on behalf of the organisation.</p> <p>One of the primary vehicles the Group uses to communicate to this audience is the Annual Report; distributed annually this document highlights key areas of activities and achievements across all four services. The distribution of strategic reports and delivery plans, many of which are sent for committee approval, are also important methods of communicating to Members.</p>

Politicians and other relevant public bodies	<p>This group includes political audiences at all levels: The Scottish Government, Westminster and local government across Scotland.</p> <p>Documents such as the Strategic Housing Investment Plan, South East Scotland Plan (SES Plan) and Housing Needs and Demand Assessment are targeted to communicate with this audience.</p>
Employees	<p>According to Standard 1.4 in the Scottish National Standards for Information and Advice Providers <i>'There must be clear lines of internal communication'</i>.</p> <p>Aside from the Annual Report, the Group ensures that employees are kept informed through the use of team meetings, supervised sessions and the corporate intranet. Information is also relayed through media outlets such as emails and digital bulletins, printed publications (for example SBScene) and notice boards.</p>
Media	<p>It is important that the Group maintains a positive relationship with members of the media, while ensuring that all members of staff adopt the corporate protocol for media interaction. Each Service has the responsibility of ensuring that the Communications and Marketing Team are made aware of 'good news' stories and topical areas of interest, so as to ensure appropriate advertisement.</p> <p>External media sources can be utilised for advertisement purposes (i.e. Radio Borders, Southern Reporter), however this should only be carried out after consultation with the Communications and Marketing Team.</p>
Key partners	<p>This audience includes Registered Social Landlords, Housing Associations, services such as Lothian and Borders Police & Fire Service, the NHS, Local Pension Service, organisations such as Citizens Advice Bureau, Borders College, Shelter Scotland, Job Centre Plus and Energy Savings Trust.</p> <p>We communicate with, and on behalf of, our key partners on a regular basis. Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Advertising information on the corporate website; - Including hyperlinks and web addresses on printed and digital media; - Publishing articles in newsletters; - Promoting external services, i.e. the Greenhomes Cashback Scheme.
Wider Community	<p>This group consists of individuals or organisations not identified through other groups. The Group will engage with this audience via the robust information that is already published on digital, social and printed media.</p>
Internal partners within SBC	<p>The Group needs to ensure that it continues to build upon managing a stronger structure for two-way communications between internal departments. This is currently being achieved through liaising with other departments regularly, holding and attending multi-agency meetings and presentations, as well as making information readily available on the intranet and corporate website.</p>

Appendix 1: Action Plan 2014-15

6.1 Promote the Service that the Group Provides			
Objectives		Communication Action	Current Activity
6.1a	Positive outcomes/good news stories to be identified and promoted	Group to work closely with Communications and Marketing Team to ensure good news stories advertised as widely as possible.	Ongoing; continuous. Recent restructure of Communications and Marketing Team has allowed for a more streamlined approach to press releases and media requests.
		Central library to be compiled for all promotional photographs to allow for inclusion in various reports, presentations, updates and strategies.	Action to be carried out 2015.
6.1b	All staff within the Group to be kept updated with key achievements and progress	Distribution of the Group's Annual Report.	The 2013-14 Group Annual report was completed in July 2014 and distributed to the Service Managers. All Annual Reports are available on the corporate website . Work to be carried out in 2015 to hyperlink text in previous online Annual Reports to allow for easier navigation.
		Consideration to be given to making progress/groups reports available for distribution across the Teams.	To be reviewed/discussed at annual Communications Meeting; circa March 2015.
		Monthly/quarterly bulletins to be developed and distributed with updated legislation/key strategic changes.	To be reviewed/discussed at annual Communications Meeting; circa March 2015.
		Team meetings to be held regularly, with option of inviting other members of the Group for inclusion.	Ongoing; continuous. Team Meetings held on average every 6 weeks.
6.1c	Engagement with target audience	Private Landlord Forums to be held annually.	Next Forum circa March 2015
		Stakeholder review on Welfare Benefits Service to be carried out.	Action to be completed by February 2015
		Modern Apprenticeship opportunities to be explored and advertised.	MA to initiate placement with Admin Team early 2015. MA will be working towards a SVQ Level 2 in Business and Administration.

6.2 Develop a consistent approach to the way that the Group communicates			
Objectives		Communication Action	Current Activity
6.2a	All staff within the Group to be made aware of the correct communications protocol	Distribution of Housing Strategy and Services Communications Strategy.	Strategy to be distributed November 2014.
		An e-copy of the 'Scottish National Standards for Information and Advice Providers' to be held centrally in the Galashiels Area Office for reference.	Action to be carried out 2015. A hard copy of the National Standards can be found in the Service Managers' office.
6.2b	All marketing/promotional materials to be held centrally	Central database of all downloadable information to be compiled and made available for all in the Group to access.	Action to be carried out 2015.
6.2c	All public information to be accurate, up-to-date and presented in plain English	Annual meeting to be held with Service Managers to review Communications Strategy and identify any information gaps which may exist.	Next meeting to be held circa March 2015.
		Communications working group to be established to review all promotional material on the corporate website.	Working Group to be established early 2015 in conjunction with Service Managers.
		'Communications Champion' to be identified in each Service within the Group; HSDA to regularly liaise with representatives and internal partners as required.	To be completed as action of Communications Working Group; 2015.
		Review and implement procedure for auditing posters and leaflets across the Group.	To be completed as action of Communications Working Group; 2015.
6.2d	Changes under Welfare Reform to be clearly communicated via corporate website.	Multi-agency meeting to be held to allow for a joint-up, consistent approach to website content.	To be discussed/reviewed with Jane Keir in early 2015.
		Range of leaflets/fact-sheets to be designed and uploaded to website and made available in Libraries and Contact Centres.	To be discussed/reviewed with Jane Keir in early 2015.

6.3 Ensure effective communication with the Group's target audience

Objectives		Communication Action	Current Activity
6.3a	Contact details for each Service to be clearly advertised.	Contact details to be made available on all webpages, leaflets, strategic documents and any other public material.	Ongoing; continuous. To be reviewed by Communications Working Group.
		HSDA to liaise with Revenues and Benefits to ensure that Group's contact details are included in annual Council Tax leaflet (2015 version).	Action to be carried out November 2014.
		Signs with names and contact telephone number for each Service to be erected in foyer of Galashiels Area Office.	To be discussed at Admin Team Meeting in November 2014.
6.3b	All public information to be accessible.	Google Analytic statistics to be regularly monitored and submitted to managers.	Ongoing; continuous.
		Equalities Impact Assessments to be conducted on all communications materials.	To be completed as action of Communications Working Group; 2015.
		Promotion of information via social media outlets to be explored.	To be reviewed/discussed at annual Communications Meeting; circa March 2015.
		Report on Scottish Social Housing Charter performance to be drafted.	Action to be completed by November 2014.
		Freedom of Information requests to be handled efficiently as per corporate guidelines under the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002.	Ongoing; continuous.
6.3c	Service Users to receive robust and efficient service from the Admin Team as first point of contact	Implement Zeacom telephony system to allow for more detailed communications statistics and more advanced monitoring of potential 'lost' calls.	HSDA currently liaising with Jane Keir and Peter Brown and Les Grant from Revenues and Benefits. Anticipated 'go live' date for Zeacom November 2014.
		Regular Admin Team meetings with Service Managers to be held.	Ongoing; continuous.
6.3d	All public material to be developed with the Service User in mind	Develop service user involvement in all communications.	To be reviewed/discussed at annual Communications Meeting; circa March 2015.
		Review demand for translations of communications materials and provision of same.	To be completed as action of Communications Working Group; 2015.
		Regularly review information packs	To be completed as action of Communications Working Group; 2015.
6.3e	Target audience are able to comment on the level of service that they receive	Housing webpages to clearly explain corporate complaints procedures.	Ongoing; continuous
		Review evaluation/service user feedback forms.	To be reviewed/discussed at annual Communications Meeting; circa March 2015.
		Explore potential for web-based service user feedback.	To be completed as action of Communications Working Group; 2015.

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