

housing strategy and services

ANNUAL REPORT 2014-15

Housing Strategy | Homelessness Services | Welfare Benefits Service | Employment Support Service

HOUSING STRATEGY & SERVICES
CHIEF EXECUTIVES



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HOUSING STRATEGY AND SERVICES

FOREWORD



As the fragile economic climate and era of austerity continues, we are reminded of the important social and economic role we play in the Scottish Borders. As a statutory housing authority, Housing Strategy & Services main focus is ensuring that the Council meets its statutory duties regarding access to, and the provision of, affordable housing and the prevention of homelessness.

We have seen another busy year for the services, with the progression of plans to provide over 100 affordable homes for mid-market rent, using the National Housing Trust/Local Authority Variant funding model.

The Welfare Benefits Service has been actively involved throughout the Scottish Borders on a number of issues relating to Welfare Reform and officers have experienced an increase in the number of complex cases they are dealing with. Income gains achieved for customers have also remained above target and were over £6.1 million.

Scottish Borders Council's Work Opportunities Scheme was also developed and adopted. The scheme offers work opportunities to improve the employment prospects of those furthest from the labour market. Over the year 28 young people have been recruited into Modern Apprentice positions in the council and 10 young people have completed work experience placements.

The Council also successfully secured over £1.6 million from the Scottish Government to fund the delivery of Home Energy Efficiency programmes in selected areas across the Borders. This year we have supported 370 properties to get External Wall Insulation. In addition to huge carbon savings and reductions in fuel bills these programmes also significantly support the local economy.

Tackling poverty remains a priority for the group. It is well documented that housing, poverty and health are inextricably linked, and various research evidence shows that better housing and improved income can lead to some improvements in self reported physical and mental health.

Looking ahead 2015/16 looks set to be another interesting and challenging year for the services. We will see Universal Credit beginning to bed in, the Integration of Health and Social Care Services and in September passenger services operating on the new Borders Railway. Robust planning and working closely with partners and clients has helped the Housing Strategy Services Group prepare for these changes.

I am very pleased to be able to present the Housing Strategy & Services Annual Report for 2014/15, and to underline the group's commitment to working with partners, and with the people of the Scottish Borders, to deliver high quality, affordable homes and related services.

Councillor Frances Renton
Executive Member for Social Work and Housing,
Scottish Borders Council

HOUSING STRATEGY AND SERVICES

GROUP MANAGERS INTRODUCTION



As Group Manger for Housing Strategy and Services I am delighted to report on another successful year delivering crucial services across the Borders. This report is structured to reflect our four main service areas and outlines some of our latest key successes and achievements.

Housing Strategy and Services, as well as Homelessness, also includes a Welfare Benefits Service whose role is to maximize the take-up of social security benefits and tax credits by the citizens of the Scottish Borders and an Employment Support Service which was tasked with improving performance and mainstreaming the delivery of supported employment activity both within and out with the council.

In 2014/15 thousands of people from across the Borders approached our services. Among some very challenging, and often complex circumstances, staff across the service have worked hard to support people and to find solutions wherever they can. Many of our clients, and indeed residents of the Borders, are faced with continuing economic challenges including problems with money, employment, fuel poverty and housing.

Over the last few years the group has undergone some significant changes, with the restructuring of the Homeless Service, establishment of the Employment Support Service and the re-location of all four services to the Galashiels Area Office. The work we have done to build our group and work closer together to focus on what our current and future clients need has laid strong foundations for meeting future challenges.

We are fortunate in that we have dedicated and committed staffs who strive to deliver year on year improvement, despite economic climate and funding limitations. I am confident that we will be able to continue current progress through 2015/16 and see the continuation of effective Housing and Social Justice Services that strive to meet the needs of the people of the Borders.

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the hard work and efforts by all staff in continuing to provide excellent services to our customers.

CATHIE FANCY

Group Manager Housing Strategy and Services

HOUSING STRATEGY AND SERVICES

HOUSING STRATEGY

WHO WE ARE

The role of the Housing Strategy Team is to plan and deliver the vision for housing and housing services across the Scottish Borders, as detailed in the Local Housing Strategy.

The team work closely with private sector housing, the Planning Department, housing developers, Registered Social Landlords and third sector organisations to plan, develop and improve housing and related services. This includes housing advice services, the development of affordable housing, improve the condition and energy efficiency of housing in the Borders and ensuring there is a long term strategic vision for housing.

Key Statistics 2014/15

- 62 affordable homes have been provided
- SBC has agreed to progress plans to seek to provide up to 200 affordable homes for mid-market rent
- 14 empty homes have been brought back into use
- SBC successfully secured £1,623,023 of funding from the Scottish Government's HEEPS:ABS
- There are currently 5,744 approved registered Landlords and 8,485 approved registered properties
- Disabled adaptations - 85 households were assisted and over 170 site visits made

AFFORDABLE HOUSING DELIVERY

2014-15 was the final year of the first 3 year Strategic Local Programme agreed with Scottish Government. 62 affordable homes have been provided this year. Overall the arrangement worked well, and lessons have been learned. However the completion of 3 construction projects for Registered Social Landlords [RSLs] have slipped beyond March 2015, meaning that these 87 affordable homes will be counted towards 2015/16 completions.

The Council has been able to consistently demonstrate assisting in the delivery of affordable housing. In 2014-15 the Council used Developer Contributions to assist RSL projects at Queen Elizabeth Drive and Chris Paterson Place Galashiels, and Jedward Terrace Denholm. The Council also used Second Homes/Council Tax to assist projects at Queen Elizabeth Drive Galashiels, High Street Innerleithen, Castle View Ayton and Dunwhinny Gardens Peebles.

Key areas of delivery 2014-15

- Eildon Housing Association completed 12 homes at Old School Place Lauder, 15 homes at Kingsmuir Drive Peebles, 18 homes at Rodger Fish Gardens Kelso, 2 homes at Old Town Peebles, and acquired a house at Chris Paterson Place Galashiels.
- Bridge Homes acquired 4 homes at Castle View Ayton, and 6 homes at Queen Elizabeth Drive Galashiels for mid-market renting as part of the Council's National Housing Trust/ Local Authority Variant initiative.
- 3 house sales were concluded using assistance from the Open Market Shared Equity mechanism

Strategic Housing Investment Plan [SHIP]

The SHIP 2015-20 was submitted to Scottish Ministers in October 2013, ahead of the November deadline. This sets out agreed and prioritised affordable housing projects for Registered Social Landlords [RSLs] to develop within a 5 year rolling planning horizon. The current SHIP identified 410 new affordable homes for anticipated completion from 2015-20, and proposed new housing projects at Galashiels, Hawick, Eyemouth, Duns, Kelso, Morebattle, Newtown St Boswells, Ayton, Cockburnspath, and Peebles.

This SHIP was delivered via tried and tested processes by partnership working with locally active RSLs and public utilities, and was produced to comply with new Guidance published by Scottish Government, which also means that future SHIP submissions will be on a bi-annual basis. This SHIP will be the basis for the second three year Strategic Local Plan, for period 2016-2019, which will agree programming and funding intentions to direct Scottish Government grant to assist Borders projects which will provide more certainty in project delivery.

For the first time, this SHIP identifies projects to be delivered via the Council's National Housing Trust/Local Authority initiative to deliver up to 200 affordable houses for mid-market rent.

LOCAL HOUSING STRATEGY [LHS]

The Housing [Scotland] Act 2001, places a statutory duty on Scottish Councils to produce a Local Housing Strategy. The Scottish Borders Local Housing Strategy 2012-17 provides the strategic direction to address need and demand and to inform future investment in housing and related services across the Council's area.

2014-15 was the third year of the current LHS. We have seen more progress being made by the Council and its partners working towards the strategic vision – "every person in the Scottish Borders has a home which is secure, affordable, in good condition, energy efficient, where they can live independently and be part of a vibrant community".



Dunwhinny Gardens, Peebles: Eildon Housing Association



Old School Place, Lauder: Eildon Housing Association



Todlaw 3, Duns: Berwickshire Housing Association



Roger Fish Gardens Kelso: Eildon Housing Association

The strategic priorities are –

1. The supply of new housing meets the needs of the community.
2. People have better access to good quality energy efficient homes.
3. People are less likely to become homeless and those affected by homelessness have improved access to settled accommodation.
4. More people with particular needs /or requiring support are able to live independently in their own homes.

The LHS covers a wide range of actions which cover all tenures – owner-occupied housing, private rented housing, and affordable housing to address identified outcomes. These range from preventing and tackling homelessness, tackling fuel poverty, delivering more affordable homes of the right type in the right place, providing housing for older people and people with particular housing care and support needs, and improving housing conditions.

Scottish Government has also published new LHS Guidance; this is being considered to ensure that the next LHS is developed and complies with the new Guidance.

The Local Housing Strategy Partnership Group met on the 6th March 2015 and the meeting was chaired by Jim Hayton from the Association of Local Authority Chief Housing Officers (ALACHO). The Group considered the progress of the LHS over the last year and some key areas of interest such as Health and Social Care Integration, Fuel Poverty, the Housing Needs and Demand Assessment and the achievements of our local Registered Social Landlords.

ON-LENDING To Registered Social Landlords

The Council has taken a leading role in seeking to support local RSLs by submitting a business case to Scottish Ministers in 2012/13, seeking consent to borrow to on-lend to assist affordable housing delivery. Scottish Government advised that there were policy issues to be considered, and so this led to the development of a policy framework through a consultative process and eventual publication of Guidance in 2014-15. Council Officers have actively been involved in this process. As a result, providing that Councils comply with the Guidance, they will be empowered to agree to on-lend to locally RSLs, and one RSL proposal has been received for consideration to date.



LHS Partnership meeting 6th March 2015

NATIONAL HOUSING TRUST/ LOCAL AUTHORITY VARIANT INITIATIVE

In December 2013, the Council agreed to progress plans to seek to provide up to 200 affordable homes for mid-market rent, using the National Housing Trust/Local Authority Variant funding model. Since then Bridge Homes has been established as the limited liability partnership company which will own the homes. Officers have investigated and engaged with owners and developers regarding 49 potential sites. Eleven of these sites are being actively progressed which could potentially provide around 80 homes, and a further 10 sites could potentially provide around 65 depending on a range of factors being resolved. 2 “windfall” opportunities enabled Bridge Homes to acquire 4 homes at Castle View Ayton and 6 homes at Queen Elizabeth Drive Galashiels. Bridge Homes has also concluded contracts with developers to provide 13 homes in Peebles, 8 homes Denholm and 6 homes in Innerleithen. The Council has also successfully sought confirmation that Scottish Government will extend the initiative until March 2019, which is anticipated will provide some more certainty in project delivery.

THE HOUSING (SCOTLAND) ACT 2014

The Housing (Scotland) Act (the Act) received Royal Assent on 1 August 2014 following a series of amendments during the parliamentary process. The Act will make changes to help the housing system operate more effectively and will also link to the housing and national performance outcomes.

The Act ends all right to buy entitlements in Scotland by August 1st 2016. It also gives social landlords more flexibility in the allocation and management of their housing stock and introduces a first-tier tribunal to deal with disputes in the private rented sector. It will give local authorities new discretionary powers to tackle disrepair in the private rented sector, introduce a new regulatory framework for letting agents in Scotland, modernise site licensing for mobile homes sites with permanent residents, place new requirements on private sector landlords to fit carbon monoxide detectors in properties with carbon-emitting appliances and to carry out electrical safety checks every five years.

HOUSING NEED AND DEMAND ASSESSMENT 2



SESplan Housing Need and Demand Assessment 2 (HNDA2) is the second SESplan

HNDA, covering the six administrative areas of South East Scotland. It has been prepared by the core Housing Market Partnership to provide accurate and reliable data on housing need and demand to inform the Main Issues Report (MIR) in advance of the second Strategic Development Plan (SDP2) and subsequent Local Development Plans (LDPs) and Local Housing Strategies (LHSs).

SESplan HNDA2 will be used to guide and help develop long-term strategic views of need and demand to inform LHSs and Development Plans. It will be used to inform policies aiming to provide an appropriate mix of housing and may also be used to inform other housing related decisions

EMPTY HOMES HOMES AGAIN PROJECT

The Homes Again Shared Service project has been in operation since April 2012. The project is based on the sharing of two full time Regional Empty Homes Officers between the five partner councils. The Empty Homes Officers are working directly with empty home owners to encourage them to bring their properties back into use. Scottish Borders Council's officer is currently working 4 days per week, sharing the time between Scottish Borders, Dumfries and Galloway and East Lothian councils.



The approach to dealing with empty homes within the Scottish Borders is set within a strategic context. The aims and objectives within the Empty Homes Strategy ensure that empty homes issues are appropriately contextualised and integrated with the wider aims and objectives of the Local Housing Strategy. The council Empty Homes Strategy has been updated, with the latest version covering the period 2015 – 18.

The Empty Homes Officer engages with property owners, particularly focussing on properties that are just 6 months void. The most effective method in dealing with owners has been through discussion and negotiation, addressing issues as to why properties are empty and finding solutions. 14 properties have been brought back in use in 2014 through direct engagement. There are a further 50 owners receiving support through the action plan developed through the project.



CASE STUDY: MR C

The owner of this property inherited it upon the death of his parents. The home was closed up and unoccupied for 5 years, and was the cause of complaints to the council from neighbours due to the deteriorating condition of the home, in particular unsecure access to an outdoor store which contained paint and tools, allegations of vermin infestation, and untidy gardens. Environmental Services carried out checks at the property but no action was required. The case was passed to the Empty Homes officer who wrote to the owner on numerous occasions asking them to discuss their plans for the property. No response was received. However it was also noted by the Empty Homes officer that the owner had another empty property, both of which were in arrears with council tax. Following a discussion with the council tax department, recovery of the arrears was undertaken, at which point the owner advised that they would occupy this property and consider sale or rental of the additional property.

Outcome: The property was occupied by the owner in April 2014.



HOME ENERGY ADVICE SERVICE

The Home Energy Advice Service has had a very busy year, providing energy advice to households in the Scottish Borders through telephone enquiries, home visits, presentations and heavily supporting the area based Home Energy Efficiency Programmes.

The Service continues to meet the needs of households in the Scottish Borders and is working to successfully meet the aims and objectives set out in the Fuel Poverty Delivery Plan 2013-16. The Home Energy Advisor spends a high proportion of his time acting as customer liaison for clients benefiting from the scheme and within the project areas. He also provides a high level of after care for clients supporting behavioural change of home occupiers.

The Advisor also conducted 5 presentations in 2014 which reached an audience of 60 people. This included 2 training sessions to staff at Scottish Borders Housing Association; 1 for technical staff and the other for housing officers. Training and advice was provided to support staff working with tenants to better equip them to support customers

potentially in fuel poverty. This included information on the extent of fuel poverty in the Borders and impact on your tenant's lives; as well as information on tariffs, fuel types, grants, loans and energy bills including details on proportions between heating, hot water and domestic appliances.

The case study below highlights the different areas of work the HEA carries out and how valuable this is to those who are vulnerable to fuel poverty:

CASE STUDY: MR AND MRS D

Mr D was referred by the Citizens Advice Bureau to the HEA as the client believed that there was an issue with his electricity meter and did not wish to pay his supplier until it was resolved. The HEA got in touch and met Mr and Mrs D at their home. The HEA checked the electricity meter and readings, confirmed the tariff, examined fuel bills, discussed the clients heating and hot water usage and noted particular aspects of the property. The client received high bills which he had paid but the HEA's investigation concluded that the current electricity tariff/meter was designed for storage heating and not wet electric direct heating. This had resulted in the higher charges as most of Mr and Mrs D's usage was during the day so resulting in peak charges. The HEA encouraged them to contact a supplier about a more appropriate tariff which is the most suitable for electric direct boilers. The client followed advice from the HEA and managed to change supplier and tariff. Mr D is now making significant savings in comparison with his previous charges.



Home Energy Scotland South East also received over 2000 calls from Borders residents in 2014, coordinated 144 events locally and engaged with over 500 through direct mail outs. Staff at the advice centre refers people for benefit and tax checks, tariff checks, Insulation schemes, loans, renewables information and in particular funding and schemes aimed specifically for those in fuel poverty.



HOME ENERGY EFFICIENCY PROGRAMMES

Scottish Borders Council successfully secured **£1,623,023** of funding from the Scottish Government's HEEPS:ABS 2014/15 allocation. This grant is to fund the delivery of Energy Efficiency programmes in selected areas across the Borders. The 2014/2015 project is being delivered via partnership with Changeworks, Home Energy Scotland, and the appointed installers.



External Wall Insulation

The Council continue to work closely with Registered Social Landlords (RSL) on External Wall Insulation projects which help to promote a 'whole area approach' and avoid only properties of certain tenure being insulated leaving others unimproved. The Council are currently working with Eildon Housing Association, Berwickshire Housing Association and Scottish Borders Housing Association in the following areas:

- Langlee
- Tweedbank
- Peebles
- Innerleithen

A major change in 2014/15 from previous years was the introduction of a customer contribution. The levels of funding available from the Energy Companies Obligation (ECO) have continued to

fall and the cost of external wall insulation is greater than the maximum ECO and HEEPS:ABS funding available for each property. The level of contributions varies between projects and property types and sizes; they range from £500 to £1500. There are interest free loans available from the Scottish Government to support private householders with this up front cost.

In Peebles a time lapse camera has been set up in 2 properties to capture the External Wall Insulation installation from start to finish. This footage should be available on the SBC's website toward the end of the summer 2015.



Before external wall insulation



After external wall insulation

Installers have almost completed the Langlee and Peebles schemes and will be on site at Innerleithen and Tweedbank in June 2015. Activity across all sites will increase significantly between June and September 2015 to ensure the deadline for completion of properties included in the 2014/15 programme is met and full spend is achieved.

If all householders decide to proceed with the offer we hope to insulate up to 370 properties with external wall insulation and 50 with cavity wall insulation as part of the 2014/15 programme:

- Supporting between 74 and 89 jobs (FTEs for one year);

- Employment increase worth £319,874 (one year);
- Annual energy savings of around £63,899;
- £31,949 increase in spending in local economy per year
- 20,000 tonnes of CO2 savings over the lifetime of the measures

Other Projects

In addition to the external wall insulation the 2014/15 programme also includes a project working with Berwickshire Housing Association targeting properties which were insulated with cavity wall insulation prior to the introduction of the Cavity Insulation Guarantee Agency and where the insulation has now failed. The failed insulation is extracted, the cavity refilled, with improved insulation material and a new 25 year guarantee is issued. This project targets BHA stock and private properties in the same area.

We have also been trialling a 'Property Health Check' project within the Burnfoot area. Burnfoot has the lowest ranking SIMD area in the Scottish Borders and also a high rate of child poverty. These factors have made the area eligible for various grants over the years and it has been targeted intensively. This project takes a slightly different approach and rather than offering certain a measure in advance, an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) is completed to identify what measures the house would benefit from.

The householder then receives a follow up visit from a Home Energy Advisor to talk through the report and agree a package of measures. Cavity and loft insulation are available but also a range of 'softer' measures we have not been able to offer in the past like reflective radiator panels, draught proofing, LED lighting, secondary glazing etc. We have engaged with around 30 householders so far and the final advice visits are scheduled to be completed by around mid May.

HEALTH AND WELL-BEING RESEARCH

This research explored the impact of insulating homes on the health and wellbeing of its occupants and how the improvement in the housing fabric should lead to health improvements. The research focused on a programme of external wall insulation (EWI) installations in 137 properties through the HEEPS:ABS 1 programme (2013/14). The research was conducted via surveys to residents before and after the installation of EWI.

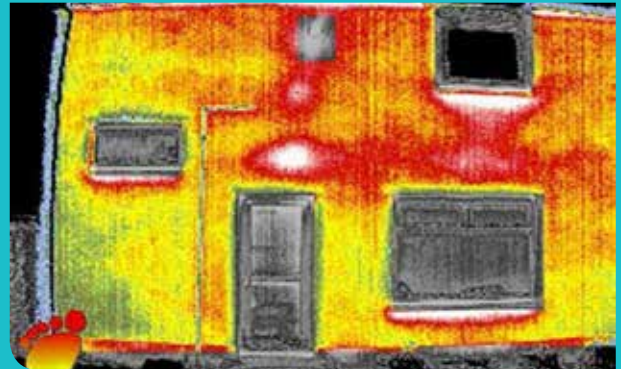
The 'after' survey has demonstrated a number of benefits realised from the insulation:

- Almost two thirds of householders (63%) thought their home was easier to keep warm;
- Four out of seven householders who had suffered from mould and/or condensation before the insulation was installed stated that this had reduced;
- Almost a third of householders (30%) felt their energy bills had decreased since the insulation was installed;
- Ten householders stated that they were less stressed and/or anxious about their energy bills;
- The vast majority of householders (86%) thought the external appearance of their home had improved. Some people felt this would increase the value of their home.

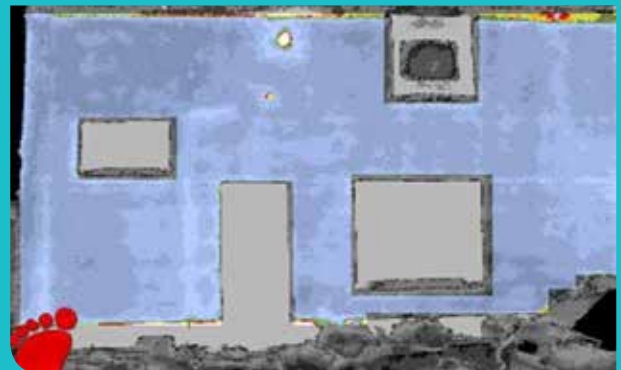
"It looks a lot better, much improved; it must have added some value, so that's a benefit"

"We didn't want to spend any more than we had to so we were taking a very careful view of what we did with the thermostat. Now we feel we can be just a little bit more liberal and we know that we are not spending any more money but we are getting a lot more heat from the system, a lot more comfort"

"It has made a big difference to the house from what it was before... We're up on a hill and the wind really gets up around here so it was quite cold before."



Thermal image showing property before External Wall



Thermal imaging after External Wall Insulation installed

FUEL POVERTY MAPPING

In 2014/15 a fuel poverty mapping exercise was carried out for the Scottish Borders in partnership with Changeworks. The purpose was to identify areas of high fuel poverty and cross reference this with other deprivation datasets (e.g. SIMD). In the report a household in fuel poverty is defined as having to spend more than 10% of its net income¹ before housing costs on all household fuel use to maintain a satisfactory heating regime (in accordance with the Scottish Fuel Poverty Statement).²

Figure One: Fuel Poverty in the Scottish Borders

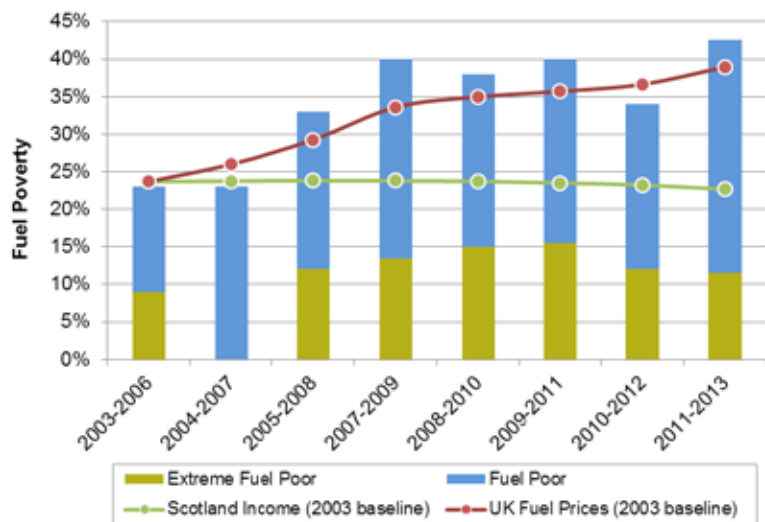
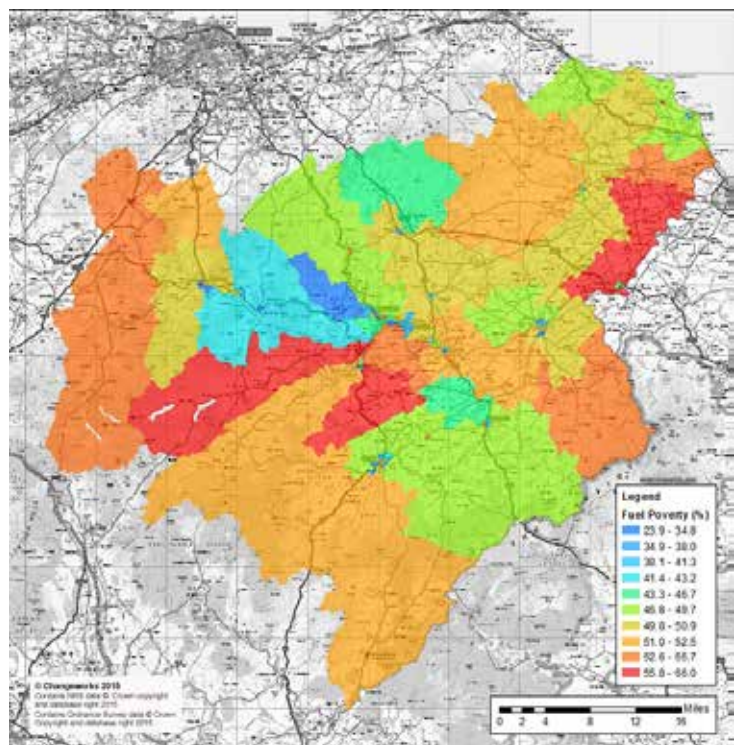


Figure Two: Fuel Poverty Map of the Scottish Borders 2015



The fuel poverty map allows estimation of fuel poverty density by data zone³ and is based on factors that increase the likelihood of households living in fuel poverty (such as single pensioners and unemployed residents). It therefore offers a useful resource for targeting energy efficiency provision to areas most in need through programmes such as Home Energy Efficiency Programmes for Scotland: Area Based Schemes (HEEPS: ABS).

The fuel poverty map acts as a useful complementary dataset to the SIMD. Previous HEEPS: ABS programmes have used the SIMD as the principal dataset for area selection to good effect with successful programmes in Langlee, Tweedbank and Burnfoot amongst others. However, many of the SIMD data zones have now been targeted by the Council and therefore the fuel poverty map offers an alternative resource for future programmes.

¹ Including Housing benefit or Income Support for Mortgage Interest.

² Considered to be 21 degrees for the main living areas and 18 degrees for other occupied areas for a period of 9 hours in every 24 (or 16 in 24 over the weekend); with two hours being in the morning and seven hours in the evening.

³ Data zones are population-based areas drawn using the 2011 Census and designed to contain between 500 – 1000 residents. They therefore can vary greatly in geographic size with very small land area in urban areas and very large land area in remote rural areas.

PRIVATE LANDLORD REGISTRATION

Under the Antisocial Behaviour Etc. (Scotland) Act 2004, all private landlords and their agents are required to register with the local authority in which they let their property. Scottish Borders Council currently has 5744 approved registered Landlords and 8485 approved registered properties.⁴

Over the past year the Enforcement Officer has initiated action against 79 private landlords in relation to registration issues. The Enforcement Officer also deals with complaints relating to repairs issues and property standards and works closely with private landlords to ensure that properties always meet the Repairing Standard. Complaints regarding the management practices and conduct of landlords towards tenants are also part of the Enforcement Officers remit. The Enforcement Officer has dealt with 35 cases in relation to repairs issues and management practices this year.

Engaging with our Landlords

The Private Landlord Registration pages on the corporate website are constantly monitored and updated to ensure that robust and accurate information is available to members of the public. The Housing Strategy Team has included useful 'help sheets' which provided step-by-step information on the online registration system and several pages detailing important legislative changes such as the Tenancy Deposit Schemes and Tenant Information Packs have been drafted.

The Team also issues regular newsletters to ensure that Landlords and Agents are kept abreast of any legislative changes. These newsletters are distributed to all registered Landlords and Agents via post and email, and are also available for download on the corporate website.



SCHEME OF ASSISTANCE

The Housing (Scotland) Act 2006 was introduced to address issues of housing quality and condition in the private sector and changed the way local authorities can help homeowners and the private rented sector to do repairs, maintenance and improvements. The main aim of the legislation is to encourage owners to plan and care for their own properties and remove the requirement for local authorities to offer financial assistance to carry out repair and maintenance. The Act also places a mandatory duty on local authorities to provide assistance to households seeking to meet the needs of a disabled occupant.

Mandatory grants remain but only for adaptations essential to meet the needs of disabled persons. Direct grant aid (with the exception of unwholesome private water supply) is no longer available for repair or improvement work.

House Condition

The Scheme of Assistance

- provides free advice about how to carry out repair and maintenance to property
- can assist with organising repairs
- offers practical assistance that identifies and prioritises repair and maintenance works to property
- referrals are made from Borders Care and Repair regarding property repair

In 2014/15 23 households were visited, including some empty properties, and assisted regarding repairs and maintenance to their property. Information and advice have been given to a further 80 via phone and email with 200 guidance leaflets having been issued.



⁴ Statistics as of 01 April 2015

The Private Sector Housing grants officer has also undertaken a significant number of conditions surveys for properties which are currently included in the Council's Private Sector Leasing Scheme. The officer will continue to support the continued development of the scheme and associated policy and procedure throughout 2015/16 to ensure a high standard of temporary accommodation is achieved and maintained, The quality of accommodation is a priority for the Council and the Team is now in a good position to progress improvements in quality and standards.

Disabled Adaptations

Using the Housing Strategy Team budget, the Council contracts with Borders Care and Repair who assist homeowners and private sector tenants aged 60 and over, and people of any age with disabilities. Borders Care and Repair are recognised as being an exemplar of good practice by Scottish Government in the delivery of adaptations. They provide a free service to project manage all repairs, improvements and / or adaptations , and provide a small repair and Handyman service. These activities all help to enable people to continue to live independently in the community.

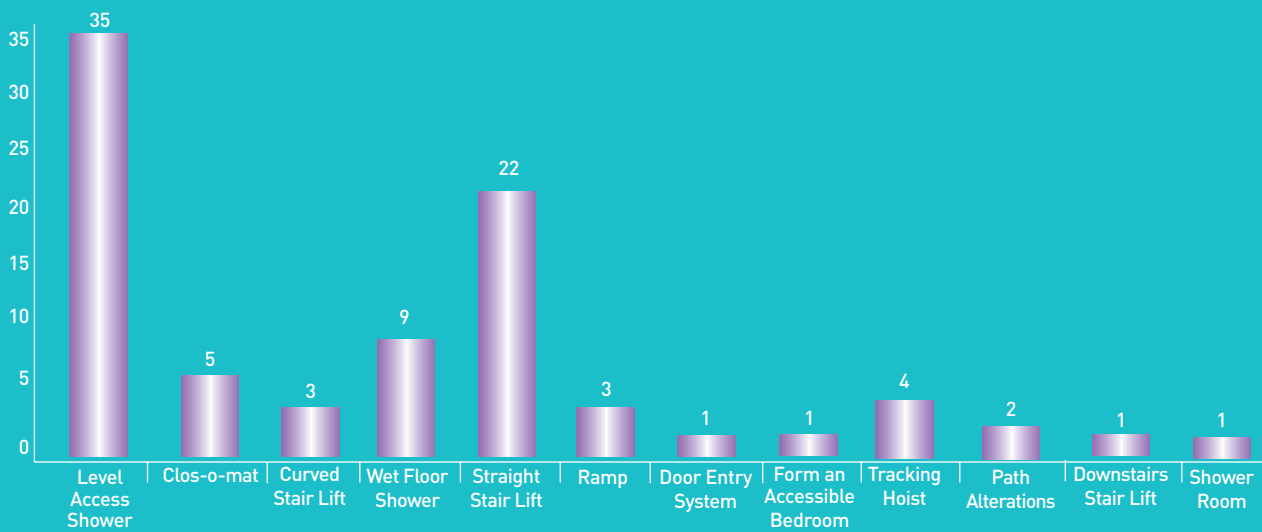
They also project manage delivery of "Stage 3" major adaptations in homes owned by Eildon HA, Berwickshire HA , Scottish Borders HA and Waverley Housing. Grant from the Change Fund to develop new processes to pilot channelling all major adaptation cases via the Care and Repair service has is being used to fund additional Occupational Therapist capacity . The pilot will be evaluated and report written during 2015/16.

During 2014/15 Borders Care and Repair –

- Carried out 75 private sector major adaptations
- Tackled 25 Below Tolerable Standard cases
- Carried out 20 small repairs
- Carried out 355 small adaptations
- Carried out 97 "Stage 3" adaptations
- Carried out 4,495 Handyman job



Figure Three: Completed Adaptations 2014/15



Effective adaptations and enabling people to remain in their own homes can prevent people from being admitted to hospital as their home is fit for purpose and they are less prone to accidents or falls, but in addition it also supports hospital discharges. For many older and disabled people going home from hospital can be a difficult time, and for those leaving hospital with reduced mobility or a new physical impairment adaptations are key to supporting them to live with dignity and regain an independent life. The work of Borders Care and Repair service is extremely valuable to people across the Borders. The service can really help prevent delayed hospital discharges and reduces pressures on other NHS and Social Care services.

2014 means celebrating 10 years of Care and repair. A total of £6 million spent in the Scottish Borders over the last ten year years:

- 83% on Major adaptations
- 11% on improvement works
- 6% on Minor adaptations

Over the last 10 years Scottish Borders Council has worked closely with Borders Care & Repair, making a significant contribution to ensuring older Borders residents continue to live independent and productive lives.

Future Priorities

The overall service directorate for Housing Strategy and Services is to: **‘Tackle and reduce poverty to achieve greater social justice for people in the Scottish Borders’**

One of the main priorities for the Housing Strategy Team in 2015 is the development of the next Local Housing Strategy which will cover the period 2017-2022. We also intend to:

- Implement the Council’s NHT Programme
- Develop the Strategic Housing Investment Plan 2016-2021
- Implement Year 3 (2015/16) of Home Energy Efficiency Programme/ Area Based Scheme and develop a programme for year 4 (2016/17)
- Embed Housing’s contribution to the Health and Social Care agenda





HOUSING STRATEGY AND SERVICES

HOMELESSNESS SERVICES

WHO WE ARE

Scottish Borders Council's Homelessness Service consists of a team of specially trained officers who are committed to preventing and tackling homelessness in the Scottish Borders.

Homelessness is a complex and extreme issue that often affects vulnerable people, requiring involvement from a range of agencies including housing providers, health professionals, social work, education and the voluntary sector. Our key partners include NHS Borders, Shelter, Scottish Borders Housing Association, Waverley Housing, Berwickshire Housing Association and Eildon Housing Association. We also work closely with private sector landlords through our private landlords' forum. We are committed to involving service users in the design and delivery of the Service.

The number of people contacting the Homelessness Service has remained broadly constant over the last 2 years. 964 people approached the Homelessness Service in 2014/15. 636 of these accessed the Service through the prevention team and were involved in prevention activities. Of these cases, 322 went on to request or require a statutory homeless assessment. In total 535 people were assessed as statutorily homeless.

The primary reasons for homelessness have largely remained unchanged over the years and relate to parents or other family or friends no longer willing to accommodate the applicant, non-violent relationship breakdown, and violent relationship breakdown.

Since April 2014, the Homelessness Service has been operating the Private Sector Leasing Scheme, managing properties leased from the private sector to provide accommodation for homeless people.



Key Statistics 2014/15

- 964 people approached the Homelessness Service
- 357 applicants have been provided temporary accommodation in the past year
- 53 evictions have been prevented
- 84 applicants were helped to secure private rented accommodation through the Deposit Guarantee Scheme

STATUTORY HOMELESSNESS ASSESSMENT AND THE PROVISION OF ACCOMMODATION TO HOMELESS PEOPLE

The Homelessness Service's Assessment and Accommodation Team continues to work towards improving the standard of temporary accommodation for homeless applicants, and provides those who require a statutory assessment the assistance to move to settled permanent accommodation that is sustainable and meets the needs of the applicant and their family. The Service achieves this through close working relationships with Registered Social Landlords, Social Work and Safer Communities partners.

In the past year, the Service has dealt with 648 assessments and has assisted 535 of applicants who were assessed as homeless or threatened with homelessness. The Service has also provided temporary accommodation to 357 applicants in the past year.

Of these 535 people who were assessed as statutorily homeless, 67% of these were able to access secure tenancies. It is important to ensure the best possible outcome for everyone accessing the Service: homelessness can impact on someone's health, self-esteem and self-confidence. It is important to build people's skills, confidence and capability in order to empower them to feel in control of their lives again.

FINANCIAL INCLUSION

The Homelessness Service's Financial Inclusion Officer works with people who are homeless or potentially homeless to help them with money matters, including housing costs, welfare benefits and debt management.

In 2014/15, this Financial Inclusion Service contributed directly to preventing 53 households from being evicted and achieved the following:

- 53 evictions prevented
- Advice only cases (gains): £771,44
- Full cases (gains): £467,450
- Housing benefit awarded: £654,156
- Backdated housing benefit awarded: £118,853



The case study below demonstrates the valued approach in assisting and making a difference for some of our vulnerable clients in accessing their benefit entitlement:

CASE STUDY: MR X

Mr X was placed in homeless temporary accommodation as he was homeless and had just been released from prison. A full Housing Benefit (HB) claim had been completed and submitted but Revenues and Benefits required further information on his claim to a social security benefit. Mr X lived a very chaotic life style and was not always able to provide information. Mr X also left temporary accommodation and then came back. There were further issues with the client as he found employment and subsequently left this employment then went in to work and then unemployed. Mr X failed to keep Revenues and Benefits updated on his changes and as a result had high rent arrears. When I was allocated the case in March 2015 I met with Mr X and got all the information required to support a new claim for HB and I requested a backdate of HB. The result was that Mr X was awarded full HB and backdated HB. This cleared a large part of the rent arrear but not all as Mr X was in employment for periods during his HB claim. I completed an income and expenditure with Mr X and agreed that Mr X pay a small amount to clear the remaining rent arrears. As Mr X was no longer working I assisted Mr X to make a new claim for Job-Seekers Allowance (income-based)

- Backdated housing benefit of £8,124.53
- JSA (IB) of £72.40 per week; equating to £3,764.48 per annum
- Housing benefit of £178.52 per week; equating to £9,283.04 per annum
- Council tax benefit of £16.47 per week; equating to £856.44 per annum

Total benefit awarded: £22,029

HOUSING SUPPORT SERVICE

Homelessness Services Housing Support offers short-term support to assist individuals to live independently within their local community. Through a wide range of activities, the support provided enables people to secure, establish and manage their accommodation whilst promoting their rights and responsibilities, both as an individual and as a tenant. Housing support is offered to all Homelessness Service applicants and gives applicants the opportunity to develop a personal support plan that is tailored to their specific needs and circumstances.

A total number of 425 people contacted the Housing Support Service in 2014/15, with 237 active cases being allocated to Housing Support Officers.

77% of active cases were closed in 2014/15. The primary reason reported for case closure was the successful resettlement of the client (67%).



DEPOSIT GUARANTEE SCHEME

Scottish Borders Council's Deposit Guarantee Scheme (DGS) provides the guarantee of a deposit, payable to a private landlord, if any damage is incurred during the tenancy.

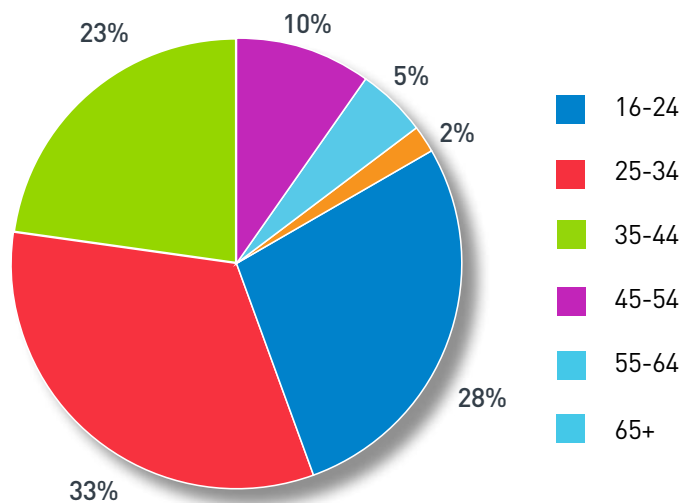
The scheme enables people on low incomes to seek homes within a housing sector that offers more flexibility and variety of accommodation. Not only is this a valuable tool in the reduction and prevention of homelessness within the Borders, but it is also a great opportunity for the Council to

further enhance the strong partnership Housing Strategy and Homelessness Services have established with private landlords.

During 2014/2015 the scheme assisted 84 applicants out of 119 referrals to secure a privately rented tenancy.

The age range of these applicants ranged from 17 years to 72 years, with an average age of 33 years. The majority of DGS applicants were female, with 57% of all applicants in 2014-15 being female, and 43% being male.

Figure Four: DGS applications by age



PRIVATE SECTOR LEASING SCHEME

The purpose of the in-house Private Sector Leasing Scheme is to secure and manage accommodation from private rented sector landlords, in order to provide short to medium stay accommodation and as a housing option to prevent homelessness. By maximising the use of private rented sector tenancies, this will contribute to the overall objectives of the Homelessness Service in terms of preventing homelessness and meeting its statutory responsibilities relative to the provision of temporary accommodation.

The overall outcomes for the service will be:

- Significantly reduce the use and time spent in Bed and Breakfast accommodation for homeless households;
- Procure a wide range of short and medium term accommodation from the private rented market for service users;

- Provide access to temporary accommodation without impacting on the supply of social rented housing.

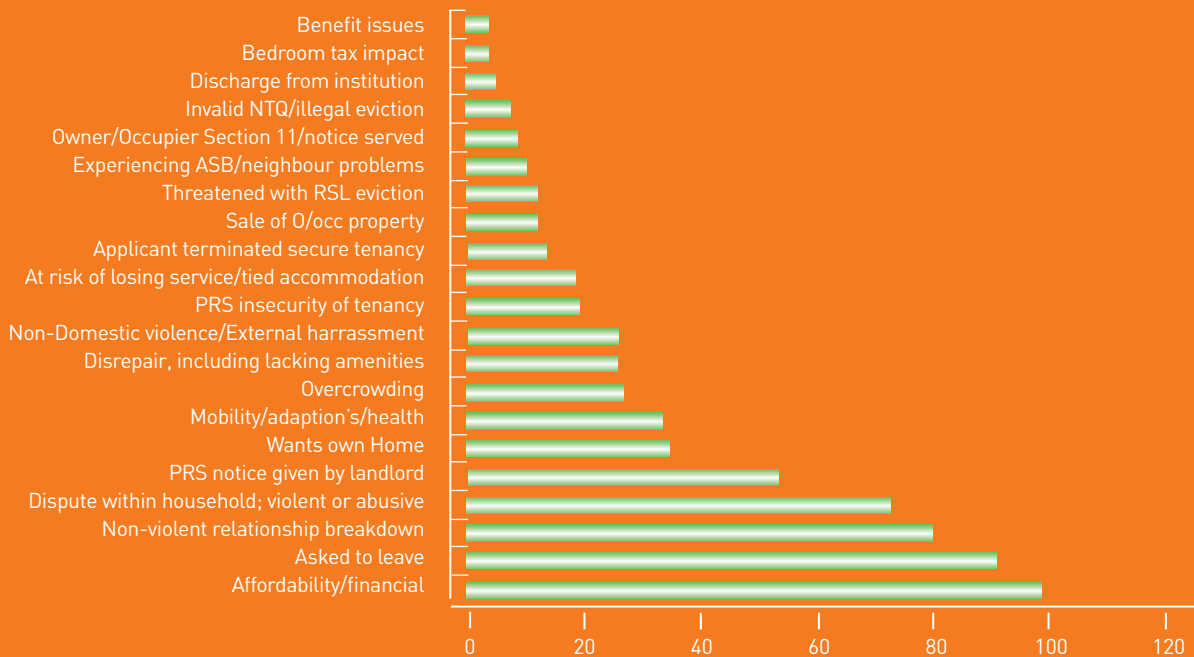
The Service has been managed in-house since April 2014 with 61 private properties currently being leased from private landlords.

HOMELESS PREVENTION TEAM

The Homelessness Prevention Team provides advice and assistance to homeless or potentially homeless households in a bid to prevent them from becoming homeless and, if necessary, to secure suitable and sustainable alternative accommodation for them.

During 2014/2015 the Prevention Team took 1,004 calls where advice was provided. 636 of those completed a housing options assessment.

FIGURE FIVE: REASONS GIVEN FOR CONTACTING THE PREVENTION TEAM



DATA RECORDING

2014/2015 also saw the introduction of the Scottish Government's 'Prevent1' for the data management and reporting of Homelessness Prevention activity within the Scottish Borders. The Homelessness Service along with partners developed a database, meeting the requirements of the Scottish Government which went live on 1st April 2014.

'Prevent1' is currently in its infancy and the Homelessness Service has and will continue its involvement in the Scottish Government Homelessness Statistics Users Group to work with the Scottish Government and other local authorities in order to continue to develop 'Prevent1'.

DOMESTIC ABUSE

Approximately 12% of the people who contact the Homelessness Service for assistance do so because they are victims of abuse from a partner or ex-partner. Specialist homeless prevention officers work closely with the Domestic Abuse Advisory Service, Borders Women's Aid and the Violence Against Women. Partnership, to ensure that women and men fleeing domestic violence are provided with robust help and support.

PROCEDURES

Preventing And Responding To Domestic Abuse



Berwickshire Housing Association



Eildon Housing Association



Scottish Borders Council



Scottish Borders Housing Association



Waverley Housing

During 2014/2015, the Homelessness Service continued to work with the 4 local Registered Social Landlords and with the Safer Communities team to develop and implement a Unified Domestic Abuse Policy aimed at ensuring a consistent, co-ordinated and responsive approach by Borders housing providers to addressing the housing needs of women and men who suffer domestic abuse. This procedure has now been agreed by the 4 local Registered Social Landlords and training is arranged for early 2015/2016 to all frontline staff within Homelessness

The Homelessness Service has been greatly involved in the first year of the (Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference) MARAC process. 94 cases have been heard at MARAC. Incorporated in these cases, 89 children were also discussed as part of the household and Homelessness Service has contributed to the safety planning for these individuals. Homelessness Service was also involved in feedback sessions on MARAC in the first year, where some useful feedback was gained. Homelessness Service plan to continue this commitment to the MARAC process in 2015/2016.

THE MEDIATION SERVICE

In this reporting period there was a total of 7 mediation referrals received between April 2014 and March 2015. Two of these referrals completed the mediation process with one having moved in with her father and the other having secured their own tenancy. Both were successful in resolving the issues around the family relationships.

Referrals came from a variety of sources with the majority (6 referrals) coming from Homeless Prevention Officers. The other referral was received from an Assessment Officer.

PEER MENTORING – "INSIGHT"

The peer mentoring scheme had previously recruited six further volunteer peer mentors, who had completed the volunteer training program, although 3 volunteers have, due to other commitments, left the service. This means that there are six volunteers suitable to be matched to clients. The scheme received 4 referrals in total although unfortunately these were unable to be matched.

Following a review of why the Peer Mentors were not able to be matched, it was accepted that a further recruitment of Peer Mentors was required to target specific areas within the Scottish Borders. In October 2014 the Scheme attempted to recruit further volunteers and received eight interested volunteers. We are hoping to follow this up in 2015/16 and deliver further training to these volunteers in order to meet the gap identified.



CUSTOMER FEEDBACK

The Homelessness Service is committed to delivering a customer-focused service and has recently reviewed its Service User Involvement Strategy. The strategy ensures that the voice of service users and service user involvement is at the centre of all activities and services offered.

One method of service user involvement is by means of exit surveys for existing service users. These are carried out by the Assessment Team, the Prevention Team, people in temporary accommodation and the Housing Support Team.

Recent work with service users who are currently staying in temporary accommodation has found that 85% are satisfied with the quality of the temporary/emergency accommodation they were provided with.

The information below has been drawn together from Service User Feedback forms that people complete when they exit the Housing Support Service.

The Housing Support Service is committed to making sure that all aspects of their involvement are experienced as transparent, fair and equal. Our service user involvement framework therefore is designed to promote and highlight best practice and to ensure that the service continues both to meet needs and to improve the service for others.



'For the first time (being single) I felt very supported which took a lot of pressure off my circumstances.'

Service Delivery

100% of service users were happy with the way the support was delivered 88% when asked if they would make any changes to the way in which they were supported answered no.

Communication

100% of service users said they were kept well informed throughout the process: 'All relevant information was made available.'

Service Improvement

'I was very happy from start of service to the end; everybody I dealt with was very helpful and polite.' 'Everything was brilliant not sure any improvement is needed.' 'Happy with service, no suggestion for improvements.'

Further Comments

'The whole process of supporting and helping me in the situation which I was very helpful and I was satisfied with it. Without it would have been more stressful and difficult to get through by myself. I would definitely recommend your service to other people who can struggle with housing difficulties.'

'Thank you again for everything you and the service has done for me. It has changed my life.'

'Delighted with the service given to me'

FUTURE PRIORITIES

The Homelessness Service continues to improve the service through a wide range of initiatives including conducting a comprehensive assessment of Homelessness Service services, including self-assessment, service user feedback, mock inspection and 360 evaluation

We also intend to:

- Implement phase 2 of Northgate IT Management System
- Complete rolling review of Homelessness Policies and Procedures to address Welfare Reform Impacts
- Undertake comprehensive review of Homelessness Prevention Model implemented in 2011



HOUSING STRATEGY AND SERVICES

WELFARE BENEFITS SERVICE

WHO WE ARE

Scottish Borders Council's Welfare Benefits Service consists of a specialist team of advisers who offer advice and advocacy in relation to social security benefits and tax credits as well as representation at tribunals. Officers are regularly based in locality offices where they support Social Care and Health staff with their service users benefit enquires and in addition to this regularly participate in the delivery of training and awareness sessions to SBC staff, partners and stakeholders.

The aim of the service is to maximise income for the people of the Scottish Borders by ensuring that full and correct entitlements are in payment. Resolving benefit issues and increasing income can often help to improve the financial health and wellbeing of individuals and their families, with many customers reporting less stress and anxiety as well as fewer visits to their GP as a result of a positive intervention by the service.

In addition to the service's core budget, funding is received from Macmillan Cancer Care, Fairer Scotland Fund, Early Years and the Health and Welfare Development Fund which has allowed for the development of specific initiatives and projects.

This work contributes to the overall Housing Strategy and Service objective of 'Tackle and reduce poverty to achieve greater social justice for people in the Scottish Borders' and the following corporate priorities:



Priority 3 – Providing high quality support, care and protection to children, young people, adults, families and older people

Priority 4 – Building the capacity and resilience of our communities and voluntary sector

Priority 8 – Ensuring excellent, adaptable, collaborative and accessible public services

Key Statistics 2014/15

- Over £6.1 million income gains achieved by the service for customers - 105% of target
- 2,364 customers receiving advice, advocacy or representation – 100% of target

The overall number of people receiving advice, advocacy or representation from the Welfare Benefits Service has been broadly similar over the past two years. However, there are some fluctuations over the course of the year with the most obvious and consistent drop in December. This is very much in line with the office being closed over the Christmas holiday period as well as staff from other agencies who make referrals to the service.

The greatest proportion of customers using the Welfare Benefits service are considered to be either sick or have a disability.

Figure Six: Referral Trends 2013-2015

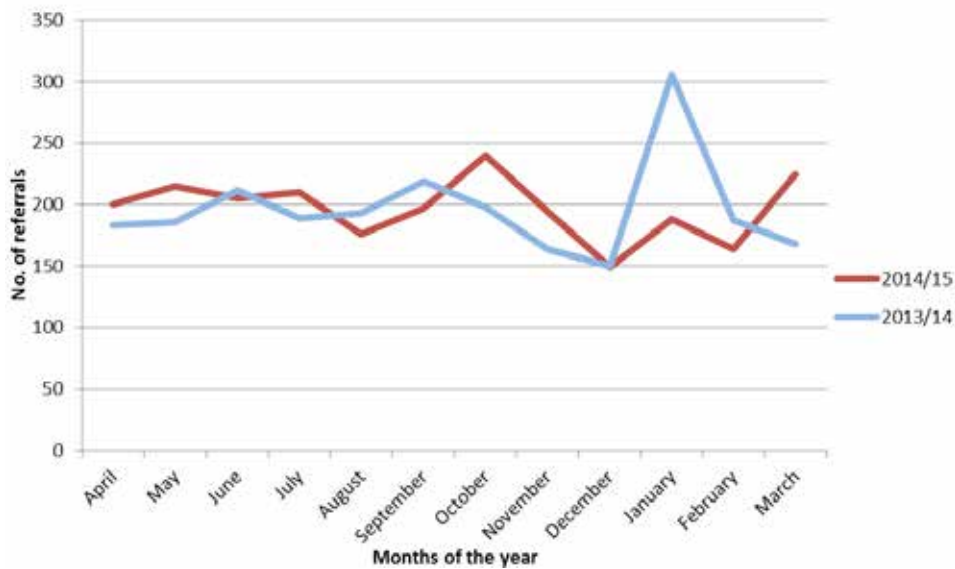
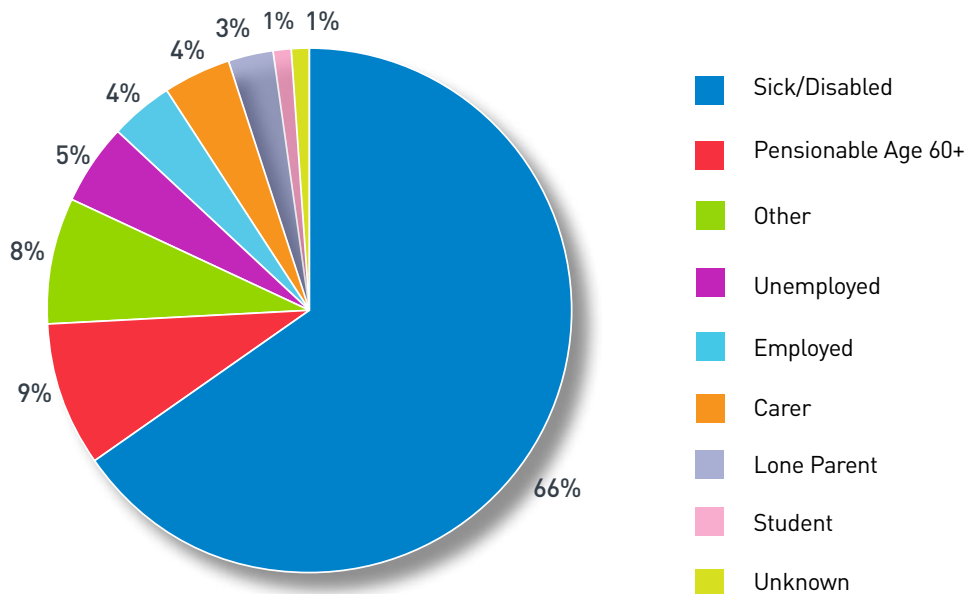


Figure Seven: Client Group Referrals



WELFARE BENEFITS OFFICER (MENTAL HEALTH)

This post is funded through the Fairer Scotland Fund initiative. Its purpose is to address increasing demand and to effectively tackle poverty for those affected by mental health issues.

Welfare benefits assistance can be critical in contributing towards recovery from mental illness and preventing symptoms worsening by relieving anxiety and stress in relation to financial matters.

A specialist officer regularly working with those affected by mental health issues and with the health professionals in this field can maintain a greater knowledge of how certain conditions affect individuals which allows better evidence to be obtained in support of claims and appeals.

The service continues to be delivered one afternoon per week from the Social Work Mental Health Team's office at Huntlyburn. Once this team is fully integrated with the NHS mental health teams (East, West, South and Rehabilitation Unit) it is planned to deliver the service from the new integrated venues on a rotational basis. This will allow continuing contact with the Mental Health social workers and increased contact with NHS staff.

Over the year, talks have been delivered at SAMH and the six local New Horizon Groups to service users and their carers on current welfare reform issues. The officer has once again achieved the project target of £600,000 with income gains just over this figure.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE WELFARE BENEFITS OFFICER

This temporary post which ended in March 2015 was funded for a fixed period of 18 months by the Criminal Justice Team. The aim of this initiative was to assist ex-offenders, or people at risk of offending, cope with the significant changes to the benefits system brought about by welfare reform.

Work across services has ensured a streamlined approach to support on benefits, housing, budgeting and employability issues. It should ensure a smooth transition and integration from custody back to the community thereby reducing 'the revolving door' theory. It is recognised that housing issues and lack of finances are commonly



linked to offending and re-offending and that in order to desist from crime, ex-offenders need to develop an established place in the community.

A series of workshops were run for ex-offenders with attendance contributing towards 'unpaid work'. These workshops included: Self Awareness, Healthy Lifestyle, Fuel Poverty – living on a budget, Cookery- on JSA budget, managing debt. These workshops proved popular and it is hoped that they can be replicated in the future.

The officer also attended the Borders Woman's Service, a group initiated by the Criminal Justice Team, in order to talk about benefit issues where appropriate.

Over the course of the project, income gains of over £173,348 were achieved and a number of key actions for follow up were identified:

- Develop an information leaflet for offenders relating to Welfare Benefits
- Build stronger links with SPS Edinburgh
- Housing Options Assessment to be completed in custody
- Benefit Options to be in place prior to leaving custody – through liaison with JCP/CJ/ Homelessness/WBS

Over the coming months it is anticipated that this work will be taken forward through existing services.

THE BORDERS MACMILLAN WELFARE BENEFITS PARTNERSHIP



Borders Macmillan Welfare Benefits Partnership is a joint initiative between the Welfare Benefits Service, Macmillan Cancer Support, NHS Borders Macmillan Centre and the DWP Visiting Service. This project is funded jointly by Macmillan Cancer Support and Scottish Borders Council for the period May 2013 to April 2016. Work has already commenced to explore further funding and service delivery options beyond 2016.

The main aim of the project is to maximise the income of people affected by cancer. This year, 651 referrals were received, with **£1.52m** income gains achieved. The main referral sources to the partnership are self-referral (43%) with (42%) coming from the Borders Macmillan Centre. The remainder are from other Health and Social Work professionals and related services. The close working relationship between partners helps to ensure a streamlined customer journey.

As part of the Transforming Care After Treatment (TCAT) pilot, currently being delivered in the TD9 postcode area, the Macmillan Benefits Officer participated in two open days which promoted a range of services available which can support patient recovery. The aim of the project is to enhance patient's health and wellbeing by providing integrated support that is relevant to individual needs and which promotes independence and a healthy lifestyle. Issues around income and benefits are consistently raised as a concern by patients both during and after treatment.

With a view to increasing knowledge and awareness of cancer related benefit issues amongst advisers in the Borders, an awareness session was delivered by the Macmillan Benefits Officer for staff from CAB and Registered Social Landlords. The feedback to this session was very positive and as well as a raised awareness of cancer related issues, participants are

now able to make claims for Macmillan Grants on behalf of customers.



Through a pilot exercise funded by the Change Fund, the partnership has ensured that people who are being faced with a life changing and/or life limiting illness have the opportunity to know what options are available to them as they look towards the end of life. The guidance provided on making a Will, Power of Attorney and planning for a funeral is now integrated into the working practice of the Macmillan Benefits Officer and Assistant thus offering an improved service from a single location in respect of future planning issues.

EARLY YEARS - TAX CREDITS AND CHILDCARE COSTS

Funding by the Childcare Partnership of a part time Welfare Benefits Assistant post, has been effective in promoting the take up of Tax Credits including child care costs. For this financial year annualised income gains to customers have amounted to **£460,000** which was attributable to 90 cases. Although the case numbers are on a par with last year, the gains have significantly increased which is in line with a significant number of more complex cases. The referral sources are widespread across the Scottish Borders and come from health and social care workers, child care providers as well as directly from members of the public.

As well as attending a number of Bumps 2 Babies events across the Borders, since the opening of Langlee Early Years Centre the worker has attended on a fortnightly basis to offer tax credit advice to parents who come to drop in sessions with their pre-school children. This has increased the accessibility of the service for many and it has proved to be successful.

WELFARE BENEFITS DEVELOPMENT OFFICER (EARLY YEARS)

This post was established as a result of a successful bid to the Health and Welfare Reform Development Fund 2014-15 by the NHS Welfare Reform Working Group, in conjunction with Early Years partners.

The project will build capacity within the Early Years partnership and NHS in order to take a holistic approach to maximising income for families with young children specifically within Langlee and Philiphaugh Early Years Centres.

The officer, who started in this role in January 2015, will work closely with a range of front line workers across SBC, NHS, and CAB to plan, develop, promote and implement a programme of screening and action planning with families which can be used to shape advice and health services. The worker will also look to contribute to the Early Year Services to help support the effective implementation of the Welfare Reform programme and any future changes to the benefit system. Links have been made with a number of local agencies and organisations to create a network of referrals.

PACE (PARTNERSHIP ACTION FOR CONTINUING EMPLOYMENT)

PACE is the Scottish Government's national response to redundancy situations. Although managed by Skills Development Scotland (SDS) at a national level, PACE facilitates local level response teams providing tailored help and support for individuals at risk of, or experiencing, redundancy. The Welfare Benefits Service is a member of the response team and has participated in two events this year.

TRAINING AND AWARENESS RAISING

Over the course of the year, members of the Welfare Benefits Service have delivered a combination of 58 training and advice sessions of which 446 people in total have attended. A significant number of these sessions have been general awareness sessions on changes to the Social Security system as a result of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 but have also included attendance at events where advice is made available.

Local Welfare Benefits Officer, entered into the spirit of the International Day at Langlee in November by not only dressing for the occasion in his kilt but piping the children outside to the car park to meet the Fire Brigade.

There have also been specific training sessions given on Personal Independence Payment, Universal Credit, Tax Credits and Macmillan Grants. Recipients of these sessions have included: Community mental health

teams, Social Work locality teams, Macmillan Nursing staff, Violence Against Women Partnership, Area Forums, Child Health Network, Burnfoot Community School, Bumps 2 Babies, CAB, Addaction, Big River, BCAT, 16+ Team, Carers Forum, Coldstream Health Centre, School Nurses, New Horizon Borders and Momentum.

Work has also been ongoing with training and development to introduce two e-learning packages on Welfare Reform. One is specifically aimed at social care and health staff with the other more aimed at Customer Services. A wider training programme is being developed for 2014/2015.



WELFARE REFORM

The UK Government Welfare Reform Act 2012 has introduced significant changes to the welfare system. We have been working with our stakeholders, and partners to understand the impact of these reforms and support residents in the Borders, in particular our most vulnerable customers.

This has proved to be another challenging year for Welfare Benefits Officers who have found the resolution of cases increasingly complex and time consuming. Keeping up to date with the new legislation around welfare reform and people from abroad as well as the ongoing changes to timelines for Universal Credit (UC) has been testing at times.

The team have reviewed and updated existing training materials including e-learning packages following an announcement earlier this year that the roll out of Universal Credit would start in the Borders for a limited number of people on 27 April 2015.

The Welfare Benefits Service is committed to working closely with the JCP Partnership Managers and other partners and stakeholders to try to resolve any issues or difficulties in relation to welfare reform changes. Further information can be found on the Council's website.



Service Delivery:

- 92% of clients thought it was either 'very easy' or 'easy' to contact the service
- 96% of clients would use the service again
- 94% would recommend the service to their friends and family
- 88% said it made a positive difference in their life

CUSTOMER FEEDBACK

We aim to ensure that our service is customer-focussed, efficient and accessible to everyone living in Scottish Borders. Most customers using the Welfare Benefits Service are seen either at home, a local council office or in an NHS setting, although appointments can be made in other appropriate locations. A significant number of customers receive telephone advice, with some choosing to communicate by letter or email. Where appropriate, interpretation and translation services are used and information is offered in alternative formats.

With the aim of improving service delivery and monitoring standards, customer survey forms are issued to customers when their case is closed. Questions are also included which allow customers to reflect on whether or not the intervention by the service had assisted in improving their wellbeing. Our statistics show that a significant number of our customers believe this to be the case.

Table One: Has the service assisted in making changes which have improved your wellbeing?

	%
I feel healthier	15
I make fewer visits to the doctor/other health professionals	8
I feel less stressed or anxious	71
No change	14
Other	7

WHAT PEOPLE SAY ABOUT OUR SERVICE?

“For me it was having someone who understood the law towards benefits and who could explain things in a way I knew what was happening.”

“Being awarded PIP has given me the money to purchase aids that will help me.”

“I really cannot fault the service I myself received therefore cannot see need for improvement. As for the difference it has made to my life it has given me back my life knowing my home is safe and I can once again pay my bills.”
Thank you”

“Last year I had nothing and nowhere to turn to. Without your help I would have had to go to food banks”

“With chronic pain conditions: more stress = more pain. The opposite is also true. So the officer reduced the level of pain I suffer from by reducing my stress/anxiety.”

Stakeholder Feedback

The Welfare Benefits Service is not only interested in the views of service users but views of partners. A survey was issued in order to establish their view on our service delivery and to aid future planning. From the responses, 98% responded the service is beneficial and 98% responded the service was significant in relation to poverty issues.

FUTURE PRIORITIES

Welfare Reform will continue to be a priority for the Welfare Benefits Service, ensuring the Welfare Reform programme is implemented and identifying the key impacts of Welfare Reform particularly the migration of income based benefits and tax credits to Universal Credit, reassessment of Disability Living Allowance to Personal Independence Payment, the funding of Temporary Accommodation under Universal Credit and impacts of Welfare Reforms on Social Care charges.

We also intend to:

- Develop the knowledge of partners and stakeholders in relation to cancer related benefits and grant application and embed the approaches taken by the Scottish Borders Macmillan Partnership into mainstream services
- Create a Modern Apprenticeship within Welfare Benefits Service through the Customer Services model, developing skills and knowledge in relation to welfare benefits, money and energy advice.



UNIVERSAL CREDIT IN THE SCOTTISH BORDERS

Universal Credit (UC) was introduced in Scottish Borders from 27th April 2015 and there has been a considerable amount of work undertaken in the last quarter of 2014/15 to prepare for this change.

It will be a very gradual introduction initially for new benefit customers only under the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Trial and Learn principle. Processes are very new not only to customers but also to staff in both SBC, DWP and partner organisations. Housing and Strategy Services have been leading a joint programme of projects to raise awareness of the changes, design services and prepare, for these changes including providing training sessions for over 100 staff, adapting e-learning training material producing communications and designing joint support packages.

There has been a partnership approach to the programme branded as "Welfare Aware Borders" which is developing procedures and initiatives to support tenants in their homes. The organisations involved are:



- DWP;
- Housing Associations;
- Citizens Advice Bureau;
- SBC:
 - o Library Services;
 - o Homelessness Service;
 - o Welfare Benefits Service;
 - o Customer Services.

SBC have also entered into a formal Delivery Partnership Agreement with DWP to provide support services for customers who need help and supply management information to aid the DWP in the development of U.C.

The services offered will include:

On-Line Support

Applications for UC must be made on-line. On-line access and support is available through SBC Libraries, Library Contact Centres and Contact Centres where approximately 100 public access computers are available across the Scottish Borders area. Assistance for completing forms can be arranged by appointment.

Personal Budgeting Support is provided by SBC for customers who the DWP consider need some additional help. This will include advising people how to budget, helping them to set up rent payments and organise bank accounts.

Debt advice will be provided by the local Citizens Advice and help with rent arrears will be provided by Housing Association landlords.

Support for the DWP Processing Centres

The DWP have asked for assistance from SBC with complex housing situations. This will include any information that SBC hold in respect of previous Housing Benefit claims, houses in multiple occupation or other similar situations.

Universal Credit

UC is designed to replace six existing benefit types for people who are out of work or on a low income. The Government hopes that UC will make it easier for claimants to move into work or increase the number of hours that they work by removing some of the interactions between current benefit types that can act as a disincentive and leave people poorly rewarded or worse off if they find work or increasing the hours that they work.



The benefit types that will eventually be replaced are:

- Job Seekers Allowance (income based)
- Employment Support Allowance (income based)
- Income Support
- Housing Benefit
- Child Tax Credit
- Working Tax Credit



HOUSING STRATEGY AND SERVICES

EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT SERVICE

The Scottish Borders has a working age population of around 71,000 people, of which 5,000 (7%) claim Employment and Support Allowance/ Incapacity Benefit or some other health related benefit. There are 1,700 individuals claiming Job Seekers Allowance and, of these, 480 (28%) are under the age of 25.

Youth unemployment and supported employment for disadvantaged people are a priority for Scottish Borders Council and the councils plans to address these issues as a service provider and as the largest employer in the Borders area.

In response, Scottish Borders Council established the Employment Support Service (April 2013) which was tasked with improving performance, providing corporate focus and mainstreaming the delivery of supported employment activity both within and out with the council.

WHO WE ARE

The Employment Support Service (ESS) works with those identified as requiring extra support within the workplace, offering support to those furthest from the labour market, including:

- Looked after and accommodated young people leaving care (16+)
- People with a learning disability
- People with a physical disability
- People with a sensory impairment
- Unemployed young people
- People who are recovering from a mental health condition
- Those who are homeless or under threat of being homeless
- People who are on the autistic spectrum

ESS is able to offer Supported Employment to those aged 16 plus, Vocational Training to 16-18 year olds about to leave or having already left school and Employability Fund training places to 16-18 year olds who need further work experience. ESS also delivers the councils internal Work Opportunities Scheme which aims to support the councils as an employer to become more representative of the borders populace.

Key Statistics 2014/15:

- There are currently 63 people being supported through the Supported Employment Service
- 63% have sustained paid employment
- 23 young people have completed vocational training
- 28 young people have been recruited into Modern Apprentice positions in the council
- 10 young people have completed work experience placements

VOCATIONAL TRAINING

The Employment Support Service provides vocational training and personal development opportunities to enable individuals aged 16-25 years of age to maximise their full potential in their career choices.

A 20 week vocational training course based in Kelso, Eyemouth, Galashiels and Hawick finished in April 2015 and is in the process of being evaluated. A short course based in Peebles for S3 students has also been completed and an evaluation will follow.

23 disadvantaged and disengaged young people have completed the training and they will move on to Employability Fund provision, Supported Employment or further education.

EMPLOYABILITY FUND (STAGE 3 WORK EXPERIENCE)

The Employability Fund is a National Programme funded by Skills Development Scotland designed to help individuals who are unemployed to access further education training or employment opportunities, including Modern Apprenticeships. Scottish Borders Council is contracted to deliver the Stage 3 Vocational Training to young people age 16-18.

23 Stage 3 places have been fulfilled with 10 young people moving successfully into paid employment or a Modern apprenticeship (44%). A further 6 young people are currently completing applications' for college (26%).

The outcome rate for this year has been particularly satisfying as the group of young people targeted by the Employability Fund are those who are furthest away from the labour market

SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT

The Employment Support Service offers a person-centered service to individuals. This includes work profiling which includes helping to identify skills, talents and preferences and job matching. We will also liaise with employers to arrange placements, job tasters and part-time employment.

There are currently 63 people being supported through the Supported Employment Service. Of these 40 are being supported to sustain paid employment (63%) and the other 23 are at various stages of job searching, profiling, building CV's etc.

The supported employment service has received 66 referrals during the year with 9 of these awaiting allocation to a support worker.



WORK OPPORTUNITIES SCHEME

Scottish Borders Council's Work Opportunities Scheme was developed and adopted in February 2014. It is designed to offer work opportunities, with appropriate support if required, within SBC to improve the employment prospects of those furthest from the labour market including the long term unemployed, young people, people with mental health issues and those with disabilities.

Over the year, 28 young people have been recruited into Modern Apprentice positions in the council and in addition, 10 young people have completed work experience placements.

9 work experience opportunities were offered to disadvantaged people who are being supported by ESS and needed some form of further training/experience, 34 student placements were filled and 6 employees supported by the Employment Support Service are in paid work.

LOOKED AFTER AND ACCOMMODATED CHILDREN (LAAC) PILOT PROJECT

A recent initiative for the service, the LAAC project is still in its infancy. The pilot has been set up for 4 young people for whom the council has a responsibility to complete a short employability course at Borders College (3 weeks), they then move on to a work experience placement for 8 weeks which, if successful, will lead on to a modern apprenticeship within the council.

The young people are currently at the stage where their work experience is almost complete and the modern apprenticeship element of the pilot project is due to begin in mid-April 2015.

An evaluation of the project will be carried out in summer of 2015.

Examples of how the Employment Support Service can make a positive contribution to service users personal and professional development:



CASE STUDY: MR X

Mr A attended Hawick High School and as part of the transition from school was referred to the Vocational Training team. Mr A recognised that he needed to gain employability skills such as confidence, team working and communication skills in order to progress to a work placement.

During his time with the training team Mr A successfully achieved qualifications in Employability and Youth Achievement Awards as well gaining an understanding of the importance of work ethic and behaviours affecting the work place. His goal was to gain employment in carpet fitting and the team worked together to secure a job taster at a local company. Involving the employer and feeding back to the school and his family throughout the process allowed Mr A the full support package which proved invaluable in his transition.

Progressing to the Employment Support Services, Employability Fund (Stage 3) programme, C progressed to a full time work placement and at the same time increased his duties. During the twelve week placement the team at the company were extremely impressed with commitment levels, attention to detail and willingness to learn new skills, so much so that they quickly made plans to take him on as a full time employee.

Mr A has been employed with the company since January 2014 and the firm have enrolled him on the Flooring Industry Training Association Master Fitter course in Loughborough, where he will become a fully-fledged carpet fitter. Both the employer and Mr A are confident that he will have a successful career ahead of him as a Master Fitter.

CASE STUDY: MR B

The Employment Support Service worked closely with the council's procurement team to implement a community benefits agreement associated with a contract with a local tyre company.

Mr B was about to leave school and had just turned 16 so had a very limited experience of any workplace although was very clear on the type of work he wanted to find. The company and ESS agreed that Mr B would take up a 12 week placement in the first instance through the Employability Fund. This allowed the Mr B to have a chance to see what the job entailed and allowed the company to see if this he was suitable for this position. Mr B had never worked before and was able to gain valuable experience as well as to learn valuable employability skills.

The placement was successful and the Mr B secured a full time contract in September 2014 which will result in him being trained as a Master tyre fitter.

He has now passed his driving test and has the use of one of the companies vans.

The company have recently contacted the Employment Support Service with a view to repeat the arrangement and another young person is currently in a work experience placement there.

CUSTOMER FEEDBACK

Employer quote

“By starting [the young person] on a work experience placement, we were able to develop his skills as an employee. Staff supervised him at all times and gave him enough work to be able to see exactly what the job involved. [The young person] worked hard and was keen to learn. Hopefully this will continue throughout his time with the company.”

Employee quote

“I’ve enjoyed my time so far with the company and I’m sure that will continue. I was made to feel one of the guys from the start.”

FUTURE PRIORITIES

The Employment Support Service is aiming to complete a 360 degree style evaluation of the service with a view to learning lessons from this. We can improve on our internal processes for gathering statistics and evidencing some of the background work which takes place in the build up to a client gaining a job.

We also intend to:

- Develop a Supported Employment Strategic Approach for the Borders
- Develop and Implement the Borders Young Persons Guarantee
- Contribute to the alignment of Employment Services across the Council to include the Borders Guarantee, Wood Commission and European Social Fund Projects



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