

housing strategy and services

ANNUAL REPORT 2011-12

HOUSING STRATEGY & SERVICES
SOCIAL WORK



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FOREWORD

Welcome to the Housing Strategy and Services Group annual report for 2011/12. This report is structured to reflect the three main service areas and outlines some of our latest key successes and achievements. Despite current economic challenges, we are proud to be able to report that we have successfully delivered on all of our objectives. As part of the statutory housing authority, our 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.

2011/12 has proved to be another very productive year, with Scottish Borders Council being one of a small number of councils participating in the National Housing Trust (NHT) Initiative Round One. This initiative has resulted in Tweed Homes constructing 26 houses in Galashiels with a further 25 houses planned for construction in Innerleithen. Additionally, one Shared Ownership property was made available in Coldstream and four house sales were completed via the Open Market Shared Equity purchase.

Towards the end of 2011 Scottish Borders Council, along with six other Local Authorities, submitted a proposal to the Scottish Government for the funding of two regional Empty Homes Officers. Consequently, the Council secured one part-time Officer who is dedicated to working towards the twenty property target.

The restructure of the Homelessness Service has placed prevention at the core of the service's policy, with a recently established Homeless Prevention Team in place as the first point of contact for those threatened with homelessness. In 2011/12, homelessness was prevented for 49% of people who contacted the service, which demonstrates the vital role that the Prevention Service plays in meeting the targets set out in the Homelessness Strategy.

Funded by the Affordable Housing Investment budget, Trinity House was officially opened in March 2012. This formal residential home has been redesigned to provide four self-contained flats to allow for transitional support to homeless young people. As well as providing general



Source: SBC HST

housing support, staff at Trinity House will also be able to offer residents training in areas such as healthy living, homemaking skills and community awareness. A family mediation service will also be available to help resolve family conflict and preserve relationships.

This year, the Welfare Benefits Service has again experienced an increase in the number of people accessing the service. Likewise, annualised income gains achieved for customers have also remained considerably high. While a combination of factors may have contributed to this increase, impending changes to the benefit system brought about by welfare reform has undoubtedly been a powerful driving force behind the rising number of people requiring benefit assistance.

The Council has entered into a contract with Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) to allow for a quicker and more streamlined response to those requiring help. CAB will be offering money and debt advice to members of the public and have also agreed to provide general benefits advice, which will allow the Welfare Benefits Service to concentrate on providing specialised advice and tribunal representation to those that need it.

Once again, I would like to acknowledge the hard work and efforts by staff in continuing to provide excellent services to customers.

CATHIE FANCY

Group Manager Housing Strategy & Services





Source: SBC HST

HOUSING STRATEGY

Local Housing Strategy 2012/17

The group have completed a strategy in accordance with the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001, which places a statutory requirement on Councils to develop a five year Local Housing Strategy, supported by an assessment of need and demand.

The Local Housing Strategy 2012-17 was fully endorsed at Council Executive in February 2012. The strategy has been submitted to the Scottish Government for review and a peer review group has been established.

A partnership approach was undertaken throughout the development process, which included; cross departmental Council staff, voluntary agencies, house developers, Housing Associations and local residents.

In an increasingly challenging economic and funding context, the strategy sets out the following high level 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.'

Four strategic outcomes have been agreed:

- 1 The supply of new housing meets the needs of the Scottish Borders communities.
- 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 housing needs and/or requiring support are able to live independently in their own home.

We hope this new strategy will work towards meeting the requirements identified through the Housing Needs and Demands Assessments and the South East Scotland Development Plan process and will create a number of positive outcomes; including that more people will be able to access suitable, affordable housing and energy efficient homes in their community of choice and enjoy the benefits of living in diverse communities and sustainable places.

HOUSING STRATEGY

Affordable Housing Activity

- Berwickshire Housing Association completed one house at Ayton.
- Scottish Borders Council completed four houses at Trinity House, Hawick.
- Four house sales were completed via the Open Market Shared Equity purchase.
- Two houses were completed for Discounted Sale.
- Two houses were assisted via the New Supply Shared Equity Scheme.
- Eildon Housing Association are currently building sixty-one houses at Dovecote Road, Peebles and six at Cleland Avenue, Peebles.
- Tweed Homes are currently building twenty-six houses at Balnakeil, Galashiels.

During the period 2009-2011 the Council and its Registered Social Landlord partners exceeded the annual target of 100 affordable homes, as set out in the Council's Social Housing Strategy and Single Outcome Agreement. Unfortunately, as the statistics above demonstrate, the annual 100 homes target has not been met this year. However, these statistics do not portray work currently in progress and we anticipate that Scottish Borders Council will exceed the 100 homes target again in 2012/13.

During 2011/12, the Council provided financial assistance to affordable projects at Newcastleton and Peebles. It has also agreed to financially assist Eildon Housing Association to acquire and redevelop the prominent gap site at High Street, Innerleithen.

Scottish Borders Council is one of a small number of Scottish Councils participating in the National Housing Trust (NHT) Initiative Round One, which seeks to provide houses for mid-market rent. Tweed Homes are currently constructing 26 houses in Galashiels and plans are well advanced for another 25 houses in Innerleithen. Both projects are planned for completion in 2012/13. The Council has also agreed to participate in the NHT Initiative Round Two, and has received two proposals for consideration against the initiative selection criteria.

The declining economic and financial environment continues to have an impact on the delivery of affordable housing, with reductions to Scottish Government budgets and grants per house. As a result, a new Innovation and Investment Fund has been introduced whilst traditional funding arrangements have been suspended. Despite complicated eligibility criteria, Berwickshire Housing Association and Eildon Housing Association both made successful bids to the Innovation and Investment Fund, which has enabled the completion of one house at Ayton and allowed Eildon Housing Association to progress the redevelopment of the former primary school site at Lauder, which will provide twelve houses.

Tweed Homes were commended by one of the industry's key trade bodies for their approach to partnership working in the delivery of affordable housing at the Homes for Scotland 10th annual lunch and awards ceremony, held at the Edinburgh International Conference Centre in May this year. The judges were particularly impressed by the commitment and openness to new thinking demonstrated, and the way in which the 'exemplar approach of strong partnership' has delivered 51 mid-market rental homes to help meet housing need and stimulate the local economy.

Strategic Housing Investment Plan (SHIP)

The Council agreed and submitted its 4th formal annual SHIP to Scottish Government in advance of the revised 31 March 2012 deadline. The SHIP 2012/15 sets out agreed and prioritised affordable housing projects over a revised three year rolling planning horizon, rather than five years, as has been previously been the case.

In the absence of any Resource Planning Assumption from Scottish Government, this SHIP was developed within the context of the financial capacity of Registered Social Landlords and their private borrowing. This included any additional financial contributions from the Council via Developer Contributions, Second Homes/Council Tax budgets, the anticipated Scottish Government Housing Supply Programme, the Innovation and Investment Fund and the National Housing Trust Initiative Round One.

The SHIP has identified 195 new RSL affordable homes which are not yet approved or on site.

Given the public sector funding constraints, it is regrettable that the Borders SHIP programme will fall short of meeting the Single Outcome Agreement annual target of 100 affordable homes and the new Local Housing Strategy annual target of 103 affordable homes.

It is anticipated that Scottish Government will be introducing new guidance regarding RSL funding and programme management arrangements early in 2012/13, and this is likely to have considerable bearing on the delivery of the SHIP 2012/15.

Concordat

Scottish Borders Council and Scottish Borders Housing Association (SBHA) have agreed a Concordat to work together to deliver a number of specific tasks across a wide range of activity.

As a result of this Concordat, SBHA has identified and targeted a number of tenants in rural settlements whom it considers may potentially benefit from home energy information and advice. The Council's Home Energy Adviser has carried out a number of home visits and tenant meetings in response to this initiative.

The Housing Strategy Manager has been liaising with SBHA, in order to come to an agreement about how the facilitation of long term empty properties being brought back to use can happen at a more accelerated pace.

The Housing Strategy Manager has also been seeking to create closer links between SBHA's investment plans and the Council's Strategic Housing Investment Plan, and tackle impediments such as the legal and financial conditions associated with the solum swaps and proposed claw-backs.

Finance and Service Plan Delivery

2011/12 has again been a very busy year for the three services within the Group.

Once again the Group has successfully delivered all its actions as set out in the Plan for 2011/12. In addition a new set of actions have been identified and agreed for inclusion in the Council's Corporate Covalent Action monitoring system for 2012/13.

On-lending to Registered Social Landlords

The Council has been asked by locally active RSLs to provide an on-lending facility to help alleviate the complications and time taken in negotiating finance. It is hoped that this will help facilitate the delivery of affordable housing projects by enabling to front fund projects.

The Council has agreed the principle of on-lending; Officers are now in discussion with RSLs about their individual requirements and are exploring the associated legal and financial issues.

This facility will provide clear benefits to RSLs and indirectly to the Council, as it will help support the delivery of the Strategic Housing Investment Programme.

It is anticipated that the outcomes of this work will be reported to the Council in 2012/13.

Private Sector Leasing Scheme

Scottish Borders and East Lothian Councils are currently participating in a Midlothian Council led contract with Orchard and Shipman to provide a private sector house leasing scheme.

In 2010/11, the Council commissioned ODS Consulting to carry out a review of the operation of the scheme in its area. The final report was received in 2011/12 and has been considered by the Council, who have decided that Officers should develop a business case to investigate the details of potentially bringing the service in-house.

Borders Choice Homes

The final report of the independent evaluation of the Border Choice Homes Common Housing Register (CHR) has been completed. The CHR provides a single route and registration list for people seeking to be housed by participating Registered Social Landlords.

Following the completion of the final report, the participating RSLs – Berwickshire Housing Association, Eildon Housing Association and Waverley Housing - have been in discussion with Officers from Housing Strategy and Homelessness Services to respond to the recommendations. There have been a number of operational changes made as a result, and the Housing Strategy Manager has now joined the Borders Choice Homes Steering Group.

Scottish Empty Homes Partnership



HOMES AGAIN PROJECT

The Scottish Government has commissioned Shelter Scotland to lead a Scottish Empty Homes Partnership, whereby the Housing Strategy Manager is now one of only two Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) representatives on the Steering Group.

The Partnership has been lobbying for legislative changes, providing feedback to consultations, promoting good practice and raising awareness of the issues and opportunities presented by long term empty housing.

The Partnership has been successful in securing funds from Scottish Government to allow for the partial-funding of a number of Empty Homes Officers. Consequently, as one of the participating local authorities, Scottish Borders Council has been successful in securing an Empty Homes Officer on a part-time basis.

Locally the Housing Strategy Team have been developing a database of long term empty homes and, following changes to the Data Protection law as applied in Scotland, have carried out a survey of owners with empty homes in the Scottish Borders.

An Empty Homes Consultation Strategy has been developed which will be considered by Members early in 2012/13.

Empty Homes Shared Services

Towards the end of 2011 Scottish Borders Council, along with six other Local Authorities in South East Scotland, submitted a proposal to the Scottish Government for funding towards two regional empty homes officers.

The two full time officers are now in post and have begun working with the authorities to proactively bring 20 empty homes in each authority back into use by the end of 2012.

Empty Homes

Scottish Borders Council have led the way within the region on the issue of empty homes, by helping coordinate the proposal submitted to the Scottish Government and engaging with the other Local Authorities.

The Council have also recently completed a survey of the 1200 empty properties in the region and analysed the data. The survey format has since been adopted by many other authorities throughout Scotland. In addition a draft Empty Homes Strategy was produced in 2011/12 which outlines the Council's priorities in terms of empty homes in the region, and identifies our approach.

Young Persons Housing Implementation Plan

The Young Person's Housing Implementation Plan has been developed in consultation with young people and agencies in order to address housing issues affecting young people in the Scottish Borders. It has been developed specifically so that all young people have access to appropriate housing and support for their needs.

By end of 2011/12 this plan was fully implemented.

The plan aimed to ensure that:

- young people are able to access appropriate housing information and advice;
- levels of youth homelessness are prevented;
- sufficient accommodation is available for young people who are or who become homeless;
- ensure the provision of appropriate support for homeless and inappropriately housed young people.

The number of young people making homeless applications has been steadily reduced. In 2010/11 there were 314 applications from 16-24 year olds, in 2011/12 this has reduced to 205. In addition the numbers of young people aged 16-24 being referred to the Deposit Guarantee Scheme has increased steadily, as well as the number of people housed through the scheme.

One of the priorities in the Homelessness Strategy is to provide a better pathway into independent housing for younger people. Trinity House in Hawick has been converted to provide four self contained flats and staff facilities for use as supported transitional accommodation for young people who have not been through the care system, yet are still highly vulnerable. This facility opened in March 2012 and offers up to 20 homeless young people per annum the opportunity to receive support to move from housing crisis into temporary independent flats for a transitional period, until they are able to settle successfully into their own homes in the community. Each young person can

access local support services and opportunities for social integration within their new community. This improves their potential to live independently in their own home.

In addition we also have the facility at Albert Place; an innovative project and an excellent example of delivering needs-led housing solutions for vulnerable young people. The project goal is to provide a safe and supportive environment in comfortable surroundings where the young people are able to learn and prepare for their own tenancies and independence.

There is a long and fruitful history of inter-organisational partnership working in the Scottish Borders. Due to the cross-service nature of the issues it was recognised early that it was vital for the projects to be strategically planned and delivered in a way which was genuinely collaborative.

Housing Strategy and Services have also delivered housing education at secondary schools as a homelessness prevention measure. Sessions took place between January 2012 and March 2012 with five groups of fifth and sixth year pupils from Hawick High School. These sessions were designed to increase awareness of homelessness, reduce the stigma surrounding homelessness, increase knowledge on homelessness and issues surrounding homelessness.

Housing for People with Particular Needs

The Housing Strategy Team has been working closely with Social Work and NHS Borders to develop a Commissioning Strategy for the Learning Disability Service and a Physical Disability Strategy.

In addition to the development of these strategies, a number of individuals within the Housing Strategy Team have been engaging with the Learning Disability Service to progress the housing element of a number of projects in Hawick, Duns, Kelso and Galashiels.

The Housing Strategy Manager has also contributed to tender development and related selection work, with the aim to provide extra care housing in the Hawick and Kelso areas and mental health re-provisioning in Galashiels.

Tackling Poverty and Financial Inclusion Strategy

The consultation period for the Tackling Poverty and Financial Inclusion Strategy was completed in May 2010 and is currently in the process of being updated. The Consultative Draft was also sent out to the People's Panel, which is composed of members of the public living in the Scottish Borders who are happy to be consulted on issues relating to living in the Scottish Borders.

The strategy's primary aims have been to:

- reduce the number of households in the Scottish Borders in debt, or at risk of being in debt;
- improve access to affordable and manageable financial services in order that household's manage their money efficiently;
- improve access to information and advice to help maximise incomes.

A significant amount has been achieved in terms of tackling poverty and the majority of actions identified in the strategy have already been implemented.

The strategy helps ensure that people can access the right package of debt and financial inclusion support and at the time they need it. Debt is linked with poor mental health, is a source of stress and anxiety which can compound problems of poverty or a drop in income. The development of this strategy has helped guide and establish effective referral pathways and partnership working arrangements to improve access to advice and support services. It has also provided a platform to increase partnership working in the Borders to gain a better understanding of people in debt and the related issues.

The strategy ensures the availability of help to maximise incomes for those in debt or experiencing poverty and social exclusion. In the current economic climate it has been a challenge to secure sustainable funding for a sector which has increased pressure. Despite this, the plan has been ambitious and aimed high. We have seen an increase in the monetary gains for people accessing the Welfare Benefits Service: £4.8 million (2008/09), £5.5 million (2009/10), £6.5 million (2010/11) and £6.1 million (2011/12).



Source: SBC HST

The number of people accessing the Welfare Benefits Service has significantly increased from 2,614 (2008/09) to 2,949 (2009/10) and 3,055 (2010/11).

The Council has established partnerships with Macmillan Cancer Support and local money advice services to improve access to specialist advice. For the period April 2011 to March 2012 the annualised gains were £1,500,502 for Welfare Benefits advice to cancer patients.

The UK Government's deficit reduction plans will see housing benefit recipients and the Scottish economy lose approximately £80million per year by 20131, which will have an effect on social and private tenants, local authorities, the Scottish Government and social and private landlords. The full extent of the implications that may occur as a result of welfare reform is not wholly quantifiable at this time, and won't become clear until the reforms have been implemented. Housing Strategy and Services are therefore reviewing the Tackling Poverty and Financial Inclusion Strategy to ensure that measures are put in place to help minimise the impact that these reforms may have.

Home Energy Advice Service

In January 2005, Scottish Borders Council appointed a part time Home Energy Advisor to work in the Housing Strategy Team. The Council continues to fund a Home Energy Advisor to provide energy advice, and make home visits to households across all tenures in the Scottish Borders.

The Home Energy Advice Service has had a very busy year, providing energy advice to households in the Scottish Borders through telephone enquires, home visits and presentations. The past year has also seen an increase in partnership working with the concordat agreement with Scottish Borders Housing Association (SBHA) and work with Energy Saving Advice Centre (ESSac). Overall, 89% are satisfied with the service provided and organisations who have worked with the service have found it to be valuable to the community. The Service continues to meet the needs of households in the Scottish Borders and has worked successfully to meet the aims and objectives in the Fuel Poverty Implementation Plan 2009-2014.

The case studies below highlight the different levels of work the Home Energy Advisor carries out and how valuable this is to those who are vulnerable to fuel poverty:

Case Studies

Mr W and his wife are both over 60 years old and they are homeowners; Mrs W has several health concerns and requires heat. Their boiler is now 20 years old and has continuing problems and due to these problems Mr W has had to switch off the radiators. Mr W was referred to the Home Energy Service by the Energy Saving Scotland Advice Centre (ESSAC). The Home Energy Advisor went to visit Mr W and explained the Fuel Poverty Intervention Fund and criteria as they had been unsuccessfully in obtaining a grant through the Energy Assistance Package. Mr W met the criteria, completing the application form and providing a doctor's letter. As a result Mr W has had a new boiler installed and the heating system is now working.

Mr M called the Home Energy Advice Service regarding concerns about central heating and under floor insulation. Mr does not work due to health reasons so his income is limited. The Home Energy Advisor met with Mr F and discussed that he may qualify for central heating through the Energy Assistance Package. Mr M qualified for gas central heating through the Energy Assistance Package and is now awaiting a call from a surveyor regarding floor insulation.

Highlights

In terms of tackling fuel poverty other key areas of activity that the Home Energy Advice Service have engaged in are as follows:

- Council Tax rebate for insulation measures - there were 215 measures installed through this scheme in the Borders in 2011/12.
- Warm Home Discount Scheme - this Scheme provides fuel poor customers with an annual rebate of up to £120 per annum for their electricity bills.
- Feed In Tariffs - rates will be reduced from 12th December 2012.
- Renewable Heat Premium Payment - this incentive has made £12m available to households who install renewal energy from 1st August 2011.
- PV Hotspot Campaign - this resulted in 28 homes having solar panels installed in 2011/12.
- Universal Home Insulation Scheme (UHS).

Scottish Borders Free Home Insulation

The Scottish Government developed a new Universal Home Insulation Scheme (UHIS) and nationally allocated £12.5 million in 2011/12 - all Scottish local authorities were invited to make project bids.

The Housing Strategy Team received a grant allocation of £385,000 of funding. In addition to this £190,000 of Carbon Emissions Reduction Target (CERT) funding was levered in by the selected insulation installer SIG Energy Management.

This built on a similar previous scheme whereby in 2010/11 Scottish Borders Council secured £404,000 in funding from the Scottish Government to deliver fuel bill savings of £4,673,600 over the lifetime of the measures and CO2 emission savings of 22,461,200 kgCO2, again over the lifetime of the measures.

The key objectives of the Free Home Insulation Scheme include:

- Providing free energy efficiency measures to a large number of private sector Scottish Borders Households; and
- To deliver emission savings and assist in reducing fuel poverty.

The target area was selected as Galashiels and Leaderdale, also including St Boswells. This target area was identified using the Home Energy Efficiency Database (HEED) which helped provide information on the potential for installations. This was supplemented by other data sources and helped to identify areas where there is a high risk of fuel poverty, or who have not already been targeted with free measures.

The particularly mild weather conditions this year did result in less people actually thinking about insulating their homes, but through extensive promotion and awareness raising the initiative built up its spend and was still receiving new cases until its end on 31 March 2012.

- 283 Virgin Loft Installations were completed
- 498 Cavity Wall Installations were completed
- 997 Loft Top Ups were completed
- 42 Under floor Insulation installs were completed
- 166 households were referred for the Energy Assistance Package stage 2
- 122 households were referred for the Energy Assistance Package stage 4

Ultimately the project, delivered in partnership with the Energy Saving Trust and funded by the Scottish Government, was a major success and resulted in many significant positive outcomes in terms of fuel bill savings and reductions in CO2 emissions, for residents of the Scottish Borders.



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.

In accordance with the Act, Scottish Borders Council developed a Scheme of Assistance for homeowners and the private rented sector. The Scheme of Assistance Statement was published in April 2010.

The scheme of assistance has two main parts:

HOUSE CONDITION

Although direct grant is no longer available, information and advice and in some cases practical assistance regarding property maintenance, repair and improvement, can be provided.

DISABLED ADAPTATIONS

Mandatory Grants are available for essential amenities and most structural alterations to meet the needs of disabled persons. Extensions (including work to outbuildings) to provide living accommodation are not included. Mandatory grants attract a minimum of 80%. Grant levels above this are calculated on a means tested basis. The grant percentage can be passported to 100% for applicants in receipt of income replacement benefits.

Housing Strategy and Services take the lead role within the council on the Scheme of Assistance. A suite of information and guidance leaflets regarding repair maintenance and adaptations is available.

To help deliver the council contracts with Borders Care & Repair who help homeowners and private sector tenants aged 60 or over and people of any age with disabilities. They provide a free service to project manage all repairs, improvements and/or disabled adaptations to the home and a small repair and handyman service.

Borders Care & Repair are recognised in Scottish Government & Care & Repair Scotland's good practice guide for the provision of adaptations.

Highlights

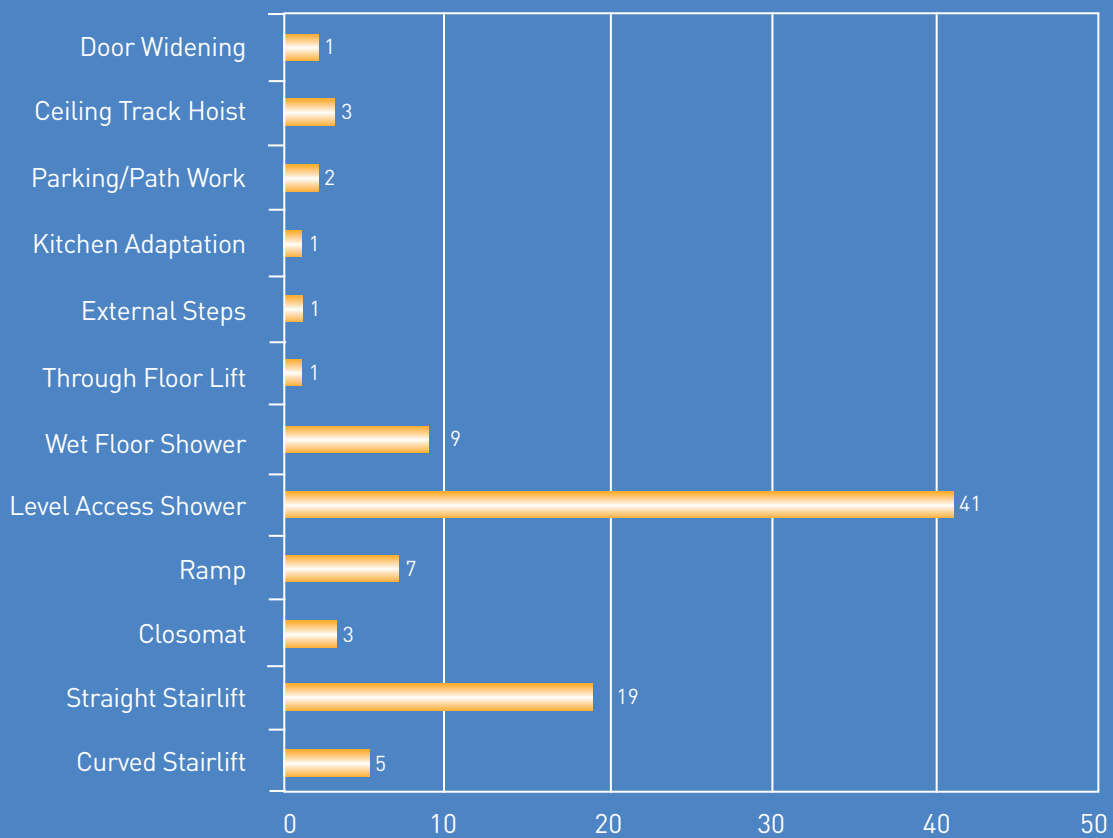
- In 2011/12 **£412,715.06** was spent on major adaptations and **£39,058** on small adaptations.
- Table one and Figure one demonstrate the outcomes for the Scheme of Assistance service in 2011/12.

Table 1: OUTCOMES FOR THE SCHEME OF ASSISTANCE SERVICE 2011/12

Major Works - 2011/12		Minor Works - 2011/12	
Total Cases Completed	166	Total Cases Completed	3563
Total Adaptations Cases (PSHG Grants)	93	Total Handyman Cases	3344
Total Advice Cases (Self Funded)	73	Total Small Adaptation Cases (Less than £500)	219

Source: SBC HST

Figure 1: TYPES OF WORK UNDERTAKEN AS MAJOR ADAPPTIONS



Source: SBC HST

Communications Strategy

In 2008 the Communications Strategy was developed and implemented; it sets out the plans of Scottish Borders Council's Housing Strategy and Services group to communicate more effectively with its internal and external service partners and the wider Scottish Borders Community. The strategy was developed to provide a consistent approach to the ways in which the Housing Strategy & Services group communicate.

The annual strategy review and update for 2011/12 was completed by the Housing Strategy Development Assistant before being circulated to the Group and Service Managers.

The Strategy provides a framework to ensure that members of the public and service-users have access to current housing related information. A number of leaflets, publications and forms have been produced during the year to enable the Council to meet its statutory obligations.

In addition to this, the housing pages of the Council's website are regularly updated and reviewed by the Housing Strategy Development Assistant. A vast amount of work has recently been carried out on the website to ensure that all information relating to impending welfare benefit changes is made available to the public; this has been achieved via a multi-agency approach.

Postgraduate Housing Studies

The Housing Strategy Officer is being supported by the Council to undertake the Postgraduate Diploma in Housing Studies at Stirling University.

The course is due to be completed in May 2012 and graduation will take place in November 2012. There are further members of staff who are interested in the course and hoping to start in September 2012.

Private Landlord Registration

In November 2011, the Housing Strategy Team at Scottish Borders Council sent out a survey to all private landlords in the Scottish Borders. The key aim of the survey was to find out more about landlords operating in the area, what issues they encountered when managing tenancies (if any) and what they thought of the registration process and the service provided by SBC.

In total there were 582 (a return of 15%) responses to the survey, of these 89% of landlords were satisfied with the landlord registration service at SBC and 90% agreed that team were very helpful. There were some areas for improvement which are already being addressed:

- **Website** – 72% of landlords never use the website so work is currently ongoing to continually update the new website, to ensure it is user friendly, easy to navigate and provide members of the public with clear information and advice.

- **Forum** – 92% of landlords said they would not attend a landlord's forum so it is important to try and identify why this is the case as it is still potentially an important way of engaging with landlords.
- **Newsletter** – 64% of landlords responded that they felt the newsletter was beneficial so it is important to carry on producing the newsletter and distribute to all landlords operating in the Scottish Borders.

Our Enforcement Officer continues to deal with private landlords who are unwilling to register or have failed to comply with the statutory

requirements of the landlord registration legislation under the Antisocial Behaviour etc (Scotland) Act 2004. Over the past year the Enforcement Officer has initiated action against 106 private landlords in relation to registration issues, a decrease of 42.4% on the previous years 184. This decrease could be attributed to the increased awareness that enforcement action will be taken against landlords that fail to comply with their requirement to register.

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 23 cases in relation to repairs issues and management practices this year.

Table 2: NUMBER OF REGISTRATIONS CREATED EACH MONTH

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
January	56	30	78	56	77	55
February	30	52	67	39	51	55
March	41	53	90	45	46	64
April	42	68	100	40	47	
May	56	51	63	38	74	
June	58	58	66	42	59	
July	34	51	61	50	57	
August	33	77	80	76	75	
September	70	110	68	77	99	
October	63	70	64	98	92	
November	72	105	50	87	84	
December	41	41	38	40	39	

Source: SBC HST

How to access our service:

Call: 01896 661392

HOUSING STRATEGY

email: housingenquiries@scotborders.gov.uk

LANDLORD REGISTRATION

email: privatelandlordregistration@scotborders.gov.uk

Write to: HOUSING STRATEGY

Galashiels Area Office | Paton Street | Galashiels | TD1 3AS

HOMELESSNESS SERVICES

Located in Paton Street, Galashiels, Scottish Borders Council's Homelessness Service consists of a team of specially trained advisors who are devoted to preventing homelessness in the Scottish Borders. The vision of the Homelessness Service is to promote wellbeing, social inclusion and social justice within a culture of partnership, equality and diversity.

The recent redesign and restructuring of the Homelessness Service has placed the prevention of homelessness at the heart of the Service. We seek to maximise any opportunities to prevent homelessness and to adopt measures that place an emphasis on achieving practical solutions to housing problems.

2011/12 was a big year for the Homelessness Service:

- In April the Service was comprehensively restructured and re-launched 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 the SBC Homelessness Service was able to remove the 'priority need' test for people applying for assistance under the homelessness legislation thereby becoming one of the 1st local authorities to meet the Scottish Government's target of removing the 'priority need' test completely by the end of 2012.
- In February, the Service relocated from Jedburgh to Galashiels. The new location offers service-users a more accessible and centrally based service.
- In August, the Scottish Housing Regulator conducted a 'Focused Scrutiny' visit to the Service which looked at access to the Service, prevention and housing options, progress towards the Scottish Government's '2012' target, and the arrangements for securing accommodation for clients. The Regulator, whilst making a number of suggestions for further improvement, recognised that the Service is moving in the right direction and acknowledged the areas of progress, improvements achieved, and the work that we are currently undertaking to continually develop and improve the homeless service
- Work to refurbish and upgrade the Council-owned former residential home at Trinity House in Hawick was completed in March. Trinity House consists of 4 self contained single person flats which will provide

temporary accommodation for young people as part of a managed stepping stone approach towards independent living.

- Throughout the year, the Homelessness Service and its partners continued to work on the successful implementation of the 2009 Scottish Borders Homelessness Strategy and, in particular, Year 3 of the Strategy action plan.

Our Vision

The vision of the Homelessness Service is to:

- Promote wellbeing, social inclusion and social justice within a culture of partnership, equality and diversity.

Our Aims

The aim of the Homelessness Service is to:

- provide homeless applicants with Housing Information and Advice to meet the Council's obligations with regard the Housing (Scotland) Act, 1987 as amended;
- work with the Scottish Government to meet the 2012 target of 'ensuring that everyone in Scotland is provided with safe secure and affordable accommodation by 2012'.

Our Objectives

The objectives if the Homelessness Service are:

- provide services that take all reasonable steps to prevent people becoming actually homeless;
- provide services to homeless households that will be accessible, of the highest quality and tailored wherever possible to their specific needs;
- seek to maximise the access to and range of support and assistance offered to help people achieve or maintain independence;
- operate a fair, accessible and responsive system for finding homeless households settled accommodation;

- put in place well publicised housing and related advice services that tackle the particular problems facing Scottish Borders residents;
- put in place an excellent management and delivery system to ensure delivery on the Scottish Borders Homelessness Strategy's objectives.

Scottish Borders Homelessness Strategy

The Scottish Borders Homelessness Strategy, published in 2009, recognises that a solution to homelessness is not just about the provision of housing, temporary accommodation and/or B&Bs but that there is a need for a comprehensive approach involving health, care for young people, education, training and support.

There has been significant progress in implementing the Strategy and the majority of actions described in the Strategy's five year action plan have now been implemented. However, the economic climate, level of resources, priorities and even the Homeless Service itself have evolved and changed considerably since the Strategy was developed in 2008/09.

The majority of actions in the action plan were medium term and targeted for completion within the first three years of the Strategy; these have now been implemented. A smaller number of longer term actions had targets for completion in years four and five of the Strategy's lifespan.

The implementation of the Strategy has resulted in significant benefits for the service users and for the people of the Scottish Borders over the last three years, and with service redesign and the commitment to prevent homelessness in the Borders, this is likely to continue despite the significant challenges of reduced resources, the potential impacts of the welfare reform and the economic climate.

Partners

Homelessness is a complex and extreme issue that often concerns 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 and a

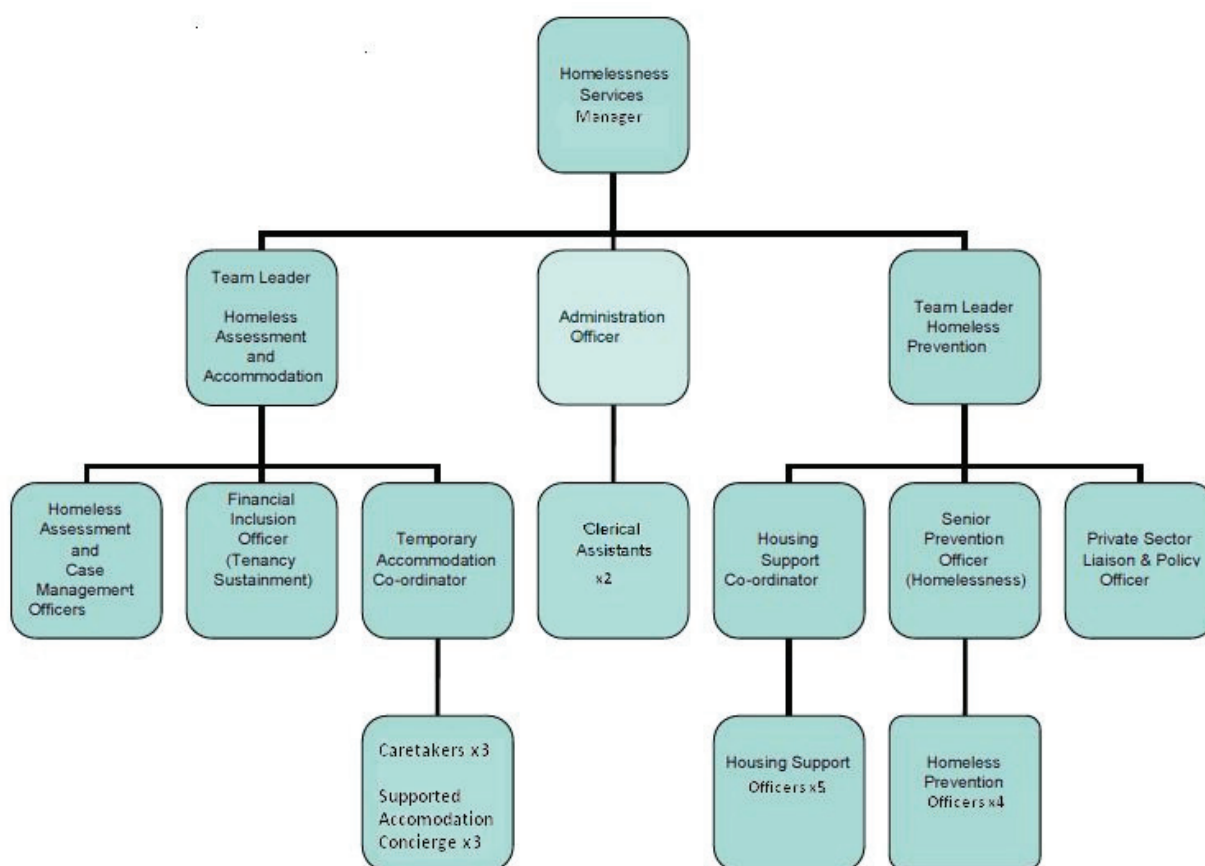
commission with the company 'Orchard and Shipman'. The Scottish Borders Homelessness Strategy stresses the importance of all the partner agencies working together in order to prevent and alleviate homelessness.

Re-design of Homelessness Service

The aim of the service redesign was to implement a homelessness prevention model that prevents homelessness by engaging with service users/tenants and ensuring that they have the skills, knowledge and experience to cope with the demands of a tenancy and the supports necessary to sustain that tenancy.

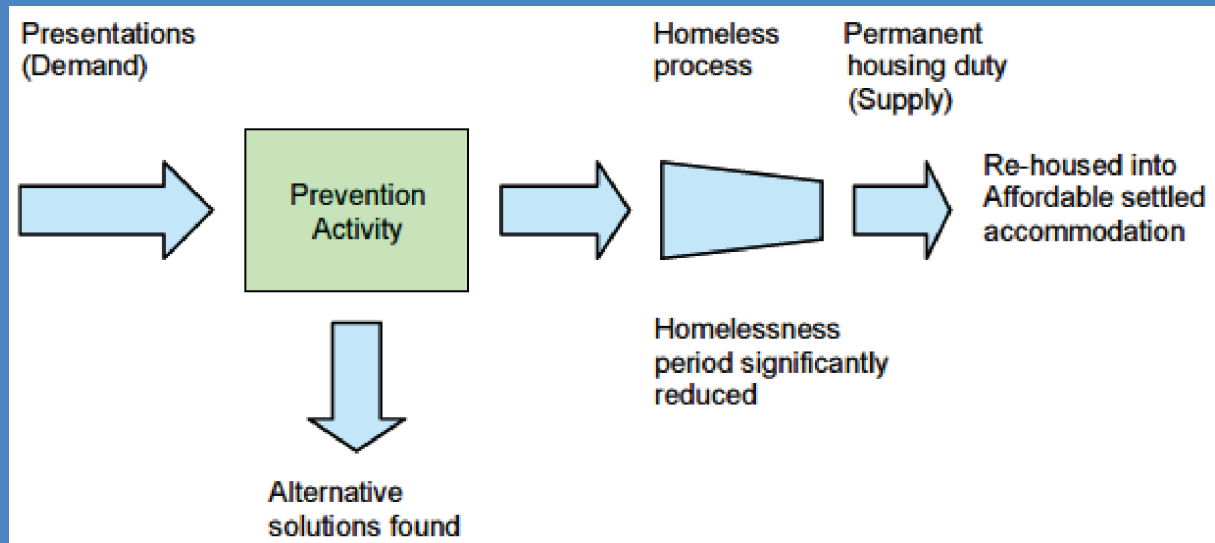
The redesigned structure has facilitated earlier intervention to prevent homelessness and the use of a housing options approach to identifying re-housing solutions, in order to provide the best possible levels of advice and assistance to people in the Scottish Borders who are homeless or threatened with homelessness.

FIGURE 2: NEW STAFFING STRUCTURE



Source: SBC HOM

FIGURE 3: NEW PROCESSES AND APPROACHES



Source: SBC HOM

The adoption of an approach which is based on using housing options to prevent homelessness has required the Homelessness Service to challenge established ways of working and has encouraged a more creative approach to service development and delivery. The new approach has helped to clarify priorities within specific service areas and to improve joint working. As a result, the Homelessness service met the Scottish Government's target of abolishing the 'priority need' significantly ahead of schedule and, in doing so, contributed to the

Council's wider objectives of improving social inclusion and reducing social and economic disadvantage.

The Homelessness Service also now enjoys a more central location in Galashiels, where the Service is more accessible to the Scottish Borders public. 70% of those who submit an application to the Service are from the central area of the Borders, Galashiels is ideally situated to service residents from all across the region.

Scottish Housing Regulator

Over the year, the Scottish Housing Regulator conducted a 'Focused Scrutiny' of the Homelessness Service which included spending a week 'on site' with the Service in August.

The purpose of the Regulator's scrutiny work is to assess, in a proportionate way, the levels of risk faced by an organisation. The Regulator scoped its 'Focused Scrutiny' of the Homelessness Service around the following areas:

- access to services;
- advice, prevention and housing options;
- progress towards 2012 – abolition of priority need; and
- securing accommodation.

The Regulator made a number of suggestions for areas where further improvements may be considered but also recognised that the Service is moving in the right direction and acknowledged progress and improvement in a number of areas as well as the work that is ongoing to further develop and improve the Service.

Trinity House

The Council converted and upgraded the Council-owned former residential home at Trinity House, Hawick, to provide 4 self contained single person flats for young people and an office room for staff. The flats will provide temporary accommodation for young people as part of a managed stepping stone approach towards providing independent living. Each of the young people will have their housing support needs assessed and floating housing support will be provided to the young people by Penumbra as part of Penumbra's existing housing support contract with the Council.

Trinity House is an innovative project that provides an excellent example of delivering needs-led housing solutions for vulnerable young people. The project goal is to provide a safe and supportive environment in comfortable surroundings where the young people are able to learn and prepare for their own tenancies and independence.

Trinity House offers a programme that aims to improve outcomes for young people and includes a coordinated approach, involving all agencies, to support the delivery of appropriate, proportionate and timely help to young people in housing crisis. It promotes shared team working that identifies solutions to problems and barriers faced by each individual.

Facts and Figures

Following a small drop in numbers in each year since 2007, the number of people contacting the Homelessness Service rose significantly again in 2011/2012. The rate of homeless applications in the Scottish Borders now accounts for about 1.9%² of households in the Scottish Borders although this is still significantly lower than the Scottish average of 2.2%.

The primary reasons for people becoming homeless 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 loss of private tenancies.

In total in 2011/12 1,060 people approached the Homelessness Service.

Of the 776 clients who worked with the Homelessness Prevention team during 2011/12, there were only 258 (33%) where prevention did not work or was not appropriate and which, consequently, required to be dealt with under the statutory assessment process and where alternative accommodation required to be provided.

The positive effect of the new homelessness prevention led approach has been significant. Despite the number of people approaching the Service increasing by 23% from 862 in 2010/2011 to 1060 in 2011/2012, the number of people who had to be considered under the statutory homelessness assessment process decreased by 37% from 862 in 2010/2011 to 542 in 2011/2012.

² This figure accounts for households approaching the service. This is based on there being 56,645 households in the Scottish Borders.

Table 3: BREAKDOWN OF PREVENTION BY OUTCOME³

Outcomes	Apr-Jun 11	Jul-Sep 11	Oct-Dec 11	Jan-Mar 12	Total
Applicant withdrew	6	3	3	0	12
Eviction prevented	1	4	1	0	6
Friends and family	6	3	1	0	10
Homeless Assessment	44	85	74	55	258
Housing Options Only	31	19	13	10	73
Lost Contact	13	14	6	2	35
Not Known	1	1	0	0	2
Other	4	9	0	0	13
Owner/Occupier	0	0	1	2	3
Private DGS	36	23	11	4	74
Private no DGS	17	14	11	5	47
PSL	13	11	8	4	36
Remained/ Returned	20	23	18	5	66
RSL	15	11	18	3	47
RSL- Management transfer	1	0	0	1	2
No Outcome	1	0	9	82	92
Total	209	220	174	173	776

Source: Homelessness Prevention Team Database as of 30th March 2012

³ There are a higher number of cases that have no outcome, specifically Jan-March 2012. This is because many of these cases are ongoing.

The Deposit Guarantee Scheme

The Deposit Guarantee Scheme (DGS) provides the guarantee of a deposit, payable to the landlord, if any damage is incurred during the tenancy. The scheme allows people who could not otherwise afford to pay a deposit the chance to rent from a private landlord.

The DGS enables people on low incomes to seek homes within a 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 which Housing Strategy and Homelessness Services have established with private landlords.

DGS Statistics 2011-2012

- From 1 April 2011 to 31 March 2012 the DGS received 144 referrals, comparing this to the same period in 2010-2011 when 89 referrals were received. The creation of a post of Private Sector Liaison Officer (PSLO) in the re-structure of the Homelessness Service has contributed directly to an increase in referrals of over 60%.
- 144 referrals during 2011-2012 resulted in 95 tenancies being set up in the private rented sector, a 66% success rate. In comparison to 89 referrals and 49 tenancies set up in 2010-2011, a 55% success rate. 2011-2012 has seen an additional 46 tenancies set up, a very positive 94% increase on the previous year.
- Of the 2011-2012 referrals 73 were male; 71 female. This compares to 36 male; 52 female in 2010-2011.
- 51 (35%) of applicants were in the under 25yrs shared LHA rate bracket pre-January 2012.
- 37 applicants were aged between 25-35yrs to be affected by the extension of the shared room LHA age bracket as of 1st January 2012.
- The 95 tenancies set up in 2011-2012 equates to £38,585 worth of guarantees. The average deposit is for £400.
- Of the 95 tenancies 77 are still active £32,225 worth of guarantees, 18 tenancies are known to have ended. It is difficult to monitor which tenancies have ended as this relies on the landlord or tenant contacting the PSLO.
- Of the 18 tenancies known to have ended 1 tenant was re-housed by an RSL; 8 were abandoned/no notice given and 9 were ended by correct notice period. 1 tenant is known to have re-presented to homeless services.
- Tenancy sustainment based on the figures above is 81%.
- Claims against the DGS for tenancies set up in 2011-2012 amounted to £2,866.50 equating to a 7% claim rate. Maintaining a claim rate below 10% for the year is a key outcome for scheme.

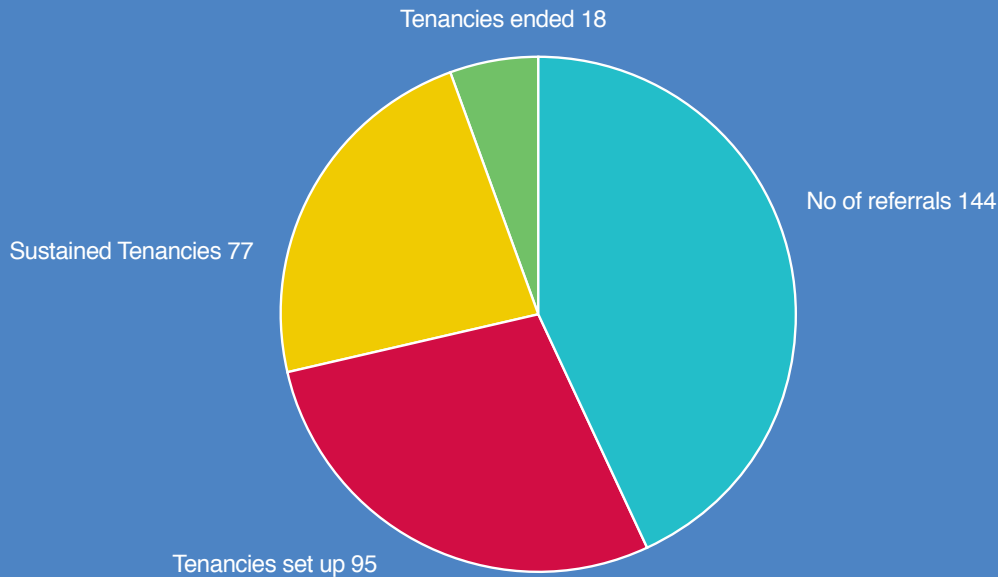


Source: SBC JADU

Figures 2011-2012

Figure 4: DEPOSIT GUARANTEE SCHEME FIGURES

Source: SBC HOM



Housing Support

The Homelessness Service Housing Support team consists of 5 Housing Support Officers and a Housing Support Coordinator.

The Housing Support Officers help people to move into new accommodation and settle into it so that they are better able to sustain their accommodation and not become homeless again.

There is evidence that housing support has a positive impact on service users, on those closely involved with the service user and on the wider community.

Housing support is offered to all users of the Homelessness Service. In 2011/2012 the Housing Support team provided housing support to 221 people. People who used the Housing Support service in 2011/2012 said:

- "This is an excellent service knowing that there is support out there with housing needs is fantastic."
- "(the Housing Support Officer) was very helpful. Service was good and she helped me with everything I asked."

Financial Inclusion

The redesign of the Homelessness Service included the creation of a Financial Inclusion Officer post. The role of the Financial Inclusion Officer is to help people to manage their finances and maximise their income in order to prevent homelessness and be better able to sustain their accommodation in future. This is achieved by providing advice, guidance and support to all homeless and potentially homeless household on matters relating to personal finance and resolving problems related to benefits and debts.

In its first year, the new Financial Inclusion Officer post achieved the following:

- From April 2011 to March 2012 The Financial Inclusion Officer had a total of 80 open cases and 194 Advice only Referrals, assisting 141 clients to make a claim for Housing Benefit, Local Housing Allowance and Council Tax benefit. This involved helping the client to complete the forms and look at overpayments of Housing and Council tax benefits.
- The Financial Inclusion Officer assisted 19 clients to make a claim for Community Care Grants, Budgeting Loans and Crisis Loans.
- The Financial Inclusion Officer assisted 12 clients to make a correct claim to a Social Security Benefit (this involved the completion of forms or helped them to make the phone call to the Customer Management System to make a claim). This has resulted in client income gains of £43,896.60.
- The Financial Inclusion Officer assisted 37 clients in negotiating with their landlords in regards to rent arrears, re-payment plans and prevention of evictions.

The case study below highlights the type of work carried out by the Financial Inclusion Officer:

Case Study

Ms A contacted the Homeless Service when she had received a Notice to Quit form from her landlord due to high rent arrears of over £4,000. The Financial Inclusion Officer contacted the client's landlord to advise that she was dealing with the case and visited Ms A at home to discuss her situation with her. Ms A had been working for only 8 hours per week and was earning less than £50pw. The Financial Inclusion Officer helped Ms A to claim Jobseekers Allowance, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit with the result that Ms A's weekly income increased by over £100pw.

Borders Housing Concordat - Homeless Prevention / Rent Arrears Protocol

As part of the Concordat between the Council and Scottish Borders Housing Association, the Homelessness Service worked successfully in partnership with SBHA over 2011/2012 to develop a joint protocol to prevent homelessness, and to maximise rental income to SBHA by targeting housing support to SBHA tenants in greatest need, thereby reducing the number of evictions for rent arrears from SBHA properties. During

the course of the year this joint working helped to reduce SBHA rent arrears and also significantly reduced the number of tenants evicted. Central to the success of the project is partnership working and the sharing of relevant information in order that the Homelessness Service can engage as early as possible with SBHA tenants who in difficulty in order to eviction and homelessness.

Peer Mentoring

In 2011, 4 officers from the Homelessness Prevention team, working with Gala Youth Project (GYP), began to develop a Peer Mentoring Scheme for young people. The Scheme aims to recruit young people who have experienced homelessness to act as volunteer mentors for other young people who are experiencing difficult housing issues, including homelessness. The volunteer mentors provide informal support to other young people through regular meetings and activities which focus on the young person's transition into independent living by relating to the mentor's own experience of housing issues.

The Homelessness Prevention team officers undertook intensive training designed to give them the skills for training volunteers to be peer mentors. Following this the Homelessness Service looked to identify young people who had used the Homelessness Service and whom might be interested in becoming volunteer mentors, as a result 6 young people attended an information evening in early 2012. All were very keen to be involved with the Scheme and a series of weekly training sessions has been set up for early 2012/2013 to provide the volunteers with the specialised skills and knowledge that they need for working with young people through activity based informal support sessions towards meeting goals set by the young person.

Feedback from Service Users

The Homelessness Service is committed to involving service users in the planning and delivery of our services. Their needs and views should inform and drive our services and directly influence current practice standards, service reviews, departmental culture, operational decision-making, and the strategic thinking and priorities for future service developments. The Service actively asks service users for their views about the Service.

Feedback received from service users during the year included:

- "Very supportive in my time of need."
- "Over the moon with the service."
- "Couldn't do enough for us."
- "the service from start to finish was outstanding."
- "Even after we were housed ... followed up with house calls in case we needed any more help."

How to access our service:

Call: 01896 661393

email: Homelessnessservices@scotborders.gov.uk

Write to: HOMELESSNESS SERVICE

Galashiels Area Office | Paton Street | Galashiels TD1 3AS

WELFARE BENEFITS SERVICE

Scottish Borders Council's Welfare Benefits Service consists of a team of advisers specialising in matters relating to social security benefits and tax credits. Their aim is to maximise take up of these for citizens of the Scottish Borders. This area of work is consistent with the Vision Statement for Social Work which seeks to promote well being, social inclusion and social justice and to work in partnership with other agencies to maximise opportunities and address disadvantage. Maximising income is undertaken by a combination of advocacy and appeal representation, assistance with benefits form completion, awareness raising, training and telephone advice sessions.

At the beginning of March 2012 the service moved from Earlston to Paton Street, Galashiels. Although based in Galashiels, the team regularly work in a variety of locations throughout the Borders, working closely with a number of partner organisations and stakeholders in order to improve customer service delivery and to ensure that the service extends to the socially excluded. The service is currently in receipt of funding from Macmillan Cancer Care, Fairer Scotland Fund, Sure Start and the Child Care Partnership in respect of project work and has a Service Level Agreement with the Local Pension Service.

The projects have developed very successfully over the year and we were extremely pleased to receive confirmation that the Fairer Scotland funded project for a Welfare Benefits Officer (mental health) has been extended.

As well as representing customers at Social Security Appeal Tribunals and advocating on their behalf, Welfare Benefits officers support Social Work locality staff and also deliver training on benefits and tax credits.

The Welfare Benefits Service is also an integral part of the Government's Partnership and Continuing Employment (PACE) team which deals with redundancy support in the Borders. The service has been identified by PACE as a major part of their response as the immediate concern for many in a redundancy situation is how their income will be affected. This year officers have attended 7 events in different locations throughout the Borders.

The service statistics for this year have again shown a significant increase in the number of people using the service. It is likely that this has been caused by changes brought about by Welfare Reform and will continue as the

programme develops. This increased demand on the service has not been without its challenges, but the team are committed to ensuring that they make a positive difference to customers' lives by tackling inequalities.

£6.1 million Gains achieved by the service for customers

This figure reflects increased income to customers from advice only enquiries and further action referrals which have been closed and income gains confirmed. This figure also encompasses gains which have been achieved through partnership working with the Department of Work and Pensions Visiting Service; a total of £845,826 (14%) of gains were secured through this collaboration.

The work of the Welfare Benefits Service has therefore contributed to aims one and three as stated in the Scottish Borders Council's Tackling Poverty and Financial Inclusion Strategy:

Aim One - 'Reduce the number of households in the Scottish Borders currently in debt, or at risk of being in debt.'

Aim Three - 'Improve access to information and advice to help maximise incomes.'

Similarly, the service has aligned with Scottish Borders Council's Single Outcome Agreement, National Outcome No 7: 'We have tackled the significant inequalities in Scottish Society'.

The local outcomes for the service were as follows:

- Maximise the monetary gains by people accessing the Welfare Benefits Service:
£6.1 million – 105% of target achieved
- Increase the number of people accessing the Welfare Benefits Service:
3113 – 113% of target achieved

Facts and Figures

Figure 5: REFERRALS AND ENQUIRIES PER AREA 2011/12

Source: SBC WBS

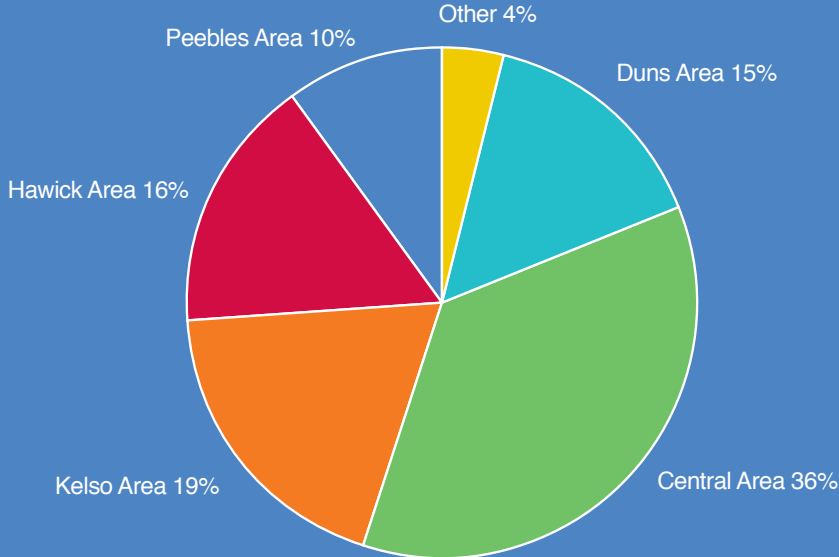


Figure 6: SOURCE OF REFERRALS 2011/12

Source: SBC WBS

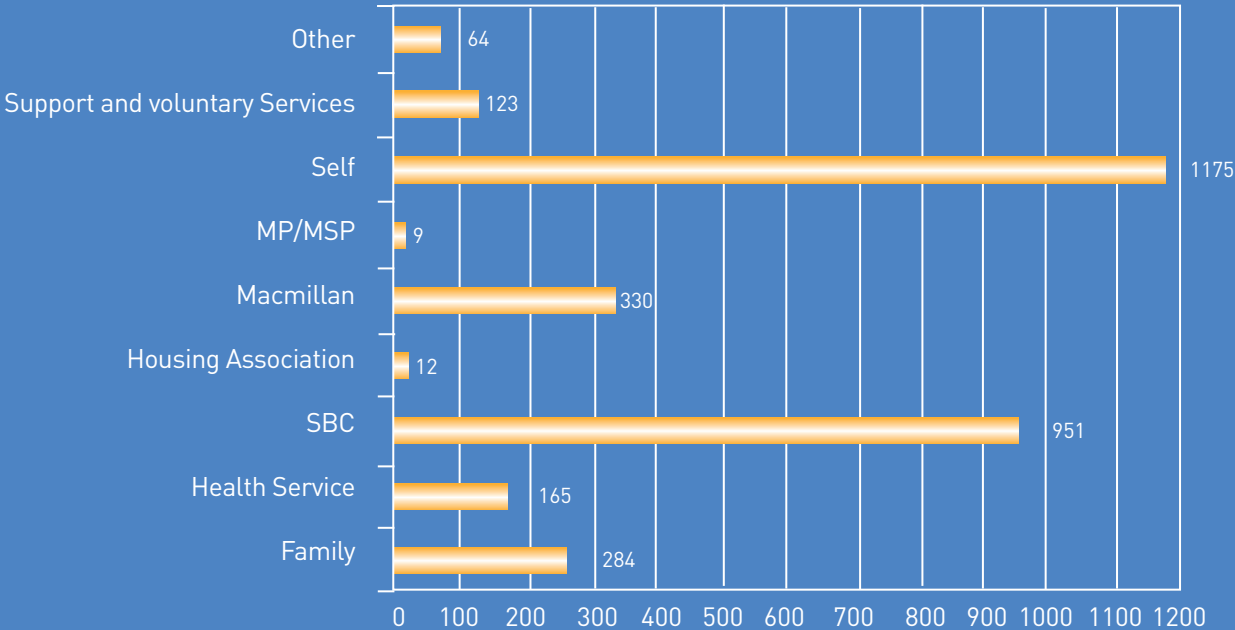


Figure 7: REFERRALS 2011/12

Source: SBC WBS

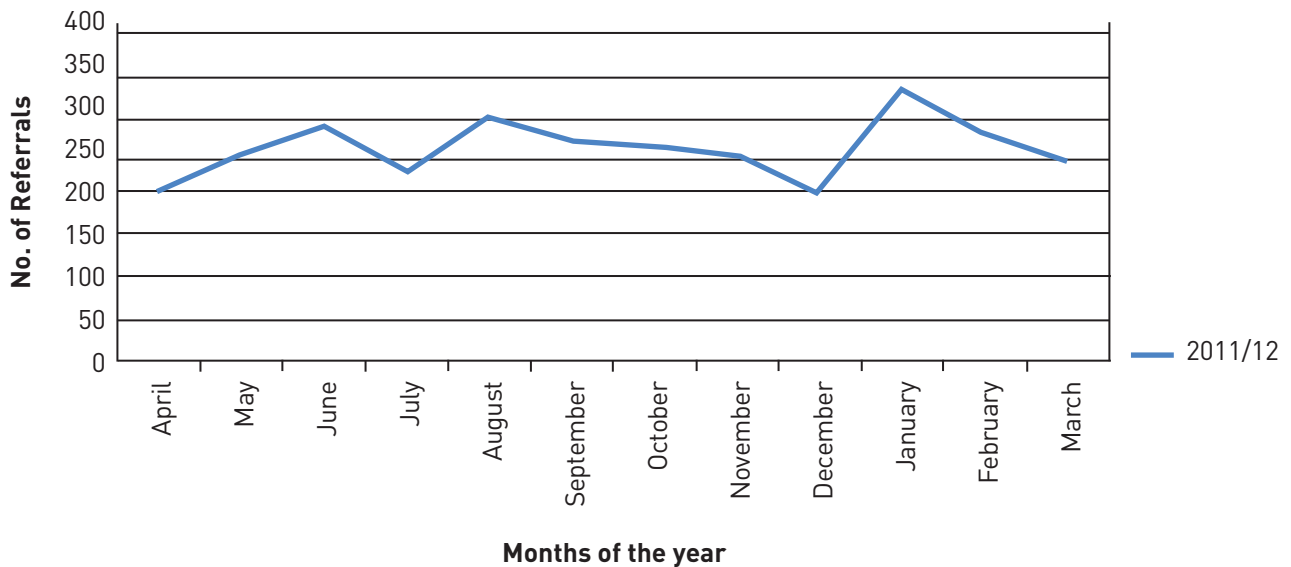
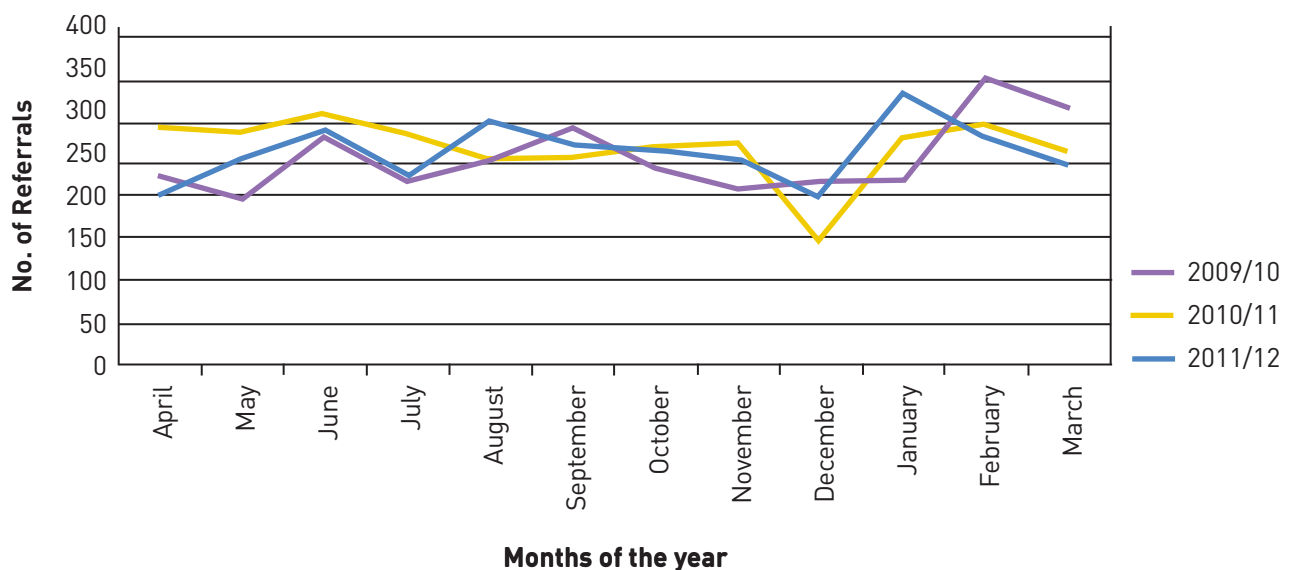


Figure 7 demonstrates a consistently high level of referrals/enquiries each month aside from June/July and November/December whereby a significant drop is indicated. This decline could be attributed to staff holidays, as a reduced number of staff may have resulted in fewer referrals being submitted to the service. As Figure Four reveals, 951 referrals to the service were made by staff within Scottish Borders Council; this accounts for 30.5% of all incoming referrals/enquiries during 2011/12.

As Figure 8 demonstrates, the number of incoming referrals/enquires for 2011/12 mirror the general pattern of previous years, however, January/February 2012 portrays a sharper rise in the number of referrals/enquiries being made than in previous years; this is most likely due to changes brought about by Welfare Reform, as forthcoming modifications to the benefit system may have resulted in a higher number of enquiries to the service at the beginning of the year.

Figure 8: REFERRALS COMPARISON 2009-2012

Source: SBC WBS



Welfare Benefits Officer (Mental Health)

This post was originally established on a temporary basis through the Fairer Scotland Fund in order to address increasing demand and to effectively tackle poverty for those affected by mental health issues. The nature of mental illness can mean increased anxiety for many. Welfare benefits assistance can be critical in contributing towards recovery by relieving anxiety and stress in relation to financial matters.

A specialist officer allows greater consistency in dealing with cases and as the officer is regularly working with those affected by mental health issues as well as health professionals in this field, a greater knowledge of how certain conditions affect individuals is gained which allows more detailed and relevant questioning in relation to disability related benefit claims and potentially a higher chance of success at the initial stages.

The project was originally funded for two years by the Fairer Scotland Fund and due to the results achieved the funding has been extended. The officer is based within the Welfare Benefits Service at Paton Street, Galashiels and attends the Social Work Mental Health Team offices at Huntlyburn Stables one half day per week, from where ward visits can easily be made.

Presentations on the benefits available to those with mental health problems and the effects of ongoing and forthcoming changes resulting from the Government's Welfare Reform programme have been made to professionals and service users.

The annualised increased financial gains to those accessing this service met its first year target of £300,000 and in the second year the annualised financial gains of £600,871 considerably exceeded the target of £500,000. The target for the third year of the project (01.08.11 – 31.07.12) is £600,000 and the gains to date suggest that this target will be achieved.

The following case study gives an insight into the type of case that the officer may become involved in:

Case Study

Miss A's Community Psychiatric Nurse contacted the Welfare Benefits Officer to assist with an appeal about payment of Disability Living Allowance after Miss A had been discharged from a long stay in hospital.



The Tribunal Service had advised that the appeal would be struck out, as based on the written appeal submission provided by the Secretary of State there was no prospect of the appeal succeeding. The officer wrote a submission to the tribunal which pointed out the errors of law in the decision made by the Benefits Delivery Centre (BDC) and obtained evidence to support holding an appeal in Miss A's house, as she was unable to travel to an appeal hearing.

An appeal tribunal was arranged, but the BDC revised their decision fully in Miss A's favour shortly before the tribunal. The officer also carried out a full benefits check and identified that Miss A should be entitled to Income Support and a successful claim for this benefit was made.

With the increase in her income Miss A was able to increase her contributions towards the cost of her extensive care package which is necessary for her to remain in the community.

The Borders Macmillan Welfare Benefits Partnership

The Borders Macmillan Welfare Benefits Partnership is a joint project between the Welfare Benefits Service, Macmillan Cancer Support, NHS Borders Macmillan Centre and The Pension Service. The project, which is funded by Macmillan Cancer Support for three years, commenced on 17th August 2009 and since then a dedicated Macmillan Welfare Benefits Officer and Assistant have operated between the Welfare Benefits Service office and the NHS Borders Macmillan Cancer Centre.

The partnership aims to increase the income of those affected by cancer in Scottish Borders by assessing benefit entitlement, assisting with benefit applications, representing at appeal tribunals, and accessing Macmillan grants. In addition, the service gives streamlined access to other useful services such as money, housing and energy advice as well as occupational therapy. The Welfare Benefits Service already has a Service Level Agreement with the Local Pension Service but further protocols have been put in place within the partnership to make certain that there is a priority service for those who are terminally ill ensuring that these customers are given a seamless service.

£1.5 million annualised gains achieved for people in the Scottish Borders affected by cancer.

For the period 2011/2012 the partnership target to increase annualised income for those affected by cancer was £800,000. From April 2011 to March 2012 the annualised gains were **£1,500,502**. These figures include £35,611 in Macmillan Grants, which are most commonly used for increased fuel costs, travel and clothing. 45% of the referrals to the partnership are from the Borders Macmillan Cancer Centre, 33% are through self referral, 12% are from other Health and Social Work professionals and the remainder a mixture of family and others such as benefit advisers at the Western General Hospital.

The total annualised gains from the start of the partnership in August 2009 to March 2012 were £4,141,277 with 1,533 referrals received and 100 with ongoing action.

There is no doubt that the close working relationship with the Borders Macmillan Centre has played a significant part in the success of the project and has allowed the Welfare Benefits Officer and Assistant greater knowledge and understanding of different types of cancer and how it impacts on the lives of patients. This in turn assists them with the completion of benefit applications and with the challenging of decisions. It has also meant that quality supporting evidence can be gained directly from the Macmillan and NHS professionals to support appeal cases.

In 2011-2012 there were 42 reconsideration and appeal cases lodged. Of these, 20 have had the decision changed in favour of the customer, with only 5 having to be taken to an appeal hearing. There are still 13 cases awaiting a decision. Appeal cases can take several months to be heard and the submission of quality evidence prior to an appeal means that clients often have to wait less time for their decisions to be changed and consequently do not have the added stress of attending a tribunal hearing.

Case Study

Mrs H had applied for an increase in her Disability Living Allowance because her care needs had increased considerably. She was receiving the lower rate of mobility and the lowest rate of the care component. She had completed the claim form herself and received a decision that her benefit would not be increased. An appeal was submitted and supporting evidence from her consultant was obtained. The Department for Work and Pensions reviewed the decision and increased the award to low rate mobility and high rate care components. This represented a financial gain of £52.45 per week but also meant that her son who was caring for her could claim Carers Allowance of £55.55 per week too. The evidence obtained from the consultant was sufficient to enable the decision to be changed before Mrs H had to attend an appeal tribunal hearing and thus saved her a lot of added stress.

Stakeholder and customer feedback

Feedback has indicated that the work of the partnership has certainly eased the difficulties people experience with benefit claims.

The benefits of the partnership have been reflected in the Stakeholder survey responses:

Stakeholder survey question:

“Do you believe that it is important to have a specialist service in Scottish Borders which can offer benefit advice and assistance together with advocacy and representation at Tribunal and to Social Security Commissioners on Social Security matters?”

Lead CNS, Palliative Care:

“I strongly feel this is an essential source and has undoubtedly influenced the care of many, many people. Patients are picked up earlier in their journey and supported better than previous ad hoc systems in place.”

Secretary, Prostate Cancer Support Group:

“Yes. Patients and carers are normally too ill, too stressed, too pre-occupied with their treatment and illness to understand the implications and legalities of the benefits system and they expect and require the expertise of an organisation who can do that for them in an understanding and sympathetic manner.”

Macmillan CNS, Palliative Care:

“The benefits system is perceived as a minefield to the lay person. Having an advocate, in the form of a Macmillan Welfare Benefits Officer can help reduce stress, increase overall well-being for the patient and reduce their financial worries.”

Borders Carers Centre:

“Yes – important to have knowledge and understanding of condition not only on patient but also on family members.”

Customers are routinely surveyed and the feedback has been very good:

“The service I received was excellent. Easing my financial problems has had a very positive effect on my health.”

“It has made a big difference to my life.”

“It’s an excellent service/partnership which supports people at their most vulnerable; when they can’t help themselves - especially with complex paperwork.”

Of the surveys returned in 2010/11

- **97%** felt the service made a positive difference in their lives
- **95%** found their adviser very helpful
- **88%** felt the service was excellent and a further 11% felt it was good



Tribunal Representation

A large part of the Welfare Benefits Officer role is assisting with appeals and tribunal representation. Sometimes when evidence is submitted the decision can be changed in favour of the appellant, the appeal is lapsed and attending a Tribunal is not necessary. In a small number of cases it may become evident through additional medical evidence or further information that the appellant will not meet the criteria for the benefit under appeal. In these cases the appellant would be encouraged to withdraw and any further options explained.

In this reporting period Welfare Benefits Officers were scheduled to represent at 238 Tribunals. Of these 45 cases were lapsed in favour of the appellant and 17 cases were withdrawn. The success rate was 68%.

The greatest proportions of tribunals are heard in Galashiels. However, some are heard in Berwick and Industrial Injuries cases in Edinburgh. Where an error of law is identified by the representative following a tribunal, cases can be heard by the Upper Tier Tribunal. Four cases went to Upper Tier Tribunal in this year.

The following case study gives an insight into the complexity and level of work required in order to ensure the customer receives correct entitlement to benefits.

Case Study

Mr S had been in receipt of Incapacity Benefit for several years due to mental health problems. However, following a medical examination he was found to be capable of work. Mr S was helped to make an appeal against that decision. In addition to his mental health problems he had broken his collarbone in an accident between the date of his medical examination and the date on which the disputed decision was made. The physical effects of this injury would, in themselves, give rise to sufficient points on the personal capability assessment for Mr S to be considered incapable of work. Unfortunately, the Department for Work and Pensions refused to accept the date that he had broken his collarbone was before the date of the disputed decision, and the case had to be considered by the First Tier tribunal.

Although that tribunal accepted the evidence of the date of the injury, no points were awarded for any mental health problem and insufficient points were awarded for the physical difficulties caused by the broken collarbone. A full statement of reasons for their decision was obtained and permission granted to appeal to the Upper Tribunal on a point of law.

At the Upper Tribunal it was argued that the First Tier's decision was an error of law because having accepted that he could not use his injured arm to reach for things he should also have scored points for being unable to turn a sink tap, as with sink taps being at the back of the sink it is impossible to use them without reaching. This argument was accepted by the Upper Tribunal Judge. Mr S was awarded arrears of over £5,000. The whole process took 14 months and involved home visits, two tribunals, numerous letters and considerable research on the legal points involved.

Sure Start

Sure Start is a Government programme whose aim is to provide support to families with very young children. A joint initiative between Social Work and NHS Borders allows the Welfare Benefits Service to offer income maximisation checks to parents of children under four, living in the Scottish Borders. This covers a range of benefits including maternity and disability benefits, tax credits, income support and housing and council tax benefit. Close working between WBS staff, Sure Start midwives, health Visitors and workers in Family Centres has allowed the successful development of this project throughout the Borders.

Much of this work can be complex and time consuming as entitlement to grants is interlinked to other benefits/tax credits. As a result matters may not be resolved in one visit but the input often enables parents to buy essential equipment for their baby or child and to relieve the stress of their financial situation.



Child Care Partnership Project (CCP)

Working in conjunction with the CCP, the aim of this project is to increase the take up of tax credits for working parents and to increase awareness of help with child care costs. Since the initial project started in July 2006, the Welfare Benefits Assistant has achieved increased income gains to the value of £1,570,000. In this reporting year, gains of £362,000 have been achieved.

Building and maintaining good relationships with child care providers throughout the Scottish Borders and regularly delivering advice sessions on a one to one basis to parents of young children continues to be an important part of the project.

Case Study

The partner of a mother with six children was arrested following a series of incidents involving domestic violence. She was left with no money for food or heating because her partner had always claimed and he was still in receipt of all the relevant benefits. On examination of the situation, it seemed as though very little of the claimed benefits had been of direct benefit to the mother and children and she was completely unaware of what she was entitled to or what in fact had been previously claimed.

When the necessary claim forms were completed and she was told she was entitled to benefits of about £600; she was really pleased



that she would have this amount of money every month to feed and clothe herself and her children.

Shortly after this happened the mother was also re-housed with her children in more appropriate and spacious accommodation and they are now enjoying their new life. This all happened just before Christmas 2011 and the mother said that she was really looking forward to buying decent clothes and presents for her children for the very first time.

Customer Service and 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.

In order to try to continually improve service delivery, customer survey forms are usually issued to customers when their case is closed. However, this year we did not have the staff capacity to carry out this task from June 2011.

Listed below are some of the comments from the first 2 months of the year:

"I have no complaints at all. The advice and help was very reassuring and can't fault it in any way. It was very reassuring under a very stressful time due to the tribunal - thank you very much for your help and support."

"Brilliant service all round - thanks!"

"I found (workers name deleted) very helpful and supportive throughout the whole tribunal and afterwards. He really did help me a lot and got all my money sorted too."

"I wish to thank all at Welfare Benefits who helped me receive my DLA. The money has enabled me to eat more healthily and starting to gain weight has helped my back considerably! Thank you."

"Very happy with your service. My case was dealt with very efficiently, promptly and effectively. Thank you."

"Personally I don't feel that your service has a high enough profile or that it is common knowledge to the general public. Your location does not make you accessible."

Awareness raising and training

Over the course of the year, the service ran 22 benefits awareness sessions the Borders for workers in health, social care and the voluntary sector including sessions held in a combination of family centres and baby groups. Significant changes to the benefits and tax credits systems resulted in 13 sessions on welfare reform being delivered to social work staff, disability groups, NHS staff and other agencies.

How to access our service:

Call: 01896 661394

Fax: 01896 662765

email: wbs@scotborders.gsx.gov.uk

Write to: WELFARE BENEFITS SERVICE
Scottish Borders Council | Paton Street
Galashiels | TD1 3AS

HOW YOU CAN CONTACT US

SCOTTISH BORDERS COUNCIL

Council Headquarters
Newtown St Boswells
MELROSE
TD6 0SA
tel: customer services 0300 100 1800

WELFARE BENEFITS SERVICE

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HOUSING STRATEGY TEAM

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BORDER CARE & REPAIR SERVICE

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HOMELESSNESS SERVICES

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