

housing strategy & services

annual report 2015-16

HOUSING STRATEGY & SERVICES
PLACE

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



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FOREWORD

I am very pleased to be able to present the Housing Strategy & Services Annual Report for 2015/16.



In an era of economic austerity and political uncertainty, 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 210 affordable homes being delivered across the Scottish Borders and the expansion of Bridge Homes' housing stock.

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 £8.5 million.

A key area of development this year has been our involvement in the Syrian Resettlement Programme; with dedicated Officers from Homelessness Services and the Welfare Benefits Team supporting the first two, of an eventual ten, families to settle in the Scottish Borders. This programme has required the coordination of multiple agencies and while there have been inevitable challenges, I am pleased to report that overall it has been very successful - both families have been welcomed into our community and we look forward to receiving the next two families later in the year.

Scottish Borders Council's Work Opportunities Scheme, which was developed and adopted in 2014, has continued to improve the employment prospects of those furthest from the labour market. Over the past two years 46 young people have been recruited into Modern Apprentice positions in the council and 58 young people have participated in work experience placements, with 34 of these being in paid work.

Looking ahead into 2016/17 suggests it's set to be another interesting and challenging year for the services, with further changes to the benefits system under Welfare Reform and uncertainty regarding the EU Referendum in June. Steps have already been taken to ensure that the Group is prepared for these changes, with a priority on maintaining the strong links we have established with our partners and clients.

Councillor Frances Renton

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Frances Renton". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Executive Member for Social Work and Housing, Scottish Borders Council

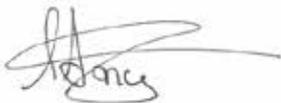
GROUP MANAGERS INTRODUCTION

As Group Manager 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.

In 2015/16 thousands of people from across the Borders approached our services for assistance. Many of our clients were faced with continuing economic challenges, including problems with employment, fuel poverty and housing. Despite some of these cases being complex and at times sensitive in nature, staff across all four services have worked tirelessly to support people and help find solutions wherever they can.

Over the last few years the group has undergone some significant changes, with the restructuring of the Homelessness Service, establishment of the Employment Support Service and the re-location of all four services to the Galashiels Area office. We are fortunate in that we have a dedicated and committed staff, which strive to deliver year on year improvement despite the current economic climate and funding limitations. I am confident that we will be able to continue current progress throughout 2016/17, and see the continuation of effective services that meet the needs of the people of the Scottish Borders.

Cathie Fancy



Group Manager 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 various departments including 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, improving the energy efficiency of housing in the Borders and ensuring there is a long term strategic vision.

The team includes Housing Strategy, the Home Energy Advice Service, Private Landlord Registration, Private Sector Housing Grants and Empty Homes.

Key achievements this year:

- Bridge Homes has increased its housing stock to 23, with further sites being identified.
- 210 affordable homes have been provided – exceeding the 100 unit target.
- Measures installed via HEEPS: ABS have resulted in estimated lifetime financial savings of £36.9m – the equivalent of £6,325 per household assisted.
- There are currently 5,766 approved registered Landlords and 8,584 approved registered properties.
- Disabled adaptations: 95 households were assisted and over 190 site visits made.

National Housing Trust – Local Authority Variant Initiative

Key achievements for Bridge Homes in this financial year:

- Acquired 13 new build properties in Peebles, increasing its housing stock up to 23.
- Agreed missives with four developers, with additional site starts being made at Croftsfield in Denholm, Bowmont Street in Kelso and Waverley Road in Innerleithen. Completions of these developments will deliver an additional 22 homes for mid- market renting in early 2016.
- Identified and proposed the construction of a further 7 homes in Lilliesleaf.
- Following a procurement and selection process, Orchard and Shipman were appointed by Bridge Homes as Managing Agents, and rose to the challenge by both marketing and letting the Standalane homes shortly after being appointed.



Bridge Homes is a Limited Liability Partnership which has been established by Scottish Borders Council in collaboration with Scottish Futures Trust, in order to provide affordable housing for mid-market renting within Scottish Borders. Aside from the above mentioned key achievements, Officers have been pursuing a number of potential development site opportunities -20 have already been actively progressed, with the potential to provide approximately 147 homes.



Margaret Burgess MSP, Scottish Minister for Welfare and Housing, and Councillor Renton at the Official Opening of the Bridge Homes Standalane Way housing site, 7th January 2016.

Affordable Housing Delivery 2015/16

There has been increasing stability in the lending market, which in turn has provided better opportunities for Registered Social Landlords to secure the necessary funds to provide affordable housing projects. In this financial year 210 affordable homes were delivered across the Scottish Borders, exceeding our 100 unit annual target.

Delivery included:

- 13 homes for mid-market rent by Bridge Homes at Peebles.
- 12 homes for mid-market rent in Duns by Berwickshire Housing Association.
- 50 homes for social rent in Eyemouth and Duns by Berwickshire Housing Association.
- 53 homes for social rent in Galashiels, West Linton and Melrose by Eildon Housing Association.
- 69 homes for social renting in Kelso and Hawick by Scottish Borders Housing Association.
- 3 Open market purchases by Waverley Housing.
- One shared ownership purchase by Eildon Housing Association.
- 10 house purchases assisted by the Scottish Government Open Market Shared Ownership scheme.

Once again the Council used its Second Homes/Council Tax budget to assist delivery of affordable housing by contributing to developments at Lilliesleaf, Peebles and Hawick.



Peebles Gait – Bridge Homes housing site, Peebles.

Melrose Gait Phase 2 – Eildon Housing Association

Strategic Housing Investment Plan (SHIP)

Scottish Government now asks all Local Authorities to submit a SHIP to Scottish Ministers on a bi-annual basis. This will ensure that the Council and its delivery partners (Registered Social Landlords and Bridge Homes) will set out prioritised proposed affordable housing developments over a 5 year planning horizon.

The current SHIP covers the period 2015-20; new guidance is expected to be published soon by Scottish Government. In February 2016 work began to identify and prioritise emerging development opportunities and these will be fed into the drafting of the new SHIP 2017-22, and submitted around Autumn 2016. The outcome of the 2016 Scottish Parliament Elections is keenly awaited since this will be a key factor in resource allocation, which will determine future affordable housing delivery over the life of the next Parliament.

Local Housing Strategy (LHS)

The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 places a Statutory Duty on all Local Authorities to produce a Local Housing Strategy. This is framed by statutory guidance published by the Scottish Government. Our current LHS covers the period 2012-17 and provides strategic direction to address need and demand, as well as informing future investment in housing and related services across the Scottish Borders.

The LHS covers a wide range of actions which cover all tenures which address Scottish National outcomes and which link to local Scottish Borders issues. Scottish Government has published new Guidance which has been considered in order to develop the next LHS - a steering group has been formed to oversee the development of the next LHS which will cover the period 2017-23, a result of which was a consultation day event held on 17 March 2016. It is anticipated that the new LHS will be submitted to Scottish Ministers in winter 2016.

Housing Need and Demand Assessment 2

The Strategic Development Planning Authority for Edinburgh and South East Scotland (SESplan) is responsible for the preparation of the Strategic Development Plan (SDP) for south east Scotland.

The second SESplan Housing Need and Demand Assessment (HNDA2) received robust and credible status on 27th March 2015. HNDA2 has been prepared in consultation with the wider Housing Market Partnership to provide accurate and reliable data on housing need and demand to inform the second Strategic Development Plan (SDP2), Main Issues Report (MIR) and subsequent Local Development Plans (LDPs) and Local Housing Strategies (LHSs).

This HNDA is a critical part of the evidence base for the LHS, with key outputs of HNDAs expected to be the starting point for setting housing supply targets in LHSs.



Housing Supply Targets

The HNDA provides the evidence on which Housing Supply Targets are based. Since June 2015, representatives from all local authorities in the SESPlan area (one from housing and one from planning) have been involved in a project team to agree Housing Supply Targets. A methodology was developed so all local authorities could consider all the relevant factors, these include:

- economic factors which may impact on demand and supply
- capacity within the construction sector
- the potential inter-dependency between delivery of market and affordable housing at the local level
- availability of resources
- likely pace and scale of delivery based on completion rates
- recent development levels
- planned demolitions
- planned new and replacement housing or housing brought back into effective use.

Housing Support Targets were approved by SESplan Project Board in February, work is currently ongoing to finalise the final report and discussions will take place to generosity percentages for the housing supply target. It is expected that this will be finalised by May 2016.

Homes Again Project

The Homes Again Shared Services Project was set up in April 2012. This was based on 2 full time Empty Homes Officers being employed by Shelter Scotland and sharing their time across the 5 participating Councils. The Officers worked directly with owners of empty homes seeking to encourage them to bring their properties back into use. Scottish Borders Council shared an Officer with East Lothian and Dumfries and Galloway Councils.

The initiative was very successful in engaging with owners, bringing properties back into use and taking steps toward data cleansing Council Tax information, which enabled us to obtain a greater understanding of the true extent and nature of the empty homes issues in Scottish Borders. The initiative has now ended. Empty Homes issues are now dealt with through Scottish Borders Council Scheme of Assistance procedures.

Home Energy Advice Service

The Home Energy Advice Service, which has been operational since January 2005, has had another very busy year, providing energy advice to households in the Scottish Borders through telephone enquiries, home visits and presentations. 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.



As Table One demonstrates, the number of enquiries in this reporting period is slightly lower than numbers received in previous years; this can be attributed to the mild winter that the region experienced, along with greater promotion of Home Energy Scotland and relevant energy saving schemes running. As Home Energy Scotland has a centralised telephone number which is robustly advertised, members of the public can contact them directly, accounting for the reduction in the number of enquiries to the HEA.

Table One: Summary of Annual Activity

Year	Enquiries	Home Visits
2005/06	302	153
2006/07	519	175
2007/08	433	173
2008/09	721	173
2009/10	512	205
2010/11	352	206
2011/12	290	163
2012/13	331	153
2013/14	211	152
2014/15	126	106
2015/16	146	144

It should also be noted that the Advisor conducted 6 presentations in this reporting period, which reached a total audience of 75 people. This figure has not been encompassed into the total number of enquiries in Table One.

MR AND MRS B

Mr and Mrs B have gas central heating; they are over 70 years of age and have lived in their 3 bedroom property for eight years. After discussing their situation with the HEA, the clients asked if the HEA could survey their property to discuss heating options, insulation and the possibility of switching supplier.

The HEA surveyed the property and after establishing that the loft and cavity walls were insulated, suggested a heating usage of 9 hours per day and adjusted the heating settings in each room. The HEA then noted their gas and electricity annual usage and agreed to check tariffs on a comparison site and then contact clients again.

After providing the clients with all the relevant information and tariffs, Mr and Mrs B were able to change energy suppliers and are consequently saving £300 per annum. Their monthly payments have reduced to £77 and are now more manageable.

Home Energy Efficiency Programme (HEEPS)

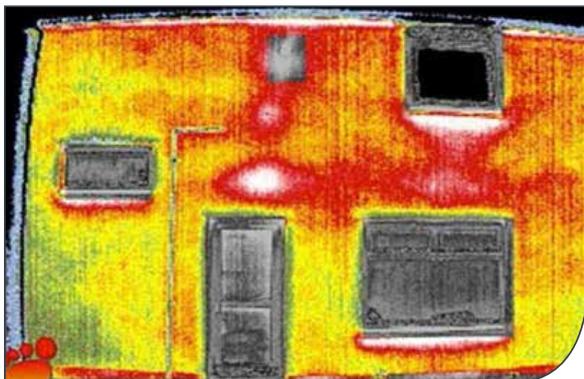
In September 2015, Changeworks completed the Scottish Borders Energy Efficiency Schemes Evaluation. The report summarises the impact of three Scottish Government funded private tenure energy efficiency schemes in the Scottish Borders over the past six years. The aim of these schemes has been to assist households with energy efficiency installations that reduce fuel costs and CO2 emissions. This study drew on a number of reports and data sources to evaluate past achievements including:

- installation numbers and associated financial/ carbon savings;
- social benefits such as wellbeing and improvement in the community; and
- partnerships created.

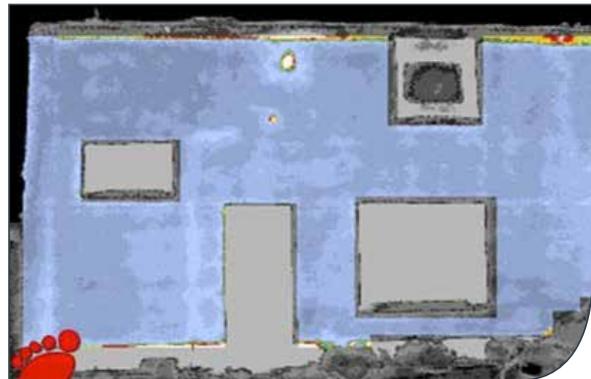
In addition, strategic plans for use in future schemes have been outlined and valuable resources for area selection summarised. This document is intended to serve as a single reference point for sourcing key statistics (e.g. for marketing) and for future planning.



Before and after External Wall Insulation



Thermal image showing property before External Wall Insulation



Thermal imaging after External Wall Insulation installed

Key findings:

- Energy efficiency schemes have resulted in 8,422 installed measures across 5,842 households;
- Installed measures have resulted in estimated lifetime financial savings of £36.9m – the equivalent of £6,325 per household assisted (£158 per annum) or £4,387 per measure (£110 per annum);
- Installed measures have resulted in estimated lifetime CO₂ savings of 157,582 tonnes – the equivalent of 27.0 tonnes per household assisted (0.67 tonnes per annum) or 18.7 tonnes per measure (0.47 tonnes per annum);
- HIS and UHIS resulted in a large number (6,731) of CWI and loft installations whereas HEEPS: ABS has a greater focus on EWI and HTTCs (591 installs to date);
- The success of HIS and UHIS was highly dependent on partnerships with a number of community groups who helped raise local awareness and enthusiasm for the schemes;
- The success of HEEPS: ABS relies on strong partnerships with RSLs mainly because EWI projects require coordination of social and private upgrades (such as mixed tenure blocks of flats);
- According to social research the wellbeing and satisfaction of homeowners has improved as a result of schemes;
- Future HEEPS: ABS will focus almost exclusively on EWI and HTTCs, with off-gas areas increasing in importance.

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. The registration scheme came into force in April 2006 and Scottish Borders Council currently has 5766 approved registered Landlords and 8584 approved registered properties¹.

As table two demonstrates, 2015/16 figures are lower than that of year 2014/15; this is because this financial year has been year three of the three year registration cycle, resulting in a lower number of registrations which have been due for renewal.

Table Two: Number of approved applications by month

Month	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
April	343	94	96
May	119	88	89
June	239	97	82
July	244	94	88
August	196	119	68
September	197	121	72
October	252	122	106
November	200	104	95
December	91	79	51
January	131	75	73
February	116	87	80
March	121	89	151

¹ Statistics as of 31 March 2016.

Over the past year the Enforcement Officer has initiated action against 43 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 Team are hoping to explore the possibility of making the website more interactive by publishing podcasts and e-forums.

The national website, which is currently administered by Scottish Government, is due to be redeveloped to allow for more reporting functions and easier accessibility for service-users; the Enforcement Officer has attended multi-agency meetings to ensure that Scottish Borders Council's views are taken into consideration when developing this new 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.

The scheme of assistance has two main parts: House Condition and Disabled Adaptations.

House Condition

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

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 & Repair regarding property repair

The Homes Again project continues to develop ways to help owners of long term empty homes bring them back into occupancy and is now within the remit of Scheme of Assistance; the principle duty of which is to develop policies, practices and procedures which lead to private sector properties being brought into residential use across Scottish Borders and be responsible for the development and maintenance of a private sector empty homes database.

31 properties were visited and assisted regarding House Condition & Homes Again in 15/16.

Further Information and advice has been given to a further **90** via phone and email with over **100** guidance leaflets having been issued.

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.

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

For major adaptations Care & Repair assist the client with making application for grant to Scottish Borders Council. All tasks in the processing of grant applications from application stage to completion are undertaken by the Housing Grants Officer, for example:

- check spec and application;
- arrange site visits;
- process application and issue offer of grant;
- re-visit to inspect completed works once application for payment received; process payment;
- prepare file for recording on deeds. Liaise with colleagues in legal.
- provide legislation and policy guidance.
- update monitoring systems throughout the process; continue to develop where required.

During this financial period **95** households have been assisted and over **190** site visits made.

Key figures 2015/16:

Figure One: Adaptations completed by area

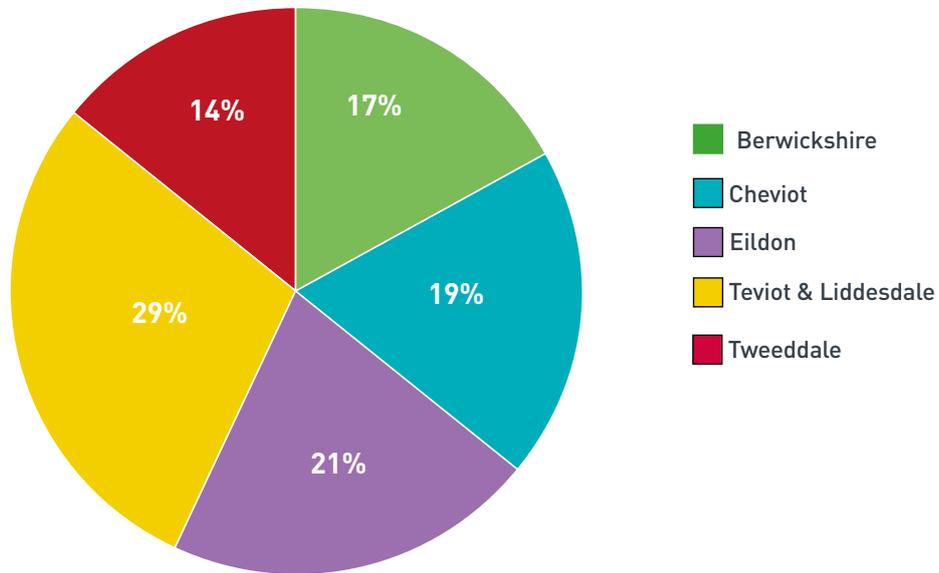
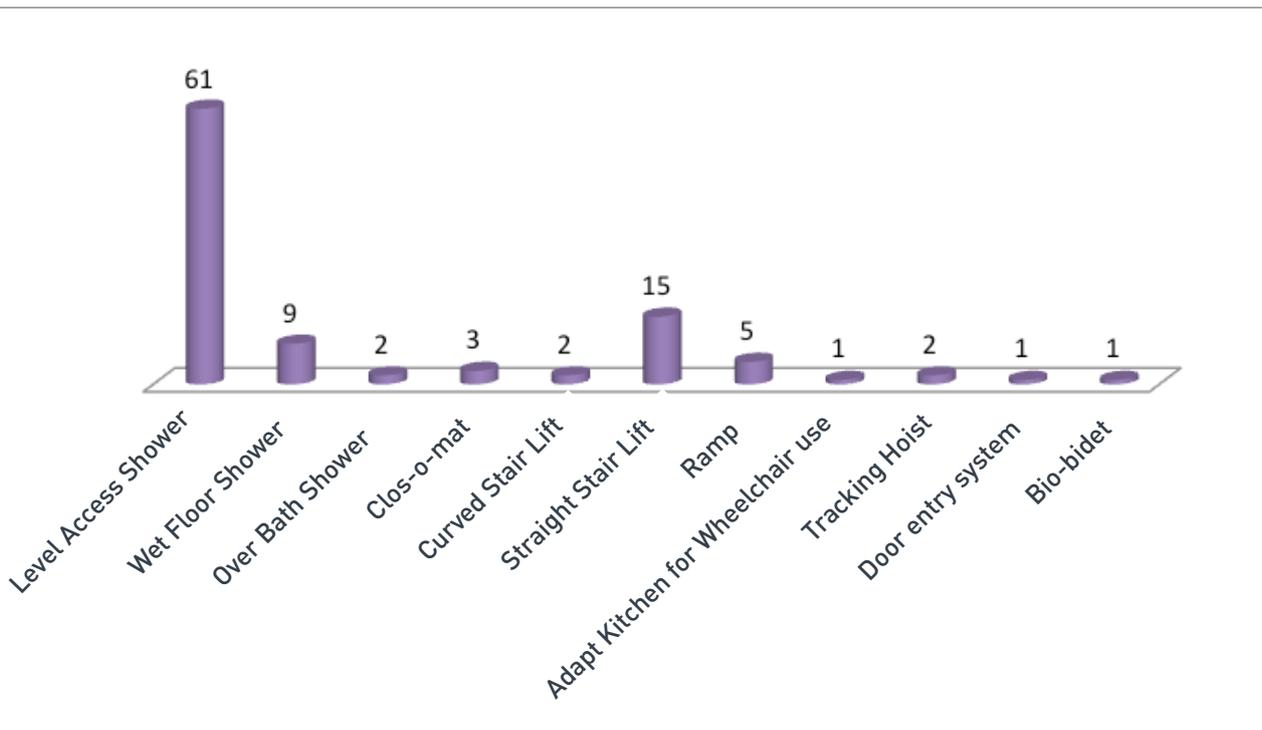


Figure Two: Adaptations completed by request





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 & 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.

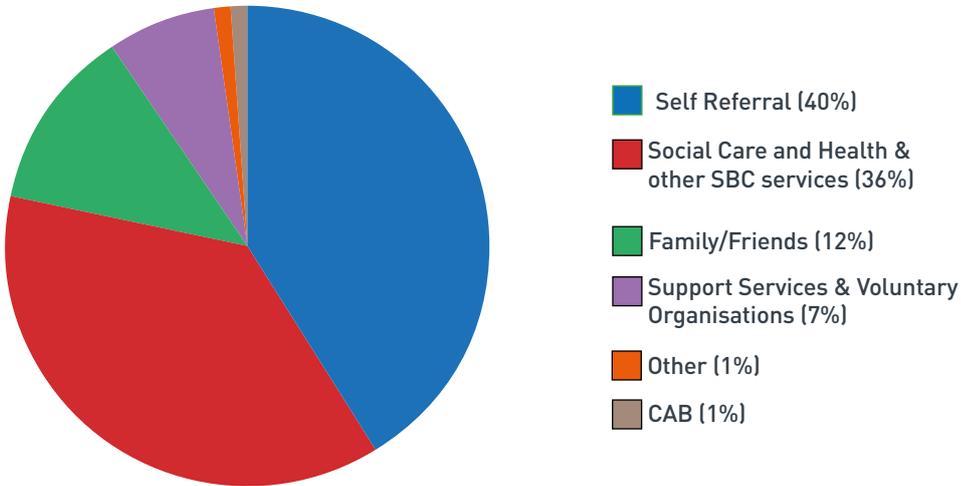
The aim of the service is to maximise income for the people of the Scottish Borders by ensuring that full and correct entitlements are in payment. Resolving benefit issues and increasing income can often help to improve the financial health and wellbeing of individuals and their families, with many customers 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 & Welfare Development Fund which has allowed for the development of specific initiatives and projects.

Key achievements this year:

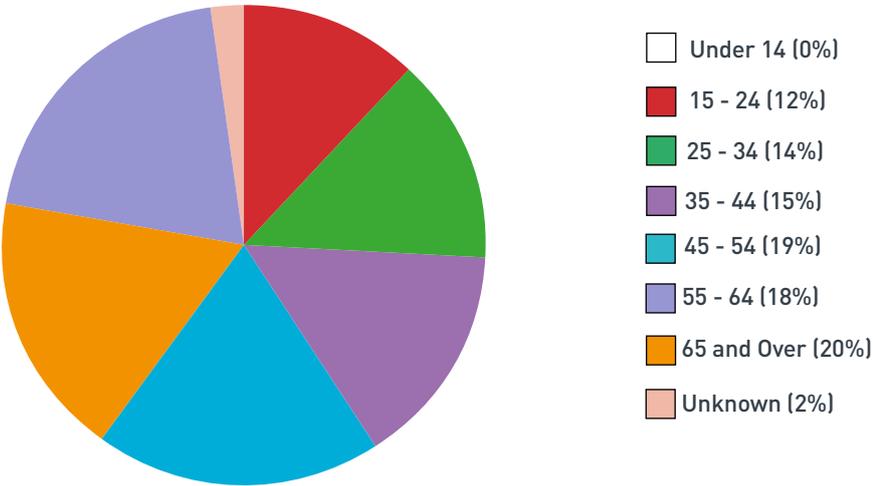
- 2,754 people have received help and assistance from the WBS Team this year.
- Over £8.5 million gains secured for service users; 148% of our annual target figure.
- Over £1.7 million gains secured for people affected by cancer.
- 54 training and awareness sessions delivered by the WBS Team, reaching an audience of over 500 people.
- Positive feedback from service users, with 98% of clients advising they would use our service again.

Figure Three: Source of Referral



As Figure Three demonstrates, the highest number of referrals to the service are categorised as 'self-referrals', although in many cases, these customers have been signposted to the service by a health worker or other support worker. The main source of referrals made to WBS on behalf of a customer is from Social Care and Health and other associated SBC services.

Figure Four: Age range of service users



The age range of service users who received advice or advocacy from the service during 2015/16 are represented in the Figure Four. This shows a relatively even spread of enquiries over most age categories, the largest being that of the 65 and over category. Advice given to workers within other council services, external agencies and support services in respect of customers are recorded under the unknown age category along with others who received advice anonymously.

The Borders Macmillan Welfare Benefits Partnership

The 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 which is currently funded by Macmillan Cancer Support and Scottish Borders Council for the period May 2013 to April 2016. The work of the project was cited in the "Welfare Rights Advice and Health - Low Commission Report June 2015" which examined the role of advice services in health.



One of the main aims of the project is to maximise the income of people affected by cancer and in the period 1 April 2015 - 31 March 2016 £1.788 million annualised gains were achieved. Over this period, the partnership dealt with 665 referrals and there are 111 with ongoing actions. The referrals came from a variety of sources with 48% from Borders Macmillan Centre, 36% through self-referral/family and 13% from other Health and Social Work professionals and the remainder being mainly from social work/local authority services. The close working relationship between partners has assisted in a greater understanding of the impact of cancer on customers and has also helped to obtain relevant benefits quickly.

The provision of welfare benefits advice can have a positive impact on health with 95% of customers responding to a satisfaction survey stating that the help provided had made a positive difference in their life with 81% feeling less stressed.

Customer's comments on the service included:

"Do not have to worry about having extra money to pay for heating oil and coal."

"I was concerned about the cost of travelling 5 days a week for a month for treatment to Edinburgh but with the help that I have received from yourselves that concern has now eased."

The Macmillan Welfare Benefits Officer has worked regularly with partners and stakeholders to develop their knowledge of cancer issues in relation to benefits. A number of training and awareness sessions with staff from local Housing Associations has been delivered and there is an intention to work with these organisations more formally in the coming year.

Guidance on making a Will, Power of Attorney and planning for a funeral is now integrated into the working practice of the service as it helps to support people when making choices in relation to future planning.



Welfare Benefits Development Officer (Early Years)

This temporary post, which ended in March 2016, was funded by the Health and Welfare Development Fund following a successful bid by the NHS Welfare Reform Working Group, in conjunction with Early Years partners. The post-holder worked with partners and stakeholders to provide information, advice and support enabling income maximisation for families with young children within Langlee, Philiphaugh and Burnfoot Early Years Centres. It has successfully contributed to the development of Early Years services and has helped to support the effective implementation of the Government's Welfare Reform programme and any future changes to the benefit system.

The project also explored ways in which income maximisation and financial inclusion services, which are currently delivered to parents in the Early Years Centres EYC, can be replicated and provided to parents in rural towns and villages outwith the catchment areas. Initial work will focus on three rural areas, Newtown, Earlston and Jedburgh. This will involve identifying and engaging local community groups, parent and toddler groups, playgroups, nurseries, primary schools and local partnerships such as Community Learning Development as well as Health visiting teams in the area.



Staff and service-users at Langlee Crèche, Galashiels

Key Areas of Work for The Welfare Benefits Officer (Early Years)

- Ensuring the delivery of benefits and debt advice within the centres through close working with the Early Years Welfare Benefits Assistant and CAB.
- Facilitating a Money Advice Scotland, Financial Capability, 'train the trainer' one day course. This was attended by 28 officers from both internal and external agencies, including CAB, customer services, SBHA, Penumbra, Eildon Housing, Maternity Support Workers (NHS), Community Learning and Development. It was very well received and some of the content from this course will now be included in the Council's Budgeting Support Training Sessions, which SBC delivers as part of Universal Credit.
- Developing a 'Christmas for less' programme which created an opportunity for a range of agencies, including Library services, Community Learning and Development, Welfare Benefits Service, DWP, Artbeat studios, Borders College, CAB, Domestic Abuse Service, Healthy Living Network, Housing Strategy (Energy), and Fire Service to engage with parents in a workshop setting. The seven week programme saw a total of 33 parents in Burnfoot EYC provided with information and advice on the different ways of saving money during the festive season.
- Organising a pamper afternoon in Langlee Early Years Centre in conjunction with the Primary School open afternoon. This was with the aim of raising awareness of the centre, services delivered and also enabling the parents to feel more nurtured by having 'free makeovers and time to themselves without children'. The makeovers were given by Borders College Students which contributed to their community work aspect of their course.
- Carrying out a 'Listening to Parents' survey/consultation with parents of children (0-8 years) to help identify needs and gaps in current provision including barriers faced.



Early years – Tax Credits and Childcare Costs

Funding by Early Years 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 £1,029,940 which was attributable to over 200 cases.

This is a significant increase on last year's income gains and has been in part due to a raised awareness of the service across Scottish Borders and in particular through development work in the Early Years Centres at Langlee, Burnfoot and Eyemouth. The worker visits the Early Years Centres on a three weekly 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 continues to prove successful.



Attendance at Bumps 2 Babies events has also proved to be a successful way to engage with those seeking advice on tax credit issues.

Welfare Benefits Officer (Mental Health)

The purpose of the post is to address increasing demand and to effectively tackle poverty for those affected by mental health issues. The officer has achieved annualised income gains for customers amounting to £654,000, 9% over target.

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 is delivered one afternoon per week from the Social Work office at Huntlyburn House. This allows continuing contact with the Mental Health social workers and enables ward visits to be made to ensure that all patients are receiving their correct entitlements, both while in hospital and following their discharge home.

Over the year, talks have been delivered to Borders Voluntary Care Voice, the Mental Health Partnership Board, Doing Well Advisors and the Mental Health Rehabilitation Team to service users, carers and health professionals on current welfare reform issues.

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. As a member of the response team, the Welfare Benefits Service has participated in six events this year across the Scottish Borders.

Kinship Care

Following an Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) investigation into the lower payment of kinship care allowances compared to foster care allowances by some local authorities, the Scottish Government asked local authorities to ensure kinship carers receive the same level of financial support for the children they look after as foster carers do. This support can be made up of kinship care payments plus welfare benefit entitlement (child benefit and child tax credit).

The Welfare Benefits service has been working with Children and Young People's Service to implement a new policy for kinship care payments in the Borders to comply with current guidance. New procedures have also been implemented to streamline and simplify workflow ensuring that crucial initial payments can be made very quickly together with a speedy referral to Welfare Benefits Service to provide advice and support in order to maximise benefit income for the family.



Modern Apprenticeship – Welfare Benefits

A Modern Apprenticeship was created within the service which will allow the postholder the opportunity to obtain an SVQ level 2 in Customer Service and at the same time develop knowledge in relation to welfare benefits, money and energy advice.

Since joining the WBS in December 2015, the Apprentice has attended two benefits related training courses at the Child Poverty Action Group in Glasgow as well as completing a number of E Learning packages through SB Learn. By shadowing WBS officers both on home visits and to the Borders Macmillan Centre and Early Years Centres, the apprentice has gained an insight into the role of an Officer and the difficulties faced by customers.



What does our Modern Apprentice think about her role so far?

“I expected it to be hard but I like a challenge and some parts have been a challenge. After overcoming my initial nerves of starting the role I found it easier to speak to new people. I have realised that for many people contacting the service it is such a big step for them to make that telephone call. It has helped me to know that I can help customers and in turn my confidence has increased.”

What would you like to gain from the role in the future?

“I want to learn more about benefits as it’s really interesting and I now realise that anyone could be in a position where they might have to claim. Completing my SVQ in Customer Service will be a really good thing and will help me to get a job in the future.”

Training

During 2015-16, the Welfare Benefits Service Team delivered 54 training and awareness sessions, with a total of 501 people attending.

Five sessions on Welfare Reform were delivered in Galashiels, Hawick, Kelso, Duns and Eyemouth for people with a learning disability, their family and carers, to find out how they may be affected by the changes to welfare benefits, particularly the introduction of Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payment. As well as providing an overview of the changes, there was an opportunity for people to ask questions and meet with advisers on a 1:1 basis to talk about their own personal circumstances.

In addition to this, training and awareness sessions were delivered to a wide range of groups which included Macmillan Nursing Staff, Red Cross, P.A.C.E. (Partnership Action for Continuing Employment), Borders Carers Voice, Criminal Justice Team, Bumps 2 Babies events, Mental Health Forum, Early Years Centres, CAB and local Housing Association workers.

The use of the two Welfare Reform e-learning packages continues to be monitored, with the acknowledgment that the promotion of the full benefits of the program still requires additional advertisement. Following an update of the packages, ongoing promotion will remain a point of emphasis for the service.

Our key statistics this year:

- 96% would recommend the service to their friends and family.
- 98% of clients would use the service again.
- 95% of clients were satisfied with advice and information they received from the service.
- 93% of clients stated the service helped to provide a positive difference in their life – up from 88% from last year.
- 98% of clients stated WBS provided 'excellent' or 'good' general service.

What our customers have said about us

"At a very low ebb and seemed nobody was prepared to listen to my concerns. Welfare Benefits listened and acted immediately on my case and put it to the Benefits Team and the right decision was made."

"When I first looked at the form online I was gobsmacked at how complex and large it was. I would have been unable to fill it in as effectively without help. The service took away the difficulty and the additional stress and upset of my son's condition."

"The worker was brilliant and very sympathetic. He was able to explain each question simply and put my words into logical answers."

"Assistance with benefits has allowed me to purchase items to improve my day to day living, make me feel more secure e.g. home phone, new walking stick – too tall for NHS."

"Entitled to benefit that stops my social isolation because I can safely care for my 3 year old son. The worker was lovely, honest, genuine, kind, caring and very helpful."

"I find the benefits system complex and worry than I will make a mistake that I will not be able to pay for which gives me intense anxiety....The worker was exceptional, responsive and knew her job. I like many others, feel better with a face to face approach rather than automated services."

Welfare Reform and service performance

The WBS continues to work with stakeholders and partners to identify the impacts of welfare reform. In addition, the service supports Scottish Borders residents to understand these very significant changes and advocate on their behalf as appropriate.

On top of a significant rise in customer enquiries and requests for advocacy, Welfare Benefits Officers have found the resolution of cases to be increasingly complex and time consuming. The monetary gains and number of people receiving advice or advocacy through WBS were higher in Q4 than Q3, than in the same period for the last two years. No single factor has caused the significant increase in the last financial year, rather a culmination of:

- increased areas of take-up activity by the service;
- increased reassessment of certain benefits by DWP;
- increased large scale redundancy events (6 attended during 2015/16);
- a constantly changing social security system which is extremely complex and results in more customers requiring support.

Action we are taking to maintain and improve performance:

Alternative ways of working are being explored and taken forward in order that we can meet increasing demand. This is of particular importance as we have not reached a point yet where we have full rollout of Universal Credit. To date, couples and families with children are not categories which are included as new claimants. We also await further detail on the roll out of devolved benefits which include a number of non means tested disability benefits as well as the regulated social fund and carers allowance.

A Service Level Agreement is being developed with the four main Registered Social Landlords which will bring them into our Macmillan Benefits Partnership and we are currently developing a training programme for this year for a range of front line workers which will raise their awareness of benefits issues and allow them to take forward low level actions and/or refer on for advocacy appropriately.

Universal Credit

Universal Credit (UC) was introduced in the Scottish Borders on 27th April 2015 for those making new claims to benefits who met certain criteria. This has been under the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Trial and Learn principle as part of the rollout of the 'Live' service across the UK. The full digital service has not been rolled out in this area yet but there are plans for this level of service to be rolled out in around 50 Jobcentres a month from next year.

UC is designed to ultimately replace six existing mean-tested 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 are increasing the hours that they work.

SBC have a formal Delivery Partnership Agreement with DWP to provide support services to customers who need help to apply online or to manage monthly payments which can include housing costs. Management information is also supplied by SBC to aid the DWP in the development of UC. It is not clear yet how UC might change in Scotland as a result of the Devolved Powers, but it is understood that there may be certain flexibilities which could allow payments to be made direct to Landlords more easily.

EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT SERVICE

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 Council's internal Work Opportunities Scheme, which aims to support the Council as an employer to become more representative of the borders populace.

Key achievements this year:

- Number of young people accessing pre-vocational training has doubled in this financial year.
- Number of referrals for supported employment has risen, and number of new paid jobs has more than doubled from 2014/15.
- 46 apprenticeships have been provided within SBC, with a further 10 identified for next year.
- Operational bid to the European Social Fund is underway.

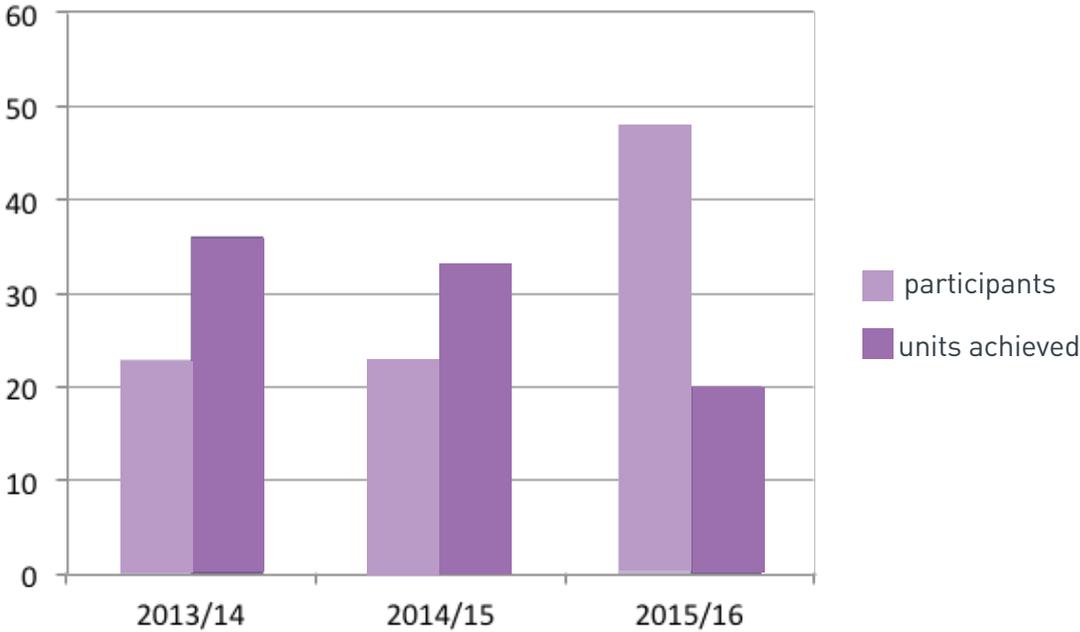
Pre Vocational Training

These training courses are aimed at young people who are approaching school leaving age and are planning to leave school at the next opportunity. The courses are employability-skills based, and are designed to prepare young people to access training programmes, college courses or jobs.



Figure Five below shows the numbers of young people accessing the training over then period and the number of accredited units achieved. It clearly shows the number of participants to the pre-vocational training has nearly doubled from 23 in 2014/15 to 48 in 2015/16.

Figure Five: Pre-Vocational Training 2013-2016²



²Figures as of March 2016

Employability Fund – Stage 3

The Employability Fund is a National Programme funded by Skills Development Scotland (SDS) 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.

ESS held a contract with SDS to deliver 23 places for this financial year, and this number was achieved by the end of the contract period. In March 2016, Skills Development Scotland undertook their annual audit of the services.

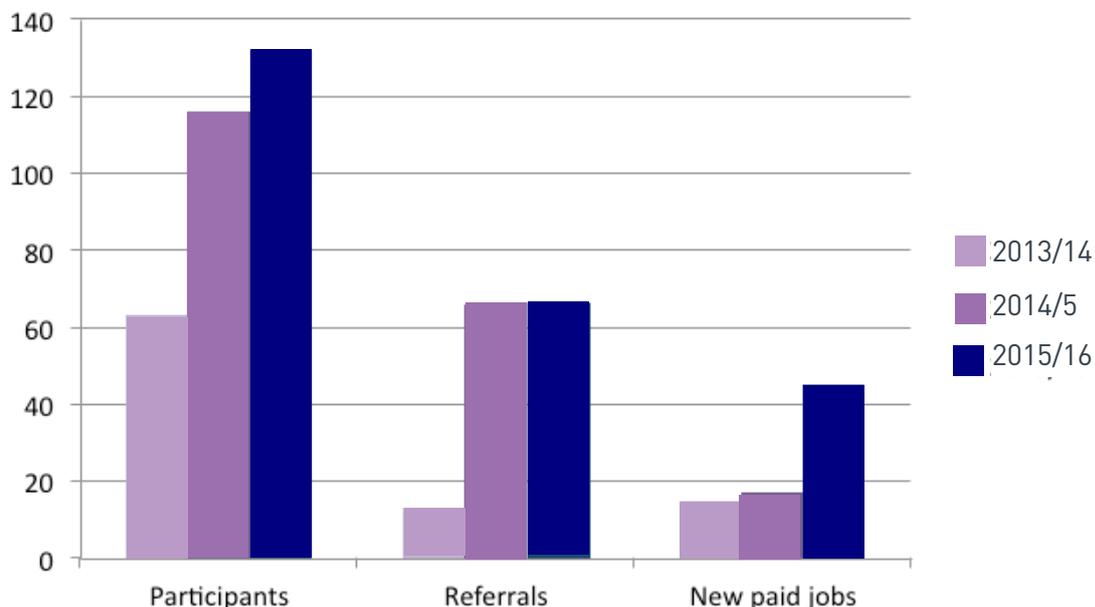
Supported Employment Service

Supported Employment is a method of working with disabled people and other disadvantaged groups to access and maintain paid employment in the open labour market. ESS currently supports people of working age who have a learning disability, a physical disability, sensory impairment, a mental health issue, are on the autistic spectrum, are homeless, are care leavers or who are disadvantaged young people. The goal for all our clients is paid work and while support for clients is available for 12 months, support would be gradually withdrawn as soon as both the client and the employer are comfortable with their situation.

Figure Six overleaf shows some key statistics from the past 3 years. The number of referrals has risen for the year (66), the number of participants has increased (from 116 to 132) and the number of new paid jobs has more than doubled from 17 in 2014/15 to 45 in 2015/16.



Figure Six: Supported Employment Figures 2013-2016³



Over the last 2 years SBC has provided work based opportunities through the 'Work Opportunities Scheme'. The Scheme is designed to offer work opportunities for those furthest from the labour market including young people, care leavers, people with mental health issues, and those with disabilities or long term health conditions. The scheme to date has been successful in providing 130 different opportunities which in return has had a positive and innovative impact on staff and business.

³ Figures as of March 2016



Key Statistics 2014-16

- 46 apprenticeships have been provided within SBC with a further 10 identified for the next financial year.
- 58 student placement have been provided, with 34 of these being paid work.
- 18 work experience placements
- 8 Employability Fund Stage 3 work experience placements.

Looked After and Accommodated Young People into Employment Project (LAAC Project)

The LAAC project was initiated in January 2015 with the identification of four young people from this group who were keen to get into employment. SBC's transitions team, Borders College, SBC's HR department, Skills Development Scotland and SBC departments have all been heavily involved in the pilot project. To date, three of the young people are still enrolled in the project.

Project Search

Project Search in the Borders is a partnership initiative between NHS Borders as the host business, Scottish Borders Council, who will be responsible for job coaching on site, and Borders College who will be responsible for all learning on site.



The Transition Programme is a one year internship for young people (17 – 24) with a learning disability or autism. It is aimed at students whose goal is competitive employment. Project Search interns spend their entire day on site at the host business. Total immersion in the host employer site facilitates the teaching and learning process as well as the acquisition of employability and marketable work skills necessary for employment at the host employer or other local business. Interns participate in three rotations to explore a variety of job and career paths.

European Social Fund Application

The Employment Support Service has been working closely with colleagues in Economic Development to bring together a submission to access European Social Fund monies to enhance employability pipeline delivery.

SBC's initial application, which is a broad outline of what is planned, has been submitted and Officers are awaiting a response from the Scottish Government. Following a positive response, an operational bid, which will require more detailed information on all intended projects, will be completed. The programme totals £1.35m and will support 338 individuals over a two year period.

Nationally, the ESS is heavily involved in the Local Authority Network for supported employment and is represented on Scottish Local Authority Economic Development (SLAED) employability group. The Services also represented on the Learning Disability Strategy Group and works with Human Resources on for example relevant policies including the reasonable adjustments policy, equalities and the delivery of community benefits.



HOMELESSNESS SERVICE

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 marginally reduced over the last year. 895 people approached the Homelessness Service in 2015/16. 538 of these accessed the Service through the prevention team and were involved in prevention activities. Of these cases, 249 went on to request or require a statutory homeless assessment. In total 494 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.

Key achievements this year:

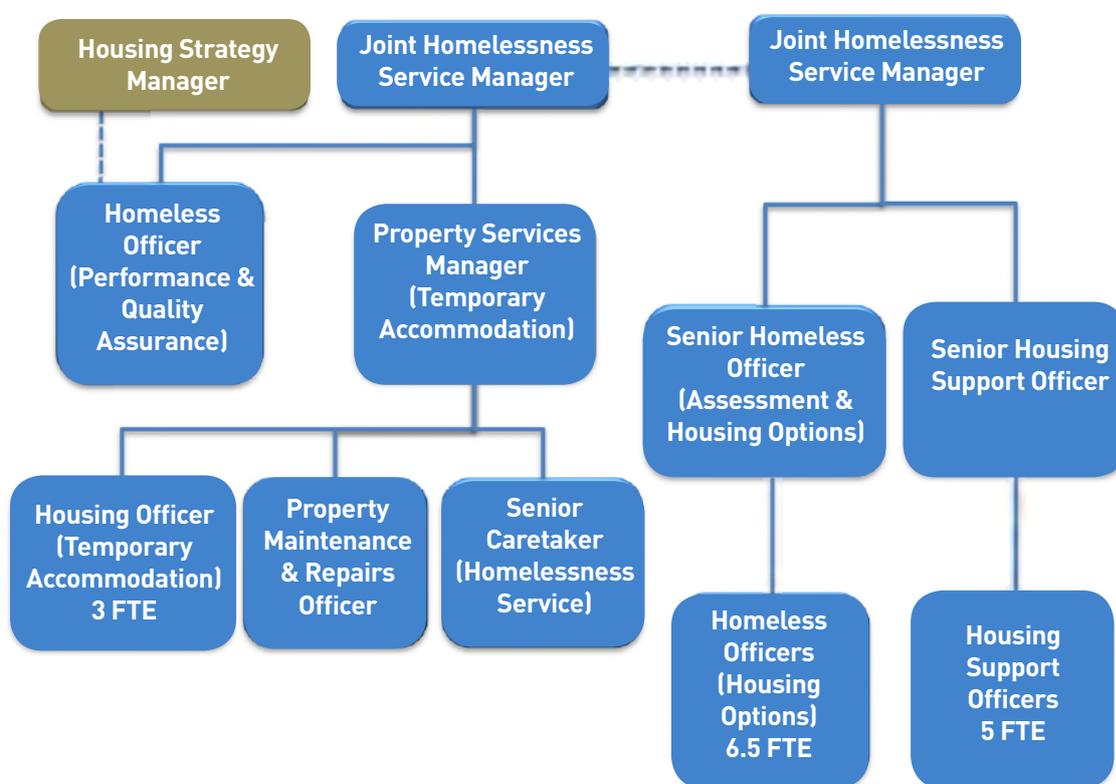
- 895 people approached the Homelessness Service in 2015/16.
- The first two families involved with the Syrian Resettlement Program successfully housed and supported.
- 100% of service users reported that they would recommend our Housing Support Service.
- Deposit Guarantee Scheme assisted 64 applicants to secure a tenancy.
- 508 referrals were made to the four local housing providers for priority to be awarded to homeless applicants for rehousing.
- Homelessness Service and Borders Women's Aid currently provide four bedrooms for women & children fleeing domestic violence.

Restructure of Homelessness Service

At the start of 2015, we committed to undertaking a comprehensive review, including a review of the operational delivery of the Homelessness Services structure and the potential impact this may have on both the service user and staffing capacity.

As the first part of this comprehensive self-assessment process, the structure was reviewed in early 2014/2015, and a new Service structure was consequently implement in October 2015. The new structure is intended to further develop the Service’s capacity to continue meeting the challenges presented by changing legislative and market demands.

Homelessness Services Structure Chart



Visit of Housing Regulator

The Scottish Housing Regulator undertook a focused scrutiny visit to the Homelessness Service in March 2016 in order to better understand reported performance and assess risks. It found that the Homelessness Service practice provided some assurance about the Council’s commitment to provision of support for service users. It also found evidence of good quality advice and information and building rapport with service users in the assessment interviews.

The Regulator did find some weaknesses in the way the Service manages and reports lost contact with applicants and the closing of homeless application cases, although it was acknowledged that the Service had already taken action to address these issues, including restructuring the Service and undertaking to pilot a new Council self-assessment model.

Syrian Regugree Resettlement Programme

In response to the unfolding Syrian refugee crisis the UK Government announced on 7 September 2015 that the UK would take an additional 20,000 Syrian refugees by 2020. Following this announcement, Mr Humza Yousaf, the Scottish Government Minister for Europe & International Development stated that **“Scotland is willing to take our fair share of refugees and to help some of the most vulnerable people in need.”** This ‘fair share’ equates to 2,000 refugees over the next 4-5 years. Local authorities are recognised by both the UK and Scottish Governments as taking the lead in the resettlement of refugees. The Scheme prioritises those refugees who cannot be supported effectively in their region of origin: Women and children at risk, people in severe need of medical care, and survivors of torture and violence.

The Scottish Borders Resettlement Program aims to resettle up to 10 refugee families in the next four years. This is in line with the Scottish Borders share of the 2,000 refugees coming to Scotland, based on the area’s proportion of the Scottish population.

Thus far, two families have been settled in Galashiels, Kirsty Armstrong (Housing Support Officer with Homelessness Services) has been the primary contact within the Housing Group supporting these families, below she answers some questions relating to the Program:

1: What is your role within the Resettlement Program?

“My primary duty is to coordinate all housing support for the relocated families; this includes ensuring all their housing needs are met and that properties are equipped to the required standards. We offer all service-users the same standard of care in terms of providing furniture and equipment, however, the families within the scheme have required some additional support, for example there are some cultural differences towards cooking and the type of equipment they are used to – we have tried to be as accommodating as possible and have found that they have been very quick to adapt accordingly.

Initially, I provided 3 weeks of dedicated support to the two families, this has been scaled down to one half day per week as they have settled in and become more independent.

2: Have there been any challenges?

“Undoubtedly the biggest challenge has been the language barrier; we have had to depend on translators and have used a service based in Edinburgh, which has been challenging in terms of coordinating times and locations. However, two Syrian gentlemen who reside in the Borders and located here independently of the Program came forward and offered to help translate between us and the families – this has been very helpful and has saved a great deal of time.

Another challenge has been the length of time it has taken for the families to receive all the necessary paperwork in order to claim welfare benefits and seek employment. In order to reside in the UK and claim the right to study, work or receive public services each person must have been issued with a Biometric Residence Permit (BRP) – there are only 8 Post Offices in Scotland which handle BRP’s, and the closest ones to us are located in Edinburgh. The Home Office have advised that they are taking steps to ensure that each person in the Scheme has the opportunity to apply for a BRP before entering the UK, to allow for a quicker transition.

3: What have been the rewards of the Program?

“The Scheme has been a great success and the families involved are very appreciative of our help. These families have complex needs and therefore require support from a range of services and organisations, all of whom have worked together in ensuring that all of their needs are met. The over whelming support of the community has been fantastic – the families have received cards and flowers from neighbours and been warmly welcomed into the town. Borders College have also provided ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) courses for them, as they are very keen to learn English.

It is very rewarding to know I’ve played a part in ensuring that these families have a better quality of life, for example one lady asked me if it was ok to open the windows in her house, as when she lived in Lebanon they were unable to do this. It’s a very small thing, but this example has really stuck with me as it demonstrates how dire the situation is in Syria, and how much the people caught up in the crisis need our help.”

4: What does the future look like for the Program?

The overall aim is to settle 10 families within the next four years and we are expecting another two families around August, although we have not had a confirmed date issued from the Home Office. There are ongoing multi-agency meetings taking place and Douglas Scott (Senior Policy Advisor) regularly keeps in touch to ensure everyone is up to speed on any progress.

The WBS Service Manager and a dedicated Officer have had significant involvement in the planning for the families and regularly participate on strategic and operational groups. The WBS Service Manager chairs a benefits sub-group which ensures a joined up and stream lined approach to benefit claims for the families on arrival, and this will continue for the next families.

The two families who have settled in Galashiels are residing in housing provided through an RSL and it is anticipated that this will be the case for the next two families, although we are looking into the possibility of settling future families into private sector lets. The geographic location of the next two families will be dependent on what housing is available.

Unified Approach to Domestic Abuse and MARAC

Approximately 13% of the people who presented as statutory homeless in 15/16 did so because of a dispute with household: violent or abusive.

During 2015/2016, the Homelessness Service staff completed training on the Unified approach to domestic abuse policy which was introduced in 14/15, and continued to work alongside the 4 local Registered Social Landlords and with the Safer Communities team in regards to providing a consistent, co-ordinated and responsive approach by Borders housing providers to addressing the housing needs of women and men who suffer domestic abuse.



The Homelessness Service continue to be involved in MARAC (Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference) to reduce risk of further harm for the highest risk cases of domestic abuse, using risk assessment, information sharing, creative action planning and mobilising partner agency resources. The commitment of partner agencies to MARAC has resulted in a priority response for high risk cases.

Homelessness Housing Support Service

Homelessness Services Housing Support provides individual targeted support to those who are potentially homeless, in housing crisis and experiencing homelessness. The team offer individual specific tailored support plans focussing on identifying, securing and maintaining accommodation, promoting positive changes to health and wellbeing, employment, education, safety and security, and social and economic wellbeing.

Homelessness Housing Support delivers their service in accordance with Section 32B of the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987 inserted by Housing (Scotland) Act 2010).

Service User Feedback

100% of service user in recent feedback advised they would recommend our service to someone else and they felt fully involved in their support and the planning of their personal support needs.

“Service has been brilliant.”

“They made what at the time was a very stressful event in our lives flow into a highly satisfactory outcome.”

“Offered way more than what I expected.”

Penumbra Supported Living Service

The Homelessness Service procured a contract with Penumbra Supported Living Service to provide community based Housing support services to homeless and potentially homeless applicants.

Penumbra’s Supported Living Service offers personalised, recovery-focused and flexible support. It provides practical, social and emotional help to vulnerable individuals in need who are at risk of losing or not sustaining their accommodation for a period of up to 18 months.



Tim Howell and Kelly Brown from Penumbra with David Stewart and Kirsty Tait from Homelessness Services

New Housing Options Guidance from the Scottish Government

The Housing Options Guidance was published in March 2016 by the Scottish Government and COSLA in order to support the development of Housing Options approaches in Scotland's local authorities. The Guidance sets out the principles on which any effective Housing Options service should be based, as well as the outcomes it should aim to achieve.

Housing Options is a person centred and preventative approach which looks at an individual's options and choices in the widest sense. This approach features early intervention and explores all possible tenure options.

Partnership Working with RSL's

The Homelessness Service has protocols in place with the four largest local housing providers (Berwickshire Housing Association, Eildon Housing Association, Scottish Borders Housing Association and Waverley Housing), designed to ensure homeless applicants secure suitable, reasonable, settled and sustainable housing.

The Homelessness Service works in partnership with the RSL's to ensure homeless applicant's risks are met and the Council's statutory duties in relation to homelessness are delivered in a positive and comprehensive manner.

During 2015/16, 508 referrals were made to the four local housing providers for priority to be awarded to homeless applicants for rehousing.



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 the private 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 2015/2016 the scheme assisted 64 applicants out of 101 referrals to secure a privately rented tenancy. The majority of DGS applicants were female, with 57% of all applicants in 2015-16 being female, and 43% being male.

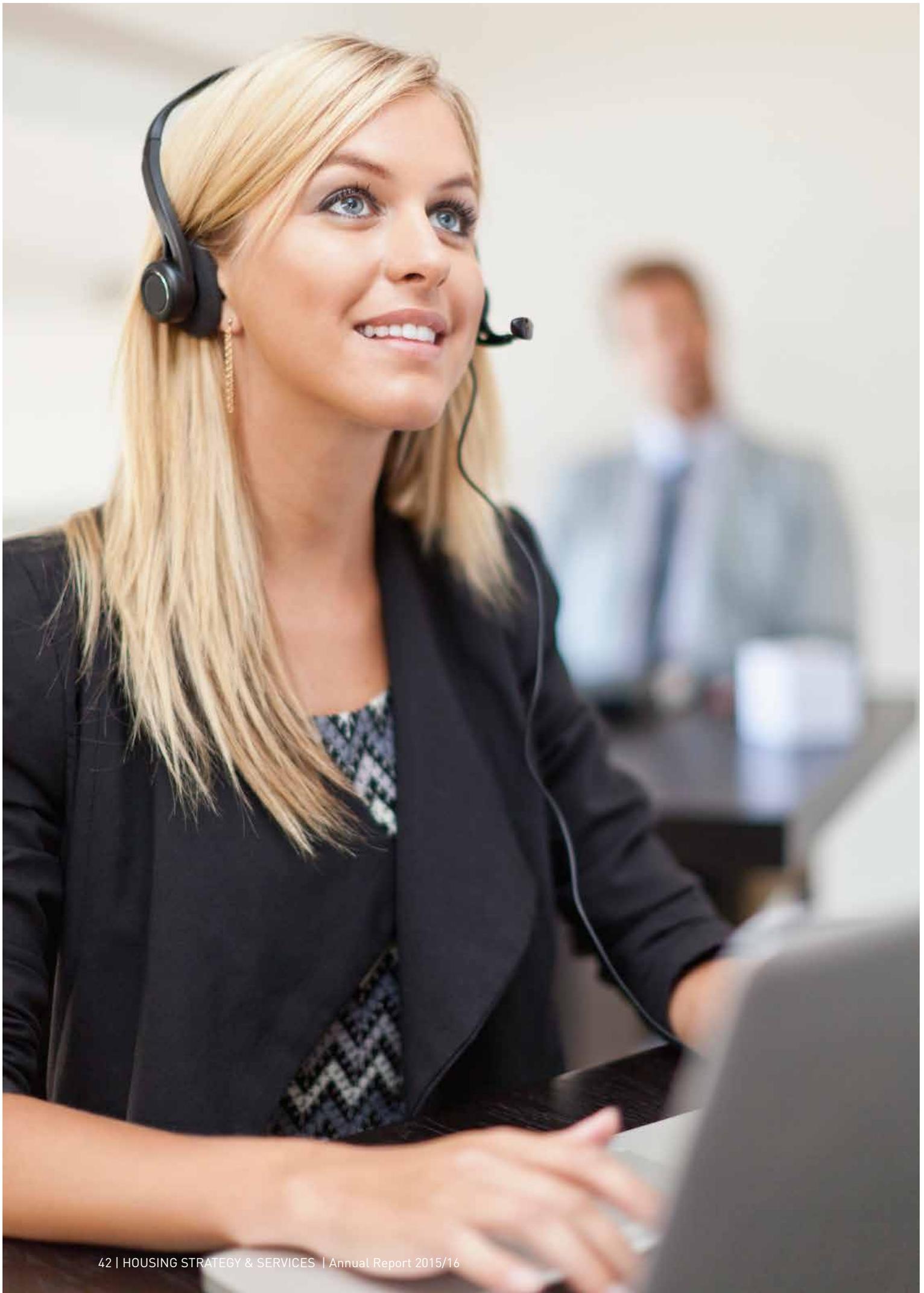
Borders Woman's Aid

Homelessness Service continues to work closely with Border Women's Aid as a temporary accommodation options for women fleeing domestic abuse. The shared refuge currently provides four bedrooms in total; one room accommodates 1 adult and 3 children with room for a cot, and the other three rooms accommodate 1 adult and 2 children with room for a cot.

In 2015/16 Homelessness Service agreed to provide funding for a 3 year period, moving away from previously agreed yearly contract. The contract continues to be monitored by the Group Manager Joint Homelessness Services Managers.

Homelessness Service and Borders Women's Aid continues to meet regularly on a liaison bases providing service updates and case discussion where required.





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