

scottish borders homelessness strategy

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Put in place an excellent management and delivery system to ensure delivery on the homeless strategy's objectives by introducing a comprehensive performance management system that clearly demonstrates progress against the aims and objectives in the Scottish Borders homelessness strategy; developing high standards of customer service and using a robust system of financial management so that services delivered as part of the Scottish Borders homelessness strategy will be expected to demonstrate that they are value for money.

Managing the strategy

The Borders Health and Homeless Strategic Partnership will oversee the homeless strategy's delivery and will report annually on its progress. If you wish further information about this strategy and homelessness in Scottish Borders or wish to comment please contact Cathie Fancy, Group Manager, Housing Strategy and Services (cfancy@scotborders.gov.uk).

At the same time the Homelessness (Scotland) Act 2003 had just come into force with the intention of strengthening obligations towards homeless people in particular by phasing out the qualification criteria of 'priority need' and by requiring Councils to make available temporary accommodation to any applicant requiring this. The strategy had therefore to show how these new obligations would be met.

Homelessness presentations had been rising from 1998/99 when 471 people made an application under the Act to 584 in 2001/02. Repeat presentations were high with almost 10% of applicants having made more than one application during this period, raising concerns that the underlying reasons for homelessness were not always being resolved. However overall the number of applications expressed as a percentage of the total households was at 1.26% well below the Scottish average of 2.1%.

Nearly a third of applications were being received from young single people (30% being under 24) and 25% from single parent households. Applications from young people under-18 had risen by 10% between 1996/97 and 1999/00 and this was particularly troubling.

The main reasons given for homelessness were that friends or relatives were no longer willing to provide a home for the applicant (31% of applications between March 1998 and January 2003) followed by marital breakdown (29% during the same period). Clearly a significant proportion of homeless applications involved the 'creation' of additional households, placing pressure on the limited housing supply in the Scottish Borders.

Other significant reasons for homelessness were action by the landlords (8%) and court orders (7%). However, housing debt was only directly attributable to homelessness for 4% of cases.

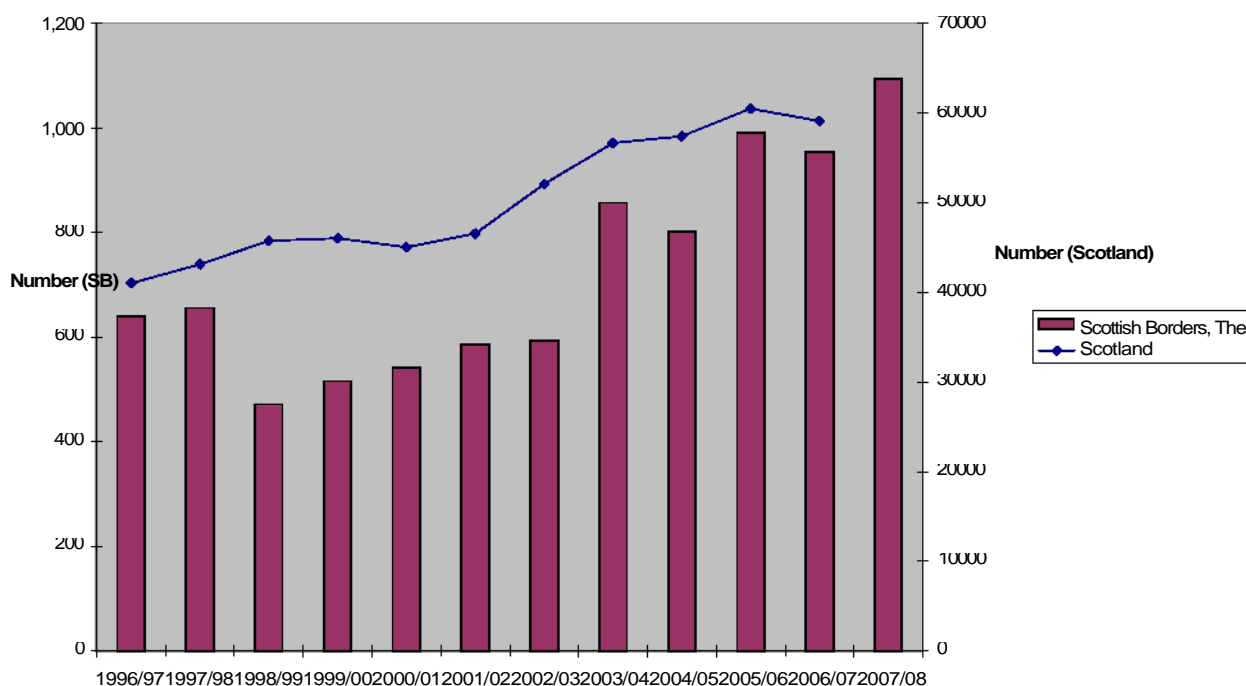
Vulnerability was recognised amongst 40% of applicants between 1998 and 2003. 530 applicants were reported to have (or had) a drink or drug related problem, 119 were under-18, and 81 had a mental health problem.

Other concerns that the strategy was designed to address were indications that a significant number of people staying in the Council's temporary accommodation were abandoning it or being asked to leave for poor behaviour.

To meet the homelessness challenge an action plan was drawn up by a partnership comprising the main statutory and voluntary organisations with a homelessness remit. It had a number of key objectives:

- To provide accessible, affordable and appropriate housing to all in the Borders
- To provide housing information and advice free of charge to all citizens of the Borders
- To prevent homelessness in the Borders
- To reduce the likelihood of people leaving institutional care becoming homeless
- Develop employment and training opportunities for those excluded as a result of homelessness

Figure 2.1: homeless applications 1996/97 to 2007/08



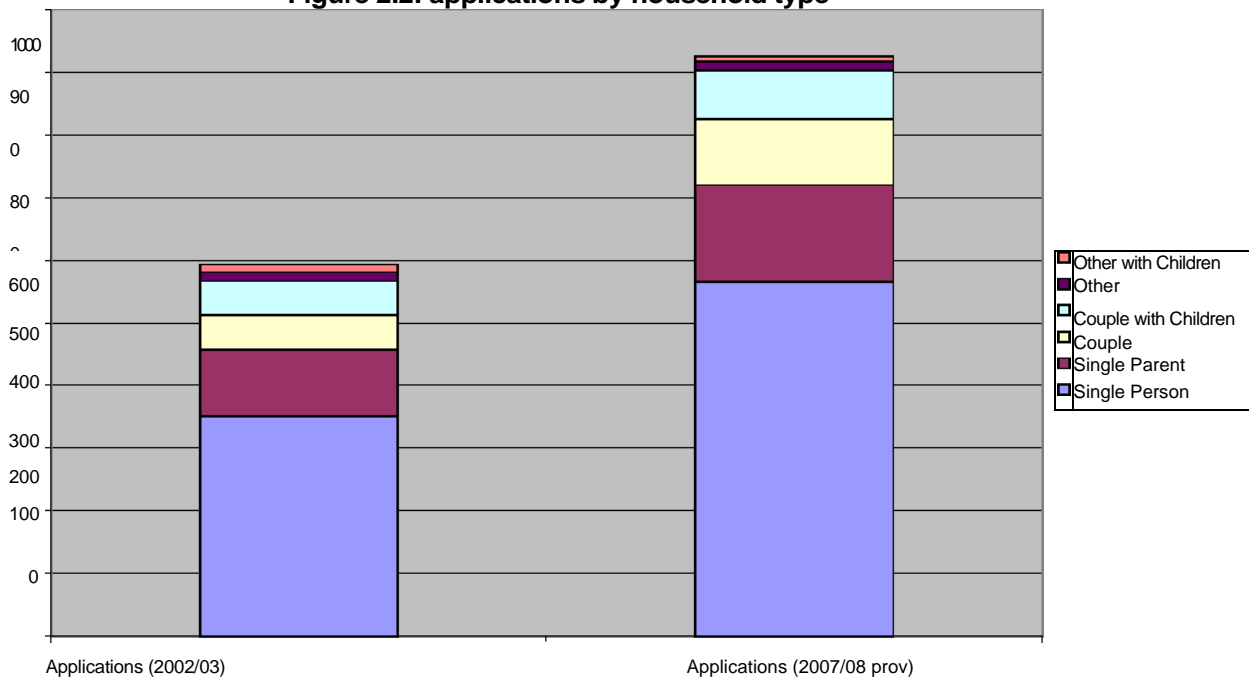
Data collected for each homeless applications dealt with by Scottish Borders in 2007/08¹ showed that the types of household applying were similar **to across** suggest this bit is reworted the rest of Scotland. Slight variations were apparent for single women (slightly higher than the national average), single parents (slightly lower for both male and female-headed households), and for couples with and without children (these being higher).

The household profile shared similar characteristics to neighbouring predominantly rural areas such as Dumfries and Galloway, but was quite different to places such as Glasgow (with its much higher proportion of single men) and North Lanarkshire (with a much higher proportion of single parents).

Comparing the position with that in 2002/03 (when the last strategy was written) there had been a marked reduction in the proportion of single parents applying (a reduction from 25% to 17%, although the numbers of applications had increased) and a corresponding increase in applications from single people. The comparative breakdowns for 2002/03 and 2007/08 (provisional outturn) are illustrated in figure 2.2.

¹ Note that the breakdown available at the time the strategy was written included 925 applications (not the total of 1094). It has been assumed that the characteristics of the additional cases are proportionally similar to those analysed.

Figure 2.2: applications by household type



Encouragingly there had been a steady drop in the proportion of applications from households aged between 18 and 25, but, at the same time an increase from those aged under-18, an increase of 32% over the last two years to 82 representing a significant failure for the last strategy. Reversing this trend will be one of the priorities for the homelessness strategy as it seeks to put in place a better pathway into independent housing for young people, particularly for those leaving the care system, and to further develop preventative work with this age group.

Although the largest number of applications continued to be received from the 25 to 60 age group, there had been an increase in applications from the over 60s in the last year, which has been examined in more detail below.

Whilst white British applicants predominated, over the last three years (2005/06 to 2007/08) there had been a large increase in applications from people recorded as 'other' white. In 2002/03 only five such applications were made, the provisional out turn for 2007/08 recorded 35 applications (but with over 50 being received in the previous two years).

The March 2008 report: 'Assessing the Housing Needs of Minority Ethnic Communities in Scottish Borders' did not uncover much information about homeless applicants but the migrant worker project based with Eildon Housing Association (EHA) who were interviewed during the strategy development recorded 16% of its enquiries over two years as being from people threatened with homelessness. Most were from the A8 countries (notably Polish) but also a significant number from Portugal. This finding was supported by the case review carried out. Of the 36 cases examined three concerned applicants who could be classified as migrant workers. They had all been employed in a variety of occupations, mainly in the agricultural sector. The downturn in the UK economy might conceivably lead to reductions in new migration perhaps already evidenced by the lower numbers of applications from these communities during 2007/08. However the large

existing population which according to information from the migrant worker project were often living in poor quality housing, frequently without tenancy agreements, and often with occupation tied to a job, will probably lead to continued (if at a lower rate) presentations.

Applications had been received from people living throughout Scottish Borders but with significant concentrations originating in Hawick (20%) and Galashiels (24%), as illustrated in figure 2.10). Presentations from Jedburgh, where the homeless service and support team were based were amongst the lowest at 7% and suggested that the future location of the service should be reviewed to increase its accessibility to residents and to also minimise journey times for homeless officers. Interviews with service users confirmed that getting to Jedburgh could be difficult and expensive.

'I had to come from Galashiels to have an interview – cost about £6, but I was not told how I could claim this back'.

Applications were seldom received from households living outside the Scottish Borders area and showed no signs of increasing. The widely held perception that there are large numbers of 'outsiders' making applications may have been fuelled by an increase in presentations from applicants recorded as non-British (though the case review suggested that these applicants had usually been living and working in Scottish Borders for some time before making an application). Another potential explanation was revealed by the case review where 15% of the applicants had moved away from the Borders for employment reasons – most frequently to North East England or London. However in all but one case they had been deemed to have a local connection with Scottish Borders. What these findings did suggest was that the removal of the local connection 'qualifying' criteria for acceptance of a homeless application was unlikely to have much effect on applications in the Borders.

Applicants who had slept rough on the night previous to making an application had reduced from previous years and the numbers were extremely small. However around 45 people (5% of total applications) in 2007/08 reported having slept rough on at least one occasion in the three months preceding their application. There were two applications which were reviewed where the person had slept rough but details about where and for what reason this had occurred was not recorded on the application form. Both individuals were single men with a pattern of short term insecure tenancies.

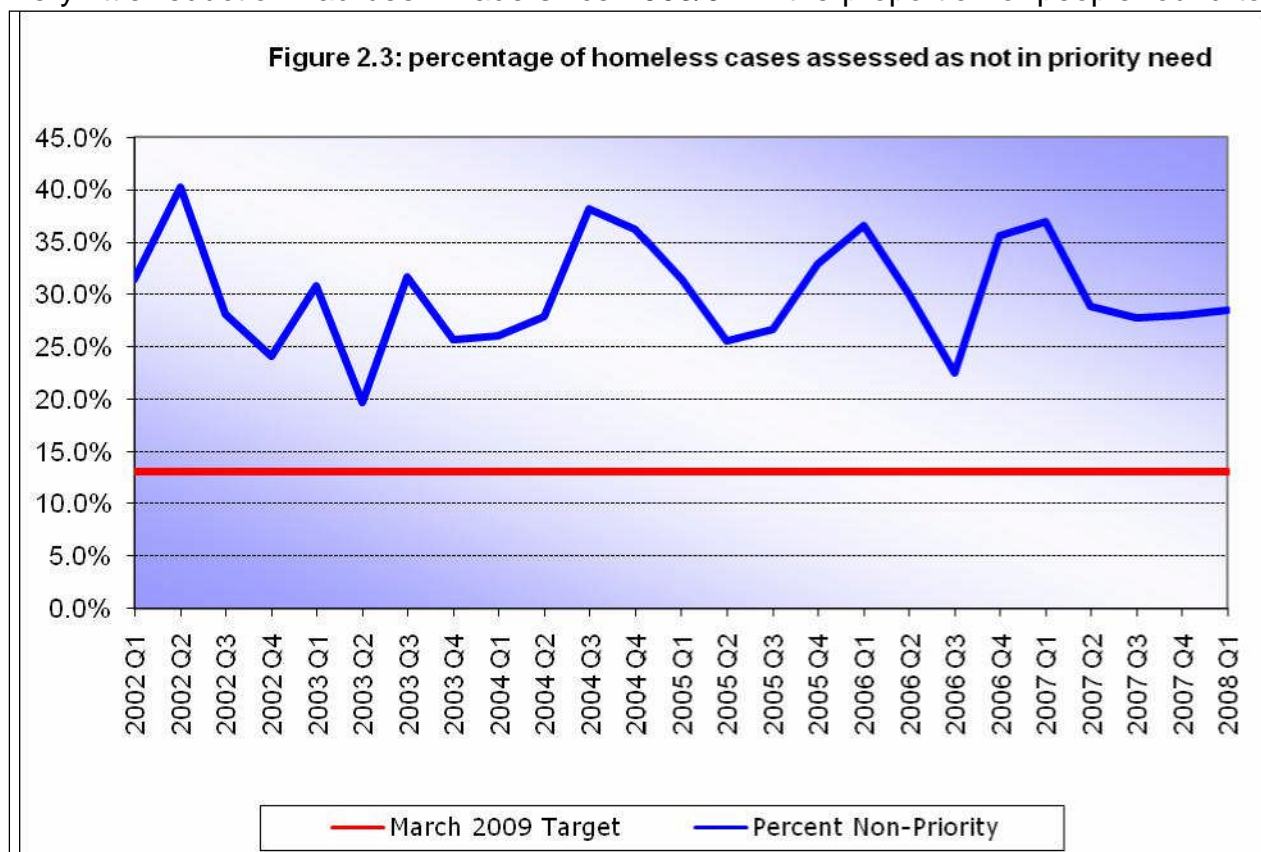
The case review revealed one other interesting aspect about applicants' circumstances – the number in employment. In the sample, over a third were working in low paid jobs (mainly in the service or agricultural sector) in Scottish Borders. A number seemed to be holding down two jobs. On occasions the homelessness application had been motivated by a change in job circumstances either because the applicant could no longer afford their present housing or because of poor transport links needed to be nearer their place of work.

A very low proportion of applications (as in the past) had been assessed as potentially homeless. In 2006-07, this was 3% compared to 14% nationally and the proportion had further reduced to only a fraction over 2% in 2007/08. It suggested that despite the previous strategy seeking to emphasise a preventative approach this had not been translated into operational practice and/or that residents of the Scottish Borders area did not routinely seek (or receive) housing advice until too late to prevent them becoming homeless.

The Council had lost contact with just under 6% before a homeless decision was reached, a significant reduction (50%) from previous years which suggested the homelessness service was either maintaining contact more proactively or that applicants were more aware of their entitlement to advice and assistance. However the case review process did not support this. As a larger proportion of non-priority homeless decisions were being completed more quickly (a number within one week) it might simply be explained by their being less 'opportunity' to lose touch.

The homeless problem was resolved before the assessment decision was made in around 7% of cases, a reduction after a steady rise from 9% in 2003/04 to 13% in 2006/07. Ideally, this last figure should be rising year on year if prevention was becoming more effective.

Very little reduction had been made since 2003/04 in the proportion of people found to be



not in priority need as figure 2.3 clearly illustrated. For 2007-08, 18% of assessments (205) were for non-priority cases, which has immense implications for both 2009 by which time the Council should have reduced by 50% the cases assessed as non priority and, ultimately, for 2012 when the concept of priority need is abolished. 70% of households considered as homeless were considered to be in priority need considerably less than the Scottish average of 77% in 2006/07.

Vulnerability reasons for 2007/08 (figure 2.4 below) were typically given for families with dependent children, people with a mental health problem or personality disorder or other chronic ill health, under-18s, and people fleeing domestic abuse.

Figure 2.4: vulnerability types for homeless applicants – comparison between 2003/04 and 2007/08

Type of vulnerability	2003/04	2007 – 08 (provisional) ²
Household with dependent children	154	177
Household member pregnant	20	29
Household member vulnerable because of old age	23	38
Household member vulnerable because of mental illness or personality disorder	48	91
Household member vulnerable because of learning disability	5	12
Household member vulnerable because of physical disability	9	30
Household member vulnerable because of chronic ill health	58 ³	65
Young person(s) under the age of 21 previously looked after	6	19
Young person(s) aged 16-17 years old	51	56
Young person(s) under the age of 21 and at risk	5	17
Household fleeing domestic violence or abuse	28	50
Household fleeing non-domestic violence (violence from person(s) outside the household)	13	10
Household fleeing discriminatory harassment	0	2
Household contains a woman who has had a miscarriage, or an abortion	2	2
Household member discharged from armed forces, hospital or prison	14	26
Homeless as a result of an emergency (fire, flood, storm, etc)	1	5
Household (member) vulnerable for other special reasons	11	62
According to local policy	-	9

The table also contained comparative data from the year the last strategy was prepared to illustrate the trends. Caution needs to be exercised when making comparisons as firstly the categories have been amended from 2007 and secondly recording practices as revealed by the case reviews were sometimes inaccurate. The most frequent problem was under recording because the vulnerability was seen as ‘secondary’ to the main reason for acceptance as priority need. This was most apparent where dependent children were part of the household. Also apparent were occasions where the vulnerability had been revealed by evidence supplied later on in the assessment process, often by a doctor’s letter, and had not been recorded. In both these examples drug and alcohol related and mental

² Multiple responses allowed

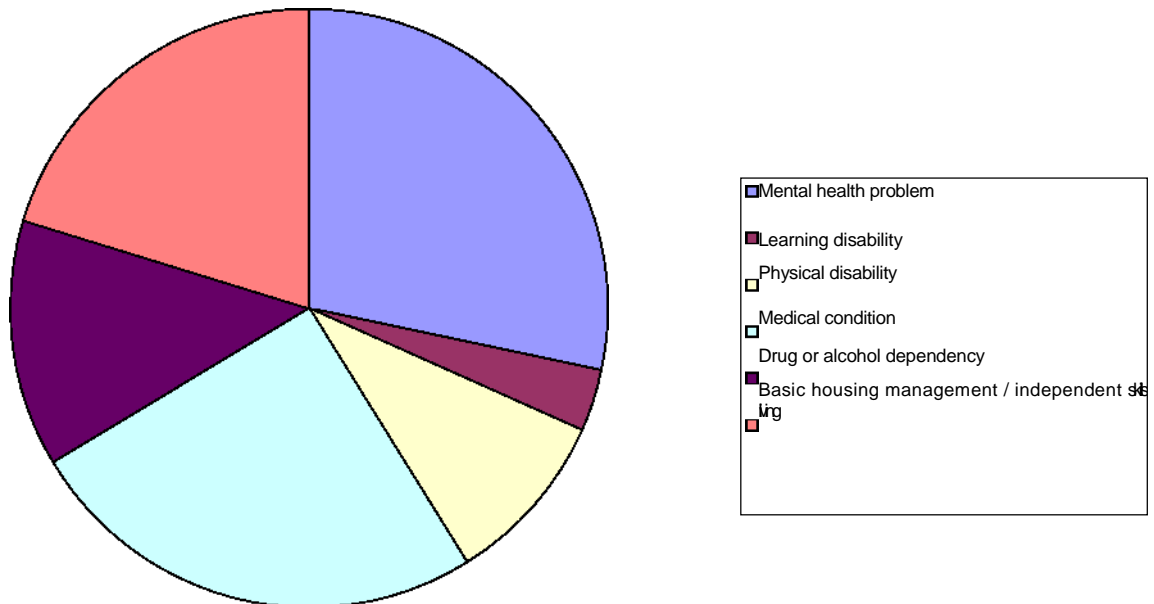
³ Note that categories of vulnerability were amended during 2007. for italicised figures the data is estimated

Figure 2.5: homeless applicants support needs

	2007 – 08 (provisional out turn)
No support needs	577
1 support need identified	211
2 support needs identified	78
3+ support need identified	32
All	898

Further analysis of support needs (figure 2.6) showed that high numbers of people required support for dealing with mental health illness (132 people), other medical condition (118) drug or alcohol dependency (62). Independent living skills were considered necessary for almost 100 applicants.

Figure 2.6: breakdown of homeless applicants support needs (2007-08)



The HL1 record was supported by the findings from the interviews and case reviews. Significantly a high proportion of the applicants with health related support needs (including mental health) appeared from the case files to have had services already in place with named care or health workers recorded. This raised the possibility that better communication and joint working between health, social work and housing professionals could lead to homelessness being avoided.

The record of support assessment during and provision made as part of the homelessness process was patchy. The Scottish Borders community support services reported that over a nine month period up to February 2008, they had received 189 referrals from the homeless service for assistance, representing they believed between 15-20% of total presentations. However the case file reviews showed that not all applicants responded to the offer of assistance and in around a third of cases assistance sought by the applicant was for furniture grants, although the file suggested that the applicant could benefit from other housing support. Interviewees from the main housing associations believed that more applicants would have benefited from both short and medium term support, or by an extension of resettlement support, which was usually limited to around six weeks from the tenancy start date. Across the board there was strong backing for an enforceable package of options for pre-tenancy training and preparation for independent living to prevent tenancy failure.

working – and as noted a significant number of applicants were in employment) or because the location was at some distance from schools or other regularly used community facilities. It was noted that no system was in place to help homeless children continue to attend their original school.

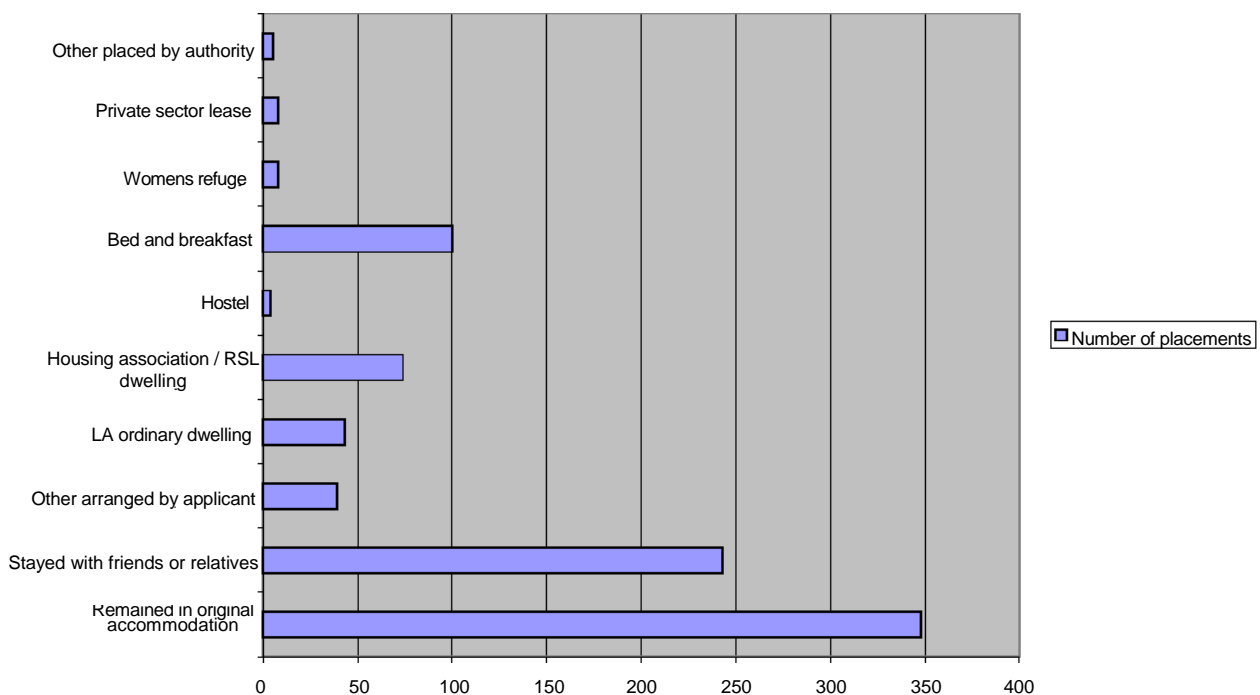
Property standards had not been published and while furnished accommodation was considered good, the quality of B&B was more variable as evidenced by service users' comments.

'It's brilliant, owner of guest house is very nice, and I have a double room and hot breakfasts, have no cooking facilities, but I don't mind.'

'In the guest house, I had no information about who else was staying there; there was no control over who was there, with other people sleeping in the room of residents. People ran riot, there was lots of drink/drugs, and loud music.'

Figure 2.11 below summarises the TA used during 2007/08.

Figure 2.11: number of placements in TA 2007/08

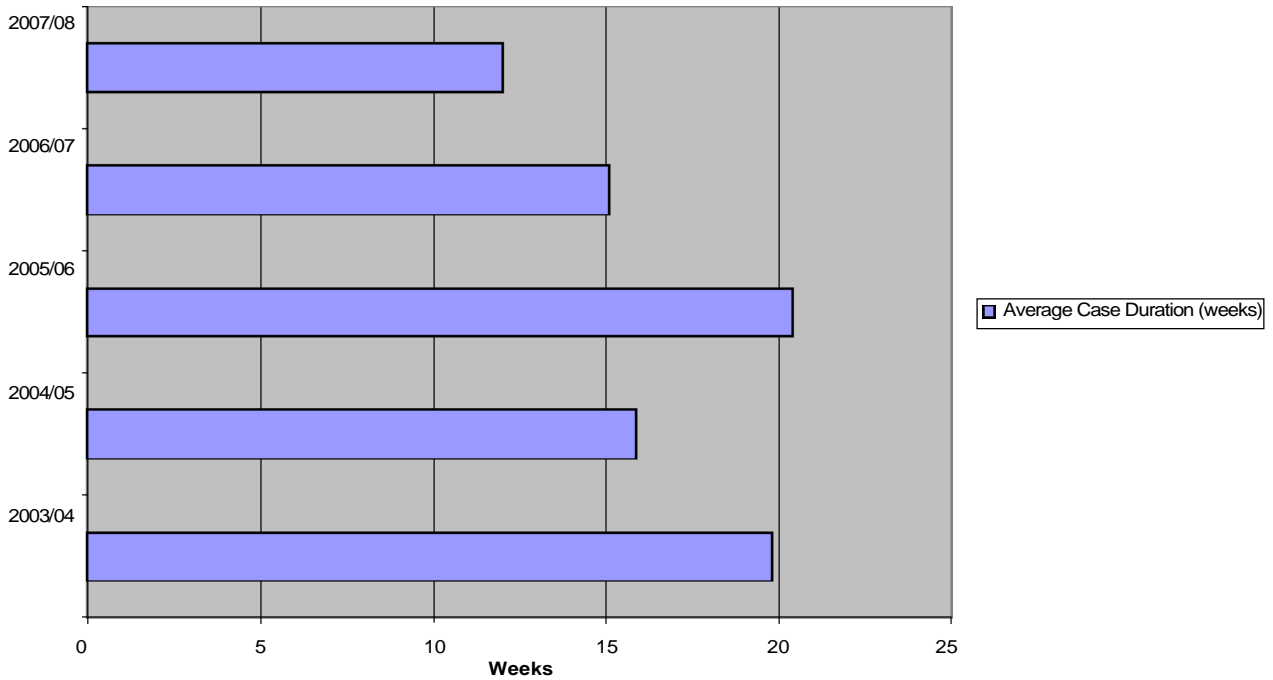


During 2007/08 a private sector leasing scheme had been set up and early indications were already positive. Its expansion was to be funded by savings made on reductions in B&B usage.

Priorities for the strategy

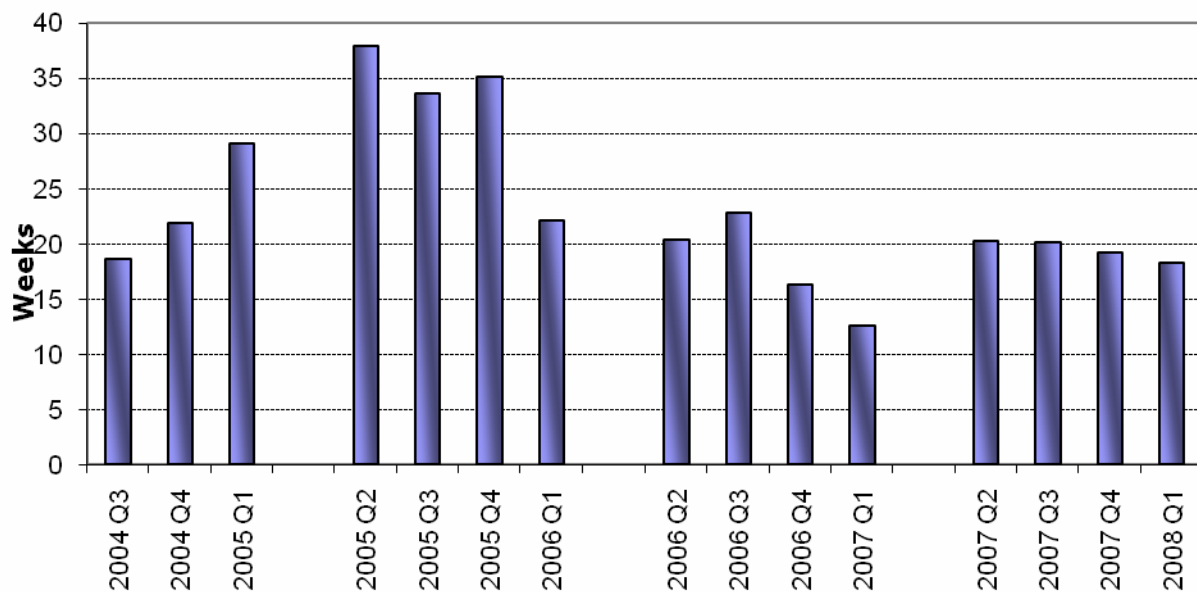
- Finalise the draft TA strategy
- Prioritise development of supported accommodation for young people
- Prepare policy and guidance for placing people in TA

Figure 2.13: average case duration (weeks)



Nevertheless the data indicated an improvement over the last few years for average durations, although further analysis by decision type revealed that duration marginally increased from 18.5 to 19.5 weeks between 2006/07 and 2007/08 for households found to be unintentionally homeless and in priority need. Figure 2.14 illustrates the recent trend.

Figure 2.14: average case duration by quarter of case closure - unintentionally homeless households in priority need



The time taken to make a decision on homeless applications during 2007/08⁵ is illustrated in figure 2.15 below. The 28 day target was being met for 59% of cases but with a significant number taking considerably longer. The case reviews showed that there was no obvious link between case complexity and length. While cases involving non priority need or not homeless decisions were generally reached more quickly, the reasons why other cases took longer was unclear. Investigations were nearly always limited to requests in writing for supporting evidence. With the files usually containing contact telephone numbers scope existed to speed up decision making and at the same time possibly help reduce applicants' unsettled circumstances and in some cases stays in TA.

Figure 2.15: time taken to make a decision

Decision time	Number	Percentage of cases
0 days	85	8
1-10 days	229	23
11-20 days	155	15
21-28 days	111	11
Less than 28 days	599	59
1-2 months	234	23
Over 2 months	84	8
Over 4 months	9	0.9

Information about the period between decision and final outcome was not available in a format capable of accurate analysis. The case reviews showed that decision and outcome dates were usually the same where a non priority decision was made which suggested that advice and assistance was being limited to the content of the decision letter. Where applicants were nominated through the Section 5 process for housing (12 cases) the time elapsed between decision and outcome (a tenancy start date) varied between four to 130 days. There appeared to be longer timescales where applicants were referred to SBHA (66 days) as opposed to 29 days for Borders Choice Homes (BCH).

Case handling, how homeless applicants were treated was considered by service users as very poor. Interviewees confirmed that feedback on case progress was limited and that existing standards about visiting people in temporary accommodation were rarely being met.

'We were told that letters had been sent but they did not arrive, have not been able to get copies.'

'They took little account of my poor health.'

⁵ To early March 08

However while the pattern of proposed development appeared consistent with demand, the 100 unit target was likely to fall short of the additional demand placed by homeless households as priority need as a qualifying criteria was abolished in 2012 (see below). Whether the type and size of units constructed would meet demand from homeless households was also unclear.

Still there could be some more positive developments in the medium to long term that will increase the number of new affordable units built. First, the correction in house prices should be beneficial to first time buyers and perhaps with proper housing options advice, more people could be helped into home ownership. Second, during the interviews carried out for this strategy concerns had been raised about how feasible the SHIP targets might be given the shortage of affordable land available for social housing. However there were already signs that prices might fall or that housing developers might be willing to sell on developments where sales were anticipated to be sluggish. Construction costs might also be anticipated to reduce.

Figure 3.2 below illustrated the phenomenal increase in tender costs for social housing development across the UK (and which are replicated in the Borders and where average development costs were reported in the SHIP to be £131,895). In the current climate it is inconceivable that tender costs will remain as high (even for the smaller sites probably more common in the Borders) and therefore there may be an opportunity to increase the units actually constructed. Already some local authorities and housing association development consortia were exploring whether more assertive and joint procurement practice could realise better value for money. Working with local housing associations and possibly neighbouring LAs Scottish Borders Council will be updating its LHS and SHIP in response to the changing environment.

Nevertheless it would require an expansion in social housing construction beyond what is currently conceivable to eradicate homelessness and meet demand on its own. More focus on a personalised housing options approach to help people secure a home will be required if real reductions in homelessness are to be realised.

