
FINANCIAL INCLUSION LANDSCAPE

Report by Service Director, Customer and Communities

COMMUNITY PLANNING STRATEGIC BOARD

10 June 2021

1 PURPOSE AND SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report sets out the current Financial Inclusion Landscape across the Scottish Borders for discussion.**
- 1.2 In the work that all partners are engaged in to prevent poverty, the advice and support to individuals on how to access the right support at the right time is of critical importance and especially at this time given the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 1.3 It provides an understanding of what the Community Planning Partnership (CPP) organisations offer in respect of financial inclusion advice and support, and to identify any gaps so that resources and activity may be targeted appropriately as well as maximising and funding opportunities.
- 1.4 It also seeks to make appropriate links to both the CPP Child Poverty Report and Action Plan and Scottish Borders Council's Draft Anti-Poverty Strategy and Action Plan to ensure that financial inclusion resources and activity brings benefits to those who most need support.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 **I recommend that the Community Planning Strategic Board:-**
 - a) Notes the financial support and advice that is currently offered by the Community Planning Partnership.**
 - b) Notes the good links between all of the organisations undertaking financial inclusion work across the partnership and in most cases referral processes are in place if required.**
 - c) Notes the concerns in relation to:**
 - (i) The Covid-19 benefits support ending, and the demand on support services across the Partnership;**
 - (ii) Food poverty and fuel poverty – providing long term solutions; and**

(iii) Digital inclusion – this is an area of focus for the Partnership, with many partners providing support through the Connecting Scotland Programme.

d) Notes the Council have recently developed a draft Anti-Poverty Strategy, which will be finalised in Autumn 2021. Actions in relation to financial inclusion will be taken forward as part of the Action Plan.

3 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The Community Planning Partnership offers a range of different Financial Inclusion services and are involved in several different work streams with a variety of partners. The total gains for the communities in the Borders from these services in 2020/21 totalled £4,237,007.
- 3.2 Financial Inclusion enquiries and referrals to the Partnership are received from sources such as Social Work, Education, Community Assistance Hubs, Self-Isolation Support Grant enquiries and other external partner organisations.
- 3.3 Community Care Assessors, Customer Service Advisors, and Housing Support Officers who meet people face to face or deal with calls are trained to provide basic advice about benefits, signpost and further refer to Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) or other specialists.
- 3.4 Officers making decisions on Discretionary Housing Payments and Scottish Welfare Fund can signpost and provide advice on benefits and other types of financial assistance.
- 3.5 Officers across the partnership also refer to third parties such as Home Energy Scotland, DWPs visiting team, Social Security Scotland, and other partners (Registered Social Landlords etc.) if this is more suitable for the person's circumstances.

4 CURRENT SUPPORT, ADVICE AND SERVICES PROVIDED

- 4.1 **Scottish Borders Council** provides and supports a range of financial inclusion services that work closely with community planning partners and other external organisations. These include:
 - 4.1.1 **Financial Inclusion Officers** - there are currently two Financial Inclusion Officers. They work on appeals and more complex benefit cases. This includes helping people from abroad, legal challenges, preparing appeal submissions, representing at hearings, and providing support for other advisors. They also provide financial advice to hospital patients suffering with mental health issues.
 - 4.1.2 **Macmillan Welfare Benefits** – a financial inclusion service is provided specifically for those affected by cancer patients in the Borders. An Officer, funded by Macmillan, co-ordinates referrals, provides advice on complex enquiries and assists with appeals. The Officer is assisted by five Community Care Assessors who also complete financial assessments for people who receive care at home or move into residential care. They provide income maximisation advice and assist with applications for benefits such as Pension Credit, Attendance Allowance and Personal Independence Payments. Prior to Covid-19 restrictions, staff were available at The Margaret

Kerr Centre at Borders General Hospital to provide financial advice and support. This service is currently provided remotely. There are plans to re-instate a face-to-face service in the near future.

4.1.3 Early Years - a Welfare Benefits Assistant provides support to parents throughout the Borders who have children up to 8 years old. Advice and support are provided in Family Centres and to anyone who is referred through the various channels which are available. The role is intrinsically linked to our ability to progress some of the child poverty actions within the Council's Child Poverty Plan. A pilot project was carried out at Galashiels Health Centre one morning per week where the benefits assistant helped to provide benefit advice to new mothers who were coming in for various clinics. The pilot was very successful, and many clients benefitted from this approach. This has not been operating since March 2020, however there are plans to pilot this service at another Health Centre in the future. The choice of location will be based on various factors such as demand and throughput of clients. NHS Borders are a partner in this work and are involved in considering different options for the roll out of this service. The Welfare Benefits Assistant also works closely with Social Security Scotland and there has been successful work in promoting the new Scottish Government benefits for new-born and pre-school children. There is a project being undertaken relating to a Parental Employability Support Fund and working with families within the Family Centres. Due mainly to the effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic, both referrals and gains increased over the year. Referrals totalled 430, reflecting gains of £1.3m.

4.1.4 Homelessness - the Council's Homelessness Services provide housing advice and support to homeless or potentially homeless households. As part of the assessment process Homelessness Case Officers identify unmet support needs in a variety of areas and regularly signpost or refer to specialised services when needed. Additionally, the Homelessness Service operates an in-house and commissioned housing support service. Housing support services provide housing support to homeless or potentially homeless households. Included within a wider support package housing support officers will;

- i. Support customers to initiate claims for Universal Credit, Community Care Grants, Crisis Grants, Housing Benefit and Discretionary Housing Benefit. They will provide a range of supporting statements and evidence and will assist customers to raise any appeals if required;
- ii. Support customers to access the digital equipment needed to make these claims when no other options are available to the applicant;
- iii. Support customers to navigate the Universal Credit application with the aim of increasing customer knowledge, skills, and confidence to enable them to do this unsupported in the future;
- iv. Directly support customers with budgeting and income and expenditure to improve life skills in this area;
- v. Identify and refer to specialist service for complex benefit applications and income maximisation assessments.

- 4.1.5 **Scottish Welfare Fund** - the Scottish Welfare Fund is available for people on low incomes who can apply for:
- i. A Crisis Grant if they experience a disaster (like a fire or flood), or an emergency (like losing money, not getting a payment which was expected, or incurring an unexpected expense);
 - ii. A Community Care Grant to help someone start to live, or to carry on living, a settled life in the community;
 - iii. A Self-Isolation Support Grant after being asked to self-isolate by Test and Protect because of coronavirus (Covid-19) where those applying will lose earnings;

After the application has been assessed, staff also signpost to other agencies if other types of assistance could be available.

- 4.1.6 **Discretionary Housing Payments** – these help claimants who already receive Housing Benefit or Universal Credit (housing element) but require further assistance to meet their housing costs such as deposits, removal expenses or to reduce the shortfall between rent charges and benefits received. Applicants are also signposted to other services to help meet any longer-term needs.

- 4.1.7 **Community Assistance Hubs** - the Hubs currently offer supermarket vouchers and food options for emergency situations and other advice, including referrals to Home Energy Scotland for tops ups. The team also chair weekly meetings for each locality area where updates are provided by a number of organisations including those involved with financial inclusion.

- 4.1.8 **Free school meals and Education Maintenance Allowance** – Parents who have a low income can apply for clothing grants once a year. Free school meals are provided to all children in P1 to P3, but parents of children from P4 to S6 who have a low income can also apply for free school meals. Children aged 16 to 19 may also receive an Education Maintenance Allowance if their parents have a low income.

- 4.1.9 **Covid-19 Response** – a report was approved at the Council's Executive Committee on 9th February 2021, which presented a number of proposals for the allocation of the Scottish Government 'Addressing future need to support individuals at financial risk 2020/21' fund. It also outlined further measures to provide wider financial support to those individuals who require additional help. The report can be viewed from the hyperlink below:

<https://scottishborders.moderngov.co.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CIId=161&MIId=5147&Ver=4> (item 5)

Scottish Borders Council was allocated £330k for supporting individuals at financial risk and £111k for free school meals from the Scottish Government Fund. A Financial Insecurity Group was set up to discuss the fund and claims were to be made by 31st March 2021. Funding was allocated to:

- i. The expansion of the Connecting Scotland Project to address the shortfall at a local level;
- ii. One-off emergency payments to vulnerable families across the Borders;

- iii. A range of existing third sector networks, community planning partners, RSL's and other partnerships and organisations already working with vulnerable individuals to assist with essentials, based on the principles of digital, fuel and food poverty and other emergency essentials;
- iv. Provide payments to families with disabled children under 18 years old who are not eligible for the Child Winter Heating Assistance Payment.

4.2 **Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB)** are contracted, by Scottish Borders Council, to provide benefit advice support and debt assistance to customers across the Borders. This includes benefit entitlement checks, assisting with applications and mandatory reconsiderations (MR). If the customer is unsuccessful at MR stage, this can be referred back to an SBC Financial Inclusion Officer for appeal/tribunal representation. They also offer support with applications for Universal Credit. CAB chair the Welfare Benefits Liaison Group which has amalgamated with the Universal Credit (UC) Operational Group and is attended by most of the partner organisations in the Borders who deal with financial inclusion such as SBC, DWP, Social Security Scotland, Registered Social Landlords, MP/MSP case workers, etc. Those attending share updates and current issues. The group also highlight and discuss policy issues.

4.3 **NHS Borders** have established and chair an Early Years Pathway Group which is chaired by NHS Borders and is referred to in the Local Child Poverty Action Report. NHS Borders have also led on the Money Worries App which is now live and was developed with a number of partners including SBC and CAB allowing people to access information on the range of support available on benefits, wellbeing, and housing within the Scottish Borders.

4.4 **Registered Social Landlords** all provide a financial inclusion services but these vary. They all have designated financial inclusion staff and offer money advice and benefit checks. Other services provided include signposting to specialist agencies, impartial advice, and support on a range of benefits and tax credits, assistance with applications or appeals and advice on energy bills. The Borders Housing Network (BHN) recently secured £450k from the Scottish Government's Social Housing Fuel Support Fund. This is split between the four Housing Associations and is to help alleviate fuel debt of up to £1000 per client:

4.4.1 **Berwickshire Housing Association** - the Financial Inclusion Team offers a service to all Berwickshire Housing Association tenants and their families who may be experiencing difficulties paying their rent and managing their money. The team works closely with their tenants to maximise their income and encourage a rent first culture. They offer:

- i. An appointment to all new tenants at the beginning of their tenancy;
- ii. Free impartial advice and support on a range of benefits and tax credits;
- iii. Representation and guidance with benefit appeals;
- iv. Assistance with grant applications;
- v. Casework support with ongoing queries;

- vi. Money guidance advice and signposting to specialist agencies;
- vii. Guidance on energy bills and signposting where necessary.

All referrals are allocated a financial inclusion expert who will undertake a financial assessment focusing on benefit entitlement and budgeting. They will work with individuals to address issues that may be impacting on their ability to make adequate rent payments.

4.4.2 Eildon Housing Association - the Tenancy Sustainment Team provides an income maximisation service and offers advice on grants and benefits as well as support for referrals to other agencies. They work closely with tenants to establish and maintain relationships, and this model has been adapted under Covid-19 restrictions to ensure that the welfare of their tenants (particularly those who are most vulnerable), is still a priority. They provide:

- i. Impartial advice and support on a range of welfare benefits;
- ii. Work closely with housing colleagues on various tenancy issues such as property condition and anti-social behaviour;
- iii. Assist new tenants with tenancy set up including grants for furniture etc;
- iv. Offer basic budgeting and money management advice;
- v. Advice and referrals on issues with fuel bills, new tariffs, and fuel debt;
- vi. Signpost, refer and work alongside other services and agencies.

The service explores many different issues and carries out preventative work to ensure that tenants can maintain their properties.

4.4.3 Scottish Borders Housing Association - have provided a Welfare Benefits Service since 2003 and following the appointment of a Financial Support Worker in 2013, expanded the offer to include a range of support and advice to develop skills that help tenants manage their finances, preventing hardship from recurring. The offer was further expanded in 2016 with a successful partnership with Changeworks, providing energy advice to tenants. Recognising the need to mainstream this, in October 2020, SBHA appointed a Warm and Well Co-ordinator, tasked with building capacity across front line teams to provide energy advice to tenants - ranging from setting tariffs, support on fuel debt, getting best use of systems and preparing for the installation of new systems. The FI Team are also involved in specific projects such as:

- i. 16+ Transitions – a partnership with Scottish Borders Council since 2010 to support looked after young people providing intensive tenancy support to build skills to enable them to live independently – including exploring housing options, gaining employment and creating pathways to Further Education;
- ii. Digital connectivity – the work of the team supported the distribution of 190 devices to get Tenants online during the Covid-19 Pandemic;
- iii. SBHA use a Triage Model where more complex cases are managed by the FI Team and have recently developed a Wellbeing Framework to ensure consistency of approach, which proved very effective during the Covid-19 Pandemic.

The FI Team offer:

1. Welfare benefits advice focusing on income maximisation and support to claim benefits;
2. Financial support such as money management and developing budgeting skills;
3. Individual support plans and affordable payment agreements for Tenants in arrears;
4. Affordable warmth work to help tenants heat their homes;
5. Early intervention and prevention work to promote tenancy sustainment by tailoring services to meet need.

4.4.4 **Waverley Housing** - has a self-funded Welfare Benefits Advisors post which supports tenants to maximise income. In 2020/21, 350 referrals were received, around half of whom did not fully engage in the support available. There has been around a 25% increase in referrals made during the year, compared to the previous year, due mainly to the Covid Pandemic and issues arising from furlough, job losses etc. The total funds recovered on behalf of tenants, which can be directly recorded as attributable to the service, amounted to £157,718. An active caseload of 36 tenants was carried forward into 2021/22.

- 4.5 **Borders College** - students can apply for Bursaries or Education Maintenance Allowance, but additional support is available including help with travel costs, discretionary funds, and childcare funds. Students studying relevant courses are sent details of how to apply for Bursary and Educational Maintenance Allowance funds prior to starting their course. Within their application they can request help with childcare costs. If a student has money troubles while studying, they can apply for help from the college discretionary fund. They also help students who have been affected financially due to the current Covid-19 Pandemic and have disseminated in excess of £350K in hardship and discretionary funding to students to support living costs and mitigate effects of Covid-19 restrictions.
- 4.6 **Home Energy Scotland** - is funded by Scottish Government and helps people in Scotland create warmer homes, reduce their energy bills, and lower their carbon footprint. They work with people and organisations to help tackle fuel poverty. They have a regional centre and provide emergency top ups and advice on a number of areas, such as saving energy and keeping warm at home, funding options including Scottish Government grants, interest free loans and installing renewable energy at home. They provide training and work closely with SBC's Energy Efficiency Strategy and Policy Officer and Changeworks, who also provide support with energy related issues, including advice on fuel poverty, reducing energy costs and disagreements with energy suppliers.
- 4.7 **Department for Work & Pensions** - administer benefits and provide support through work coaches for those who apply for and receive Universal Credit. Prior to the Covid-19 restrictions they also provided a visiting service to assist the most vulnerable people applying for DWP benefits. Most organisations have direct contact with the DWP Partnership Manager who will assist with any issues relating to DWP benefits. There are also direct escalation routes for SBC staff to use if they have a customer experiencing benefit issues which allows a quicker resolution.

- 4.8 **Social Security Scotland** – has committed to a local delivery set up. There will be support services in every Local Authority area in Scotland. As the rollout of new benefits continues, assistance will be available in person for anyone who needs support to apply for or maintain a benefit which is administered by Social Security Scotland. In addition, they will signpost people to other organisation’s services which might also be applicable.
- 4.9 **Food Banks/FareShare/Community Larders & Fridges** - the provision of food security varies in the Borders. There are a variety of organisations who provide food parcels, including community groups, charities, faith-based groups, etc. Some offer other support, money advice or signposting, but they may also limit the number of times they provide assistance. These organisations have been supported by community planning partners, who have provided both resources, vehicles and funding.
- 4.10 **Charities and Voluntary Organisations** - other organisations such as community groups, Red Cross, Penumbra, Borders Care Voice, Border Women’s Aid, The Bridge, Shelter and Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) provide advice or support to people in the Borders to apply for benefits or maintain claims and signpost to other organisations if required.

5 CONCLUSION

- 5.1 There are generally good links between all of the organisations undertaking Financial Inclusion work across the partnership and in most cases referral processes are in place if required.
- 5.2 However, there are concerns about solutions to food poverty and fuel poverty and there is an increasing emphasis on doing more than providing the ‘sticking plasters’ of Crisis Grants, energy top ups or food parcels. Organisations are encouraging more sustainable long-term solutions e.g., improving energy efficiency, applying for benefits/grants, or signposting to employability services which will increase income and reduce the possibility of a crisis occurring in the future.
- 5.3 Digital inclusion is another factor, and some partners are piloting initiatives such as free devices and connectivity as the lack of internet access can be a barrier to education, employment or maintaining a benefit claim. A recent study estimated that one in seven adults in Scotland was experiencing ‘data poverty’ and those on low incomes try to juggle buying food, fuel and having access to the internet.
- 5.4 There is support for some fuel emergencies such as energy arrears or meter top ups, but there is a potential gap for people with ‘old style’ oil and gas heating systems which require upfront payments of around £300 to £400 depending on the market rate at the time.
- 5.5 There are concerns about the impact when Covid-19 related financial support ends. The Furlough Scheme and a £20 per week Universal Credit top up are both due to end on 30 September 2021. This is likely to have a significant impact and potentially increase the demand on support services in the last three months of 2021.

- 5.6 There are also concerns about the impact of losing benefit entitlement on other forms of assistance. For example, where a parent is eligible for free school meals, they will also receive a clothing grant for each child. In 2021/22 they will receive 3 payments of £100 per child, which are funded by Scottish Government. The implications of a slight increase in income can result in losing this assistance and other benefits/grants such as Best Start Grant, Scottish Child Payment and Education Maintenance Allowance, so good advice and maximising take up is really important.
- 5.7 A mapping exercise is currently underway to set out all the work streams that the Council is involved in, along with partners and other organisations. This will include specific funding streams, mapping the services that are available, increase awareness of support offered and give advice on signposting.
- 5.8 The Council have recently developed a draft Anti-Poverty Strategy, and work is underway to produce an Action Plan. The finalised Strategy and Action Plan will be presented to Council in the Autumn for approval. Actions around Financial Inclusion will be taken forward as part of the Action Plan.

6 IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Financial

There are no costs attached to any of the recommendations contained in this report.

6.2 Risk and Mitigations

There is a risk that individuals do not realise what benefits and support is available to them. Failure to ensure that the financial landscape of Scottish Borders Council and community planning partners is known to individuals may result in benefits being under-claimed and people experiencing financial difficulties. Actions to assist with the identification of benefits will be included in the Anti-Poverty Strategy Action Plan.

6.3 Integrated Impact Assessment

An Integrated impact assessment has been carried out on this report. There are no specific implications.

6.4 Sustainable Development Goals

In considering each of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the following may make a difference:

- i. End poverty in all its forms – changes to service provision, improving local income and taking local action through the Anti-Poverty Strategy and action plan and the Local Child Poverty Report and Action Plan;
- ii. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture – these issues are likely to be addressed in the Anti-Poverty Strategy and action plan as well as the Council’s Food Growing Strategy;
- iii. Ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages – taking local action, changes to service provision such as actions outlined in the registered social landlords paragraphs above (para 4.4);

- iv. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities – opportunities are offered as part of early years advice given around parental support and employment opportunities;
- v. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all – gaps are identified to affordable energy, particularly to vulnerable groups and housing tenants;
- vi. Reduce inequalities – identify and tackle poverty and exclusion through the Local Child Poverty Report and Action Plan, the Anti-Poverty Strategy and Action Plan, and through income maximisation opportunities.

6.5 Climate Change

There is no impact on climate change as a result of this report.

6.6 Rural Proofing

There are no rural proofing implications as a result of this report.

6.7 Data Protection Impact Statement

There are no personal data implications arising from the proposals contained in this report.

6.8 Changes to Scheme of Administration or Scheme of Delegation

There are no changes required to either the Scheme of Administration or the Scheme of Delegation as a result of the proposals in this report.

7 CONSULTATION

- 7.1 The Executive Director (Finance & Regulatory), the Monitoring Officer/Chief Legal Officer, the Chief Officer Audit and Risk, the Service Director HR & Communications, the Clerk to the Council and Corporate Communications have been consulted and any comments received have been incorporated into the final report.

Approved by

Name: Jenni Craig

Signature

Title: Service Director Customer and Communities

Author(s)

Name	Designation and Contact Number
Janice Robertson	Strategic Planning & Policy Manager
Gary Murdie	Financial Support & Inclusion Team Leader
Shona Smith	Communities & Partnership Manager

Background Papers: N/A

Previous Minute Reference: N/A

Note – You can get this document on tape, in Braille, large print and various computer formats by contacting the address below. Janice Robertson can also give information on other language translations as well as providing additional copies.

Contact us at: Janice Robertson, Council HQ, Newtown St.Boswells, TD6 0SA
 01835 824000
 jrobertson@scotborders.gov.uk