

GRANTS **ISSUE** 2010

Ballyclare

IN THIS ISSUE:

Grants Budget Pressure
2010/2011

Modernising Services
Update

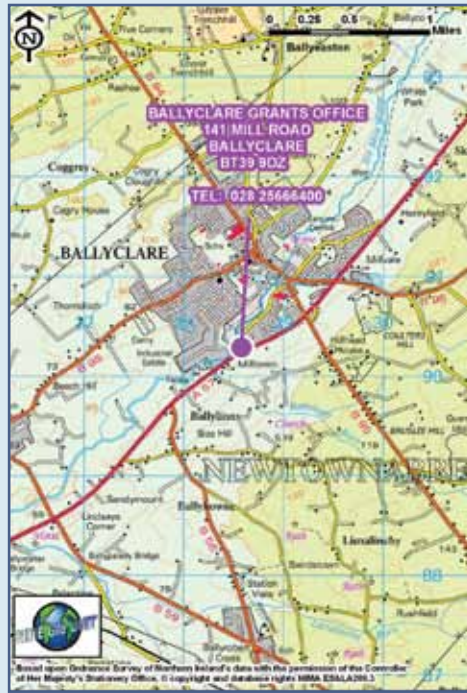
Northern Ireland
Housing Executive



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Ballyclare Grants Office covers the three Council Areas of Newtownabbey, Carrickfergus and Larne.

Where to find us



Office contact information

Ballyclare Grants Office
141 Mill Road
Ballyclare
BT39 9DZ

Tel:
03448 920 900

Fax:
028 2566 6416

Email:
ballyclaregrants@nihe.gov.uk

Opening Hours

Monday - Friday
9.30 a.m. - 4.00 p.m.

Duty Rota

Monday/Tuesday/Thursday
Monday/Wednesday/Friday

Technical Officers

Roy Lucas
Jim Parke



Staff at Ballyclare Grants Office Back Row left to right: Robert McFaul, Chris Black, Lynn Montgomery, Christine McCann, Ivan McNeill, Tom Watson. Front Row left to right: Lorraine Aiken, Ron Mitchell, Gerald Hagan. (Not Included Joan Foster, Roy Lucas, Jim Parke, Chris King) Gerald and Tom retired in March and Robert retired in May we wish them along and healthy retirement.

Cover photograph:

Carnfunnock Country Park, Larne.

This publication is available in other formats.
Please contact your local Grants Office for details.

General enquiries about your grant application may be made to the office by telephone although if you wish to speak to a particular member of staff you should preferably arrange an appointment. Home visits are available to applicants who cannot travel to our office.

Please let us know if you need information in other formats as we offer a range of services such as large print leaflets, language translation, signing services and our reception area is equipped with a hearing induction loop system.

The management of this grant office takes money and staff. The office has a staffing structure of 13 staff with a staffing budget of £381,100.00. The outturn at the end of the financial year was £381,272.00k (£172.00 over budget). In addition to staff salaries we have to pay for such items as the building itself, stationery supplies, computers and support services from staff in other departments. The running costs of the office was within the annual budget of £58.1k the actual outturn was £53.8k.

As the manager I was satisfied with the overall performances of the office in a very difficult and challenging year for my staff. During the year we implemented a new computer system to improve our service and had some down time to allow staff to train in the system. We also had added pressure on our Budget allocation.

Expenditure in 2009/10 was on target at £2.289 million, 196 Grant approvals released, due to budget controls this total was down on the predicated target.

Following the announcement of the Housing Executive's Board in May 2009 due to the pressure on the budget it was necessary to significantly curtail the availability of grants and only mandatory grants (Disabled Facilities Grants and Repair Grants) were available from May 2009. This in turn has provided many challenges for my staff in dealing with our customers and has resulted in over 300 discretionary cases placed on hold subject to availability of future funding. We have sent letters to all our customers



Joan Foster
Senior Officer,
(Administration)



Conor Bell
Senior Technical
Officer

affected keeping them up to date with the strategy we will be employing if additional funding becomes available. We also informed the applicant what category their application was in.

In order to monitor our performance in terms of value for money we look at our processing costs. The processing

costs are broken into units of work to produce a standardised rate, which for 2008/09 was £34.13 (before implementation of the new computer system). This performance is measured against a benchmark set by the Housing Executive. As our performance of £34.13 was higher than the benchmark figure of £24.83 we are working to improve this and significant improvements against other offices will be seen following the implementation of the new computer system which will improve the performances of all our offices.

In 2009 our office was used as the pilot office for the implementation of our Modernising Services Programme where new technologies and processes have been developed to help improve the overall grants service and make it more accessible to our customers. This implementation period has proved successful and the programme for rollout to other grants offices was completed in July 2010.

Ron Mitchell
Grants Manager
Tel: 028 2566 6400



Ron Mitchell, Grants Manager

Welcome to the latest issue of the Home Improvement Grants Newsletter for Carrickfergus, Larne and Newtownabbey Council areas.

In this edition we aim to provide information and assistance which is available through the Home Improvement Grants Scheme, our office performance and other related topics which I hope will be of interest to you.

Please take some time to read through this Newsletter and let us know your views on its contents and presentation. These can be reflected as we produce future editions.

Information on available grants can be found by visiting or calling our office. You can also access information on grants and other Housing Executive activities and services on our website at: www.nihe.gov.uk

2009 Grants Province Wide Survey

In addition to the Customer Telephone Surveys carried out for each local Grants Office, every few years the Housing Executive commissions independent research to evaluate the level of customer satisfaction with our grants service. The Home Improvement Grant Survey was last carried out in 2004, but new independent research was carried out in 2009 and the completed report has just been published. In addition to questions relating to the overall Grants Scheme, respondents were asked about their satisfaction with each stage of the process and the assistance they received from both the Grants Office and our partners.

I am pleased to report that we have witnessed a significant increase in those who stated they were either satisfied or very satisfied with the overall grants service, (from 87% in 2004 to 92% in 2009). While this is welcome news, we don't want to become complacent and will be endeavouring to further improve all areas of our service. For example, although the report shows an increase in satisfaction levels about the time it takes us to process your payment, we would like to further improve this important stage of the process. Respondents expressed low satisfaction levels with the overall Test of Resources process, so we have streamlined our Test of Resources procedures and revised our documentation as part of our Modernising Services Programme.

We have also introduced direct electronic payments to our Finance Department which will reduce the time taken to process your payment. However, to help reduce processing times it is also important that you provide the documentation we need to process your payment in a timely manner. This will reduce the time taken to release your payment. The implementation of our new computer system and the introduction of a dedicated Case Officer will further improve our service and should make it easier for you to complete the documentation we need from you.

The full report is now available from your local Grants Office but I have included a few of our key results below:

Question	Very Satisfied or Satisfied		Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied		Dissatisfied	
	2009	2004	2009	2004	2009	2004
Overall how satisfied or dissatisfied were you with the overall Grants Scheme?	92%	87%	4%	7%	4%	7%
Thinking about your experience of completing the necessary Schedule of Works documents, overall how satisfied or dissatisfied were you with this stage of the process?	87%	85%	3%	6%	5%	5%
Satisfaction with the Test of Resources Stage	72%	84%	4%	6%	3%	3%
How satisfied or dissatisfied were you with the time taken to complete the payment of your grant?	74%	72%	6%	7%	12%	13%

Grants Budget 2010/11

In last years edition of the 'Grants Issue' we told you about the effect on the Housing Executive's funding from the collapse in the housing market, particularly the impact on the Private Sector Grants budget. The reduction in our funding made it necessary to curtail certain aspects of the Grants Scheme. Applications for discretionary grants, including Renovation, Replacement and Home Repairs Assistance Grants

could only be approved in exceptional circumstances. Mandatory grants such as Disabled Facilities and Repair Grants were not affected by the budgetary restrictions and have continued to be processed as normal.

While the Housing Executive was successful in bidding during the year for additional funds, we were not in a position to lift the restrictions on entry into the Grants Scheme. However, these additional funds did allow us to

invite those applicants who were designated 'Category 1' status (statutory applications which had been refused at the time of the budget announcement in May 2009), to re-submit their statutory applications. We are currently processing those applications for which documentation has been returned. At the current time there are no plans to invite those who were designated as 'Category 2' applications, (cases which had not yet reach statutory application stage) to re-apply for grant aid.

...continued on pg 5

This has been a very difficult period for both our customers and the Housing Executive, and we are very aware that a number of you have been disappointed not to see your applications proceed. Unfortunately with the reduction in funding there was little choice but to take the action we did, but I hope at least that the letters we issued kept you up to date with developments.

You will be aware that in the current economic climate public sector funding is continually under scrutiny, so it is difficult to predict the outcome of the various reviews which are currently underway. However, it would be reasonable to predict that the designated £34m grants budget for 2010/11 will be subject to the same review as other divisions within the Housing Executive, and indeed other Government departments.

The current position is that we continue to process mandatory Disabled Facilities and Repair Grants, and those Category 1 applications which have re-submitted their documentation. However, legislative requirements dictate that some parts of the process, such as the Test of Resources assessment, have to be repeated.

We will of course keep you up to date if there are any changes to the current position which may affect your application as early as possible.

Grants Outlet Review

The current economic climate, the drive for efficiency savings and the introduction of new ways of working through our Modernising Services Programme has meant we have had to review the locations of our Grants Offices.

In December 2008 our Belfast, North & West and South & East Grants Offices were amalgamated to become a single Belfast office as the first step of this review.

Modernising Services



The new Private Sector Management System (PSMS) has now gone 'live' in all our Grants Offices and we are currently supporting our staff as they implement our new ways of working. This should make no difference to you in how you submit your application, but will enable us to process your application more efficiently.

There are a number of changes to the way we work as a result of the new system, but to summarise, the main changes are as follows;

- Designation of a Pro-active Case Officer for all applications. The Case Officer will be your main contact point with the Grants Office
- Your Case Officer will be contacting you, the customer, at key stages of the process
- All case files will now be electronic, which will ensure your documentation is stored safely and letters can be issued to you quickly and accurately
- Our Grants Officers will be using mobile computer technology to record information on their site visits
- Payments will be processed to our Finance Department electronically, which will be quicker and more cost efficient

For a short period of time each of our offices were closed to enable training and implementation of the new system to take place. These closures were announced in the local press and we apologise for any inconvenience caused, but I am sure you will appreciate that these closures were unavoidable.

As you will understand, the introduction of new ways of working together with the preparation, training and implementation of a major IT system is a huge undertaking. Therefore it is inevitable there will be some disruption to our service as staff become familiar with the new processes and new computer system.

I would therefore ask for your patience as we continue to 'bed in' the new ways of working, but I believe the benefits will soon become apparent to you as you proceed with your application.

At that time we planned to align our Grants Offices with the new council structure proposed under the Review of Public Administration. However, while the new council structure has been postponed, we must still seriously consider the number and location of our offices.

We must also acknowledge that a reduced budget will affect the number of offices and staff required to run the service. Recently we have released a number of our technical staff under the terms of the Housing Executive's Voluntary Early Retirement Scheme, but further savings have to be found.

The proposed new structure has recently been approved by the Housing Executive's Board and issued for consultation to a wide range of relevant bodies, including your public representatives. While the exact details were not confirmed at the time of publication, you will be kept informed in the coming months of any changes there may be to the location of your local Grants Office. We would like to reassure you that, although the location of your local Grants Office may change, you can still expect the service provided to be of the same high standard you have come to expect from us.

How we performed

Performance against Standards April 2009 - March 2010

This has been a satisfactory year for the office taking into account the difficulties with the implementation of the new computer system, the changes to the way we work and with the reduced budget available to Private Sector Grants. We have continued to provide a professional service to our customers.

From April 2009 to March 2010 we received 278 Preliminary Enquiry Forms for grant assistance, carried out 295 inspection, issued 263 Schedules of Work and carried out 168 Formal Test of Resources.

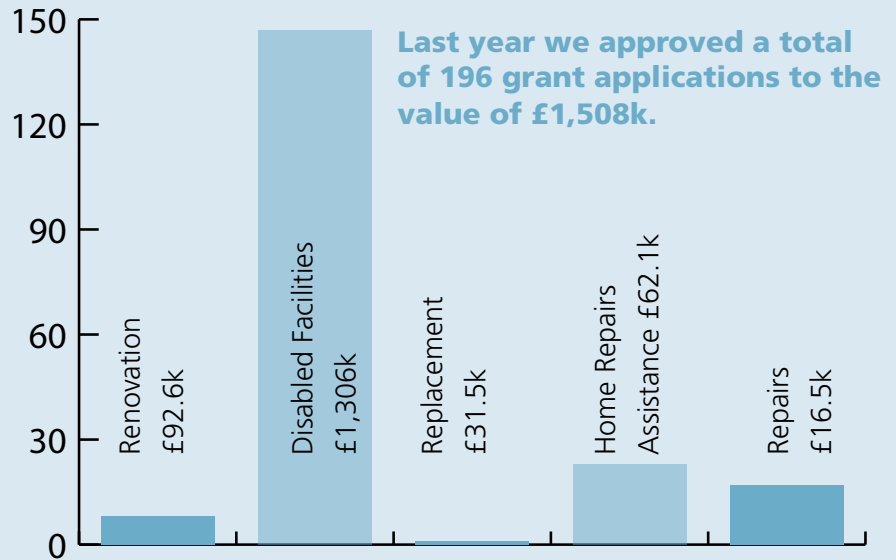
We approved 196 grants to the value of £1,508k (up from £1,318k), released grant payments to the value of £2,289k (up from £2,045k)

With our response times we have achieved or exceeded our targets in three areas and are continuing to show improvements in the area of payments with the introduction of payments direct to applicants / builders bank accounts.

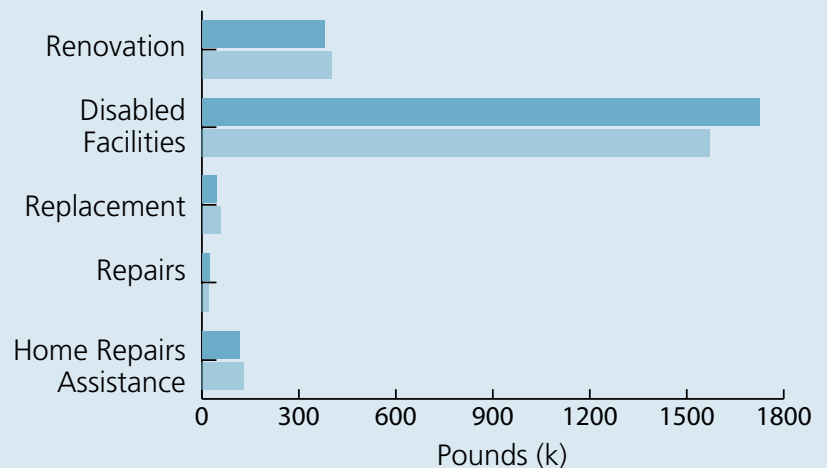
In terms of value for money and quality of service the office is measured using set standards (see bar chart on performance). When compared to the processing rate of £24.83 set by the organisation for all offices our performance of £34.13 for 2008 / 09 was higher than the benchmark. Our office was used as the pilot for the modernising services programme in 2009 and due to this we are unable to compare ourselves against other offices. With the rollout now completed we will be able to compare our performances against the other offices in 2010/11.

Year Average 08/09	KPI
£34.13	£24.83

Approval Outputs April 2009 - March 2010

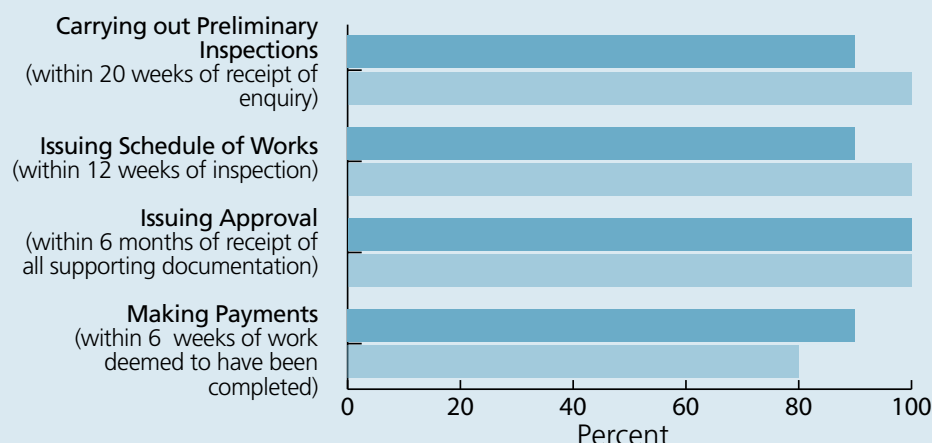


Grants Payments (£k) April 2009 - March 2010



In 2009/2010 we were successful in spending a total of £2,289k for all grant types.

Performance against Service Standards April 2009 - March 2010



Customer Care Charter

This Charter sets out the standards you can expect from staff in Ballyclare Grants Office. If you feel we have failed to meet any of these standards please tell us.

We aim to provide you, the customer, with the highest possible level of service and professionalism. We are continually looking at ways that we can improve our service and we welcome our customers' views on how we can achieve this.

Our staff will:

- be prompt, polite, helpful, fair and sensitive
- advise you of who is dealing with your case
- be trained to give advice and assistance within policy
- wear name badges to identify ourselves and show identification when we visit your home
- make appointments for all preliminary inspections
- on request provide a map showing our office location

In reception we will:

- advise you of our opening hours
- attend to you within 5 minutes
- monitor our achievement against the above standard
- provide a private interview room on request
- have information leaflets available
- provide a summary Business Plan on request
- provide an interpretation service if your first language is not English
- provide a comments card for your comments, suggestions and compliments
- act on suggestions and provide more choice
- monitor our achievement against the above standard

On the telephone we will:

- answer calls or take a message in office hours
- answer your call to our main switchboard within 3 rings (5 seconds) then in our office within 3 rings (5 seconds) in total 6 rings (10 seconds)
- monitor our achievement against the above target times
- tell you our name
- deal with your enquiry or return your call within one working day

For letters, fax, emails which we receive we will:

- reply within 5 to 10 working days if necessary by letter, fax, phone, email or visit
- acknowledge your correspondence within 3 working days if a reply will take longer than 10 working days
- sign our replies stating our name and position
- write in plain English
- check emails received twice daily
- monitor our achievement against the above standards

For people with disability or aged 60+ we can:

- arrange a sign language communicator
- provide a portable loop hearing system
- provide leaflets and forms in a choice of formats
- visit you in your home

For people whose first language is not English we can:

- arrange an interpretation service by arrangement
- provide leaflets and forms in a choice of format

For Property Inspections/ Home Visits we will:

- respond to a Preliminary Enquiry receipt in 5 working days

- arrange property inspection within 4 weeks
- issue a schedule of grant aided work in 12 weeks
- issue formal approval within 6 months on receipt of completed documentation
- do interim / final inspections in 2 weeks and pay in 4 weeks
- While these figures represent the maximum time it will take, we will endeavour to process each stage of your application in as short a time as possible.

If you have a complaint we will:

- try to resolve them at Ballyclare Grants Office
- on request, give our 'How to Make a Complaint' leaflet
- reply to your complaint within 15 days
- monitor our achievement against standards
- put matters right and apologise if we made a mistake
- learn from any mistakes and improve our services as a result

Customer Satisfaction

We are constantly seeking customers' views of our service in order to improve. We conduct on a regular basis a survey of grant applicants and the results of the latest survey are:

Satisfaction with overall grants process	90%
Satisfaction with telephone service	97%
Satisfaction with written correspondence	93%
Satisfaction with inspection stage	94%

Complaints / Compliments / Feedback

We take all complaints received very seriously and try to resolve them initially at the Grants Office level. However, a number of our customers take advantage of the formal complaints process.

Last year, we investigated:

Stage 1

Two complaints received and

resolved satisfactorily at the Grants Office

Stage 2

No cases referred to second or final stage for investigation by the Chief Executive.

Commissioner

We had no complaints dealt with by the Commissioner for Complaints.

If any complaints were upheld we put in place the necessary procedures to ensure there is no reoccurrence.

We received 14 enquiries from Public Representatives on behalf of applicants. All enquires were dealt with in 15 working days.

We received two thank you cards/ letters

How to make a complaint

We aim to provide a good quality of service but sometimes despite our best efforts things do go wrong. If you have a complaint about our service we will:

- Carry out a full and fair investigation
- Give you a full explanation
- If a mistake has been made we will put matters right and issue an apology

You should first raise any problem with staff in the grants office who will try and resolve the situation.

If you are dissatisfied you may raise the matter formally with the Grants Manager who will aim to reply to your complaint within 15 working days.

Following this if you are still dissatisfied you can write to:

The Chief Executive, The Housing Centre, 2 Adelaide Street, Belfast, BT2 8PB

Please contact us if you wish to have a "How to make a Complaint" booklet sent to you.

Customer Choice

Where possible we will offer you choice in how we provide our service. Currently we offer the following choices:

- Day, morning or afternoon appointments for home visits and inspections
- Help to complete your application using Fold Housing Association's Staying Put service
- Choice of warranted contractors
- Grant Payments can be assigned to your contractor
- Stage payments
- Method of contact eg: phone, e mail, fax, letter, in person

Complaints between April 2009 & March 2010

With our high volume of work we sometimes receive complaints which we take seriously and try to resolve initially at Grants Office level. However, a number of our customers take advantage of the formal complaints procedure.

Last year, we investigated 2 first stage cases which were resolved

satisfactorily at the Grants Office. No cases were referred as second stage complaints for investigation by the Chief Executive and we had no complaints referred to the Commissioner for Complaints.

We received 14 enquiries from public representatives on behalf of applicants of which all were dealt with within 15 working days.

We received two thank you compliments which have been circulated to the staff concerned.

Target times for responding to telephone calls 6 seconds we are currently answering in 8.5 seconds on average.

Any suggestions you may have about how we can improve our service would be most welcome.

Standards of Service

On receipt of an Occupational Therapist's Recommendation our Case Officer will aim to contact you within two days.

We aim to carry out an inspection of your property within four weeks.

Following inspection of your property we aim to issue your Schedule of Works within 12 weeks.

Following submission of all your documentation we aim to issue your approval within 6 months.

We aim to inspect your property following completion of works within two weeks

We aim to make payment following inspection and receipt of payment documentation within four weeks

DFG Performance	Target %	Achieved %
Carrying out Preliminary Inspections (within 10 days)	90	87
Issuing Schedule of Works (within 20 days of inspection)	70	70
Issuing approval (within 40 days of receipt of all supporting documentation)	70	35

A helping hand

Finding your way through the grants process can require some help and assistance. Whilst staff in the Grants Office are available to assist, you may be able to get help with your application from FOLD Housing Association, if you are elderly (over 75), or have a disability.

The Staying Put service provided by FOLD offers FREE practical advice and support to repair or adapt your home, their services include:

- Advice on the repair and improvement of your property
- Provide assistance with completion of paperwork
- Provide information on local architectural services and building contractors
- Assistance in obtaining plans
- Provide assistance with queries whilst the work is in progress

Staff in our office work directly with local FOLD representatives:



- Susanne Warwick who covers the Newtownabbey Council area
- Richard Harper who covers the Carrickfergus and Larne Council areas
- Alan Kane (Technical Adviser) who covers all council areas.

They can all be contacted on: 028 9042 8314

The Housing Executive has a wide range of leaflets. We have information on all of the Grants we offer as well as a number of other related areas of interest:

- List of architects/Agents
- Lists of Registered Builders
- Assessing your contribution
- Standards of service
- Use of Recognised Contractors
- Customer Care Charter
- How to make a Complaint

The leaflets above are also available in large print as well as on audio tape. Please contact your local office to request a copy.

Wake up to a warmer home

The Warm Homes Scheme is funded by the Department for Social Development to make your home warmer, healthier and more energy efficient. It's for people who receive certain qualifying benefits and own or rent their home from a private landlord. To find out if you qualify, call freephone: 0800 988 0559 or visit www.warm-homes.com



A Department for Social Development Scheme

Corporate Social Responsibility

As part of the Housing Executive's CSR policy staff are encouraged to identify and participate in local fundraising, volunteering and waste management activities which can continue to improve the opportunities and quality of life in the communities we serve.

Last year grants staff actively participated in a range of these activities:

- Coffee Mornings for staff nominate charity
- Work experience availability for local schools
- Our staff are committed to waste management activities, recycling of cardboard, plastic, stamps and toner cartridges
- We made donations of second hand goods to the Mid Antrim Animal Sanctuary for them to sell as well as donations of food for the animals.

Focus Group

We have a focus group which meets once a year and consists of our partners - Fold Housing Association, Occupational Therapists, Warranted Builders, Architects and Applicants.

It is always useful to get the feedback from our group on the positives and negatives involved in the grants process and any improvements within our working practice are always introduced (joint visits with Occupational Therapists when requested, joint visit with the Warranted Builders Scheme in cases where dispute has arisen)

Would you like to join our Customer Focus Group?

If so, please complete the slip on page 12 of this newsletter and return to The Manager, Ballyclare Grants Office, 141 Mill Road, Ballyclare, BT39 9DZ



Focus Group

Your Safety and Security At Home

Home security is the best way to reduce your chances of being burgled. A lot of burglaries are spur of the moment, as a burglar may see an open window or other easy point of entry and take their chance.

neighbours, and that alarms turn off after 20 minutes.

- Fitting a 'spy hole' allows you to see who is at the door. Having a door chain means that you can open the door a little way to talk to them

Be a Good Neighbour, report suspicious activity immediately to the Police on

0845 600 8000

Basic Tips

- When you go out, always lock the door and close the windows-even if you are going out for a short time.
- Window locks, especially on older windows will help stop people getting in (And remember, a burglar is less likely to break in if they have to smash a window).
- If you have deadlocks, use them. They make it harder for a thief to get out again. But don't leave the key near the door or in an obvious place.
- Don't leave spare keys outside or in a garage or shed, and put car keys or garage keys out of sight in the house.
- Use timers for lights and radios if you need to be away from home overnight. They will create the impression someone is in.
- Visible burglar alarms, good lighting, and carefully directed security lighting can put burglars off. But make sure that lights don't disturb your

'Make sure that any improvements you make don't stop you from getting out of your house as quickly as possible if there is a fire'

Bogus callers

- Most people who come to your door will be genuine callers. But it's best to make sure.
- Use your door chain or spy hole it will help you check who the caller is.
- If you were not expecting someone to call, a genuine caller will not mind waiting outside while you contact their company. Find the phone number in the phone book, or look on your last bill.
- Most companies have a password scheme.
- If you let someone into your home, even if it is someone you know, and you become uncomfortable, make excuses and leave. Go to a neighbour's house, or ask a friend to come back with you.



Useful telephone numbers

Ordnance Survey
T: 028 9025 1515

Carrickfergus Borough Council / Building Control
T: 028 9335 1604

Larne Borough Council / Building Control
T: 028 2827 2313

Newtownabbey Borough Council / Building Control
T: 028 9034 0000

Larne and Carrickfergus Planning Department
T: 028 2565 3333

Newtownabbey Planning Department
T: 028 9025 2800

Newtownabbey and Carrickfergus Rates Collection
T: 0845 300 6360

Larne Rates Collection
T: 028 2566 0700

Larne Occupational Therapy Unit
T: 028 2827 5427

Newtownabbey Occupational Therapy Unit
T: 028 9034 1555

Carrickfergus Occupational Therapy Unit
T: 028 9085 5866

Fold Housing Trust
T: 028 9042 8314

Building Guarantee Scheme (BGS)
T: 028 9087 7147

Contractors Insurance Guarantee Services (CIGS)
T: 028 7032 5980

National Register of Warranted Builders (FMB)
T: 028 9068 4260

National Housing Builders Council (NHBC)
T: 028 9038 6000

Construction Register Ltd (CRL)
T: 028 9049 2117

Construction Insurance Direct (CID)
T: 028 7035 5237

Carrickfergus Citizens Advice Bureau
T: 028 9335 1808

Larne Citizens Advice Bureau
T: 028 2826 0379

Newtownabbey Citizens Advice Bureau
T: 028 9085 2271

Rural Community Network
T: 028 8676 6670

Text Phone (24 hours)
0845 650 4381

Why not have your say?

If you would like to comment on our service or the contents of this newsletter please complete and return the slip at the bottom of this page.

Also, if you feel you would be interested in being part of our customer focus group to look at the different aspects of the grants process, indicate this on the slip.

We will contact you, in this regard, in due course. We would welcome any suggestions to improve choice in the Grants service.

Comments

I would be interested in joining your Grants Focus Group YES / NO

Name

Address

Telephone

Please return to: The Manager, Ballyclare Grants Office, 141 Mill Road, Ballyclare BT39 9DZ

Housing Executive