

PRESS RELEASE

New guide helps Scotland's elderly through benefits maze

MSP Sarah Boyack launches new initiative by Trust, Hanover and Bield Housing Associations

Edinburgh, Nov 22, 2006 (For immediate release)

Older people from Black and Minority Ethnic communities in Scotland will receive vital help to negotiate the benefits maze with the launch of a new Easy Guide to Benefits for the 60-plus age group, developed jointly by the Trust, Hanover (Scotland) and Bield Housing Associations and sponsored by **Communities Scotland**.

The guide is the latest in a number of innovative projects jointly developed by the three Housing Associations and is part of a pioneering Pension Benefit Outreach Project.

The highly effective equality programme has been short listed for a Guardian Public Services Award and the key focus of the Benefits Guide was to target older people from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities in Scotland, who are harder to reach.

Sarah Boyack Labour MSP for Edinburgh Central, who launched the new guide at the Scottish Parliament, said: "A lot of older people don't take up the benefits they are entitled to. There are many barriers in their way, from knowledge barriers to psychological and physical. If that means the elderly are missing out, that's a tragedy. I want to congratulate Trust, Hanover and Bield on this initiative. It's a landmark getting this document published."

The new Easy Guide to Benefits has been published in six languages (Arabic, Bengali, Cantonese, Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu and English) and its launch follows the housing associations' major success with its Pension Benefit Outreach Programme. This guide can be downloaded in all these languages on the multilingual website **www.EqualityScotland.com**

Sarah Boyack commended the Housing Associations: "I think this will be one of the most important and tangible things you have done. The outreach project has already raised £400,000 in benefits for elderly people from the Black and Minority Ethnic communities. It has helped over 200 people. That's a real tangible benefit."

Sarah Boyack added: "These are benefits which should not be locked up in a filing cabinet. This initiative means more elderly people can look forward to enjoying their right to a house they can afford to heat and help from Care and Repair programmes if needed."

Rohini Sharma Joshi, Housing Equal Opportunities Manager for Trust, Hanover (Scotland) and Bield Housing Associations, said research found that fewer people from ethnic minority communities apply for benefits.

More../

She attributed this to several factors including language barriers, cultural beliefs, lack of knowledge of the benefits system, attitudinal barriers, including lack of cultural awareness among some benefits staff, and a lack of simple information readily available for the BME communities in their own languages.

Rohini Sharma Joshi's team worked closely with Pension Services offices to improve the take-up of pension benefits in the BME community and to ensure that entitlements reach those who need them most.

"Our Pension Benefit Outreach Worker has radically changed the lives of scores of older BME people who have now achieved a higher standard of living, greater physical and emotional wellbeing, and a sense of independence and empowerment," Rohini Sharma Joshi said.

Beneficiaries of the scheme include an elderly Pakistani couple who were reluctant to admit that they were struggling financially and reliant upon their children. They had not claimed Pension Credit because they thought that they would have to pay it back. They were persuaded to apply and were delighted to be awarded a backdated credit of £6,000 as well as ongoing payments.

Another beneficiary was an elderly Bangladeshi gentleman who had been a permanent resident in Scotland for eight years and whose family were unwilling to continue to support him financially. He faced language barriers in communicating with the Pension Service but with the help of an outreach worker he successfully obtained benefits to which he was entitled.

Speaking of his experience with the outreach worker, he said: "She made things so easy that it's given me the confidence to do other things, to be independent...She has changed my life for the better."

Notes to Editors:

The new Easy Guide to Benefits for 60+, which was sponsored by Communities Scotland, is aimed at elderly people in Scotland who require assistance in navigating the complexities of the benefits system. It has been published in six languages as part of a programme of initiatives specifically designed to assist hard-to-reach elderly people in BME communities throughout Scotland. It is the latest pioneering project to be launched by the Trust, Hanover (Scotland) and Bield Housing Associations' jointly- run Equal Opportunities Programme which has developed a range of award-winning projects designed to empower Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) older people. The Scottish Executive is working on a strategy to provide a long-term framework for greater access to opportunities for older people.

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For information on the housing associations involved in the project:

Trust Housing Association Limited www.trustha.org.uk

Hanover (Scotland) Housing Association www.hsha.org.uk

Bield Housing Association www.bield.co.uk