

Future plans



What we've seen with SkillsBridge over the last year is that when we bring the right people together to face a challenge or explore an opportunity, there are clear and positive results all round. SkillsBridge works! We have the evidence and the case studies to show it achieves results. Our next challenge couldn't be clearer – we now have to find a way of making it sustainable.

But where is that money going to come from? We know that grant funding is in short supply and for a project like SkillsBridge, classified as 'infrastructure', it is virtually non-existent. It never seemed likely that charging the voluntary and community sector for our services would provide a sustainable income and that leaves a rather short list of potential funders.

We have plans under development to diversify our income and develop new services that can generate revenue for the organisation but that will take time. In the short term, over the next year we need to raise funds if we want SkillsBridge to survive into and beyond 2014.

We have shown time and again that SkillsBridge produces high impact results with sustainable benefits and with a positive value for money return that ranges up to over £3 for every £1 of funding we receive. The evaluation carried out this year and the feedback we get every week has shown us this is a valued and valuable service that no-one wants to see come to an end.

The greatest hurdle was in getting to this stage and developing a model for SkillsBridge to make this kind of support fulfil the potential we felt it had, and we've done that. With the continued support of everyone who has got behind the project so far, I believe we can overcome this hurdle and continue to survive and grow, and I look forward to continuing our journey with you.

Testimonials

"Andy was the voice of reason; he is very calm, very logical and gave me sound advice. After time spent with Andy, I felt that I had been in a counselling session, he never seemed under pressure."

Susan Tron, Stepney Bank Stables, speaking about Andy Holgate, Holgate HR

"We found this project an invaluable experience and fully enjoyed working with Peter. We are in a great place just knowing that all of our H&S policies are up to date and we have H&S advice the end of the phone or e-mail now."

Beverley Cook, Tik Tok Nursery, speaking about Peter Younger, Benfield Motor Group

"Peter had fantastic knowledge, I was so lucky to get someone with his experience and background. He works in a big housing association and manages a large number of people and projects. He also has wider knowledge of the not for profit sector. I found the support extremely beneficial."

Hazel McCallion, South Tyneside TEN, speaking about Peter Stott, Home Group

"Caroline provided practical advice and help to our organisation during a process of structural change... she provided us with model letters to use and advised on good practice, she also acted as a critical friend."

Fiona Swindell, East End Community Development Partnership, speaking about Caroline Dixon, Holgate HR

"Much more progress as an organisation in terms of thinking about how to make the most of what we already have and maximise opportunities. Mark has been able to work with us to get the foundations of the organisation in a position for us to push on from here."

Toby Lowe, Helix Arts, speaking about Mark Fenwick

"[Neil] was able to consult with planners, English Heritage, and various other stakeholders when he was developing the plans. He brought an authority and professionalism to his work. He pre-empted needs by developing an accessibility statement, he was a breath of fresh air."

Shona Alexandra, Newcastle CAB, speaking about Neil Mandle from GVA

"Lots of knowledge and skills were passed during the training session. This allows the staff to become much more proficient in using the software and enables them to be much more efficient in both dealing with tasks but also from the customer point of view."

Caroll Pattison, Sunshine Fund, speaking about Maggie Cottier, MSC Computer Training

SkillsBridge Annual Review 2012

Chairman's letter



Richard Bottomley OBE
Chairman

In the last year alone we've managed through SkillsBridge to bring over £100,000 worth of free consultancy and expertise to the aid of our region's charities and social enterprises.

As we enter our third year of activity for SkillsBridge it gives me pause to reflect on the journey we've been on since launching the project in 2011. When we founded this charity over 12 years ago we actively sought to find ways to bring support from the private sector to benefit communities. Thanks to the SkillsBridge initiative we believe we have found the most direct and the most valuable way of doing that so far.

Our research, carried out by Durham University, made it clear that the voluntary and community sector in our region would be facing an inevitable contraction due to the knock-on effect of the economic climate. Without the funding required to carry out business as normal, organisations would need to restructure and re-shape to meet the demands they face with the resources still available. We believed our private sector companies were equipped with the skills, the experience and the good will to help them to meet those challenges and I'm pleased to say we were right.

Two years on and today over 50 businesses have signed up to support SkillsBridge. Local authorities and other public sector organisations are putting their weight behind the scheme and some of our leading charities are giving freely of their time to help their peers through SkillsBridge.

SkillsBridge isn't the only answer to the challenging times we face but it's a strong response that shows the country that businesses in the North East care about their communities and their people. They are driven by values as much as they are by business acumen, and when called upon they will answer that challenge and step forward to put their shoulder to the wheel.

In the last year alone we've managed through SkillsBridge to bring over £100,000 worth of free consultancy and expertise to the aid of our region's charities and social enterprises. The benefit to them of the help they've received is several times that in terms of real cost savings and new revenue.

This year our communities look set to face some of their greatest challenges to date and we need our charitable sector to remain strong and resourceful to bring help to those who need it the most. We may not all have skills and the knowledge of the dedicated staff who work in these organisations but by doing what we can, we stand alongside them in helping them in their vital work.

I couldn't be more proud that this initiative, started right here in the North East, has taken root so well and is supported by some of our most trusted and established companies as part of their commitment to corporate responsibility. Businesses of all sizes and from all sectors have joined forces to lend their support and in doing so have opened their staff up to new and exciting challenges that stand to benefit them both professionally and personally.

On behalf of ourselves and almost 200 charities supported through SkillsBridge we owe them a great debt of thanks. As we look forward to 2013 we do so with greater confidence knowing that our region, so well known for its generosity of spirit has embraced the opportunity to show how it can lead the way on a national stage in partnership working and in building bridges between sectors, companies and individuals for mutual benefit.

At SkillsBridge we look set for our busiest year to date and if you think you can support our work then I urge you to get in touch, your support and your help will be very much appreciated.

Chief Executive's letter



Andrew White
Chief Executive

We've built our model for the delivery of SkillsBridge around what the sector has asked for and told us they need.

Welcome to our Annual Review for 2012. At the start of last year we were faced with the challenge of building on the promising start SkillsBridge made since our launch in 2011. What we had found, and continue to find is that when we explain the project to companies and organisations almost all of them get it straight away. Throughout the year we've seen a number of businesses from sole traders and consultants to multi-national PLCs join us in supporting their local charities and social enterprises.

During the summer we celebrated signing our fiftieth SkillsBridge Advisor and by the end of the year that number had risen to over eighty. Our advisors have delivered one-to-one support projects and workshops that have benefitted almost 100 voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations, exceeding our own targets.

The feedback we've received on our work has been hugely positive as you'll see, and this is due in no small part to the fact that the service is user-led. Not only do we coordinate our work with other VCS partners supporting the sector, we've built our model for the delivery of SkillsBridge around what the sector has asked for and told us they need.

In some cases SkillsBridge support has taken the form of long term, high level mentoring or work with a Chief Officer and board to clarify the direction of an organisation, in other cases it's a few hours training to understand how to use a piece of software. It's great to be able to offer that flexibility, helping to meet the needs of organisations and making the best use of the talent and good will offered by those volunteering their time.

But in order to really work each SkillsBridge project requires commitment. For every hour a SkillsBridge Advisor puts in, a Chief Officer or manager of the charity might put in three or four. They take on board the learning and advice and get over the hurdles they have been facing. In doing so they have real ownership, not only of the learning but of the results.

What we're aiming to support is a stronger, more resilient sector delivering high level services and building on the lessons learnt from other sectors to add to their skills sets. Where we can take that learning and share best practice there is a chance of real and tangible gains being made. SkillsBridge Advisors have been able to offer support to reduce risk, manage finances, adapt structures and processes and offer advice that has saved a number of charities money.

Looking at the equation from the other side, for those working in business, the chance of taking their skills and experience into a whole new environment and putting their resourcefulness to the test can be both challenging and rewarding. It's a step outside of the comfort zone and into the unknown but the rewards vastly outweigh the risks. Working to support some of the best causes helping those in need and working alongside some outstanding and inspirational teams has led our advisors to come back time and again and offer their services so generously.

SkillsBridge is nothing without the hard work and effort put in on all sides and to everyone who has taken part we would like to say a huge thank you for your vision, your commitment and your hard work.

Our Board

From the initial discussions that led to the development of the concept, right through to implementation, SkillsBridge has been fortunate to have strong leadership and a wealth of experience to draw upon at Board level. Our Trustees are leading figures from the private, public and voluntary sectors who have each enjoyed many years of working at the highest levels within their chosen field.

Our Board are responsible for helping to not only forge a clear direction for the organisation but also to make the links and connections that have done so much to support us along the way. They remain actively committed to the development and success of SkillsBridge and are responsible for ensuring that we remain true to our mission of forging lasting alliances between organisations, sectors and individuals for mutual benefit. As an organisation we are extremely grateful for the time and resources they commit to SkillsBridge in doing so. In the summer of 2012 we were delighted to welcome Jan Worters MBE as our newest Trustee.



Richard Bottomley
OBE, Chair

Richard has been Chairman of SkillsBridge since 2009. A former KPMG Senior Partner, he has advised on strategic planning and corporate transactions, including multi-national groups as well as owner managed businesses. Richard is currently Chairman of Greggs Plc Pension Scheme, a director at Durham CCC and a consultant with UBS Wealth Management.



John Litherland,
Board Member

Having supported the development of SkillsBridge in 2011 John accepted a position on the Board of Trustees in January of 2012. As the former Executive Director of Northumberland Strategic Partnership John has over 20 years of experience in creating partnerships that deliver strategic objectives.



Tim Pain, Board Member

Tim Pain is a self employed consultant working on a variety of assignments from economic strategies and business engagement projects, to helping publicly funded organisations and services diversify. Tim is Chair of Taste Club HQ and was previously Head of Business Enterprise & Skills at One North East.



Tim Jones, Board Member

Tim has been CEO of Allia since 2002. He has worked in North America, the Gulf and Europe – posts included Head of Marketing at Royal Life and Managing Director, Europe, at Direct Marketing Corporation of America. He had founded, and sold, two enterprise start-ups – Fraser-Milne and STD Belgrade – before taking on Allia.



Graham Randell,
Board Member

Graham is the former Director of Social Responsibility and Managing Director for Greggs Plc in the North East and Cumbria. He is also a Trustee of Northern Sinfonia and of the Tyneside Cinema.



Adrian Stanley,
Board Member

Adrian is a Partner and the Senior Office Partner for Eversheds in the North East, specialising in public and private sector urban regeneration schemes. He is also on the board of Northern Architecture and a governor at Dame Allan's Schools.



Jan Worters MBE,
Board Member

Jan is currently Chair of Durham Rural Community Council and a Trustee of the national umbrella body,

ACRE (Action with Communities in Rural England). Before retiring she was Chief Officer of North Tyneside VODA.

She has extensive experience in working with and in the voluntary and public sectors and has promoted the value of the third sector in a range of forums, including North Tyneside Strategic Partnership, VONNE and the Community Foundation serving Tyne and Wear and Northumberland. She also played an active role in the Invest 2006 Campaign and the Regional Task Force, which was set up by GONE. In 2007 Jan was awarded an MBE for services to the community in the North East.

SkillsBridge Team



Andrew White
Chief Executive



Chris Orrick
Operations Manager



Angela Radojic
Project Officer North Tyneside



Sanjee Ratnatunga
Project Officer Durham

SkillsBridge



Our Vision

The vision behind SkillsBridge is a simple one: to forge lasting alliances between individuals and organisations across sectors for mutual benefit. What was recognised from the start is that there are many inspirational and highly talented people in our region working in all sectors. SkillsBridge is about making the links and forging the connections that bring people together in a meaningful way.

The purpose for doing so is the desire to support the voluntary and community sector, not through funding but through access to skills and knowledge. But rather than have those skills and knowledge contributed by a volunteer we wanted to have them transferred by an advisor, who is there to mentor and support key staff through the learning process.

It's the old cliché of teaching someone to fish, but the teaching and learning goes both ways. There are many challenges faced by being an advisor and adapting what you think you know to a totally new and different environment. The reward is that not only have you helped and supported an individual or group of people, but in doing so you have also helped their beneficiaries and those who rely on the charity.

One of the advantages of the relationships brokered by SkillsBridge is that they do not need continuous funding to bring sustained benefits. Not only does the model of skills transfer ensure that learning is embedded in the organisation supported, but also the matches we make, will in many cases lead to long lasting or ongoing connections being made.

These longer term relationships, if we add up their value in terms of access to consultancy support are worth far more than the costs of setting them up, before we even take into account the ensuing benefits to the organisation that accrue over time.

Our Aims

Since our launch in 2011, SkillsBridge has faced its share of challenges and complexities in terms of design and delivery but from the beginning there has been a real enthusiasm for this project to succeed from partners on all sides. With their backing and the hard work of the team we've supported over 180 voluntary and community sector organisations. So far over 50 businesses have been recruited, from sole traders and consultants to multi-national PLCs and everything in between.

It makes sense that senior managers and professionals in giving their time, have their skills and experience matched to the needs of organisations in their local area. But it's not an easy ask. There are few off-the-peg solutions in the voluntary and community sector as those working within it know only too well.

So there's quite a degree of 'stretch' as we ask our advisors to roll up their sleeves and sit down with their counterpart and a blank sheet of paper in addressing the challenge at hand. It's essential to understand fully the aims and vision of the organisation to be supported and to keep that at the forefront. Our sector is not short on passion and that's something that quickly rubs off on our advisors as they work with charity leaders to help build stronger more effective organisations.

It's a chance to really make a difference and bring benefit to those most at need, by doing what they do best: using their skills. Our feedback from advisors is that they find working on SkillsBridge projects to be both rewarding and an effective use of their time. But as well as that, along the way we have not only seen some great working partnerships develop but friendships as well.

It's important to remember that all of this would not have taken place without the intervention of SkillsBridge – it's not activity that was already happening, and it's not something anyone else will be doing if we're not around to do it.

Business Engagement

When we first launched SkillsBridge we couldn't be sure of the level or type of support we would receive from North East businesses. We'd had some promising initial feedback from our research but now we had to put that into practice.

Our assumption at the start was that it would prove difficult to engage with businesses and that each advisor would need a break between projects. I'm happy to say that we were quite wrong. We've enjoyed fantastic support from people in businesses of all sizes right from the start, and often advisors who have recently finished a project approach us to ask if we have anything else they can help with!

We couldn't have foreseen the level of support we've received and it's a happy responsibility finding great projects and organisations for our ever-keen advisors to engage with. We owe everyone who has given their time freely to support SkillsBridge a huge debt of thanks and we look forward to continuing to work with you.



Working with the Voluntary and Community Sector

We recognised from the outset that for SkillsBridge to realise its potential it would have to take up a place alongside the organisations that do such a great job in supporting the voluntary and community sector, and work closely in partnership with them. The strength of SkillsBridge is in finding and filling some of the gaps in support provision that charities and social enterprises were telling us they faced.

One of the essential roles of our cross-sector Steering Group is to advise on how best to direct our resources. Knowing when to refer an organisation for support to their local Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) or Development Association has been just as important as getting referrals back from each of them. I'm pleased to report that SkillsBridge is now seen as being very much part of the map of support that exists for the voluntary and community sector across the region.

Through our workshops and our presence at a number of events, as well as a host of e-bulletins and newsletters, including our own, we have steadily built a strong profile for our work. There is still more to be done as we engage with the charitable sector across the North East, but the foundations for this work have been well laid. Our service remains popular and feedback to date reveals a high level of success and satisfaction amongst organisations who have received support.



Measuring Impact

In October 2012, SkillsBridge commissioned an evaluation to assess its performance, effectiveness and impact. The findings of this evaluation are summarised below.

Performance

Overall SkillsBridge met or surpassed its performance targets. We have exceeded by 40% our annual target of supporting 72 Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) Organisations (168 staff members)

The support projects implemented have improved skills, operational efficiency, policies and procedures, supported the development of new revenue streams and increased the resilience of VCS organisations to change.

SkillsBridge advisors from the private and public sector have been plugging skills gaps in a range of areas. Key skills expertise has included; Business planning (23%), HR (19%), Marketing (19%), Architectural (9%) and Legal (7%) as shown in Fig. 1.

Effectiveness

SkillsBridge has been very effective at recruiting significant national and regional employers to participate in the service. The project has also attracted directors and owner managers from small businesses who are keen to put something back into their local community.

We currently have over 80 advisors on our books. A successful recruitment strategy, which maximises the use of social networks, means numbers are growing at a steady pace.

SkillsBridge operates a highly personalised matching service. This involves understanding and helping to scope the needs of the voluntary and community sector and then matching these needs to the advisor's skills, experience, personal interests and motivations. This has led to high levels of service satisfaction 91% of those interviewed commented on the high quality of the match and the level of expertise the advisor brought to the project.

"It has been a great process to be involved in. The matching element works very well. Mark is a perfect match for us!" Toby Lowe, CEO, Helix Arts

The VCS and advisor experience of the matching process has been a very positive one and their comments on SkillsBridge below demonstrate this.

"Good grasp of what we needed." "Useful", "Professional", "Spot on", "first class", "exceptional", "fully understood us" "friendly" and a "really effective broker."

92% of VCS organisations had a very positive experience with a SkillsBridge advisor.

Impact

SkillsBridge support contributed to making things happen better, quicker or more effectively. The impact of SkillsBridge is summarised in Fig. 2.

SkillsBridge advisors provided expertise in a range of areas, including understanding legislation, use of software systems, health & safety audits, fundraising strategies, architectural plans and marketing briefs.

"The fundraising training was of a very high quality, all 14 staff in the organisation attended, they now know a great deal more about fundraising. Some of the staff have had a go at putting in bids and have won new funding as a result. We have paid for training before that has been nowhere near this quality."

Alyson Stott, CEO, Streetwise

Other unintended outcomes are requests for SkillsBridge advisors to become trustees and the use of advisor's high value networks to bring the very best expertise to the VCS organisation.

There have been significant benefits to SkillsBridge advisors from participating in the programme and these are summarised into four categories, the feel good factor, knowledge and skills, opportunities, and networks and alliances. Advisors involvement with the project is summarised in the following comments.

"It was great to help a charity, it gave me a sense of satisfaction."

"It gave me a really good feeling at a time when I was definitely under-employed, it felt good to be able to work at that level again."

"It was great profile raising activity via word of mouth"

"I gained an insight into a new sector which I had no experience of."

Conclusions

Overall SkillsBridge is on course to achieving its vision as set out in its Business Plan 2012-2014.

The service has supported 101 VCS organisations and supported 186 staff members during the period December 2011 to December 2012.

SkillsBridge is perceived to be a high quality brokerage service by VCS organisations and advisors alike which has made a real impact through the projects it has supported.

FIG. 1

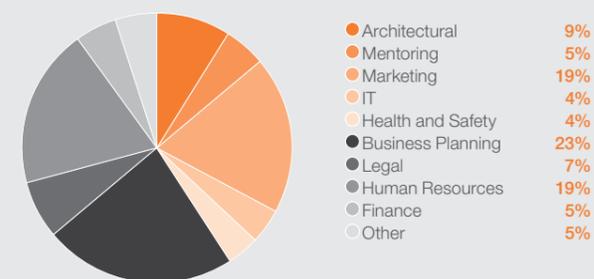
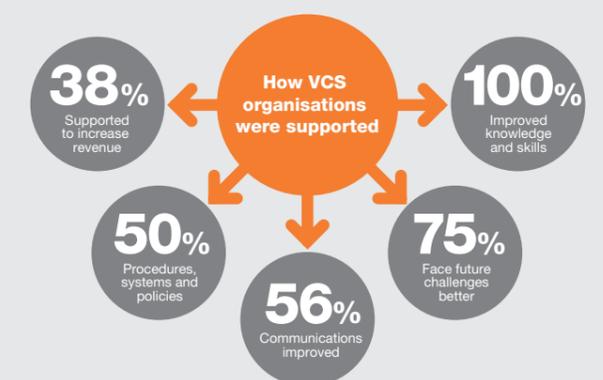


FIG. 2



Statement of financial activities

Year ended 31 March 2012



	UNRESTRICTED FUNDS £	RESTRICTED FUNDS £	TOTAL FUNDS 2012	TOTAL FUNDS 2011
Incoming resources				
Incoming resources from generating funds:				
Investment income	1,706	–	1,706	4,459
Incoming resources from charitable activities	211,884	43,000	254,884	199,223
Other incoming resources	29,556	–	29,556	–
Total incoming resources	243,146	43,000	286,146	203,682
Resources expended				
Charitable activities	158,988	54,545	213,533	272,461
Governance costs	4,583	–	4,583	8,745
	163,571	54,545	218,116	281,206
NET INCOMING/(OUTGOING) RESOURCES FOR THE YEAR BEFORE TRANSFERS	79,575	(11,545)	68,030	(77,524)
Gross Transfers Between Funds	9,991	(9,991)	–	–
Net movements in funds	89,566	(21,536)	68,030	(77,524)
RECONCILIATION OF FUNDS				
Total funds brought forward	145,812	23,261	169,073	246,597
TOTAL FUNDS CARRIED FORWARD	235,378	1,725	237,103	169,073

The Statement of Financial Activities includes all gains and losses in the year and therefore a statement of total recognised gains and losses has not been prepared.

All of the above amounts relate to continuing activities.

Balance sheet

31 March 2012



	2012	2011
Incoming resources		
Fixed assets		
Tangible assets	1,725	23,261
Current assets		
Debtors	2,111	9,330
Cash at bank and in hand	243,304	251,091
	245,415	260,421
Creditors: Amounts falling due within one year	(10,037)	(114,609)
Net current assets	235,378	145,812
Total assets less current liabilities	237,103	169,073
Creditors: Amounts falling due after more than one year	–	–
Net assets	237,103	169,073
Funds		
Restricted income funds	235,378	23,261
Unrestricted income funds	1,725	145,812
TOTAL FUNDS	237,103	169,073

For the year ended 31 March 2012 the company was entitled to exemption from audit under section 477 of the Companies Act 2006 relating to small companies.

The members have not required the company to obtain an audit of its accounts for the year in question in accordance with section 476 of the Companies Act 2006.

The trustees acknowledge their responsibilities for complying with the requirements of the Act with respect to accounting records and the preparation of accounts.

These financial statements have been prepared in accordance with the special provisions for small companies under Part 15 of the Companies Act 2006.

These financial statements were approved by the members of the committee on the 10 October 2012 and are signed on their behalf by:

R J Bottomley OBE
Trustee

Case Studies



Property expert helps Citizens Advice Bureau save thousands

Newcastle Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) offers support to residents of the city across a wide range of areas including debt, housing, benefit entitlements, consumer issues and employment. SkillsBridge was able to provide a volunteer from the local office of commercial property consultant GVA, to offer specific and valuable support to Newcastle CAB for a vital property development project.

The headquarters of Newcastle CAB are in a grade one listed building on Nelson Street, and various restrictions make it challenging to improve the premises so that they are completely fit for purpose in the 21st Century. The costs of developing a viable plan for the building using an external agency were prohibitive and CAB did not have the expertise in house.

Thanks to SkillsBridge, Newcastle CAB chief executive Shona Alexander was able to secure the help of GVA, one of the UK's leading commercial property consultants. Through its Newcastle office, GVA, which is regularly consulted on multi-million pound projects, has been a supporter of SkillsBridge since August 2011 when the organisation identified property asset management as a significant knowledge and skills gap in the voluntary and community sector. GVA has offered four volunteers to date, including associate director Neil Mandle.

SkillsBridge arranged for Shona and Neil to meet and discuss the issues faced by Newcastle CAB. They worked together to create a new plan

for the building, designed to employ the space available better, brighten up the surroundings and make the office more accessible and user friendly for both staff and CAB's drop-in visitors.

Neil provided Newcastle CAB with a comprehensive and fully costed plan for the building. His contribution has proved to be extremely valuable to Shona and her team and will have saved CAB thousands of pounds.

Shona Alexander, chief executive of Newcastle CAB, comments:

"As a busy city-centre advice service with thousands of visitors every year, our premises are in an ideal location. However as it is grade one listed there are restrictions on how we use the building."

"We wanted to see if we could improve access to the public, especially our cramped waiting room, in keeping with its heritage. SkillsBridge provided us with Neil Mandle at GVA, who has particular expertise in re-designing heritage buildings. He rose to our challenge straight away, and provided us with a very clear proposal on how to improve things. The SkillsBridge initiative was ideal for us. We would never have been able to finance this on our own or commission an architect to do it for us."

Neil Mandle, an associate in the building division at GVA, Newcastle said: "It has been a rewarding and enjoyable experience to work with SkillsBridge and Newcastle CAB. Both organisations provide such an important service and I am just pleased to have had the opportunity to assist them on this project."

Mike Cuthbertson, regional senior director at GVA, Newcastle who heads up GVA's input into SkillsBridge added: "As a business that places corporate social responsibility high on the agenda, we wanted to find a way of putting something back into our local community. SkillsBridge has given us the platform to provide pro bono property advice to local community groups and charities, which has already benefited a number of not for profit organisations in the area. This has been a very worthwhile initiative for us."

Andrew White, chief executive of SkillsBridge, comments: "This is exactly the kind of project that epitomises how SkillsBridge can make a vital and valuable difference to the voluntary and community sector. GVA has been a great supporter of ours and has provided volunteers who bring with them really specialist expertise. It was extremely rewarding to be able to offer Neil's support when Newcastle CAB was facing a specific and very challenging issue. I'm delighted that the outcome has been so positive and I hope that it inspires more companies to come forward and get involved in the work."

Neil Mandle has already been a valuable volunteer on a number of other SkillsBridge projects, including advising Streetwise Newcastle on the most efficient use of space for their premises and delivering support through a workshop to groups in County Durham.

On course for success



From left to right are:
Susan Coulson – Director of People Management & Development
Dr Charlotte Carpenter – Director of Strategy and Communication
Mark Henderson – Chief Executive
David Ripley – Head of Strategy and Research
Mark Whitehead – Head of Treasury

Home win for refugee service

The North of England Refugee Service (NERS) is an independent charity set up to meet the needs and promote the interests of asylum seekers and refugees who have arrived or have settled in the North of England. Like many charities NERS have recently faced a range of challenges brought about by the knock-on effect and impact of public sector funding cuts. The Board and senior management had a number of ideas about how they might diversify their income streams to become more sustainable but felt they lacked the key skills to evaluate and develop their plans.

Home Group is one of Britain's largest social housing providers and a leading supporter of SkillsBridge. They were originally approached to offer support focussed on business remodelling to address what NERS foresaw would be a period of critical change within the organisation brought about by a drastic loss of funding. Initial involvement from Dr. Charlotte Carpenter, Home Group's Director of Strategy and Communication, focused on high level planning for the business.

However, as the project developed it was realised that the priority lay with the management of change and development of team roles within the existing organisation. This was an area where Charlotte's support could really add value. The focus of the project quickly evolved into creating a performance management plan for the Refugee Service enabling NERS to have the correct resources, templates and knowledge to create an appraisal and training system within the organisation to manage employees' performance.

Through Charlotte's work and the additional support from colleagues from Home Group, NERS management team is being equipped with the knowledge to assess employees' performance to deliver key tasks, implement supervision and support meetings. The team

are being supported to deliver performance feedback and actively engage with the staff appraisal framework.

As a result of the assistance received from Home Group, NERS is on course to be able to effectively manage, observe and measure how well each member of staff is performing in their role. Home Group's intervention has enabled them to identify areas of staff development and gain a greater understanding of staff roles and performance expectations.

As well as improving internal communications, NERS have been able to implement a staff performance culture, with policies and procedures in place to support at every stage.

Daoud Zaaroura, CEO of NERS commented: "Charlotte gave us very good advice and helped to build more confidence within our team members in their way of working. She has enabled people within the team to think more challengingly. We have been delighted at her involvement with NERS and the impact this has had on the organisation."

One of the core aims of SkillsBridge support is that the learning goes both ways. The mentoring and planning needed on the part of the SkillsBridge Advisor can have a positive impact on their learning. Charlotte herself said:

"This project really underlined for me the benefits of skills sharing between large and small organisations within the charitable sector and the importance of strong management and communication processes whatever an organisation's size. I really enjoyed the process of supporting a small voluntary sector organisation through SkillsBridge."

Home Group continues to support SkillsBridge in working with a range of voluntary and community organisations across the North East, bringing vital advice and expertise at a time when support from other sources is in short supply.

One of the features of the work of SkillsBridge in 2012 has been the delivery of a number of highly effective workshops. In some ways it was a risk for the organisation to move into workshop delivery. Our initial research for the project had shown that there already exists a number of free or highly subsidised training events for the voluntary and community sector and that traditionally these have not been well attended.

We knew that in order to deliver a successful programme of SkillsBridge workshops, they would have to meet some demanding criteria. Firstly and most importantly, to get people to commit half a day or a day out of their busy lives, the subject matter and content would need to be relevant and focused on specific areas of need. Secondly the workshops would have to be delivered by highly skilled professionals with expertise and experience.

Thanks to the support of our SkillsBridge Advisors we were confident that the delivery of each workshop would be at the highest level. To make sure we got the content right we took time to speak to a number of organisations and ask them exactly what they needed and where they would like us to focus our attention.

Our three main workshops which looked at marketing, asset transfer and business planning were all well attended and delivered with the support of half a dozen of our most highly skilled advisors. With a value to the sector of around £5,000 the savings in having this support brokered by SkillsBridge is a huge boost to organisations in these challenging times.

Critically, when we looked at the feedback from each event 100% of delegates felt the workshop met or exceeded their expectations and 100% felt it was relevant to them and their organisation. It's always a massive help to have an expert on hand of whom you can ask your most burning and challenging questions, and who have the answers at their fingertips. That sort of expertise is not easy to come by but it does exist within the private sector in a number of companies across the region.

Where these companies have donated their valuable time and skills to support SkillsBridge we have the opportunity to access and unlock their knowledge for the benefit of the voluntary and community sector. In giving their time in this way, the experts who support SkillsBridge not only know how much their advice means, they get the chance to develop their presentation skills and have their knowledge tested in action.

A further programme of workshops is planned for 2013 and the details of these can be found on our website at www.skills-bridge.org