

The background of the slide features a large, light blue watermark of the University of Aberdeen crest. The crest is a shield divided into four quadrants. The top-left quadrant shows a castle tower, the top-right shows a stag's head with a cross between its antlers, the bottom-left shows a three-masted sailing ship on waves, and the bottom-right shows an eagle with wings spread. Above the shield is a crown with four floral motifs. Below the shield is a banner with the motto 'A NE FOR A'.

Agenda Item 7

Payments at Advice and Support Hubs

Falkirk Council

Title: Payments at Advice and Support Hubs
Meeting: Falkirk Council
Date: 4 December 2019
Submitted By: Director of Corporate and Housing Services

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1. To provide Council with the cost of taking payments at the Advice and Support Hubs (Hubs) throughout lunch period.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1. **It is recommended that Council-**

- (1) **Consider whether they wish to extend payment hours at Advice and Support Hubs to include the period 12:30pm to 1:30pm, at a cost of £44,334 per annum.**

3. Background

- 3.1. On 25th September Council agreed the following motion
Council recognises and values the progress made in delivering an accessible online resource for paying bills etc.

Council asks that further work be done to enable those on low incomes to pay their bills in whatever way they find easiest.

Council will ensure that all 3 hubs are open at lunchtime and that members of the public are able to pay their bills at a time convenient to them and in particular during lunchtime.

Council asks that the Director of Corporate and Housing Services report back to the next meeting to confirm that this has been done and that if there are any budgetary implications to advise what those are.

- 3.2. At present face to face payments are taken in Hubs between 9am and 12:30pm and from 1:30pm to 4:30pm Monday to Friday.
- 3.3. Advice and Support Hubs do not have any dedicated cashiers and the staff who offer frontline advice, support, and referrals take payments as part of a wider remit. Time spent attending to cash payments could be spent providing advice and support to our customers.
- 3.4. In addition payments are accepted at over 130 Paypoint outlets and Post Offices across the Falkirk Council area. The opening hours for some of these can be as early as 6am and as late as 11pm every day of the week.

- 3.5. To understand the current payment arrangements it is useful to look at some of the key factors in the evolution of how customers pay their bills.
- Since 1996 customers have been able pay their rent and council tax in council offices, post offices and by Direct Debit
 - In 1999 we added the option to pay by telephone
 - In 2006 we added option to pay online
 - Since 2006 we have increased Direct Debit options and now allow payment on any day of week, fortnight, four week period, and month.
 - In 2015 we added Paypoint as an option, with over 100 outlets locally, to ensure customers moving on to Universal Credit, and therefore paying rent for first time, could easily make payments
- 3.6. We did not initially promote Paypoint with customers as each transaction at these outlets costs the Council a fixed fee of c. 45p. This would have been on top of the cost of the existing local office infrastructure.
- 3.7. When all 8 local offices were open, and demand was at its peak, a number of local offices did not take payments between 12:30pm and 1:30pm.
- 3.8. The East Hub has had these cash collection hours in place since it opened in December 2016 and West Hub mirrored this when it opened in November 2018. The modest reduction in when payments are taken has not caused difficulties in these locations and has ensured that more customers with more acute needs can be dealt with more quickly.
- 3.9. The One Stop Shop, at Callendar Square was the only office that did not have a lunch-time closure for payments but to ensure consistency with the other two Hubs this was implemented when it opened as a Hub in May 2019.
- 3.10. The major difference between Central Hub and the other two Hubs is that the Central Hub did not close for any period during its minor refurbishment. This meant that customers were not given the natural opportunity to consider alternative ways to pay their bills and for most that status quo initially persisted.

4. Considerations

- 4.1. Advice and Support Hubs have now been operational for almost 3 years and, other than the Central Hub being an interim arrangement, they are well established and well known by our customers.
- 4.2. There is a trend in how our customers pay for their services. In 2007/08 over 23% of payments made for council tax were made at local office or post office. This reduced to 14% in 2013/14 and in 2019/20, including Paypoint, it is down to under 10%. For rent payments 84% of payments were made at local office or post office in 2013/14 and this has reduced to 42% in 2019/20.
- 4.3. Fewer and fewer customers want to pay in person and of those who do a larger proportion are choosing to pay at Paypoint/Post Office. This is

reflective of societal changes, improved alternatives, and our reduction in offices.

- 4.4. Based on work we have undertaken, most customers who pay in person, c.95%, could benefit from reduced travel time, and potentially cost, by paying at Paypoint or Post Office.

5. Consultation

- 5.1 As part of the Payment Review two surveys have been carried out to establish how our customers currently make payments (and how they plan to) and the synergy between payments at Hubs and associated advice and support.
- 5.2 In August 2019 we identified that, on average we receive 92 payments per day at each hub. 1 customer per day, per Hub, was asked to make a payment after engaging with a Multi-Skilled Advisor. An average of 2 customers per day, per Hub, were referred for further support/advice after making a payment. The survey results suggest therefore that those customers who make payments undertake no further business at our Hubs.
- 5.3 A full survey of customers on how they currently pay, and plan to pay, monies due to Falkirk Council was carried out in January and February 2019 and it's results were consistent with the patterns of payments that we currently receive. The survey highlighted that not all customers were aware they could pay at Paypoint locations, as well as Post Offices.
- 5.4 We are now working with each customer to both make them aware of all payment options but also support them in making that transition, as appropriate.
- 5.5 The cost of extending payment hours at Hubs to be 9am to 4:30pm each day would amount to c. £4 per transaction. The cost of a payment at Paypoint/Post Office is c. 45p per transaction.

6. Implications

Financial

- 6.1 To provide face to face payments from 9:30am to 4pm, without any gaps, at all 3 Hubs would cost £44,334 per annum in addition to pre-existing costs.

Resources

- 6.2 A total of 1.62 FTEs would be required to ensure additional payment period could be supplied every day, without reducing other services to customers.

Legal

6.3 There are no legal issues.

Risk

6.4 No risks associated with this.

Equalities

6.5 There are no equalities issues.

Sustainability/Environmental Impact

6.6 There is no sustainability or environmental impacts

7. Conclusions

- 7.1. There is no evidence to suggest that payment desks in Hubs improve income collection and while a number of residents default to paying by this method this is primarily due to established routine, and lack of information on alternative locations where payments can be made, rather than genuine convenience.
- 7.2. We are working with each individual to ensure they are aware of all the payment options and help support them to implement the most suitable method for their circumstances.
- 7.3. This is designed to maximise the convenience for our customers on where they can make payments, thereby freeing up staff time at Hubs to provide support and advice to those customers who need it most.

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