

FC38. Fees & Charges - Concessions

Council considered a report by the Director of Corporate and Housing Services providing an update on the actions taken following the decision of Council on 27 February 2019 where it requested that a report be presented on the implementation of proposals for fully developed concessions for 2020/21.

The Corporate Charging and Concessions Policy's aims and principles, included ensuring there was a consistent approach to applying concessions. To ensure a degree of consistency the policy noted that for any new charges, free concessions would be available to all customers who were in receipt of means tested income related state benefits. For existing charges in place before the approval of the Policy, the eligibility and level of concessions offered were to be reviewed by Services. If there were reasons that free provision was not possible, that should be clearly justified as part of the Equality and Poverty Impact Assessment. Extending concessions for other services would be considered as part of the budget process for 2020/21, in particular those services provided by Falkirk Community Trust.

As part of the budget process for 2019/20 it was proposed not to change the eligibility for free provision for free school meals and breakfast clubs as they were assessed in line with national standards. In addition there was also universal free entitlement to school meals for all children in primary 1-3. To fully align with the Policy, consideration was also be given to extend free entitlement to those children whose families were in receipt of housing benefit, council tax reduction and pension credit. Based on current claimant data free school meal entitlement would be extended to c700 children across both primary and secondary schools. While for breakfast clubs there was a reduced rate of £0.75 per breakfast for those in receipt of housing benefit and council tax reduction. For music tuition alignment with the Policy would extend free provision to those in receipt of the means tested benefits noted above.

Other than the charges detailed above, the only other fees and charges managed by Children's Services were school and community lets. Ideally these charges and concessions would be aligned to those managed by Falkirk Community Trust. It was proposed that this would be reviewed alongside the Trust business planning arrangements for the 2020/21 budget.

The Trust undertook a general review of its charges each year. Their annual charges review process adhered to a set of 'key principles': -

- FCT 'charges' should not be seen by potential customers as a 'barrier to their participation'.
- Concessionary charges should ensure that those who can least afford to pay for our services are supported the most.
- FCT charges should be easily accessible and simple to understand.
- The timing of the introduction of any revised charge should consider the impact this will have on customers.
- Charges can be flexible with the ability to offer promotional discounts at appropriate times to actively promote new services or boost falling attendances.

- Charges will be levied which fully consider local competitors and neighbouring Trusts' and Local Authorities' charges.
- Charges will enable improved levels of income generation, where market rates and the ability of our customers to pay, allow.

The Health and Social Care Partnership was drafting a delivery plan. The delivery plan included a review of the charging practice and policy. This was scheduled to be complete, with a revised policy in place by April 2021. In the intervening period, a focus would be given to ensuring the infrastructure was in place to implement the revised charging policy.

For Corporate and Housing Services and Development Services the scope for extending concessions was minimal, primarily as they were business focused and not suitable for applying the Council's concessions policy. However there were a few charges, such as the small handyperson service, special uplift arrangements and blue badge applications, that still needed to be reviewed and it was proposed that these were addressed during the 2020/21 budget process.

Decision

Council:-

- (1) agreed to extend the entitlements for free school meals, breakfast clubs and music tuition as detailed in sections 4.2 – 4.4 of the report from April 2020;**
- (2) noted the proposals for extending concessions managed by Falkirk Community Trust will be considered as part of the Business Plan process for the 2020/21 budget;**
- (3) noted that proposals for extending concessions managed by the Integration Joint Board will need to be considered alongside the charging review, and**
- (4) noted that although the scope for increasing concessions for charges managed by other Council Services is minimal, this will reviewed further as part of the budget process.**