

PERTH AND KINROSS COUNCIL

13 MAY 2015

CHANNEL SHIFTING IN LOCAL TAXES

Report by Executive Director (Housing and Community Care)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this report is to provide an update on the above project.

This report highlights the potential benefits for both the Council and our customers and demonstrates how the project meets the requirements of the Council's Channel Shifting Agenda and aligns with previously approved developments.

Also included in this report is an update in relation to the success of other areas of Channel Shifting initiatives which have taken place within the Revenues and Benefits Service.

1. BACKGROUND/MAIN ISSUES

- 1.1 The Local Taxes Team is now fully engaged with the Channel Shifting Agenda and plan to emulate the excellent results achieved in other areas of the Revenues and Benefits Service. The implementation of new software helps maximise the benefits of channel shifting services to the web for both Council Tax and Non Domestic Rates, by automating back office transaction processing and enabling those customers who can self-serve to do so. There will be a reduction in the amount of manual checking and processing performed by Local Taxes staff as a lot of the work will be automated by the new software. This aims to deliver efficiencies, improved service to the public and cost savings to the Council.
- 1.2 We have already implemented 'digital by default' and channel shift in the Revenues and Benefits area with eClaims for Housing Benefit, Council Tax Reduction and the Scottish Welfare Fund. **Appendix A** provides some statistics and information which highlights the success story in relation to Benefits and the Scottish Welfare Fund.
- 1.3 On 4 March 2015, a presentation was given to the Modernising Governance Member Officer Working Group; this highlighted progress on each of the channel shift initiatives, including an overview of the latest Local Taxes project at that time.

2. BENEFITS OF THE ENHANCEMENT TO LOCAL TAXES SOFTWARE

- 2.1 This project was enabled through the implementation of new software. This new software (known as Webcapture) is an enhancement to our existing Local Taxes system and enables the following benefits to be achieved:

- (i) Frees up Local Taxes resources, enabling them to deal with more complex cases and debt recovery, which has been an increased challenge.
 - (ii) Removes the need for customers to phone either the Customer Services Centre or Local Taxes Team for more straight forward transactions, thus leading to efficiencies in both teams.
 - (iii) Delivers benefits to our customers by giving them 24/7 access to update their details rather than having to phone or visit during office opening hours or having to write or email. This enhancement to our existing software now allows customers to access a range of on-line services, these are:
 - Set up a Direct Debit
 - Report a move out of the Perth and Kinross Council area
 - Report a move into the Perth and Kinross Council area
 - Report a move within the Perth and Kinross Council area
 - Claim a Single Occupancy Discount
 - (iv) Enables a balance of high volume, low complexity cases to be carried out automatically whilst ensuring that more complex cases and those which require a degree of evidence gathering and decision making are dealt with by experienced staff.
 - (v) Results in reduced scanning and indexing of documents, as this is done automatically by the software, thus releasing resources to deal with other priorities.
 - (vi) Transforms the workplace and helps to continue the digital journey.
- 2.2 The process is supported and managed by a defined set of complex and creative validation rules to ensure accuracy and gain customer confidence in the service; any uncertainty over validity of a transaction will immediately be referred to experienced Local Taxes staff for further consideration.

3. PROGRESS TO DATE

- 3.1 The project was successfully implemented and delivered within budget and ahead of the target delivery date. The “go-live” date was initially April 2015, however, every endeavour was made to ensure the service was available for our customers at the time Council Tax annual bills were delivered; customers were therefore able to utilise this from 9 March 2015. Some customers actually started to use the system prior to receipt of their bill.
- 3.2 It was important that the website fully supported the new features and therefore we reviewed, redesigned and improved the Council Tax section within the Perth and Kinross Council website, as the new software is available to customers from here. The new style allows the addition of important notices and the layout is also closer to that used by the Benefits and Welfare Rights teams, thus creating a more cohesive approach to the information and services provided.

- 3.3 Approximately 70,500 Council Tax payers received an enclosure advertising the on-line services provided by the Revenues and Benefits Service with their Council Tax bills. All future bills, payment reminder notices and other documentation will also raise awareness of the new on-line services.
- 3.4 The Local Taxes team e-mail automatic response message has been enhanced and a telephone message will also be added to raise customer awareness and encourage channel shift.
- 3.5 Training for relevant groups of staff was successfully undertaken. Further training for other groups will be carried out as required.
- 3.6 Work continues to be carried out in relation to improving elements of the product (e.g. improved management statistics and enhancement of reporting tools).
- 3.7 The Local Taxes team consider this project to be an excellent example of joined-up working and are appreciative of the assistance by colleagues in both Welfare Rights and Information and Communications Technology teams.
- 3.8 **Appendix B** provides the initial take-up statistics of the new Council Tax on-line Services.

4. NEXT STEPS

- 4.1 In respect of Council Tax, there is a significant volume of incoming workload (e.g. telephone calls, processing payments, setting up Direct Debits, change of circumstances/address, processing reductions/discounts, etc) dealt with on an on-going basis by both the Local Taxes Team and the Customer Service Centre. The aim is to redirect as many as possible of these customer interactions via the new on-line service. To assist with this, wider communication strategies will be considered once the initial customer take-up and staff response have been analysed.
- 4.2 The software providers have advised that the Council Tax Service will be enhanced later this year to facilitate use by landlords and management agents and we will progress with this as soon as it is available to do so.
- 4.3 We are committed to delivering a similar service to Non-Domestic Rates customers. It is anticipated that the enhanced version of this product will be available during the current financial year and work will commence to implement this as soon as it is available.
- 4.4 Every endeavour will continue to be made to ensure that the efficiencies gained will be used to provide a better service to our customers and the Council.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 5.1 This development should help ease the demand pressures being experienced by both the Local Taxes Team and the Customer Service Centre; and introduces new technology which enables further customer choice through self-service, allowing us to concentrate on delivering a service that is focussed on those who need it most. This new way of working will help support both the Government's and the Council's digital/channel shifting agenda.
- 5.2 The Revenues and Benefits Service is committed to transforming our service provision, improving our options to customers, making best use of resources and improving performance in all areas.
- 5.3 It is recommended that the Council note the progress made towards channel shifting in the Revenues and Benefits Service as detailed in this paper and approves the future potential expansion of this service as outlined at 4.2 and 4.3 above.

Author(s)

Name	Designation	Contact Details
Lynn Brady	Revenues, Benefits and Welfare Rights Service Manager	lbrady@pkc.gov.uk Tel. 01738 475678

Approved

Name	Designation	Date
John Walker	Executive Director (Housing and Community Care)	1 May 2015

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1. IMPLICATIONS, ASSESSMENTS, CONSULTATION AND COMMUNICATION

Strategic Implications	Yes / None
Community Plan / Single Outcome Agreement	Yes
Corporate Plan	Yes
Resource Implications	
Financial	Yes
Workforce	Yes
Asset Management (land, property, IST)	Yes
Assessments	
Equality Impact Assessment	None
Strategic Environmental Assessment	None
Sustainability (community, economic, environmental)	None
Legal and Governance	Yes
Risk	Yes
Consultation	
Internal	Yes
External	Yes
Communication	
Communications Plan	Yes

1. Strategic Implications

Community Plan / Single Outcome Agreement

- 1.1 The purchase of the Webcapture software is a “spend to save” project that meets Perth & Kinross Council’s channel shifting agenda. It also supports the Government’s digital agenda. Accordingly the proposals are positive and support the delivery of the Perth & Kinross Community Plan / Single Outcome Agreement and Corporate Plan.

2. Resource Implications

Financial

- 2.1 The costs are based on a contract term of 5 years. The first year costs will include implementation and consultancy fees which are £68,000, thereafter costs will be £45,000 per annum. For the financial years 2014 to 2018, Local Taxes will receive an extra £50,000 per annum from Scottish Water. The expectation is that this additional money will be used to improve collection and release resources to enable more pro-active debt recovery work. The purchase of the Webcapture software will release staff resources to allow more time to be spent on recovery initiatives. From year 2019 onwards, if the Scottish Water funding ceases, the Local Taxes Team will meet the annual recurring costs from within its existing budgets.

Workforce

- 2.2 There is no direct impact on the Council's workforce as a result of these proposals from 2014 to 2018. However, from 2019 effective plans will be in place to reduce the workforce in order to pay for the software. Staff reductions are planned through natural wastage. The software will allow customers to input their own changes on-line in respect of Council Tax and Non Domestic Rates. This will reduce the level of telephone calls and face to face contact for both Local Taxes and Customer Service Centre teams. This will then enable Local Taxes staff to concentrate on more complex cases and debt recovery, which has been difficult to improve or maintain due to Welfare Reform.

Asset Management (land, property, IT)

- 2.3 The software and IT changes required to operate this new Webcapture software are being managed by Local Taxes staff and IT.

3. Assessments

- 3.1 There is no equality, environmental or sustainability impact from the development. A Privacy Impact Assessment Form has been completed and passed to Information Security Officer.

Legal and Governance

- 3.2 There are no legal and governance matters to refer to the Head of Legal, however, the Information Security Manager and colleagues in IT have been consulted in relation to the project.

Risk

- 3.3 There is a minimal risk to the Council of reputational damage arising from customer complaints and dissatisfaction from the use of the software.

4. Consultation

Internal

- 4.1 There has been internal communication with the Data Security Officer, internal audit and I.T
- 4.2 The Welfare Reform Steering Group, which has membership including NHS Tayside, CAB, PKAVS, Registered Social Landlords, Scottish Business in the Community, DWP and each Council Service, have also been consulted and supported this development.

5. Communication

- 5.1 There have been regular updates to the Housing and Community Care Transformation Board.
- 5.2 A presentation was carried out on 4 March 2015 to the Modernising Governance Member Officer Working Group.

6. BACKGROUND PAPERS

No background papers have been used to create this report.

Take-Up of On-Line Services

Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction (e-claims):

- Between April 2014 and January 2015, we received 1613 electronic claims through the portal.
- This represents 64% the total new claims (2526) for the same period.
- Out of the remaining 913 cases, an estimated 780 of these were Local Authority Information Documents (LAIDs), which are passed from the Department of Works and Pensions; we have no control over these cases.
- In summary for e-claims:
 - Electronic: **64%**
 - LAIDs: **31%**
 - Paper Claims: **5%**

This positive result exceeded even our own high expectations.

Scottish Welfare Fund (on-line applications):

- Our Welfare Fund on-line application commenced 1 October 2013. We continue to deliver training sessions on how to complete the online application to partner agencies in order to increase up-take/promote this channel.
- During quarter two we received a total of 1,139 applications: 283 Community Care Grant and 856 Crisis Grants.
- 463 (41%) applications were completed on-line with no assistance from the Welfare Fund team.
- On average up-take for each channel is as follows:

Crisis Grants:

- Paper applications: **1%**
- Telephone/Face-to-Face applications: **95%**
- Electronic applications: **4%**

Community Care Grants:

- Paper applications: **34%**
- Telephone/Face-to-Face applications: **1%**
- Electronic applications: **65%**

The high level of customers being assisted in relation to Crisis Grants via face to face is encouraging. These customers are among the most vulnerable in our community and it is imperative that we are ensuring that they are being provided with a holistic service which is carried out at the earliest point of contact.

Take-Up of On-Line Services (Council Tax)

The following statistics represent the number of on-line transactions that were performed from the date of launch on 9 March 2015 to 30 April 2015;

- Direct Debits: **618**
- Moves: **144**
- Single Occupancy Discounts: **65**
- Total: **827**

