

REPORT TO: BEST VALUE SUB COMMITTEE - 26 JANUARY 2007
REPORT ON: FREE SCHOOL MEAL/SCHOOL CLOTHING GRANT PROCESS
REPORT BY: DEPUTE CHIEF EXECUTIVE (FINANCE)
REPORT NO: 77-2007

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

This report concludes the planned review of making use of revenues data to improve the free school meal and school clothing grant application process.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Sub Committee is recommended to:

- 2.1 Note the improvements made by joining up the application form as outlined in para 6.7.
- 2.2 Approve the proposed automatic provision of entitlement to free school meal and school clothing grant where the benefit data held by the Revenues Division verifies this.

3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no costs, however, the full implementation of the proposals will amount to almost £50,000 efficiency savings.

4. SUSTAINABILITY POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The outcome of this review makes a contribution to the anti-poverty strategy as it will supply and improve access to benefits and services that will benefit low income families. The action taken to date has resulted in a further 800 children being registered for free school meals.

5. EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IMPLICATIONS

None

6. REVIEW FINDINGS

6.1 Definition of Service

As a statutory requirement and in common with other authorities Dundee City Council supplies free school meals to pupils whose parents/carers are in receipt of certain key benefits. Currently Free School Meals can be applied for bi-annually, once in July and again in January. In addition, as part of the anti-poverty strategy, DCC award an annual Clothing Grant to qualifying parents/carers of pupils in June/July.

6.2 Review Methodology

The review was conducted by the Organisational Development Section of the Personnel Department who mapped and analysed the Free School Meals (FSM) and School Clothing Grant (SCG) processes.

The review involved consultation with the Education Department, Internal Audit, Finance Revenues, IT and Support Services (Customer Services).

6.3 **Stakeholders**

The critical stakeholders for Education Related Benefits – Free School Meals & School Clothing Grants are:

- Claimants
- Internal Departments – Education, Finance (Revenues) Department & Customer Services

6.4 **Performance Review**

The review was concerned with two critical elements of the process.

- **Free School Meal & School Clothing Grant Application Forms**
- **Application Validation**

The process of applying, validating and receiving the benefits involved resources from the Education Department, Finance Department, School Administration Departments, Tayside Contracts and Customer Services.

6.5 Applicants were required to claim independently for 'Free School Meals' (FSM) and for 'School Clothing Grant' (SCG) regardless of the fact that:

- 64% of SCG claimants automatically meet the requirements of the FSM criteria and conversely
- ALL (100%) of FSM claimants automatically meet the SCG criteria

6.6 This requirement to pick up two forms and claim independently created the following process statistics:

- Five hundred (500) applicants, representing 800 children eligible for a Free School Meal did not pick up the FSM application form
- Two thousand two hundred (2200) applicants, representing 3500 children, were required to fill out two application forms, one for a FSM and one for a SCG. A total of 6400 forms.
- The form processing method required Education operators to access the same pupil record twice in the Pupil Information System database equating to a total of 10700 record entries
- By not picking up a Free School Meal application form when entitled resulted in a failure of a key Scottish Executive Performance Indicator: The conversion of '*ENTITLED TO RECEIVE A FSM*' to '*REGISTERED FOR A FSM*', where Dundee City Council had a conversion rate of 82% which was below the national average of 92%.
- Applicants handed in their forms at Customer Services Tayside House where all documentary evidence was photocopied. This equated to 14,600 copies annually and required 100 staff hours of customer service operator time annually for the receipt and photocopying.

- Education dept received all applications and attached copied evidence. Applications were validated for eligibility and sorted into FSM and SCG groups. At this stage 24% of forms were rejected for various reasons.
- Education validation and FSM record updating equated to 101 staff hours.

6.7 **Improvements Identified and Implemented**

- Combine the Free School Meal & School Clothing Grant application forms.
- Remove the photocopying of all evidence
- Move the validation process to Customer Services Level 2

6.8 **Improved Process Statistics**

By merging the SCG form and the FSM form, into one generic application form for an education related benefit and moving the validation of the application process to Customer Services level 2, there are successes in the following areas:

- 800 additional children are registered for a Free School Meal
- The national performance indicator is fully achieved at 100% conversion rate and above the national average
- A reduction for the customer in the number of times information is supplied when applying for both the SCG and the FSM
- Reduced customer journeys having only one form to collect and complete
- A reduction in form handling for all departments from 6400 to 4200 forms
- A reduction in annual form printing from 9000 to 6000 with an annual print and delivery saving of £840
- A removal of the photocopying of 14000 pieces of evidence and the use of the paper and the photocopier
- A saving of 100 staff hours of customer service administration time in receiving and copying evidence
- An increase in value added service delivery staff hours of 101 hrs by validating live at Customer Services Level 2
- A reduction in the number of record updates by education officers from 10700 to 7200
- The removal of all validation processes by education officers (100 staff hours)

6.9 In summary, by transferring the validation process to Customer Services, Tayside House, acting as the primary point of contact we have:

- Resolved customer's request/enquiry at the first point of contact or point of delivery

- Reduced the customer journeys for customers whose application would normally have passed at Customer Services only to be rejected at a later date by Education validating and processing thereby requiring a customer revisit.
- Removed the non-value added photocopying
- Converted the time spent on administrative tasks into providing an added value business process.
- Removed the validation process, and associated staff hours, from the education department.

6.10 **Proposed Next Step**

The free school meal/clothing grant application is processed by the Customer Services Team using the citizen account. This obtained the citizen's permission (or not) to share data. A link is now possible to the applicants data held in the other relevant systems: council tax and housing benefit, school management system. Consequently, it is possible for the customer service system to verify from those systems if circumstances still confirm entitlement.

- 6.11 The review identified that almost 80% of recipients re-apply and continue to be entitled. It is therefore proposed to set up a system for people on the Council Tax and Housing Benefit system that have children in a Dundee school will automatically receive their free school meals and school clothing grant. Only people entitled for other reasons (e.g. family tax credit) will need to apply directly. This will save a further 6,000 application forms being processed each year.
- 6.12 Work is also being done to include the school clothing grant payment in the automatic cheque issuing system and this will save further staff time.

7. **CONSULTATIONS**

The Director of Education, Chief Executive, Depute Chief Executive (Support Services) have been consulted on this report.

8. **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- Free School Meals & School Clothing Grant Report v2.2
- Integrating Income Related benefits – Report of Investigation Area 1, investigating combining Free School Meals and School Clothing Grant Application Forms
- Integrating Income Related benefits – Report of Investigation Area 2, investigating level 2 photocopying and means of reducing

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