Council Tax

E-Billing Project
North Ayrshire Council

Contact for Enquiries

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North Ayrshire Council put together a cross-department team to deliver an e-billing project that has saved the Council money and satisfied customers who wish to manage their accounts online and reduce their environmental impact.

Background

At the end of 2014/2015, North Ayrshire Council started phase 1 of its e-billing project. At this time, a project team made up of staff from several departments—council tax, customer services and IT—was put together, with the aim of developing an effective strategy to get customers to channel shift to receive their council tax bills online.

The aim was to produce an annual bill online for 2015/16 for a sample of customers using the council's customer management system, Lagan. In the early stages, the council wanted to target a small number of people who had already signed up to the council's customer hub and were registered as advanced customers. This type of customer knew how to access their council tax online, and it was believed that they would be more inclined to go online and use online services.

Customers who use the hub provide an email address and this was used to contact the target group of direct debit payers. An email was sent out to around 305 customers to say that the council was looking to set up e-bills and offered an opt-out option. The response was very positive.

An e-bill was produced for around 300 customers at 2015/16 annual billing. The bill is a PDF template that a customer can view and print on Lagan.

Proof of concept was achieved and Phase 2 was started in 2015/16 to develop ad-hoc billing. This proved to more difficult with more variations, for example: where there is a couple, one person leaves, who would have access; joint and several liability; or where someone dies. IT was successful in producing e-bills for any method of payment, as phase 1 only targeted direct debit payments.

An email was sent out to all advanced customers, nearly 3500, with the option of opting-out. Only 213 people opted out. Around 3,500

e-bills were produced for the 2016/17 annual billing.

The main driver behind this initiative was to see a reduction in postage costs, a reduction in the use of paper from a paperless and environmentally friendly perspective and to improve the customer service experience providing more convenient options as well as preventing any disputes about the bill and making it printable.

Using the LGBF data, it can be seen that while North Ayrshire already has comparatively low council tax costs, other councils have seen a faster rate of reduction over the past five years and so the gap has diminished.

The cost per dwelling of collecting Council Tax
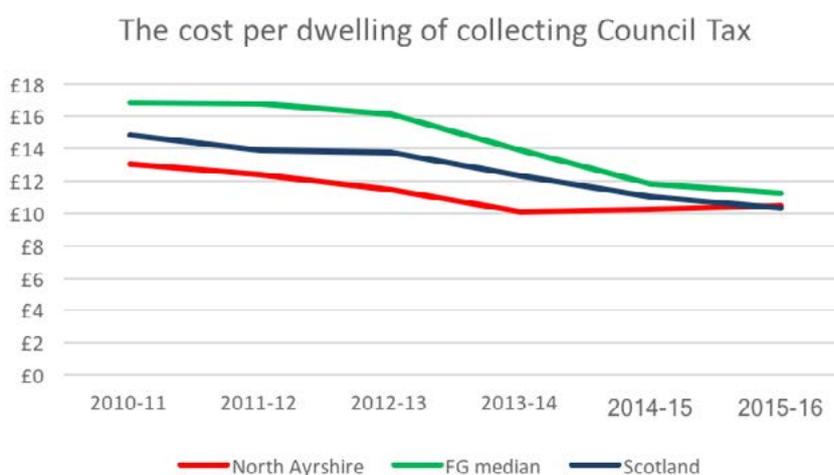
Key Activities

Developing an e-billing process proved to be the main challenge and biggest area of work.

In order to build in the option for an online bill, IT development of Lagan and coding Northgate to allowing data and information to flow between both systems was required.

The team addressed this by working with the IT department to develop a platform to achieve their aim. They used Lagan for the Hub account and meetings were held with Fife Council which was already providing e-billing using Lagan.

It was easier and more effective for customers to have an opt-out option rather than an opt-in.

The Council also uses Acorn. This programme gives a customer behavioural profile, which segments customers and provides insight into the needs and behaviour of a customer. This tool is used to formulate and shape the communication strategy across different groups.

Benefits and Impacts

The main drivers behind this initiative were to see: a reduction in postage costs; a reduction in the use of paper from a paperless and environmentally friendly perspective; and to improve the customer service experience by providing more convenient options as well as preventing any disputes about the bill and making it printable. The project is meeting the needs of those customers who wish to reduce their carbon footprint.

Customers can use the hub to learn about other online services and report changes online, request special uplifts and communicate in general with the council instead of making a call, and they can access their data on a 24/7 basis.

At the end of phase 2, 3000 – 3500 people have already signed up to e-billing. The council has set the following targets for the upcoming years:

- 15/16 - 5300
- 17/18 – 7500
- 18/19 - 10500

The council is happy with the initial take up, which is better than anticipated; the team were unsure at first how the initiative would be received but take up level has been seen across the board, regardless of method of payment.

While savings of 25p per bill of the 3500 customers, the council is aware that there is still savings to be made from replacement bills, external printing costs.

Learning

The project was well planned and the project team put the work required into the project to make it work; everyone was determined to succeed in making e-bills a reality.

What advice would you give to others dealing with a similar situation?

North Ayrshire Council would advise any other councils looking to undertake a similar e-billing project to meet with other Councils that provide e-bills first to see how the process works and how their implementation went. North Ayrshire met with Fife Council to help with their project. The Council also highlights the importance of getting the right people involved from the start, people who can make decisions and meet on a regular basis.

Further advice offered by North Ayrshire Council for other Councils considering embarking on a e-billing project are:

- Put together a project team and a database to display bills.
- Consider how to communicate, including how to capture.

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- Give sufficient time for proof of concept, it is a good idea to continue to send out paper bills and electronically for first sample so that someone does not receive their bill due to a technical error.

Additional Information

Details of the council's e-billing implementation plan are available on request.

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For further information about the Local Government Benchmarking Framework, please visit www.improvementservice.org.uk/benchmarking or email jacqueline.greenlees@improvementservice.org.uk