



Case Study: Online School Payments

It's part of the early morning rush that many parents could live without – that daily scramble for loose change for the kids' school lunches or the hunt for the cheque book to pay for school trips and other fees.

For many parents, the option to pay for school expenses online using a debit or credit card in the same way they pay for many other bills and purchases, would be the ideal solution to the stressful daily treasure hunt.

Fortunately for them, online school payment systems are growing in popularity, and they don't just offer increased convenience to parents; they can reduce the time spent and cost of cash handling and recording in schools too.

Easing the burden

The cost and administrative burden of cash handling in schools can be significant.

In Scotland, around 56 million school meals are served each year and the country's 2,544 state schools take in around £82 million in school meal payments (2012-13 figures). Added to that is almost £40 million in payments for other school expenses such as trips, tuition fees and uniforms. It means schools are carrying out hundreds of thousands of small transactions each year, many of which are handled manually.

And that is costly. One recent analysis by a Scottish local authority showed that for every pound collected in primary schools, up to 41p was swallowed up on handling costs; for secondary schools, it was up to 9p in every pound received.

By reducing the number of manual transactions, online payment

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Head of IT,
Aberdeenshire Council

systems offer the potential to save millions every year across Scotland. A business case developed in 2013 estimated that councils could save £750,000 each year if 20% of school payments were made online. Online payments also lessen the amount of cash held in schools, reducing security risk and lowering the number of cash collection visits required.

For the local authority, an online payment system provides a standardised approach across schools with better management reporting, reconciliation and accounting.

Aberdeenshire Council

When Aberdeenshire Council introduced an online payments system for school catering services across all its secondary schools, it did so using myaccount for authentication – the first council in Scotland to do so.

myaccount is the simple and secure sign-in service for online public services in Scotland. Managed and operated by the Improvement Service with Scottish Government funding, myaccount provides people living in Scotland with the ability to set up an online account, and use it to access a growing range of online services made available by eligible public bodies.

Using a payments system developed by Midlothian-based CRB Solutions and integrated with myaccount, parents and guardians of school-age children now have the option to pay online for lunches. Paying for school trips, and other school expenses will be possible as part of a future phase.

Nicola Graham, Aberdeenshire Council’s Head of IT says, “This exciting development enables us to improve the service we offer to local parents of children attending Aberdeenshire’s schools, helping them pay online using their own laptop, tablet or smartphone in an easy and secure way.

“Across Aberdeenshire, internet access and usage is increasing. With more people using mobile telephones than landlines, and with a growing upturn in smartphone sales, there is a clear and growing demand for more public services to be made available on the move - anywhere and at any time.

“Aberdeenshire Council is firmly committed towards addressing this demand, planning to expand the range of online services throughout 2016 and beyond.”

Parents or guardians wishing to use the online school payments system simply register or sign-in through an online portal, add in details supplied by the Council to establish the link to their child or

children, and then add funds electronically via their debit or credit card.

The money automatically goes to a central bank account, avoiding cash and cheques having to be sent to the school. Parents can also check balances and transactions online. The service is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

It was launched in all of Aberdeenshire's seventeen academies in December 2015 and rolled out across the entire school estate by June 2016.

Aberdeenshire parents have immediately embraced the system, with over 11,000 signing up to the online service since its launch. Statistics show a significant increase in myaccount activity related to online school payments especially on Sunday evenings from 6 pm onwards and Monday mornings between 7am and 9am, when parents are using the convenience of online payments to top up their child's account for the coming school week. The 'anytime, anywhere' nature of the service is further evident from the fact that over 57% of transactions are being carried out on mobile devices (smartphones and tablets).

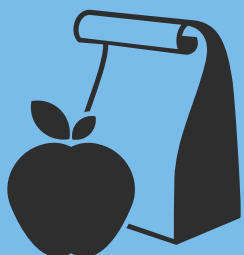
Feedback from Aberdeenshire parents using the online school payments system is encouraging. In a recent survey, 87% rated the usability of the system as positive (excellent, good and above average), 84% gave a positive rating to the service's roll-out and to the information provided. 87% rated the registration and set-up process of myaccount in the same way.

"I really like this system," said one parent. "It is much easier to keep track of what you owe and does away with the hassle of tickets."

Another commented: "Excellent idea – much easier to manage and great to be able to see what my children have been eating."

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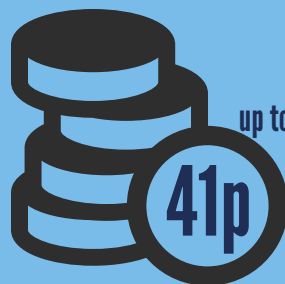
Number Crunching...



56,000,000
school meals served
each year in Scotland

£120m

is collected by state
schools each year



admin cost for every
£1 received in primary
schools (manual
handling)

cost of processing cash
and cheques compared
to online transactions



“This is much better than trying to remember lunch tickets every day and I can pay for a whole month’s worth when I have been paid,” said another.

The online payments system also provides benefits to the school, giving it a consistent electronic method of collection and management for payments coming into the school. It provides a much better audit trail and provides potential savings in terms of cash collecting, banking and administration.

Almost half the teachers surveyed (47.5%) reported that the new process reduced meal ordering times in the classroom from being able to open up the meal ordering website for their own class before children arrive. With this, children then just tap their name on the smartboard, select their meal options and their order is then sent to the school kitchen. Eighty-one percent of teachers have rated the new payments system positively.

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**Martin Brown,
Head of Business
Development,
Improvement Service**

While Aberdeenshire Council has still to fully quantify the benefits as the rollout is still in progress, it is expecting to see significant recurring savings through a reduction in the number of meal tickets issued, less on-site cash handling, fewer secure pick-ups, and process improvement. The Council also expects to have made savings around procurement by taking advantage of a National Framework Agreement brokered by Scotland Excel and the Improvement Service. Through this, there are three online school payments suppliers, which allow councils to buy services without going through a separate procurement process on their own.

As Martin Brown, Head of Business Development for myaccount, says: “Online school payments are a proven way of taking hard costs out of the system while bringing added convenience to parents trying to juggle busy lives. In a period of growing financial constraints on Scotland’s local authorities, they deliver bottom line benefits while freeing up valuable teacher and school support staff time to focus on what adds value.”

Myaccount... simple and secure

With the uptake of online school payments, more and more people across Scotland are benefitting from the convenience that myaccount offers.

Over two million people already use myaccount to access public services; 120,000 of those are online accounts. With nine organisations already using myaccount across 11 services, and at least nine more scheduled to introduce it within 6-12 months, that number is set to grow.

Recently, North Lanarkshire and West Lothian Councils have both adopted myaccount for their own online school payment systems.

Established users include City of Edinburgh Council, which uses myaccount to allow its citizens to access its online services securely, and NHS Scotland, which uses it to authenticate patients using 'My Diabetes My Way', its diabetes patient information portal.

Myaccount has also been integrated with the National Entitlement Card and is used for two national concessionary travel schemes run by Transport Scotland: one providing free bus travel for people over 60 and those with disabilities, and the Young Person's Scheme, which offers discounted bus and rail travel to 16-18 year olds and full-time volunteers aged 19-25.

All figures date from June 2016

Find out more...

For more information about myaccount and online school payments, contact Martin Brown at the Improvement Service at: martin.brown@improvementservice.org.uk