

'THAT'LL DO NICELY'

Parents embrace school online payment system

By David Friel

It is a scene played out in households across Scotland every morning. The clock is ticking towards the start of the school day, children wait patiently, and parents scramble around trying to find loose change needed to make up the required lunch money.

If only life was simpler. If only parents had the option of paying for school lunches and school trips in the same way that they shop online for clothes and books. If only a few clicks of a button could take away any hassle.

Well, life has become simpler in one Scottish school following the launch of an innovative new online payments system, which has allowed parents to consign the stressful daily treasure hunt to the past.

There are many positive examples of cashless catering systems in schools across the country but the new school online payments system recently introduced in Dumfries High School by Dumfries & Galloway Council is an exciting development in this area.

Using a simple system that links pupils' Young Scot National Entitlement Card (NEC) to a secure online account, provided by e-payments specialists, sQuid, parents now have the option to pay online for lunches, school trips, and other school expenses.

All parents have to do is register on the online portal, add the details from their child's Young Scot card and then transfer funds via their debit or credit card. The money automatically goes to the school's bank account.

The school online payment system was developed as part of the Improvement Service's nationwide Scottish Government-sponsored Customer First Channel Shift programme and provides various benefits for parents, pupils, schools and councils.

Parents are offered a convenient, modern

payment option; pupils do not need to carry cash to school; concerns over cash safety and bullying are potentially reduced; there are potential cost savings and reduced administration time for school, and an online record of payments for school trips is maintained.

Dumfries High is a bustling, thriving school close to the town centre. With a roll of almost 1000, lunchtime is busy. Like all schools, there are lunch options outside the school gates but the canteen is never quiet as hundreds of pupils filter in.

Tom Armstrong, 12, Ciaran Nicol, 12, and

makes my life so much easier," said one parent.

On a day-to-day basis, the school online payments system will be used by parents for lunches, but significant value lies in other areas. Parents traditionally pay for school trips by sending cheques to the school. This new system will enable them to make regular payments via their online account. With several exciting foreign trips lined up in the coming months, parents will make regular use of this facility.

One senior member of staff declared an ambition that the new payments system will soon become viewed as the 'Dumfries High School online shop' and that is the ultimate goal. From lunches to school prom tickets, from home economics expenses to trips in Scotland and abroad, parents will have the convenient option of paying online.

Chris Barbour, Head Teacher at Dumfries High School, has backed the development of this new system from the start. He said: "The school online payments system will save teaching staff and administrative staff a huge amount of time. It's a modern and innovative system and has huge potential nationwide. I think every school should follow Dumfries High School's example.

"There are various benefits. For example, in terms of a trip going to London, parents can use the online payments system instead of sending in cheques for every scheduled payment. That saves youngsters bringing money into school. It's all set up for the parents, it's simple to use and saves everybody a huge amount of time."

Sally Buchanan, Project Manager, Customer First, at the Improvement Service, explained the background to the project, which began in late November: "In the internet age, it is vital that public sector services can be accessed in a modern,



Reo Kirk, 13, are all S1 pupils and are already enjoying the benefits of the online system. They attended the official launch in mid-March and after smiling for the cameras, tucked into a healthy pasta lunch.

The process was simple. They picked their food of choice, moved on to the till and swiped their pre-loaded Young Scot NEC to make the payment. Queuing was kept to a minimum, giving the youngsters more time to spend with their friends.

Parents at Dumfries High have immediately embraced the system. Within the first few days, around 20 per cent of pupils who regularly eat school meals were signed up to the online system. "It



convenient way. This new online system utilises the latest technology and will help meet parents' expectations, and in turn enhance the reputation of the school and council."

Brenda Robb, NEC Programme Manager, added: "The project again highlights the versatility and potential of the NEC, which continues to extend its reach across the wider public sector, in education, health, local government and transport."

From a hardware/software perspective, the system is centred entirely at the point of sale, which means payment is either made online through the Young Scot card or by cash. The anonymity of free school meals is preserved by use of the card.

sQuidcard Ltd (sQuid) is the provider of the eMoney online payment system and manages this end to end. At the point of sale there is an EPOS system that comprises an Octepos 15" Touch Screen Megapos Lite and Octepos Touch Software. The sQuid application software is integrated into the EPOS unit and the use of the online payment system is transacted by the presentation of the Young Scot to a card reader. Parents can also check balances and transactions online.

The online payment system for school trips and other payments to the school is the sQuid operated Offer Management System (OMS). This enables the school to offer trips and other items requiring payment by means of an online portal.

This then avoids cash and cheques having to be sent to the school, ensures the money reaches the school and gives the school an electronic method of

collection and management for payments coming into the school. Overall, it provides a much better audit trail and provides savings in terms of cash collecting, banking and administration.

The new school online payments system in Dumfries and Galloway Council is the latest example of the cross-sector work of the Customer First Channel Shift Programme, which is designed to take demand and cost out of systems to protect frontline services.

As well as meeting customers' expectations in the internet age, Customer First aims to make dealings with government as easy as internet banking or shopping. With internet access and usage increasing across the country, more people using mobile telephones than landlines, and a massive upturn in the sale of smartphones, there is now a clear demand for public services to be available on the move – anywhere, at anytime.

The Channel Shift Programme is focusing its activity on supporting councils to meet these **f r e s h**

challenges and save money by achieving a substantial shift in the volume of transactions being handled through cheaper communications channels. As the parents, pupils and teachers at Dumfries High School will testify, progress is already being made.



David Friel works for the Improvement Service. For more information on the new Dumfries High School online payments system and Customer First Channel Shift Programme, contact: david.friel@improvementservice.org.uk



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