



2007

Direct Debit Awards

Staffordshire Moorlands District Council celebrates the double



Council wins two Direct Debit awards from Bacs

The revenue collection team at Staffordshire Moorlands District Council is celebrating a double achievement after winning two prestigious Local Authority Awards from Bacs Payment Schemes Limited (Bacs) – the not-for-profit industry body behind Direct Debit.

Presented at the annual Institute of Revenues Rating & Valuation (IRRV) conference held in Brighton, the awards recognise the council's achievement in encouraging more local residents and businesses to pay council tax and business rates by Direct Debit. Over the last 12 months an additional 3,052 households and 141 businesses in Staffordshire have signed up pay by Direct Debit, an increase of 8.13% and 6.81% respectively.

Joanne Wheeldon, Local Taxation Manager at Staffordshire Moorlands District Council said, "With over 22,000 households and over 900 local businesses already using Direct Debit, we knew this was a popular payment method. However, we still felt we could be doing more. When industry research revealed the level of Direct Debit take-up we could be achieving, we decided to revise our current Service Plan to fully utilise our Direct Debit capabilities. Our new targets are to raise Direct Debit take-up on council tax to 85% and business rates to 75% by the end of the 2010/11 financial year. To help us meet these objectives we introduced three initial promotions to raise awareness of Direct Debit in the local community."

The first key tactic was to offer Direct Debit incentives to both customers and staff. To do this the council introduced extended payment terms exclusively for customers opting to pay council tax or business rates by Direct Debit. Building on the flexible payment dates already offered by the council, customers had the option to spread payments across twelve instalments rather than the standard ten, with payments being taken on the 1st of every month.

Cash payment facilities were withdrawn from the council's One-Stop Shops and Small Business Grants are now awarded on the condition that the recipient signs up to Direct Debit. Staff were also encouraged to promote the payment method with the introduction of Direct Debit take-up targets in appraisals - plus a monthly £25 staff prize.

The second key initiative introduced by the council was the implementation of paperless Direct Debits. Previous experience revealed some customers who agreed in principle to take up Direct Debit over the phone, would then fail to complete and submit a valid mandate form.

With this in mind, the council purchased and installed Automated Direct Debit Instruction Service (AUDDIS) software that enables new Direct Debit customers to be signed up instantly over the phone. To ensure a smooth transition to the new system, paperless Direct Debit applications were channelled to a dedicated phone line which gave residents fast-track access to the council's customer service team.

The council also launched a high profile promotional campaign, designed to dramatically raise awareness of Direct Debit. The campaign, which included articles and press coverage in local media plus posters, leaflets and flyers, focused on the council's main campaign slogan "Making life easier" and was accompanied by a "put your feet up" image. To further promote the benefits of Direct Debit, adverts were placed on the back of all standard tickets issued in council run car parks.

Direct mail was also used as part of the council's promotional activity. Letters and Direct Debit mandates were sent to existing cash paying customers and all new residents. They were also included with all reminder letters, highlighting the benefits of the payment method and encouraging customers to sign up.

Commenting on the win, Chris Hartgrove, Head of Finance and Revenues said, "We're over the moon to have won these awards. It's down to sheer team work that we are able to deliver our revised strategy and increase overall awareness of Direct Debit. All the initiatives have proved extremely popular with the local community and in addition the strategy is also helping dramatically reduce the number of recovery notices we issue. Awareness of Direct Debit is at an all time high among Staffordshire Moorlands residents and we're now well on our way to meeting our new take-up targets."