

<h1>BRIEFING</h1>	TO:	Rothercard Working Group
	DATE:	15 th November 2022
	LEAD OFFICER:	Luke Sayers Assistant Director of Customer, Information and Digital Services
	TITLE:	The Rothercard Scheme

1. Background

- 1.1** The Rothercard scheme was launched as an anti-poverty initiative in 1993 to prioritise support for Rotherham people living on a low-income by offering a discount on a range of Council services, as well as discounts on goods and leisure activities from a small number of other organisations.
- 1.2** It is understood that the last formal report relating to the Rothercard scheme for consideration by elected members was sometime in 2008. Since then, there has been no strategic management or development of Rothercard and there is no formally agreed departmental owner; although in 2019 Customer Services (F&CS) took on the responsibility for administering card applications, implementing an improved digital application process in 2020.
- 1.3** There is no charge for a Rothercard. To qualify for a free Rothercard, applicants must live in a property which is registered for Council Tax in Rotherham and be able to provide appropriate evidence that they meet one of the criteria listed in **Appendix 3a**.
- 1.4** Since the new digital application process was implemented, 2,245 cards have been issued during the period 1st September 2020 to 31st March 2022.
- It is estimated that there were around 8k existing Rothercard holders prior to the new digital application process being introduced; although this figure cannot be confirmed as the database originally used to collate this information is no longer supported or accessible.
- Anyone who was issued with a 'one year' Rothercard before 1st September 2020 will have since needed to reapply, which means the details of these residents are now digitally recorded and included in the figures above.
 - All those aged over 60 who were issued with a card prior to 1st September 2020 have a card with a 5 year expiry date. Over time, the number of these 'unknown' card holders will decrease as cards lapse and residents reapply. This means that unless the scheme changes, all applicant data will be held as a digitised record by 1st September 2025.
- 1.5** The current scheme has not been developed or promoted for some time. This is likely to mean that some of the people who could most benefit from the scheme, are missing out.

- 1.6** The Council Plan (Page 17, People are safe, healthy, and live well) refers to a ‘new’ Rothercard ‘*that will provide discounts on Council services for those who most need them.*’
- 1.7** Outcome 2.15 of the Council’s Year Ahead Delivery Plan 2022 (*Inequalities are addressed and nobody is left behind*) sets out an action to complete a review of the Rothercard scheme by June 2022.
- 1.8** The purpose of this paper is to provide a summary of the findings of the Rothercard review and set out proposals for a new Rothercard scheme and required actions.

2. Key Issues

2.1 Scheme Ownership

There is currently no formally agreed departmental owner. This means that lines of reporting and accountability are unclear.

Customer Services (CIDS) currently administer the Rothercard application process, which includes the ongoing support and maintenance of the digital process, assisted access for applications/renewals, dealing with general enquiries and the production of the physical card.

As a general overview of current responsibilities:

Table 1

Directorate	Service Area	Responsibilities
F&CS	Customer Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing multi-channel access for customers wanting to apply/re-apply for a Rothercard • Assessing and approving applications based on the Council’s agreed eligibility criteria • Providing approved applicants with a Rothercard • Ensuring information across all channels (online, contact centre, face to face) remains updated with any changes requested by directorates (eg. pricing change, new benefits etc) • Identifying any opportunities as part of the Customer & Digital programme to implement new technological solutions that improve customer experience and improve efficiency
All Directorates	All services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying services that will offer Rothercard holders a discount/benefit • Working with finance colleagues to ensure discounts offered are affordable • Keeping Customer Services aware of any changes to Rothercard discounts/benefits so that customer information remains up to date and relevant
F&CS	Financial Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring any benefits/discounts have been accounted for in service budgets and reflected in the council’s Fees and Charges document

No agreed owner	No agreed owner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotion of the scheme • Membership numbers • Measuring the impact of the scheme
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2.2

The Rothercard Audience

A review of all available data has been undertaken to:

- Identify which customer groups are currently applying for a Rothercard (based on applicant data over the period 1st September 2020 to 31st March 2022)
- Gain a sense of the size of the audience that would most benefit from the future scheme and how others would be impacted by any proposed changes.
- Better understand how card holders are benefiting from the current scheme
- Identify how the future scheme should be designed so that it will provide discounts on Council services for those who most need them.

2.3

Demographics and current card holders

- It is estimated that there are around 144k residents across the borough who are eligible for a Rothercard under the current scheme; out of which only 10k (7%) are currently card holders (*estimated figure, which includes those card holders who applied prior to 1.9.20*)
- 2021 mid-year population statistics suggest there are circa 68,760 residents aged over 60; of which it is estimated around 8k (12%) of residents in this age group are current card holders. This includes those with a valid card issued before 1.9.20.
- 51% (1,528) of applicants indicated that they were applying as an 'adult on low income'. This is less than 3% of the estimated number of 'adults on low income' across the borough (62,732); although it should be noted that under current scheme rules, there is an extensive list of eligible benefits with many applicants in receipt of more than one type of award which makes it difficult to confirm numbers with any real accuracy.
- The final group of eligible applicants make up less than 3% (72) of applications received. There is a potential estimated 12.2k of young people, looked after children or refugee/asylum seekers eligible across the borough which means that less than 1% are currently benefiting from the scheme.

Please see Appendix 3b for more detailed information

2.5

Current Benefits and Take-Up Rates

The majority of the discounts currently offered to Rothercard holders are leisure based which is typical of most local authority schemes.

- **Council Services:**

All the Council services that currently offer a Rothercard discount are delivered by the Regeneration & Environment directorate. The majority of discounts relate to leisure and event activities.

A Rothercard holder can however also receive a discount when using:

- Bulky Waste service
- Requesting an additional/replacement bin if the bin is black, green or black with a pink lid. There is no discount for brown bins.
- Pest control service where the report relates to rats - the discount does not apply to the treatment of other pests

R&E regularly review the type of services that are suitable for offering a Rothercard discount. Where there are any changes (new discounts or

amendments to an existing one), details are included in the Council's Fees and Charges report.

With the exception of the Bulky Waste service, there is no available data to provide any indication of current take-up rates. Use of a Rothercard to obtain a discount for a Bulky Waste collection is routinely collected as part of the recently redesigned digital process.

During the period 1st January to 31st March 2022, there were 1,913 bulky waste collections booked and paid for. Of these, 436 (23%) received a discount as a Rothercard holder.

- **Places for People (PfP)**

The Council's contract with PfP has been operating for 12 years and is valid until 2041. It was set up as a profit gain share arrangement whereby any profit is shared 50/50 between the Council and PfP with 10% of the Council's share of the profit being committed to sports development.

Under the terms of the contract, Rothercard holders are eligible for a discount across a number of different leisure activities; but there is no available data to indicate how many residents have actually used their cards for this purpose.

- **Looked After Children**

Discussions are separately taking place with CYPS and PfP to explore the provision of a 'Looked after Children' (LAC) VIP card.

2.6 **Appendix 3c** provides an overview of all discounts currently available (2022/23) to Rothercard holders.

2.7 **Junior Rothercard rate**

As referenced in **Appendix 3a**, a number of leisure activities offer a Junior Rothercard rate for children under the age of 16 who are dependants of a Rothercard holder and who are living in the same household as a Rothercard holder.

The application process is in need of redesign as it currently requires separate applications for each family member which is administratively clumsy and a poor experience for customers.

2.8 **Carers and Paid Personal Assistants**

Rothercard holders who have a carer or paid personal assistant, can also apply for the carers discount which gives the carer discounted entry to leisure facilities, and discount rates at Rotherham Theatres when accompanying the Rothercard holder. (NB. The carer is not issued with their own card).

This application process was redesigned and implemented in July 2022.

2.9 **Systems and Software**

- **Application process (managed by Customer Services)**

The current Rothercard application process (implemented Sept 2020) provides customers with a single application form (regardless of access channel). Once submitted, the same system automatically triggers a back-office assessment process which ensures the appropriate eligibility checks (eg. evidence of benefit) are undertaken and recorded so that an award decision can be made.

There is no current notification process advising customers when their Rothercard is about to expire.

- **The 'Rothercard'**

The physical Rothercard is produced by the Customer Services Print & Post team who overlay the Rothercard design template onto a blank plastic card. They use the same type of blank plastic card that is used for Council ID badges but minus the chip that is used for controlling building access.

If approval has been given for the Rothercard holder to receive a discount for their carer/personal assistant (when accompanying them to activities or the theatre), the card is issued with the wording 'plus carer' after their name

- **Recording use of a Rothercard**

In the majority of cases, Council services that offer a Rothercard discount have no current means of capturing when a discount is applied, and for which type of activity.

As part of the Customer & Digital programme, a number of service redesign projects are already underway, and a key requirement that has emerged from this work is the need for a corporate booking solution. Colleagues in Green Spaces and Sport Development have been involved in these discussions. Over the next few months a 'requirements specification' will be created and this will include the need for future software to have the ability to deduct a discount under specific validated circumstances before calculating the cost to the customer.

As referenced previously, any discounts related to the Bulky Waste collection service are routinely recorded as part of the request process. The same digital process is followed regardless of the contact channel the customer uses to make their request; with the web form requiring the customer to enter their Rothercard account number. There is however no current way to verify that the reference number given is valid and in date. The only check at present is to ensure that the details entered are in the expected format.

Further development work would be needed by the Customer Services digital team to create a more robust and effective solution. Rather than treat this in isolation, it is considered best to wait until the procurement of the corporate booking system has progressed as the objective is to identify a solution that can include this functionality and be used for multiple purposes.

- **Digital card**

There is no current facility to provide users with a digital pass. For example, the ability to add a virtual 'Rothercard' to an Apple or Google Pay Wallet which can then be viewed/presented as and when required until it expires.

In today's world people increasingly prefer to save documents, tickets and membership cards in a virtual wallet rather than having to carry a physical record with them just in case it's needed.

The Customer Services Digital team are currently exploring ways in which the new Rothercard could be produced as 'virtual' by default; whilst still providing a physical card for anyone unable to access/make use of digital technology. It is planned that the solution will be available to offer to customers by the Autumn 2023.

Work will continue to identify other more longer-term improvements such as the ability for providers of discounted services to be able to scan a Rothercard/code in a similar way to how retailers for example, handle reward cards.

2.10 Financial

There is no specific budget for Rothercard.

- **Services**

In terms of concessionary rates offered by services, all services have income budgets that are uplifted by inflation each year. Any income is reviewed each year as part of budget-setting and adjusted accordingly to reflect planned take-up and rates the following year.

There are no corporate budget allowances for income streams where Rothercard discounts make up a significant proportion. Services are expected to manage any pressures or gains arising from discounts for their services as part of their monthly monitoring.

Services that offer a Rothercard discount are listed in the Councils Fees and Charges schedule.

- **Customer Services**

Customer Services administer the Rothercard application process. Costs for staff time are accounted for in the staffing budget.

There is no budget for the cards themselves, but current costs are minimal. The cost of producing 2,245 cards (at 6.5p per card) was £146.

- **Places for People**

Any reduction in income as a result of offering a Rothercard discount is taken into account before determining the value of the profit gain share that is returned to the Council

3. Key Actions and Timelines

3.1 The Future Offer

A number of changes are proposed to deliver a new Rothercard scheme that '*will provide discounts on Council services for those who most need them,*' and:

- make changes to the eligibility criteria so that the focus of the scheme is directed towards residents who will most benefit
- make the scheme easier to manage and administer
- improve customer experience in terms of both applying for and benefiting from the Rothercard scheme
- target the right people to increase awareness of the scheme

i) **Use existing Council records as the means to verify the 'Adult on Low Income' eligibility criteria**

Rationale

- A key outcome of the Rothercard review is the need to focus the scheme on residents who will benefit the most.
- Making use of existing Council records to verify that someone is on 'low income' improves customer experience by removing the need for an applicant

to have to produce documentation they have previously provided. This also makes the scheme easier to manage and administer.

Impact and Action

- The details of residents in receipt of Council Tax Support are already recorded and could therefore be used as the means from which to verify that someone is on 'low income.'
- The administrative process for assessing applications will need to be updated to include a verification step to be undertaken by Customer Services. This may initially require a degree of manual review with a digital solution created later.
- The revised digital process will incorporate an improved method of assessment/award for dependent children of a Rothercard holder who are under the age of 16 and living in the same household as a Rothercard holder.
- Cards issued to an 'adult on low income' will be valid for 12 months unless they have reached 'state pension age' (see 3.1 ii). This means that when a renewal request is received, Council records can be rechecked to ensure the applicants remains eligible under this criterion.

ii) Replace the '60 and over' eligibility criteria with 'state pension age AND on low income'

Rationale:

- According to DWP [Labour Force Survey](#) the average age of labour market exit is now 65.2 years old for men and 64.3 years old for women.
- Linking the eligibility to the state pension age, reflects the national increase in the age of people remaining in work and future proofs the scheme by avoiding setting a specific age which might then need to change in later years.
- The focus of the Rothercard scheme is to benefit residents who most need it, which is not necessarily everyone who has reached pensionable age. For this reason, applicants will need to meet **both** the 'low income' and state pension age' criterion to be awarded a Rothercard in future.

Impact and action

- The date someone has reached their state pension age varies according to their date of birth; information which can be verified on [gov.uk](#).
- If a someone meets the 'state pension age' criteria, they will also need to meet the 'low income' criteria as well (as described above in 3.1 i). Adults who reach pensionable age but who don't meet the 'low income' criteria will not be awarded a Rothercard.
- Anyone who satisfies both the 'state pension age' and 'low income' criteria will be issued with a card that does not have an expiry date. The reason for this is that an applicant's age will not change and the likelihood of their income status changing in later life is extremely low. This will improve customer experience and reduce renewal related administrative burden/costs.
- Adults who continue working up to their state pension age may still be eligible for a Rothercard if they are on 'low income;' in which case they would be awarded a Rothercard with a 12 month expiry date.
- Existing card holders –anyone aged 60 or over awarded with a Rothercard under the current scheme, will be allowed to continue using their card until it expires; even if they would not be eligible once the new criteria has been introduced. Once the resident's card expires (5 years from the original issue date) they will need to reapply under the eligibility criteria of the new scheme.

- Some of the residents who reapply will no longer be eligible for a Rothercard which may create dissatisfaction.
- The number of residents who will meet both the pensionable age and 'low income' criterion is unknown.

iii) Replace the 'Young person aged 16 to 19 years in full time education' criteria with a new Young Person age category of '16 to 21 years of age'

Rationale

- This would extend the eligibility to include young people who for example are not in education but are undertaking apprenticeships or other jobs with training/qualifications built into employment. These groups are not currently eligible for a card.
- Young people who are newly embarking on their future career paths can often be in low wage jobs.
- As a local comparison, South Yorkshire Transport provide reduced cost travel costs for young people up to the age of 21

Impact and action

- The size of the 'young person' audience will increase which may mean greater take up of discounted activities across both Council and Places for People services. Any impact to budget would require monitoring and review ahead of setting out the next period of Council Fees and Charges.
- The Rothercard scheme would help enable more young people to do the things that are important to them – 'have fun.' (Council Plan, page 19)
- Customer experience will improve and the administrative burden will reduce – currently, a resident applying under the criteria 'Young person aged 16 to 19 years in full time education' needs to provide a letter from their school or college and proof of their parent receiving child benefit. This will not be required under the new proposed criteria; proof of age/residency will be all that will be required which will require a change to the current digital process.
- The validity period for a Rothercard issued to a young person applying under the 'up to 21 years of age' criteria will be valid up to 23:59 the day before they turn 21.

iv) Automatically provide Section 95 Local Authority supported refugees/asylum seekers with a Rothercard:

Rationale

- These customer groups have arrived in the borough as a result of a humanitarian crisis.
- The benefits of the Rothercard scheme compliments other support packages already in place and provides quicker access to the type of activities that have a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing.

Impact and Action

- This would be one less 'thing to do' for newly arriving refugees or asylum seekers.
- Numbers may increase dependent on events happening worldwide and/or other emerging crises.
- Cards issued under these circumstances would be issued with a fixed one year period of validity; which means that applying for a card after expiry will only be approved if the applicant meets a different eligibility criteria.

- The process for the automatic allocation of a Rothercard for refugees/asylum seekers will need to be designed to compliment existing Council arrangements.

v) Remove 'Looked after children/young people' as a Rothercard criteria

Rationale

- Discussions are currently and separately underway to create a 'Looked after Children' (LAC) VIP card. It is therefore anticipated that retaining this criterion will not be required and may otherwise cause confusion.
- Assuming this initiative is implemented as currently expected, and that the timing does not conflict, there would be no reason to include this eligibility criteria

Impact and Action

- Subject to the successful implementation of the VIP card, it is anticipated that looked after children will benefit from a more rounded and bespoke offer.
- It is understood that the administration of the VIP card will be undertaken by CYPS to compliment existing LAC related processes.
- A young person aged 16-21 will still be able to apply for a Rothercard if they can provide proof of age and residency.
- Should the expected introduction of a VIP card not go ahead, a separate review will be undertaken to consider how the Rothercard scheme could be best used to the benefit of looked after children/young people.

vi) Creating a more consistent level of discount and extending the range of services that offer a discount

Rationale

- Discounts offered are set by the service and vary from anywhere between 10% to 50%.
- Setting a single standard percentage discount would remove customer and organisational confusion, improve consistency and minimise the administrative burden.
- Extending the range of discounted services available to Rothercard holders opens up new opportunities to those who need help the most.

Impact and Action

- Setting a single standard discount means that the customer may receive a greater/lesser discount than they do now, dependant on the activity or service they are wanting to access using their Rothercard.
- A single standard percentage discount will simplify the administration and ongoing management of the scheme offer.
- There will be budget implications to consider as a result of extending the range of discounted services and/or increasing/decreasing the discount percentage. This will need to be worked through in more detail with finance and service colleagues.
- There needs to be an exemption process put in place that would allow services to request approval to offer a different discount.
- The ability to extend the range of discounted services and implement a single standard discount for Place for People activities may not be possible due to contractual limitations. Further work will be required to explore the potential.
- Local businesses are likely to be interested in offering Rothercard holders a discount to goods/services as a means to boost their trade and increase the

number of people 'shopping local.' This is a piece of work that will be developed during 2023/24.

vii) **Re-establish ownership of scheme responsibilities**

Rationale

- Over time the responsibilities for the Rothercard scheme have become unclear with some activities such as promotion of the scheme and measurement of take-up rates/outcomes not being undertaken at all.

Impact and Action

- Table 1, section 2.1 provides an overview of current responsibilities. It is recommended that those responsibilities already established and working well remain in place.
- Subject to discussions with the appropriate departmental colleagues, it is proposed that those responsibilities without current owners are allocated as follows:
 - Promotion of scheme discounts and benefits to the appropriate target audiences– **Comms & Marketing**, working closely with service colleagues
 - Measuring outcomes, including take up rates and the impact the benefits of the scheme have on Rothercard holders – **Policy, Performance and Intelligence**
- Raising the awareness of the scheme is likely to increase take-up rates which could have budget implications and therefore any promotional activities would need to be carefully considered and planned with finance and service colleagues

viii) **Card Expiry Dates and Changes to Card Holder details**

Rationale

- There is no current process of advance notification ahead of a Rothercard expiring.
- There is no established process for dealing with changes to the card holder details; for example, if someone changes their name, or the person becomes deceased.

Impact and Action

- Administrative processes need to be established to generate a notification in advance of someone's card expiring to allow them time to re-apply if this is something they want to do/are eligible to do.
- The advance notification needs to advise the customer of the eligibility criteria they will need to meet in order to receive a new card; for example, a customer who applied previously under the '*Young Person under the age of 21*' criteria may still be eligible if they are an 'adult in receipt of Council Tax support.' A person who previously applied under the 'age over 60' eligibility criteria may continue to be eligible if, based on their date of birth, they have reached the 'state pension age'.
- Under the new scheme, residents that are awarded a Rothercard because they have met the 'state pension age' eligibility criteria, will not need to renew their card as the card will be valid for their lifetime. A process will be designed to periodically contact these card holders to check that their details remain valid and the customer has continued residency in the borough.

3.2

Summary of Actions

Action	Owner	Timescales
1 st Draft report outlining the findings of the Rothercard review and associated proposals shared with the working group	L. Sayers	May 22 Complete
Final draft report incorporating comments and feedback	L Sayers	September 22
Conclude review and present final version of report shared with key stakeholders	Rothercard working group	November22
Seek formal approval of recommendations	Cabinet	TBC
Create a new set of eligibility rules and required evidence	H Barker	By Dec 22
Create a new digital application process based on the new eligibility rules	H Barker	By Feb 23
Establish a new process for the automatic allocation of a Rothercard for refugees and asylum seekers	H Barker	By Feb 23
Work with services & finance to confirm discounted services and standardise discounts	H Barker	Once approved
Agree owners of currently unallocated responsibilities	L Sayers	Once approved
New Rothercard in place		Apr 23
Promotion of new scheme – in advance of new scheme being introduced, continuing afterwards	Comms	To start Feb/Mar 23
Implement a digital card	H Barker	Autumn 2023
Monitoring of take up rates and measurement of outcomes	TBC	Ongoing
Explore any opportunity to further extend the range of discounted services on offer	Service departments	Ongoing
Undertake an annual review of the scheme	L Sayers	Annual
	L Sayers	Autumn 2023

	Work with local businesses to extend the range of available discounts to Rothercard holders			
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4. Recommendations

4.1	<p>It is recommended that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The changes and actions set out in this report are approved in order to deliver a new Rothercard scheme that ‘will provide discounts on Council services for those who most need them,’ and: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ make changes to the eligibility criteria so that the focus of the scheme is directed towards residents who will most benefit ○ make the scheme easier to manage and administer ○ improve customer experience in terms of both applying for and benefiting from the Rothercard scheme ○ target the right people to increase awareness of the scheme • The Council continues to explore any opportunity to further extend the range of discounted services on offer to those who need to benefit the most. • An annual review takes place each year to assess customer engagement, experience and take-up rates and monitor administrative processes and application of discounts.
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