



## Case study: the Aberdeen Gift Card

### Background to the Aberdeen Gift Card

The Aberdeen Gift Card launched on the 26<sup>th</sup> November 2020 and can be spent with 170 businesses in Aberdeen. Over £150,000 of Aberdeen Gift Cards were sold within the first 5 weeks, making it one of the most successful Town and City Gift Card programmes in the UK. The project was led by Aberdeen Inspired with the support of Aberdeen City Council.

Shona Byrne is a senior project manager at Aberdeen Inspired:

### What research did you conduct to find a gift card solution and what were the key elements you were looking for?

“It was always part of our business plan at Aberdeen Inspired to introduce a gift card or loyalty card in the first year of our third term but the pandemic accelerated that need. We undertook research into the gift card market looking at places like Stavanger, cities in North America and the UK. We knew the gift card market was big and growing and when we saw the size of the UK gift card market, we knew it was definitely a good opportunity for Aberdeen as we did not have any city wide scheme.

“There were risks for us as a BID in introducing a gift card scheme in the last year of our term, the ballot for our renewal will take place in June this year, so it was key for us to get ownership of the scheme from Aberdeen City Council. We agreed that Aberdeen Inspired would take the lead on the project, and in the event that Aberdeen Inspired no longer existed, the local authority would take over.

“The decision to develop an Aberdeen Gift Card with Miconex was agreed at board level in September 2020. Aberdeen City Council supported us in a few ways. They provided funding for the launch of the programme and assistance with marketing communications. The local authority already had various campaigns booked for the festive period, such as their safe city campaign and we were able to make the Aberdeen Gift Card messaging part of these campaigns.”

### How was the idea of the Aberdeen Gift Card received by merchants? How did you onboard them?

“Merchants welcomed the Aberdeen Gift Card with open arms. When we told them that it was free and as easy as taking a swiped Visa or Mastercard transaction they were sold. We had two business

engagement members charged with visiting all businesses, dropping off the information and, if possible, signing them up there and then by taking the test swipes. If necessary, our business engagement team would make a second visit to the business. It was a successful roll-out and we had over 120 businesses at launch date.”

### **Can you please tell us about your launch, marketing and PR activity?**

“It was 8-10 weeks from signing the contract to launching the programme, so it was incredibly fast. Working alongside Aberdeen City Council, we had a really high profile launch, using digital, outdoor, press and broadcast media (mainly radio), as well as lots of competitions to win a gift card plus extensive PR coverage. The campaign theme was ‘a gift to you to spend in our city’. Aberdeen City Council is one of the biggest employers in the city, and they supported and promoted the Aberdeen Gift Card to their staff on digital channels.

“One of the important factors which was key to our success was launching the gift card at a time when supporting local has never been more important, or talked about. The need to support local businesses was promoted through lots of channels but the Aberdeen Gift Card captured people’s imaginations and made local shopping simple. We were able to counter the uncertainty for customers around single retailer gift cards, giving them a local gift card that can be spent with a number of businesses.

“Our core message was that the Aberdeen Gift Card supports local livelihoods, local jobs and it’s a secure way to shop and gift, with multiple businesses to redeem your gift card. We played with that message in a creative, soft way that resonated with our target market on an emotional level.

“We have a positive, proactive relationship with the local authority. The implementation and day to day running of the gift card is down to us at Aberdeen Inspired and, as Aberdeen City Council has provided funding to the project, we report key figures to them within a quarterly report, including the number of businesses signed up, number of gift cards sold, average values of gift cards sold, online sales, total value of gift cards sold and redemptions.”

### **What are your future plans with the Aberdeen Gift Card?**

“One of the ways we can develop our gift card is by extending its use across the corporate sector including our local authority. The city has many big employers who run incentive and reward schemes and we will be encouraging them to choose the gift card as a way of supporting the local economy, it fits well with CSR policies. There is also the potential to set up additional sales points for the gift card to be sold by our local authority at their public offices at other outlets in the city centre.

“We haven’t begun to unlock the potential of any corporate sales at all yet and we believe this offers huge potential market for the city. We have an annual marketing plan and after the ballot, we plan to allocate some discounts to big corporate businesses. We’ll also be onboarding more businesses. The Aberdeen Gift Card will continue to be marketed at key times of the year, such as Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, Valentine’s Day and the end of term but there is the potential to let the marketing take a different approach.

“People often see local as small independents but the M&S in Aberdeen is as local as the greengrocers, both supporting local jobs and therefore local livelihoods. National brands attract customers to the city, and that benefits the small independent businesses. We’ve sadly lost Debenhams and John Lewis in Aberdeen City Centre but we can work to change perceptions that local means small independents, and we’re happy to have the likes of M&S, New Look and Next alongside our independent retailers.

“We’re working really hard at the moment on the reopening of non-essential retail with a campaign for businesses that reminds them how to receive the card as a payment method. Some shops have been closed for three months and staff will not have seen an Aberdeen Gift Card. We’ll be visiting or calling each business and letting them know that reminder leaflets are on their way, encouraging them to brief staff. I think that engagement and keeping the Aberdeen Gift Card top of mind with businesses is something we just have to keep on pushing. We’ll undertake mystery shopping visits to check acceptance. We want to ensure customers have a positive experience of using the Aberdeen Gift Card and protect the reputation of the card.”

### **And finally, any advice for other places thinking about launching their own gift card?**

“My advice is to be really clear on the technical side of the gift card, it will be down to you to communicate to businesses and customers how to redeem the card so you need to understand this yourself. The Aberdeen Gift Card was one of the first to have an expiry date on the card but there’s also the CVV code which is above the QR code. Understanding the little technical details will make answering queries from businesses easier.

“We have a small team here but we had a clear plan of what we needed to achieve in the 8-10 weeks prior to our launch. If you are a local authority, or working alongside a local authority, to launch a gift card programme, try and arrange an in person sales point from the outset and make the gift card central to incentives and rewards for council staff and local employers. Involve your local authority in your press activity, with quotes from local councillors and get that support for the gift card in council communications as it makes a big difference.”

## **APPENDIX 1**

“The Aberdeen Gift Card has been hugely beneficial for the city. In a short period, we’ve taken £150,000 in sales, and as people will spend 40% plus on top when they redeem their card, that’s £210,000 or more for the Aberdeen economy.”