

Denbighshire County **Council**

School Meal Debt Policy

Introduction

The accumulation of debts in schools has a detrimental effect on the aims of the Catering Service and wastes valuable work hours that are precious to both schools and the authority as a whole.

This revised School Meal Debt policy mirrors the Parent Pay School Meals Debt Policy, and both policies aim to reduce costs to the authority, and adopt a consistent approach to school meal debt and provide clarity and consistency in managing this debt, and will also help parents and School Staff clearly understand what is expected of them. This in turn will help in the reduction of the administration burden to schools, through continued, and improved partnership working and mutual support, to ensure that all school meal debts are administered effectively, and wherever possible recovered.

There have been many discussions around whether a child should be refused a meal in school if they have not been paid for, or this is an outstanding school meal debt. However the school meals service is no different than any other business and the school meals must be paid for by someone.

It is not the intention of this policy to prevent children from receiving school meals, but it is to make parents/carers aware of their parental responsibilities and duties, and that steps will be taken to reduce school meal debts, and to help resolve any problems at an early stage that parents and the child may be experiencing.

For those families that are eligible for FSM, the School Catering service will provide any assistance to those families. Once FSM is authorised the child/children will be able to take a free school meal the following school day.

For those parents and schools who use the ParentPay system, keeping track and paying for school meals is easy to use and monitor.

Parents/Carers who make no attempt to repay the outstanding debt will be referred to the Head Teacher of the school concerned, and an investigation into the circumstances around the lack of provision of food for the child/children will take place. In the vast majority of cases this will not be necessary, but any concerns with regards to a possible Safeguarding issue will be raised with the Head Teacher of the school initially. ALL Staff are duty bound to ask the appropriate questions and refer any concerns in relation to Safeguarding in accordance with the Safeguarding policy.

Procedure for School Meal Payment and Collection of School Meal Debts

School meals should be paid for in advance of the actual school meals being taken/consumed by the pupil(s).

School Meals can be paid for by the following means:

*Cash.

*Cheque.

*Parent pay

*Or by debit card by contacting the catering office

*Schools will generally engage with parents/guardians when accounts incur a debt, usually by verbal communication with the affected parent/guardian, or by via telephone/text/letter. This process, in the vast majority of cases does avoid the formal process outlined below:

The debt procedure will be implemented when:

*A family accumulates a debt of £11 or more.

*Therefore the County Policy on School Meals Debts is to be implemented by putting into operation the following procedure:

The Referral of School Meal Arrears

It is proposed that minimal debt be incurred, and that in order to achieve this objective non-payment of **1 week of school meals** would instigate a standard letter (see example of standard letter at attached at Annex A), being sent by the Schools Catering service.

Debts over £11.00 should be referred to the School Catering Administration by 2.30pm on every Friday in order for a copy of Annex A to be generated and posted to the parent/guardian by first class post on that day. This can be in the form of an email to:

Lyndsey.Cassidy@denbighshire.gov.uk. Information required to generate this action will need to be: Pupils name, address, telephone number and the amount of the outstanding debt.

Included in this letter will be a brief explanation of Free School Meal Entitlement and the Civic Contact Number, who will be able to assist the parents/guardians further in relation to Universal Credit/Free School Meal entitlement.

Action is to be taken at an early stage, in order to prevent arrears of dinner monies from accumulating to a point beyond parents have the available means to settle and this will also address any other potential problems i.e. loss of dinner money, bullying etc.

Should a child/children arrive at School having received the school meal debt letter, and without payment or a packed lunch, the School will notify the School Catering service, and the School will make contact with the parent / guardian via a telephone call/text message to establish lunch arrangements for the child and signposting to the School catering Service who will then discuss payment off the outstanding monies/future payment plans/signposting to FSM (if applicable – see below).

Parents / guardian that incur a debt and are subsequently entitled to Free School Meals, Schools should then are notify the School Catering administration on 01824 712119, as soon as practically possible to enable the School Meal debt to be reviewed.

If a school does not engage with the School Catering service by notifying them of a debt, (and subsequently permits a pupil's debt to exceed £11.00), the Catering Service will recharge the outstanding debts to the school budget. A notification will be made to Head Teacher, Business and Finance Managers. When a pupil incurs a debt and moves School within Denbighshire County Council the School Catering Service will work with schools involved, and the debt will transfer with the pupil.

When a parent/guardian has an outstanding debt and stops using the School Catering Service, the School Catering Service will transfer the debt with the pupil to their appointed Secondary School, if this School is within Denbighshire.

Attached at Annex B is a flow chart which summaries the above information, in a clear table format for ease.

School Staff are **not permitted to incur a debt** and meals are to be paid for in advance. Schools that do allow School staff to incur a debt **will be recharged for the debt.** These School Meal debts will be forwarded to the appropriate School Board of Governors by Modernising Education/Lifelong Learning, should there be persistent non payers of School Meal Debts and/or concerns regarding certain members of staff who are deemed to have accrued school meal debts in excess of £11.00.

Summary

To ensure that neither the authority and/or the affected school are adversely affected by increasing School Meal debts, and the administrative burden that this causes for all concerned, it is vitally important that both parties work together.

More importantly, this policy is in place to ensure that all school children attending a Denbighshire County Council school do not go without eating a healthy, and nutritional meal during their school day.

Annex A to School Meal Debt Policy – February 2019 Edition

Insert customer name
Insert customer address
Insert customer address
Insert customer address
Insert customer address

Ein cyf/Our ref

Dyddiad/Date

Rhif union/Direct dial 01824 712119

e-bost/e-mail Nigel.highfield@sirdynbych.gov.uk
Nigel.highfield@denbighshire.gov.uk

Dear.....,

Payment, amounting to £, has not been received for school meals provided to_____at Ysgol .

Please pay this amount IN FULL using a debit card by calling 01824 712119, paying at the School Office or topping up your Parent Pay account.

It is Council Policy to suspend schools meals where debts amount to **£11.00**. Therefore, as of _____ will not be served with a school meal until this debt has been paid.

You must then ensure that you provide them with a packed lunch.

If you pay the amount outstanding, school meals will **not** be suspended.

We strongly suggest that you contact us on 01824 712119 if you have difficulty paying this amount or are in receipt of any of the following (which would entitle you to claim for Free School Meals)

- Income Support (IS)
- Income Based Job Seekers Allowance
- Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
- Child Tax Credit, Provided you are not entitled to Working Tax Credit and your annual income does not exceed £16,190
- Guarantee element of State Pension Credit
- Universal Credit

We look forward to receiving your payment.

Yours sincerely

Head of Service Signature (TBC)

SCHOOL MEAL ARREARS FLOWCHART–Annex B

AT ANY TIME DURING THE WHOLE PROCESS ALL STAFF (SCHOOL STAFF AND DCC STAFF) ARE DUTY BOUND UNDER THE ALL WALES CHILD PROTECTION PROCEDURES TO ASK THE APPROPRIATE QUESTIONS AND REFER ANY CONCERNS IN RELATION TO SAFEGUARDING IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE LA POLICY

Trigger point - Account in arrears

INFORMAL PROCESS - School to engage with Parents / Guardians when account incurs a debt. (Verbal, telephone, letter)

FORMAL PROCESS - Debts over £11.00 should be referred to Catering Administration by 2.30pm on every Friday in order for the relevant letter to be generated and posted to the parent / carer first class on that day. FSM eligibility check undertaken. *"Overall Family Debt should not exceed £11.00 irrespective of how many children within the family"* Failure to notify Catering Department of debt at £11.00 may result in recharge to school. Parents informed of suspension of meals.

Failure to contact to pay the debt

Debt is paid - no further action

Welfare checks on level of vulnerability, Child Protection status, FSM eligibility. Discussion with HT.

Debt not paid or failure to contact LA to set up payment plan

Family deemed not vulnerable packed lunch provided
Parent / Guardian pays for packed lunch
No child left without a meal

Family deemed vulnerable

Pupil continues to receive packed lunch and debt increases. After 1 week Catering Service to contact Head Teacher.

Hot Meal provided and supported

Increase in debt reaches debt recovery threshold and referred

DEBT RECOVERY SERVICE