

School Meal Debt Recovery Policy

Athelstan Primary School



Summary	This document details the school's approach to dinners and dealing with any debts.		
Originator	Zoe Godwin, School Business Manager	Date:	March 2026
Responsible Governor	Richard Joel	Responsible Committee	Compliance
Approved By:		Date:	
Review Date:	March 2025	Implementation Date:	Monday 15th April 2024

Policy Statement

The Athelstan Primary School Debt Recovery Policy has been adopted to ensure there is a consistent and fair approach to debt incurred by parents/carers whose children take school meals. It provides clarity and consistency in managing the debt and will also help parents/carers clearly understand what is expected of them.

As the Local Education Authority is no longer accountable for the administration of dinner money debt, the responsibility now falls on the school to pursue instances of non-payment. As a result, the school budget will have to directly fund any outstanding debts that cannot be recovered thereby directly affecting the amount of money that is available to provide education to all pupils.

School wishes to avoid a situation which allows parents/carers to accrue large amounts of debt for school meals, which can then be difficult to clear. It is very time consuming for the office staff to continually chase parents/carers for payment. It can also have a negative effect on our relationships with some families.

Provision of School Meals

Children in Foundation Stage and KS1 are entitled to receive Universal Infant Free School Meals. This entitlement will cease when the child moves into KS2.

Income based Free School Meals are available for parents/carers of children of any age, who meet certain criteria, including if they are in receipt of certain benefits. Income based Free School Meals are a statutory right, and it is important that all parents/carers who qualify, take up their child's entitlement, so that they can receive a school meal each day.

Information on the entitlement to Income Based Free School Meals and an application form can be found on the Sheffield City Council's website:

<https://www.sheffield.gov.uk/schools-childcare/school-meals>

If a child's entitlement to free school meals expires or the parents/carers personal circumstances change, the parent /carer must provide a packed lunch or make a payment in advance for a school meal.

Cost of School Meals

School meals are available to children at a cost of £2.95 per day or at no cost to those in receipt of Free School Meals entitlement. School meals **must** be paid for in advance via ParentPay. Parents/Carers will be notified of any revision to the cost of school meals the term prior to the new charge taking effect.

Payment for School Meals

Payment for school meals must be made in advance via the online payment system, ParentPay, www.parentpay.com. The school office does not accept payments by cash or cheque.

The school must ensure that all dinner money collected is banked in a timely manner in accordance with the School's Financial Regulations which are periodically inspected by audit.

Management of School Meal Debts

To ensure that the school's budget is not adversely affected by the cost of school meal debt, the Governors consider the fairest system to all families is to pursue a 'Zero Tolerance' approach. Although this may seem harsh to some parents/carers, it is important that the school budget is spent for the benefit of all our pupils and not a small number.

If a child arrives at school without a packed lunch and the account is in arrears, or if a child's entitlement to free school meals has ceased, the school will telephone/email the parent/carer in the first instance to establish if alternative arrangements have been made.

When a parent/carer has failed to pay for school meals, the school may allow a meal to be provided where it is felt that this is a temporary situation e.g. temporary hardship etc. however details should be recorded in writing and a record maintained and monitored.

If a child takes a school meal which has not been paid for in advance, an email will be sent to the parent/carer detailing how much is owed and requesting payment to be made via ParentPay. Prompt action will be taken to address any debt issue at an early stage in order to prevent arrears amassing.

Where a child continues to require meals, the school must establish if the child is entitled to free school meals, or if the parent/carer is experiencing hardship which affects their ability to pay. Under these circumstances the parent/carer

should be invited to apply for free school meals or speak confidentially to the School Business Manager or Headteacher.

When the debt reaches £10.00 for a child or family, a ParentPay email will be sent to the parent/carer requesting them to clear the outstanding amount and, if they are unable to do so that day, to provide their child/children with a packed lunch for the following day and until the account is in credit to prevent further arrears (*Example email*). If the amount is not cleared and the child/children is/are not provided with the requested packed lunch, and the parent/carer cannot be contacted by telephone, the school will provide the child/children with a sandwich and a drink only and send out a formal letter to the parent/carer (*Example letter 1*).

If action proves unsuccessful in securing dinner money arrears, the school should inform the Safeguarding Team and formally write to the parent/carer, explaining that the school is not obliged to provide a school dinner where advance payment is not forthcoming or where authorisation for free school meals has not been received (*Example letter 2*).

Monitoring and Recovery of School Meal Debts

At each meeting of the Governing Body/Compliance Committee, the Headteacher or School Business Manager will provide Governors with details of any outstanding dinner money debt and the current position with regard to such debt. The aim of the school's dinner money policy is to minimise the opportunity for debt balances to build up and incurring costly referral to the school's solicitors. The school does however, reserve the right to begin legal proceedings to recover outstanding school meal debts and inform the local authority that a child is not being provided with a suitable meal at lunch time.

All Write-offs of outstanding debt must be approved by the Governing Body/Compliance Committee following submission of details of the debt by the Headteacher or School Business Manager together with reasons for no further action being taken.

Date of review: March 2026

Date of next review: March 2027

Example Email

Date

Dear Parent/Carer,

Outstanding Dinner Money – Pupil Name & Class

(Pupil name's) dinner money account is showing a high balance of **£xx.xx** outstanding.

In order for your child to continue to receive school lunches it is important to keep your account in credit. Please log onto your child's ParentPay account to make a payment as soon as possible.

Please provide your child with a packed lunch until the account is cleared in full.

If you have any queries regarding these arrears, or if you have difficulty making a payment, please contact the school office to discuss this further.

Yours faithfully

Athelstan Primary School

Example Letter 1

Parent/Carer of (Pupil Name)
(Address Line 1)
(Address Line 2)
(Address Line 3)
(Post Code)

Date

Dear xxx

School Meals provided to (PUPIL NAME & CLASS)

According to our financial records, your child's dinner money account has a debt of £xxxx outstanding.

As we have been unable to contact you, and in accordance with our School Meal Debt Recovery Policy, we have provided your child with a sandwich and drink today. To prevent this debt increasing further, please provide your child with a packed lunch until the account is in credit.

To ensure that the school's budget is not used to clear your child's debt, please arrange for the outstanding dinner money debt to be paid by (date - 7 days).

Once you have cleared the current debt, I would be grateful if you could ensure that you keep your account in credit. The current cost of a school meal is £2.95 per day or £14.75 per week.

If you believe that you may qualify for entitlement to Income Based Free School Meals, which also entitles you to free Breakfast Club attendance and school milk, please contact the school office for further details. Income Based Free School Meals are a statutory right. It is important that you use it if you qualify.

Additional information and an application form can also be found on the Sheffield City Council's website:

https://forms.sheffield.gov.uk/site/form/auto/apply_school_meals

If you have any queries regarding these arrears or wish to discuss the matter further, please do not hesitate to contact the School Office.

Yours sincerely

Dave Shaw

Headteacher

Example Letter 2

Parent or carer of (Pupil Name)
(Address Line 1)
(Address Line 2)
(Address Line 3)
(Post Code)

Date

Dear xxx

School Meals provided to (Pupil Name & Class)

I am writing regarding the outstanding school meal debt that is showing on (pupil's name) ParentPay account. Despite previous correspondence, the account is still in arrears. Our records show that as at date the outstanding debt is £xx.xx.

I would ask that you please arrange to clear this debt immediately and take steps to ensure your child's account is kept in credit in the future.

The current cost of a school meal is £2.95 per day or £14.75 per week.

If you believe that you may qualify for entitlement to Income Based Free School Meals, which also entitles you to free Breakfast Club attendance and school milk, please contact the school office for further details or for them to send an application on your behalf. Free School Meals are a statutory right and it is important that you use it if you qualify.

Additional information and an application form can also be found on the Sheffield City Council's website:

https://forms.sheffield.gov.uk/site/form/auto/apply_school_meals

Since the school has to fund all school meal debts from its budget, it is essential that all payments are up to date so that the quality of the service provided to all pupils is maintained.

Unfortunately, if the debt on your child's account is not cleared by **(date: 7 days)**, a school meal will no longer be provided and you must provide them with a packed lunch each day until the account is in credit.

The school reserves the right to begin legal proceedings to recover the outstanding debt and to inform the local authority that your child is not being provided with a suitable meal at lunch time.

If you have any queries regarding these arrears, or have any difficulty in making a payment, please contact the school office immediately so that this matter can be resolved.

Yours sincerely

Dave Shaw

Headteacher

School Meal Debt Recovery Process

An email will be sent to the parent/carer detailing the amount of debt and requesting this be cleared in full.



If a parent/carer is unable to make a payment the same day to clear the debt, a packed lunch should be provided until the account is in credit to prevent the debt increasing further.



If a packed lunch is not provided, and the school is unable to make contact with a parent/carer, the school will provide the child/children with a sandwich and drink only.



A formal letter will be sent to the parent/carer.



If no agreement has been reached between the school and the parent/carer, the Safeguarding Team will be notified and a further letter will be sent to the parent/carer.



The school reserves the right to begin legal proceedings to recover the debt and to notify the local authority that a child is not being provided with a suitable meal at lunchtime.