

Gillamoore CE (VC) School School Meal Arrears Procedure

Introduction

The following is a standard procedure to be applied when school meal arrears arise in primary and special schools. Although timescales have *been suggested* at each stage of the process it is left to the discretion of the school as to when it feels it should implement the various stages.

The letters included in the Appendices can be used or adapted to suit the requirements of the school. However, the basic information within the templates should be included in any letter sent to parents/carers regarding school meal arrears.

In following this procedure a pro-forma invoice should not be raised by the school at any stage nor should the school contact Legal Services direct to request the pursuance of a school meal debt.

Stage 1: Arrears of 1-2 weeks (suggested)

It is assumed that schools will, at the earliest opportunity, have attempted to make contact with the parents/carers. This will be via Parentpay, Class Dojo or in person, in an effort to try and resolve the issue and avoid it becoming unmanageable.

The first letter/email to parents/carers should detail the outstanding balance and outline the eligibility criteria for free school meal entitlement. Parents must complete an application form FMB1 in order that eligibility may be determined. As entitlement starts from when an application is made it is important to try and get parents/carers to complete and return the form as soon as possible. Immediate payment should be requested and it is suggested that alternative lunchtime arrangements should be made for the child(ren) until the debt is settled. (see Appendix A template)

Copies of all letters sent home should be retained should the matter have to be referred to the Welfare Team at Jesmond House, Harrogate.

Stage 2: Arrears of 2-3 weeks (suggested)

If payment remains outstanding, a second letter of a stronger nature should be sent by the school to the parents/carers detailing the level of the debt reached as at that week ending. Parents/carers should be encouraged to contact the school to make an appointment in order to discuss the situation and determine a resolution. It is advised that this letter should either be sent by post or hand delivered – it should not be sent home with the child. (see Appendix B template)

A meeting arranged between the parents/carers and the Headteacher is an opportunity to identify any issues that may require support from either the school or other services such as the Education Social Work Service. Such a meeting may highlight that the parents/carers require support in making an application for free school meals. Arrangements for payment by instalment can be drawn up to help clear the debt. It should be stressed that if the child is not entitled to a free school meal the parents/carers should either (i) provide a packed lunch or (ii) commence payment for meals forthwith. For debts amounting to more than £50 it should be stressed that, should they default on an instalment arrangement, the debt will be automatically referred to the Welfare Team at Harrogate. A Council invoice will be issued and any necessary debt recovery action instigated.

Stage 3: Referral to the Welfare Team at Jesmond House, Harrogate

Only if the debt is for more than £50, the school feels that it has exhausted all attempts to collect the outstanding dinner money and the parents/carers are avoiding contact with the school can the matter be referred to the Welfare Team at Jesmond House, Harrogate. Debts amounting to less than £50 at this stage should be either "written off" or pursued further by the school.

Contact details for the Welfare Team are:

01609 533405

Team Managers:

01609 534953

Address: CYPS, Jesmond House, 31/33 Victoria Avenue, Harrogate, North Yorkshire, HG1 5QE.

Copies of the dinner register and the letters sent by the school should be included with the referral. (see Appendix C template)

The Welfare Team will confirm by e-mail to the school that the referral has been received.

If a parent/carer disputes the debt with the school **after** the referral has been sent, the school should advise the Welfare Team as a matter of urgency so that the referral can be placed on hold until the dispute has been investigated. The school should advise the Welfare Team of the outcome and confirm the resumption or withdrawal of the referral as soon as is practicable.

If a payment is made by the parent/carer in the period between the referral leaving the school and its receipt by the Welfare Team the school should notify the Welfare Team immediately to either (i) cancel the referral or (ii) reduce the value of the amount outstanding that is to be invoiced.

The Welfare Team will cross reference the referral to their records of free school meal entitlement/applications. This process is likely to take up to a week. The referral will be placed on hold if an application is in the process of being assessed and the school advised accordingly. If an application/renewal has not been received the Welfare Team will follow it up with the parent/carer.

If, following the receipt of Form FMB1 from the parent/carer, the Welfare Team can confirm eligibility to free school meals a letter will be sent and the school advised. **However, as is the DFE guidance, entitlement can only start from the date the application for free school meals is made.**

If school meal arrears are outstanding prior to the date eligibility starts an invoice will be raised to the parent/carer. The Welfare Team will liaise with the school to confirm the amount to be charged by invoice should the amount outstanding cross the eligibility/non-eligibility periods.

If it is found that an entitlement to free school meals does not exist, the Welfare Team will send a letter to the parent/carer. The letter will advise that an invoice is to be

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issued separately and debt recovery procedures will automatically commence should payment not be made within the terms stated on the invoice itself. (see Appendix D template)

The invoice will include in the body of the text (i) the name of the school, (ii) the name(s) of the child(ren) (including surname(s) as they may differ from those of the parents/carers) and (iii) the period in which the debt has accumulated.

Arrangements can be made to pay the amount outstanding in instalments. To discuss/request this, the parent/carer should be advised to contact Credit Control on 01609 532643.

The invoice will be coded to the School Meal Arrears Holding Account. Once the invoice is paid the holding account will be debited and the school credited with the value of the payment.

By using a holding account Children and Young People's Service Finance will be able to monitor the level of school meal debt across the county. Invoices have previously been coded to the school at which the debt is incurred making it impossible to see at any point in time the level of debt and whether or not school meal arrears is a significant issue in North Yorkshire.

Once an invoice has been raised any payments against the referred debt made to the school by the parent/carer must be advised to Credit Control as a matter of urgency so that the value of the invoice can be reduced accordingly.

Stage 4: North Yorkshire Council Debt Recovery

If payment is not received within 21 days of the invoice being raised, Credit Control will telephone the debtor to arrange payment. If they are not contactable by telephone, Credit Control will send a **First Reminder** letter.

After a further 7 days Credit Control will telephone again. If this proves unsuccessful a **Final Notice** will be sent.

After a further 7 days an **Intended Legal** letter is sent and Credit Control will make a further effort to make contact by telephone.

After a further 7 days Credit Control sends **Notification** that the debt will be referred to the Legal Services of NYC. If there is no response to this last letter Credit Control will contact the Welfare Team at Jesmond House, Harrogate for a copy of the file relating to the debt.

If the Headteacher will not support the pursuance of the debt through legal action then Credit Control will have no other option but to write off the debt. This would require the approval of the School Governing Body if the debt were less than £250 in value and the Assistant Director (Finance and Management Support) if over £250 in value. The debt would be written back to the holding account so cancelling the invoice. The school would have to bear the cost of the meal(s) taken but not paid for. No further action will be taken against the debt unless the school wishes to pursue it themselves. However, by this point it would appear that all avenues have been exhausted and the debt would be deemed irrecoverable.

Stage 5: North Yorkshire Council Legal Action

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Credit Control will forward the file to Claire Rouse (Legal Officer – Litigation) in Legal Services, Room 64.

Legal Services will take the decision based on the evidence provided as to whether or not the debt can be pursued via legal proceedings.

Dear

School Meal Arrears

It appears that as of today an amount of £(*amount*) remains outstanding for school meals taken by (*name of child(ren)*). I would be grateful if you could arrange to pay this amount to the school office as soon as possible in order that we can balance the dinner register.

Until the debt is cleared and to ensure that it does not increase further I would request that you make alternative arrangements for your child(ren) at lunchtime as a school meal can only be provided if payment is received in advance.

If you would like to discuss this matter please do not hesitate to contact the school. The school is keen to provide any necessary assistance and support it can to try and resolve this matter as quickly as is possible. Our contact details can be found at the top of this letter.

Free School Meal Eligibility

A free school meal is available to children whose parents have applied for free school meals and who are in receipt of **any one of the following:-**

- Income Support
- Income-Based Jobseekers Allowance
- Child Tax Credit (**but not if you are also receiving Working Tax Credit**) and your joint Annual Taxable Income (as assessed by the Inland Revenue) is £16,190 **or less** per annum (this figure is subject to change in April of each year)
- Employment and Support Allowance (income related)
- State Pension Credit (Guarantee Element)
- Supported under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999.

A copy of application form FMB1 is enclosed for completion should you meet any of the above criteria for eligibility. This should be sent direct to the Welfare Team, Jesmond House, 31/33 Victoria Avenue, Harrogate, North Yorkshire, HG1 5QE.

Please note that entitlement to free school meals commences from the date the application is made and cannot be backdated beyond that. It is therefore important that you complete and return form FMB1 as soon as you can.

For further information about free school meal eligibility please contact either the school (details above) or the Welfare Team at Jesmond House, Harrogate (tel 01609 533405).

I look forward to this matter being resolved in the near future.

Yours sincerely

Head Teacher

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Dear

School Meals Arrears

Despite my previous letter of (*date*) it appears that the amount owing for school meals remains outstanding and has now reached £(*amount*). This amount should be paid to the school office with immediate effect.

As stated in that letter until the debt is cleared you should make alternative arrangements for your child(ren) at lunchtime as a school meal can only be provided if payment is received in advance.

Free School Meal Eligibility

A free school meal is available to children whose parents have applied for free school meals and who are in receipt of **one of the following**:-

- Income Support
- Income-Based Jobseekers Allowance
- Child Tax Credit (**but not if you are also receiving Working Tax Credit**) and your joint Annual Taxable Income (as assessed by the Inland Revenue) is £16,190 **or less** per annum (this figure is subject to change in April of each year)
- Employment and Support Allowance (income related)
- State Pension Credit (Guarantee Element)
- Supported under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999.

For further information about free school meal eligibility or to request application form FMB1 you can contact either the school (details at the top of this letter) or the Welfare in Harrogate (tel 01609 533405).

Please note that entitlement to free school meals commences from the date the application is made and cannot be backdated beyond that. It is therefore important that you complete and return form FMB1 as soon as you can.

I must advise you that failure to settle this outstanding amount will result in your debt being referred to the Welfare Team at Jesmond House (Harrogate) from where a North Yorkshire County Council invoice will be issued to you for the amount outstanding at that date.

If you would like to discuss this matter please do not hesitate to contact the school. The school is keen to provide any necessary assistance and support it can to try and resolve this matter as quickly as is possible. Our contact details can be found at the top of this letter.

Yours sincerely

Head Teacher

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**Referral of School Meal Arrears to the Welfare Team
(Jesmond House, Harrogate)**

Appendix C

School: Address:		DfE No:	
Postcode:		Tel:	
E-mail:			
Contact at School:			
Family Details:			
Child(ren):		D.O.B:	
Parent / Carer: Address:			
Postcode: Tel:			
Amount Outstanding £ for meals taken between _____ and _____			
<p>In referring this school meal debt I confirm that all necessary action as outlined in the School Meal Arrears Procedure guidance has been implemented by this school to no avail.</p> <p>Enclosed with this referral are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) photocopies of the Dinner Register showing the accrual of the school meal arrears (ii) copies of letters sent to the parents/carers. (iii) any other information of relevance to this referral including details of any disputes investigated <p>Authorised by the Headteacher _____.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Should the debt remain outstanding after Stage 4 of the Procedure it will be automatically referred to Legal Services unless advised otherwise by the school.</p>			
Dinner Register Key		Letter/symbol indicated by	
School Dinner			
Packed lunch			
Absence			
Other			
Price used to calculate meals taken			
£	Child's name:		
£	Child's name:		

Appendix D

Dear

SCHOOL MEAL ARREARS

I have been advised by *(name)* School that as of week ending *(date)* you have incurred a debt of £*(amount)* in relation to school meals for *(name of child(ren))*. Despite several attempts being made by the school to resolve this matter the amount remains outstanding.

It is therefore assumed that the debt is not in dispute and this office is now required to forward an invoice to you for the amount outstanding. This will be sent under separate cover. Payment should be made according to the instruction on the invoice. Failure to settle your account will result in the debt being referred for Legal action.

Until this debt is cleared you should make alternative arrangements for your child(ren) at lunchtime as the school will no longer be able to provide a school lunch.

Free School Meal Eligibility

The school has previously included information regarding free school meal entitlement in its letters. A free school meal is available to children whose parents have applied for free school meals and who are in receipt of **one of the following:-**

- Income Support
- Income-Based Jobseekers Allowance
- Child Tax Credit (**but not if you are also receiving Working Tax Credit**) and your joint Annual Taxable Income (as assessed by the Inland Revenue) is £16,190 **or less** per annum (this figure is subject to change in April of each year)
- Employment and Support Allowance (income related)
- State Pension Credit (Guarantee Element)
- Supported under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999

However, from the information we have received you do not meet the eligibility criteria for free school meal entitlement.

If your circumstances change in the future and you do then meet any of the above criteria for free school meal eligibility please contact this office as soon as possible so that we can confirm entitlement and advise the school accordingly. Our contact details can be found at the top of this letter.

To discuss payment arrangements please contact Credit Control on 01609 532643. You should not contact the school or this office regarding payment of this debt. This matter is now being managed by Credit Control.

Yours sincerely

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Example from Parentpay

DEBT LETTER

IMPORTANT: This letter contains sensitive information and must be managed carefully.

Dear

Pupil: Class:

I am writing to remind you that according to our records, you have arrears on your child's account, which we would appreciate you clearing..

Our records show that for your child (name) Class: at your debt is

Your username and password are:

User Name

Password

You can check your account balance at anytime by logging into your ParentPay account.

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

Yours sincerely

Headteacher

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Example from Parentpay

FINAL REMINDER

Dear

OUTSTANDING BALANCE REMINDER

Our records show that you have still not paid dinner money for your child
(name) Class

As at <date/> your account is showing an outstanding balance of <balance/>.

Please arrange for this money to be paid within five days. Failure to bring your account up to date could result in your child being denied a meal and the school having to proceed with its debt recovery procedures.

Once the outstanding balance is cleared please ensure your child's school meal account remains in credit.

If you have any queries regarding these arrears, or require assistance in paying, please do not hesitate to contact school..

Yours sincerely

Headteacher