

Elsenham C. of E. Primary School

School Debt Recovery Policy



Last reviewed:

Date: June 2025

**Next review due
by:**

June 2026

This policy aims to help our school to adopt a consistent and fair approach to debt incurred by parents/carers with a view to eliminating it completely. It provides clarity and consistency in managing debt and will also help parents and carers clearly understand what is expected of them.

The services provided by school are no different to those provided by any other business and meals and other services must be paid for by someone. In the case of school meals for example, free meals can only be offered to children whose parents qualify for Free School Meals entitlement.

Most parents make prompt payment for services received; however a minority of parents do not pay on time for services offered by the school. This puts the school in the position of subsidising a few families with funding that is intended by law for all children, as well as causing considerable extra work for office staff.

Free School Meals are available for parents who meet certain criteria including the receipt of state benefits. Anyone who may qualify for Free School Meals should contact the School Office for further information. 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.

The ParentPay system used for most services offered by the school to make payment easier.

Provision of School Meals

School meals are available to pupils at a cost of £2.50 per day or at no cost to children in Early Years and Key Stage 1 and to those in receipt of a free meal entitlement.

The payment for meals is required in advance on a daily, weekly, monthly or half termly basis.

- School meals are chosen on the day. These are paid for online, and in advance, by using payment facility ParentPay linked to Parentmail
- Meals can be booked on a daily, weekly or half-termly basis.
- In the case of absence, payment received will be credited to the following week or for the next meal booked.
- If a meal is booked but the child then goes home, the payment cannot be refunded as preparation for the meal will already have been started

If payment has not been made

To ensure that the school's budget is not adversely affected by the cost of school meal debt or debt incurred from other services, the Governors consider the fairest system to all families is to pursue a 'Zero Tolerance' approach i.e. the school does not accept debt. Although, this may seem harsh to some parents, 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 or payment, or if a child's entitlement to free school dinners has ceased, the school will telephone the parent/carer in the first instance to establish if alternative arrangements have been made.

When a parent has failed to produce dinner money the school may allow a meal to be provided where it is felt that this is a temporary situation e.g. temporary hardship. 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, a letter detailing how much is owed will be sent to the parent/carer requesting payment directly to the school within 7 days. The same process will be used if a cheque is not honoured by the bank. 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 Head Teacher.

When the debt exceeds £11.50 for a *child or family* a formal letter must be sent to the parent/carer informing them to provide their child/children with a packed lunch to prevent further arrears. If the child/children is/are not provided with the requested packed lunch and the parent/carer cannot be contacted, the school will provide a snack and a drink only.

If the debt exceeds £23 for a family and/or action proves unsuccessful in securing dinner money arrears, the school may inform the local Safeguarding Team and formally write to the parent/carer, explaining that the school is not obliged to provide a school dinner where payment is not forthcoming or where authorisation for Free School Meals has not been received.

The school will, in exceptional circumstances, postpone the refusal to provide meals where parents have advised the school of their financial situation and school is satisfied that the funding will be forthcoming.

Parents who are experiencing difficulty in paying for a chargeable service offered by the school should inform the school office immediately. In most circumstances a payment plan can be agreed to help parents clear their debt to the school as soon as possible. Large debts left unpaid may be passed to a professional debt collection firm to legally recover.

Debt policy implementation

Key Information

1. A copy of the debt policy is available on the school web site
2. All services provided including school lunches; milk (from the term after the child turns five onwards), music tuition, residential trips and clubs must be paid for in advance
3. No child should be sent to school with no money in their account and expect to be given a meal, milk, music lessons etc.
4. Parents who don't want their child to have a school lunch, should provide a healthy packed lunch

Parents are contacted midweek by phone or text if there is insufficient credit on their account for that week.

Monitoring and Recovery of Debts

At each meeting of the Governing Body/Resources Committee, the Head Teacher 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 debt management 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 debts. The school also reserves the right to inform the local authority that a child is not being provided with a suitable meal at lunch time.