Title	BSET School Meals Debt Policy
Purpose	To record procedures for managing and recovering debt relating to school meals
Relevant to	Trustees, Local Governors, Staff, Parents/Carers
Responsible Officer	Finance Manager
Introduced	March 2025
Modification History	
Related Policies	BSET Pol5 Financial Regulations Policy BSET_Pol.36_Charging and Remissions Policy
Date Due for Review	February 2028
Relevant committee for review	Finance, Audit, Risk & Resources Committee
Approved by Trustees	26/2/2025
Filed as	BSET-Pol.45-School Meals Debt-Policy

INTRODUCTION

Barnet Special Education Trust recognises that the physical and emotional wellbeing of the children in their care is of paramount importance. The trust, however, has a legal and moral obligation to apply the resources it receives fairly, to support and for the benefit of all pupils, and is not in a position to subsidise, on a regular basis any one child or group of children.

The trust has therefore adopted a debt recovery policy aimed at supporting parents, carers and families in avoiding accumulation of debts in relation to services within its schools such as school dinners and school trips.

Parents/carers are expected to pay in advance for services provided by the trust and this can be paid using the online payment system: COMPASS. All debts owed to a trust including those due from parents/carers have an impact on the budget as the trust has to meet the actual costs incurred. This means that any money owed to the trust diminishes the resources that can be provided to all students. We hope that parents/carers understand this and that they will make every effort to avoid owing the trust money.

FREE SCHOOL MEALS

It is very important that if a parent or a carer believes their child may be eligible for Free School Meals, that they contact the school office to apply for Free School Meals. This allowance is a statutory right, and it is vital that parents/carers use it if they qualify. We will help parents/carers with their application, as required, to find out if they are eligible. The school is only allowed to provide free school meals to pupils where entitlement has been verified.

All pupils in the Foundation Stage and Key stage 1 are entitled to receive Universal Infant Free School meals.

SCHOOL MEALS DEBT

For those families not receiving Free School Meals, it is the duty of parents/carers, to provide a midday meal for their child. Parents/carers must either provide a packed lunch for the child or request that the school provide a lunch. Parents/carers whose child is not entitled to Free School Meals are expected to pay for these in advance. The Governors of Barnet Special Education Trust reserves the right not to provide a school meal in circumstances where payment has not been made.

It is accepted that on occasion arrears may arise for various reasons. However, this accrued debt must be paid within one week and future meals must be paid for in advance. If the debt is not cleared, parents should provide a packed lunch.

DEBT RECOVERY

The Governors of Barnet Special Education Trust will take all reasonable measures to vigorously collect debt as part of its management of public funds. The school meals debt recovery policy will observe the relevant financial regulations and any other legal requirements. If debts are incurred, these have to be paid from the school budget. This means that money which should be spent on all pupils' education is used to pay for debts incurred by individual parents/carers. The governing body see this as unacceptable and request that all parents/carers give this policy their full support.

The Governors of Barnet Special Education Trust reserve the right to begin legal proceedings against parents/carers to recover debts owed to its schools.

DEBT RECOVERY PROCEDURES

Where payment from the parents/carers has not been received in advance, or at the end of the first week, the following process will be applied:

- A gentle reminder letter will be sent home after one week / in excess of £13.25 accumulated arrears (Appendix 1).

- The parent/carer will be informed in writing where two weeks / in excess of £26.50 arrears has accumulated and advised to make immediate payment (Appendix 2).

- A final letter will be sent home after three weeks / in excess of £39.75 accumulated arrears informing them that no meals will be provided for their children if payment has not been received by a specified date in accordance with the policy (Appendix 3).

- No meals to be provided to pupils when arrears exceed four weeks / in excess of £53.

- Once the final letter deadline has expired the Governing Body will decide whether legal proceedings should begin.

REPAYMENT TERMS

Parents/carers in debt to the school are expected to settle the amount by a single payment as soon as possible after receiving the initial reminder.

Repayment terms may be negotiated at the discretion of the Headteacher. A record of all such agreements entered will be retained. In all cases a letter will be issued to the parents/carers confirming the agreed terms for repayment. The settlement period should be the shortest that is judged reasonable.

MONITORING, EVALUATION AND REVIEW

The Headteacher of each school and the Governing Body will assess the effectiveness of this policy. The policy will be promoted and implemented.

This Policy will be reviewed by the Governing Body on a three yearly cycle. Adherence to the policy will be monitored by the Governing Body.

APPENDIX 1

Date:

Gentle Reminder

Child's name:

Dear Parent/Carer

According to our records, there are outstanding dinner monies for your child/children.

The arrears are for the week commencing …….

Please make the payment of £ ……. by ..../…/….

If you have any queries regarding the above, please contact the school office.

Yours sincerely,

Headteacher

APPENDIX 2

Date:

Accumulated School Meals Arrears

Child's name:

Dear Parent/Carer

Following our letter dated …… regarding outstanding dinner money, our records show that this has not been paid.

To date, the amount of arrears is £…….

These arrears need to be cleared as soon as possible. Payment can be made via Compass. Alternatively, we can set up a payment plan to pay the debt off in installments. To do this, please contact the school office.

If by …./…./…. you have not either paid off the debt or contacted us to set up a payment plan, we will invite you to a meeting to explore options to help you pay the amount above. If you do not attend or if we do not reach a satisfactory result together, we may seek legal advice on recovering the debt.

Our school budget is intended to support children's learning, and we cannot use it to cover debt owed to the school.

Any parent/carer experiencing financial difficulty may make a claim for the remission of charges which should be addressed to the Headteacher and will be considered confidentially on an individual basis.

Please do not hesitate to contact the school office if you have any questions or difficulties complying with this letter.

Yours sincerely,

Headteacher

APPENDIX 3

Date:

Non-payment of school dinner money arrears

Child's name:

Dear Parent/Carer

Our records show that you have not cleared the school dinner money arrears for your child/children despite previous letters sent home on …… and …… and the meeting held …./…./…..

Your outstanding debt is £ …….. As we have not received payment from you to settle this, I have no option but to refer this outstanding debt to our advisers to see what legal action we can pursue to recover it.

Until the debt is cleared, you must provide a packed lunch for your child/children. A school meal will not be provided. In a case when payment is not received nor a packed lunch provided, we will phone to ask you to come to school with a packed lunch before lunch time.

We will continue to offer support where practical. If you would like to hear more about the support available or meet again to discuss options, I would be more than happy to do so. You can contact the school office to arrange this.

We will contact you in due course over the action we will take, which could include making a claim in the small claims court.

To prevent this, please contact the school office by …./…./…. to discuss steps you can take to repay the debt.

Any parent/carer experiencing financial difficulty may make a claim for the remission of charges which should be addressed to the Headteacher and will be considered confidentially on an individual basis.

Yours sincerely,

Headteacher