

Rowlands Gill Primary School

School Meals Payment Policy (Dinner Money Debt Policy)

Date Written: September 2021

Ratified by Governors: October 2021

Re-adopted by Governors: October 2025

Next Review Date: October 2026



Policy Review Dates:

Review Date	Changes made	By whom	Date shared
Oct 2023	30 hours nursery FSM; online system is now Arbor; price of meals	Lindsey Clarke	Oct 2023
Oct 2024	Price of nursery meals	Lindsey Clarke	Oct 2024
Oct 2025	No changes	Lindsey Clarke	October 2025

The policy has been written to help our school adopt a consistent approach to debt incurred by parents whose children take school dinners. The aim of the policy is to have a clear procedure for staff and parents.

The following will be at the centre of our policy.

- **Always keep the child's needs central.**
- **Start a dialogue as soon as possible.**
- **Assign a designated member of staff.**
- **Do not rely on letters, texts and emails.**
- **Recognition that DMD (dinner money debt) could be symptomatic of deeper problems.**
- **Ensure that families who are eligible for free school meals have an easy way to sign up.**

Rowlands Gill Primary staff will work with families to ensure non-payment of school meals is kept to a minimum. We will request parents accept support offered in relation to non-payment of school meals including working with staff, keeping school informed of circumstances within the home and providing children with a packed lunch if necessary to stop debt accruing. The money for non-payment of meals must be paid for out of the school budget and this impacts directly on the education of the children.

Payments need to be made in advance for meals. Please use our online Arbor system. This allows you to pay for meals in advance and will send notifications when your balance is low. If you are having problems, we accept cash or cheques (made payable to Gateshead County Council) although this costs school to process and we will always advise online payment first as it is the most secure option for all.

All KS1 children (Reception, Year 1 and 2) are entitled to Universal Free School Meals (UFSM) with funding provided by the government. Nursery children must pay for meals as they are not entitled to a UFSM until they are in Reception (unless they attend 30 hours in a LA maintained Nursery and are in receipt of the benefits which entitle them to FSM). **When children move to KS2 (Years 3-6) they must pay for their meals unless they qualify for FSM through a means-tested system.**

If you think you may qualify for benefit-related Free School Meals (FSM), please contact the school office for further information. We cannot back date claims so it is important that if you think you are entitled you check with staff and make a claim. If you qualify and move to free school meals any outstanding balance still needs to be paid to school.

Remember that Free School Meals (FSM) are a statutory right and it is important that you use it, if you qualify. Your child will then receive a School meal each day at no cost.

Additional information and an application form can be found on the Gateshead Council's website or in the school office if you do not have access to the Internet:

<https://www.gateshead.gov.uk/article/7433/Free-school-meals>

OR Apply by contacting school or the Benefits Service, Civic Centre, Regent Street, Gateshead, NE8 1HH. Telephone 0191 433 3729.

Our procedure for dealing with dinner money debt applies to children in Nursery and KS2 (because KS1 children are entitled to Universal Free School Meals).

1. Start a dialogue as soon as possible.

Weekly reminder sent via Arbor to anyone who has a debt balance of any amount.

Action when amount will reach £20

- Letter advising parent that they owe £20 and must provide a packed lunch for their child/ren. **(Appendix 1)**
- If payment is made to clear the debt school meals can resume for the child/ren.
- School can apply discretion depending on circumstances, please inform us if your circumstances change.

2. Recognition that dinner money debt could be symptomatic of deeper problems. (At this point the child should be on packed lunches provided by home)

Further Action by school if payment has not been made

A letter will be sent to parents if no payments are received. The letter will again ask for payment and signpost families to relevant support agencies. **(Appendix 2)**

A meeting will be arranged between the Headteacher and parents to discuss the outstanding payments. **(Appendix 3)**

School will endeavour to recover all payments owed for school meals and there will be no time limit in the recovery of debt.

If debts are incurred, then the school budget has to pay for them. This means that money which should be spent on the children's education is used to pay for debts incurred by parents. Every parent will agree that this is unacceptable and we request that all parents give this policy their full support.

Ultimately, if there is no reasonable plan in place and attempt made to re-pay debt by a parent, after the steps above have been taken, then school will follow the Local Authority Debt

Prevention and Recovery Procedure (which can be found as Appendix 4). The model letters will be edited to reflect the steps previously taken - they are provided as a guide only.

Appendix 1

DATE
NAME
ADDRESS

Student: NAME

Dear NAME,

There is an outstanding dinner money balance of £AMOUNT as of DATE.

As from Monday DATE your child needs to be provided with a packed lunch from home until the remaining balance is paid in full. This can be paid via Arbor (online portal), a cheque to school or in cash (we incur a charge for cash and cheques so prefer payments via Arbor which is also more secure.) If you have any queries relating to the balance owed, we are happy to provide a breakdown of all dinners taken and payments received.

No matter how you pay, you can check the account balance anytime by logging into your Arbor account. You can see what meals have been taken and when. The cost of a school meal is £3.10 per day - £15.00 per week. (For Nursery children the cost is £2.75 per day £13.75 per week).

Yours sincerely,



Lindsey Clarke
Head Teacher

If you would like further help and support, please contact school and/ or the agencies below.

www.stepchange.org

www.citizensadvice.org.uk

www.nationaldebtline.org

Gateshead Council Benefit advice 0191 433 3677/3675 or benefitwelfareadvice@gateshead.gov.uk
or you can call in person at the Gateshead Civic Centre on Regent Street, NE8 1HH. Monday – Friday
9am- 4.30pm.

Appendix 2

DATE
NAME
ADDRESS

Student: NAME

Dear NAME,

Our records show that you have not paid dinner money for your child NAME Class: XX despite a previous written reminder.

We have already agreed with you that NAME is to bring a packed lunch from home until the remaining balance is paid in full.

Please arrange for this money to be paid immediately to avoid further action.

Yours sincerely,



Lindsey Clarke
Head Teacher

If you would like further help and support, please contact school and/ or the agencies below.

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Appendix 3

DATE
NAME
ADDRESS

Student: NAME

Dear NAME,

I would like to meet with you to discuss the outstanding school meals payments owed for NAME. The amount now stands at £AMOUNT.

The meeting will discuss options open to you in relation to how we can proceed to support you in this matter.

I am able to meet on DATE at TIME if this is suitable.

Please contact the office as soon as possible on 01207 549 359 to agree or amend the date and time.

Yours faithfully,



Lindsey Clarke
Head Teacher

If you would like further help and support, please contact school and/ or the agencies below.

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www.citizensadvice.org.uk

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Gateshead Council Benefit advice 0191 433 3677/3675 or benefitwelfareadvice@gateshead.gov.uk
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Debt Prevention and Recovery Procedure

School Dinner Monies

Date of issue	19th May 2022
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Aims and Purpose

The purpose of this guide is to provide a clear procedure for the schools of Gateshead, to ensure debts relating to school dinner income is recovered in a timely manner, while adhering to the Council's Thrive approach and National Nutritional Standards.

Unless the child is in receipt of free school meals, where the parent / guardian receives certain welfare benefits, the parent / guardian will be liable for the costs applied by the school for a lunch prepared by the school's catering team.

School / Academy Responsibilities

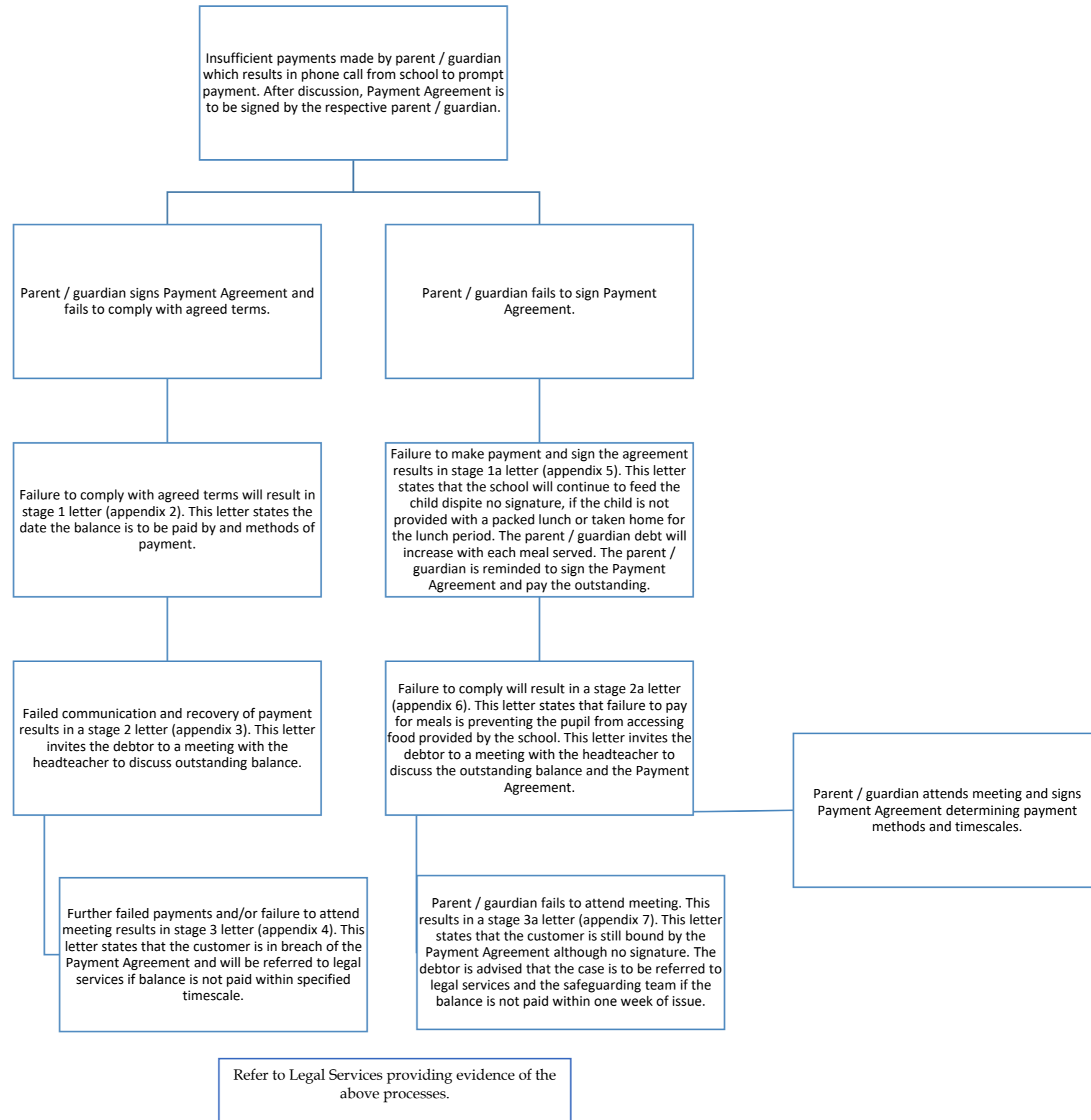
- Act promptly when debts begin to increase
- Enter a Payment Agreement with all paying parents / guardians to ensure the debt recovery action is enforceable by Legal Services (appendix 1).
- Communicate with debtors who are experiencing financial difficulty to understand their circumstances.
- Give the debtor appropriate and timely notifications in order to pay the outstanding balance, as recommended in the debt recovery process below.
- Be transparent about the consequences of not recovering the debt.

Debt Prevention

It is of utmost importance to make early interventions with those who fail to meet the required payments. Communication with the debtor is key to understand reasons why they are failing to meet the required payments. If possible, the preferred payment dates should be discussed in order to take a collaborative approach which benefits both the school and the customer.

Phone calls or text / e-mailing systems should be utilised to prompt parents who fail to meet payments. If communication fails and the debtor has not paid the outstanding, the debt recovery process is to commence.

Recommended debt recovery process



Legal Services Approach

Prior to taking legal action, the Legal team will request the school to provide background and the following supporting documents:

- Payment Agreement
- Evidence of outstanding balance
- Copies of correspondence / evidence of any phone calls or in-person communications.
- Evidence of meetings and their outcome.

This is to demonstrate that the debt is due and owing.

The relevant Civil Procedure Rules Practice Directions for Pre-Action Behaviour will be followed, and Court proceedings will be conducted in accordance with the Civil Procedure Rules.



Payment Agreement

In signing this agreement, the parent / guardian will be liable for payment of the outstanding balance owed to the school on the date agreed. Failure to comply with the agreement may result in debt recovery action by Gateshead Council's Legal Services.

Parent / guardian name:

Address:

Name of pupil:

Class:

Missing payment period:

Amount (£):

Agreed payment date:

Preferred payment date and amount:

Position:

Signed:

Name:

Date:

Parent / Guardian

Business Manager

Appendix 2 – Stage 1 letter

Address block

Date:

Dear *parent / guardian*,

Outstanding school lunch monies – Payment reminder

We are contacting you regarding the outstanding balance on your account. As per the Payment Agreement enclosed, the balance was to be paid *in full/in instalments of £x by date agreed*.

Please could you arrange for payment to be made at your earliest convenience.

If you have any queries with the contents of this letter, please do not hesitate to get in touch on *school telephone number* or via email at *schoolrepresentative@gateshead.gov.uk*

Yours sincerely,
School representative

Appendix 3 – Stage 2 letter

Address block

Date

Dear *parent / guardian*,

Outstanding school lunch monies – Second invoice payment reminder

We are writing to inform you that the balance on *pupil's name* school lunch account remains unpaid. We have previously contacted you via letter on *dd/mm/yyyy*, following a telephone call dated *dd/mm/yyyy*.

Since the balance remains unpaid and the Payment Agreement has been breached, we invite you to a meeting to discuss the outstanding with *headteacher* on *dd/mm/yyyy* at *tt:tt*.

Failure to attend will result in the commencement of the debt recovery process.

If you cannot attend the above meeting, or have any queries with the outstanding balance, please do not hesitate to get in touch on *school telephone number* or via email at *schoolrepresentative@gateshead.gov.uk*

Yours sincerely,
School representative

Appendix 4 – Stage 3 letter

Address block

Date:

Dear *parent / guardian*,

Outstanding school lunch monies – Legal action

We have previously contacted you regarding the outstanding balance on *pupil name's* school lunch account by telephone, letter on two separate occasions, dated *dd/mm/yyyy* and *dd/mm/yyyy*, and followed up by a meeting with *attendees dd/mm/yyyy*.

As discussed in our meeting, you have failed meet the Payment Agreement signed on *xx/xx/xxxx*, therefore your account is to be passed over to Gateshead Council's Strategic Director of Corporate Services and Governance to commence debt recovery action.

You failed to attend the meeting set out above, therefore your account is to be referred to Gateshead Council's Strategic Director of Corporate Services and Governance to commence debt recovery action.

If you wish to pay the outstanding or have any queries, please do not hesitate to get in touch on *school telephone number* or via email at *schoolrepresentative@gateshead.gov.uk*

Yours sincerely,
School representative

Appendix 5 – Stage 1a letter

Address block

Date

Dear *parent / guardian*,

Outstanding school lunch monies – Outstanding balance and failure to sign Payment Agreement

We recently contacted you by telephone on *xx/xx/xxxx* notifying you of the outstanding balance on *child name's* school lunch account. We requested that you visit the school office to sign a Payment Agreement, you have since not been in contact to do so.

A Payment Agreement has been enclosed for your attention. Please complete the form and return to the school office where payment of **£AMOUNT** can be discussed.

We will continue to feed *pupil's name* if they are not provided with a packed lunch or taken home for the lunch period. If the school provides *pupil* with a meal, the amount owed will continue to increase.

If you have any queries with the contents of this letter, please do not hesitate to get in touch on *school telephone number* or via email at *schoolrepresentative@gateshead.gov.uk*

Yours sincerely,
School representative

Appendix 6 – Stage 2a letter

Address block

Date:

Dear *parent / guardian*,

Outstanding school lunch monies – Outstanding balance and failure to sign Payment Agreement

We contacted you by letter on *xx/xx/xxxx*, following a phone call on *xx/xx/xxxx*, requesting for the outstanding balance to be paid and to sign the Payment Agreement and return it to the school office. You have since not paid the balance of **£AMOUNT** or returned the Payment Agreement.

Since the balance remains unpaid, we invite you to a meeting to discuss the outstanding with *headteacher* on *dd/mm/yyyy* at *tt:tt*.

Failure to attend will result in the commencement of the debt recovery process.

We ask at this time that you provide *pupil's name* with a packed lunch or take them home for the lunch period until the balance is cleared.

If you have any queries with the contents of this letter, please do not hesitate to get in touch on *school telephone number* or via email at *schoolrepresentative@gateshead.gov.uk*

Yours sincerely,
School representative

Appendix 7 – Stage 3a letter

Address block

Date:

Dear parent / guardian,

URGENT REQUIRES IMMEDIATE ATTENTION

Outstanding school lunch monies – Outstanding balance and failure to sign Payment Agreement

We contacted you by letter on *xx/xx/xxxx* requesting for you to attend a meeting to discuss the outstanding balance with *headteacher* on *dd/mm/yyyy* at *tt:tt*, which you failed to attend.

Although we have been unsuccessful in obtaining a signed Payment Agreement, you are still bound by its terms and conditions.

Failure to make payments towards the outstanding amount of **£AMOUNT** has resulted in Gateshead Council's Strategic Director of Corporate Services and Governance commencing debt recovery action.

Sending your child to school without a packed lunch and denying them access to a school meal is extremely serious. Therefore, this case is to be referred to Gateshead Council's Safeguarding Team.

***include this if the child continues to stay for school lunch*.**

If you have any queries with the contents of this letter, please do not hesitate to get in touch on *school telephone number* or via email at *schoolrepresentative@gateshead.gov.uk*

Yours sincerely,
School representative