



# **SCHOOL MEALS ARREARS PROCEDURE**

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## **Section 1: Introduction**

- 1.1 This document provides guidance to help schools manage the collection of school meals income, and procedures to follow when debts arise if parents/guardians fail to pay for school meals.

## **Section 2: General Information**

- 2.1 School meals must be paid for weekly in advance on a Monday morning (or first school day of the week if different).
- 2.2 Cheque payments can be accepted but must be made payable to 'St Helens Borough Council'.
- 2.3 Meals can be paid for in advance on a monthly or termly basis, if preferred.
- 2.4 Change should not be given to any parent/carer whose child is still in arrears.
- 2.5 Dinner registers must be updated accordingly for any children arriving late in a morning.
- 2.6 If a child has forgotten their packed lunch, schools should seek consent from the parent/guardian before providing the child with a school meal. In the event that consent cannot be obtained, it is a matter for schools to decide whether a meal should be provided. The cost of the meal will be charged to the school account, and therefore schools should seek to recover such cost from the parent/guardian.
- 2.7 Arrears must not be written off at the end of the academic year, they should be carried forward in the registers to the following year.
- 2.8 There will be a requirement for schools to send a list of all children in arrears at the end of each school term to the People's Services Finance Section (Appendix 6).
- 2.9 Milk money should be collected on a termly or annual basis, at the beginning of the term or academic year.
- 2.10 Refunds may be given where appropriate out of cash received providing they have been clearly recorded, authorised and receipted. Refunds should only be given in the following circumstances:
- when entitlement to free school meals overlaps a period when the parent/guardian has been paying for the meals; and
  - when parents/guardians have paid for meals termly in advance and are subsequently in credit at the end of the term due to pupil absences.
- 2.11 If payment has been received by cheque, please wait 2 weeks after depositing the payment before giving any cash refund to ensure that the cheque has cleared at the bank.
- 2.12 If payment has been received by credit/debit card via an online payment system, the credit must be refunded back to the original card via the online payment system. Cash refunds should not be given.

### **Section 3: Free School Meals**

- 3.1 Children in reception, year 1 and year 2 can receive a free school meal as part of the Universal Infant Free School Meals scheme (UIFSM's). Children in these year groups who require milk should still pay for milk unless they have an underlying entitlement to free school meals and appear on the official list provided by Education Benefits.
- 3.2 Children in other year groups should only receive free school meals if they have been confirmed as being entitled to free school meals by the Education Benefits team (confirmation either by inclusion on the official list or telephone call to Education Benefits). Pupils are only entitled to free school meals when a claim has been submitted on their behalf, and their eligibility has been verified by the school where they are enrolled or the Local Authority. From 1<sup>st</sup> April 2018 some children will be entitled to Transitional Protection – advice regarding this should be sought from the Education Benefits team.
- 3.3 Once a child is removed from the official list the parent/guardian must immediately start to pay for their school meals or make alternative provision.
- 3.4 Any apparent gaps in entitlement to free school meals should be checked with the Education Benefits section as sometimes entitlement can be backdated and any arrears therefore cancelled.

### **Section 4: Arrears Procedure**

- 4.1 A reminder letter should be sent to the parent/guardian on the first day of non-payment of meals (Appendix 1)
- 4.2 After 5 school days have passed without payment, a further letter should be sent which must include the period of the debt (Appendix 2 – Letter A).
- 4.3 After 10 school days have passed without payment, another letter should be sent by first class post. Again, this letter must include the period of the debt and where arrears are in excess of two weeks, and no attempt has been made to reduce the arrears, parents/guardians should be informed that they must make alternative arrangements for their child's midday meal until the arrears are cleared (Appendix 3 – Letter B).
- 4.4 If no payment has been received after 15 school days have passed, then the matter should be referred to People's Services Finance via [financegeneral@sthelens.gov.uk](mailto:financegeneral@sthelens.gov.uk). Arrears will only be pursued where the outstanding balance exceeds £100, except in exceptional circumstances where a lower amount may warrant action at the discretion of the Children's Services Finance Business Partner (Charlotte Turner). Exceptional circumstances may include repeated small arrears, safeguarding concerns, or patterns of non-payment that impact school operations. In general, arrears below £100 will not be actively followed up. To undertake this, the School Meals Arrears Referral Form (Appendix 5) must be completed and supplied together with copies of the three letters sent (see paragraphs 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3). On receipt, People's Services Finance will endeavour to process the arrears within two weeks (excluding school holidays).
- 4.5 If a parent/guardian makes arrangements to pay and the arrears reduce each week then there is no requirement to send the letters detailed above. As long as the

outstanding arrears are reducing, and future school meals are paid for in advance, school meals can continue to be provided.

- 4.6 All letters to parents must be on school letter-headed paper and must include the full name and address of the parent/carer. Copies should be kept of all letters sent along with a record of dates and notes of any conversations held.
- 4.7 Once a parent/guardian has been invoiced by the Council no further attempts at recovering the debt should be made by the school and no payments should be accepted by the school against this invoice. Methods of payment as stated on the invoice should be followed. A copy of the invoice will be sent to the school at which point the school should enter a credit to the value of the invoice on the dinner register against the child's name, and adjust the debit balance b/fwd on the Provision of School Meals and Milk form with supporting details (i.e. invoice number).
- 4.8 If the parent/guardian insists on paying at school please check with People's Services Finance for how to proceed.
- 4.9 If the parent/guardian requests that the child goes back onto paid school meals then the school must check with People's Services Finance that the previous arrears have been cleared.
- 4.10 If school becomes aware of any change in circumstances for a family which may have contributed to the non-payment of school meals, the family should be referred to the appropriate agencies e.g. Education Benefits Section, Education Welfare Service etc.
- 4.11 Once the Council's Income Section have exhausted all methods of recovering the outstanding arrears, the corporate Debt Recovery Policy will be followed to recover the debt. If the matter does proceed to court there may be a requirement for a representative from the school to attend and give evidence.
- 4.12 In addition to these procedures, schools may wish to contact parents/guardians by telephone or speak face to face on the playground to discuss arrangements to pay. Reminder messages may also be sent by a text messaging service.
- 4.13 If schools do not comply with the procedures in relation to school meals arrears, any resultant arrears will be charged to the school. All information relating to school meals arrears should be retained on file and handed over appropriately to staff replacements.

## **Section 5: Leavers**

- 5.1 If a child transfers to another school:
  - contact the new school if it is within the borough of St Helens and inform them of the level of arrears;
  - issue a letter to the parent/guardian requesting the arrears are cleared using first class post (Appendix 4 – Letter C)
  - if a child leaves no forwarding address, the new school should be contacted to request that the letter is passed on to the parent/guardian; and
  - if no payment is received within 10 school days of the child leaving, the debt should be referred to the People's Services Finance Section.

NB. The school meal debt does not transfer with the child.

5.2 With regard to Year 6 children:

- two weeks prior to the end of the school year a forecast of charges should be calculated and sent to every parent/guardian of Year 6 children;
- every attempt should be made to collect money before the end of term from any Year 6 child who is in arrears;
- during the first week of the new academic year in September, Letter C (Appendix 4) should be sent to any parent/guardian with outstanding arrears for their children; and
- if no payment is received within 10 school days, any outstanding debts for former Year 6 children should be referred People's Services Finance Section. Any arrears must be carried forward in the school dinner registers until advised otherwise.

## **Section 6: Adult Meals**

- 6.1 A member of staff requiring a school meal should be entered either in the class register or on a separate staff register.
- 6.2 Staff meals paid by the individual should be collected on a weekly basis and paid into the Council's account via the cash income system, or collected by an online payments system.
- 6.3 Duty meals provided for any staff should be paid for by the school budget. A request for journal transfer for the relevant amount should be sent to People's Services Finance who will arrange for the school delegated budget to be charged. Journal transfers should be requested at least every half term to cover the cost of these meals. **Cheque payments should not be raised from delegated budgets for school meals.**

## **Section 7: Provision of School Meals and Milk Reconciliation Sheets**

- 7.1 The reconciliation sheets must be completed on a weekly basis and returned to People's Services Finance.
- 7.2 Schools using the Parental Payments System are not required to submit a Reconciliation form as the information can be obtained electronically.

Schools using alternative online systems should submit a catering return with short manual reconciliation – it will not then be necessary to submit the School Meals and Milk Reconciliation.

- 7.3 If free school meals are awarded and backdated, any arrears in the dinner register need to be adjusted and the number of free/paid meals adjusted appropriately on the Provision of School Meals and Milk form.

## **Section 8: Banking Arrangements**

- 8.1 Registers should be accurately completed, up to date and reviewed and signed by the Headteacher on a weekly basis.
- schools using SIMS dinner money software should ensure that the Headteacher signs the weekly banking return and catering return; and
  - schools using the Parental Payments System should ensure that the Headteacher signs the dinner money records electronically on a weekly basis.
- 8.2 Total cash collected and banked should reconcile to the school meal records.
- 8.3 Every half term the Headteacher should confirm that cash/cheques received reconcile to the bank paying in records and evidence undertaking this review on the banking slip.
- 8.4 Monies should be banked on a regular basis, at least weekly, and large amounts of monies should not be left in the safe over the weekend.
- 8.5 Cash income forms should be completed and sent to the Income Section as soon as possible after completion by one of the following methods:
- faxed and original posted;
  - scanned and e-mailed, and original posted;
  - original sent via black bag; and
  - original posted
- 8.6 The income codes and Value Added Tax (VAT) indicator to be used are detailed below:

	Code	VAT Indicator
<b>Primary Schools:</b>		
Pupil Meals	AAZAB 8031	OTS
Pupil Milk	AAZAB 8016	OTS
Adult Meals (paid by individual) 15/07/20 – 12/01/21	AAZAB8030	DMS
Adult Meals (paid by individual)	AAZAB 8030	STD
<b>Special Schools:</b>		
Pupil Meals	ACZAB 8031	OTS
Pupil Milk	ACZAB 8016	OTS
Adult Meals (paid by individual) 15/07/20 – 12/01/21	ACZAB8030	DMS
Adult Meals (paid by individual)	ACZAB 8030	STD

**Reminder Letter**

School Name

CHILD'S NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

CLASS: \_\_\_\_\_

Date:

Dear Parent/Guardian

School meals must be paid for in advance on Monday mornings (or first school day of the week if different). Please send in £\_\_\_\_\_ dinner money tomorrow. If you have any queries please contact the school office. Cheques must be made payable to 'St Helens Borough Council'.

Yours sincerely

School Business Manager/School Office Manager



Letter A – After non-payment for 5 school days

*<School Letterhead>*

<Parent/Guardian full name>  
<Address line 1>  
<Address line 2>  
<Address line 3>  
<Address line 4>

Date: < \*\*/\*\*/\*\* >

Dear <Parent/Guardian's name>

Our records show that you have not paid dinner money for your child <Name> for the period < \*\*/\*\*/\*\* > to < \*\*/\*\*/\*\* >.

School meals currently cost <£\*\*.\*\*> and must be paid for in advance on a Monday morning.

As at < \*\*/\*\*/\*\* > your account is showing arrears of <£\*\*.\*\*>.

Please make arrangements to pay the outstanding arrears immediately. If you have any problems in making this payment please contact the school office.

Yours sincerely,

Headteacher

Letter B – After non-payment for 10 school days

*<School Letterhead>*

<Parent/Guardian full name>  
<Address line 1>  
<Address line 2>  
<Address line 3>  
<Address line 4>

Date: < \*\*/\*\*/ \*\* >

Dear <Parent/Guardian's name>

Our records show that you have not cleared dinner money arrears for your child <Name> despite a previous written request on < \*\*/\*\*/ \*\* >.

As at < \*\*/\*\*/ \*\* > your account is showing arrears of < £\*\*.\*\* > for the period < \*\*/\*\*/ \*\* > to < \*\*/\*\*/ \*\* >.

I must inform you that if payment is not received within 5 working days of the date of this letter I will have to refer you to the Council's Debt Recovery Section.

I am obliged to warn you that the debt recovery procedure can result in a summons to Court.

**Until the debt is cleared I am forced to instruct you to make alternative arrangements for your child's midday meal.**

It is with regret that this debt has caused action to be taken. Should you wish to discuss any issue regarding this debt please contact the school.

Yours sincerely,

Headteacher

Letter C – School Leavers

*<School Letterhead>*

<Parent/Guardian full name>  
<Address line 1>  
<Address line 2>  
<Address line 3>  
<Address line 4>

Date: < \*\*/ \*\*/ \*\* >

Dear <Parent/Guardian's name>

According to our records <Name> left this school on < \*\*/ \*\*/ \*\* >. At this date your school meals account is in arrears by <£ \*\* . \*\* > for the period < \*\*/ \*\*/ \*\* > to < \*\*/ \*\*/ \*\* >.

Please make arrangements to pay the outstanding arrears immediately. I must inform you that if payment is not received within 10 working days of the date of this letter I will have to refer you to the Council's Debt Recovery Section.

I am obliged to warn you that the debt recovery procedure can result in a summons to Court.

{ *School transfers within St Helens borough only – for information purposes, the details of this debt will be forwarded to your child's new school.* }

Should you wish to discuss any issue regarding this debt please contact the school.

Yours sincerely,

Headteacher

**School Meals Arrears Referral Form****SCHOOL:** \_\_\_\_\_

Debtor Details: (Person responsible for the payment of meals)	
Relationship to child	
Title: (Mr/Mrs/Miss/Other)	
Forenames(s):	
Surname(s):	
Address Line 1:	
Address Line 2:	
Address Line 3:	
Address Line 4:	
Postcode:	
Telephone Number:	
Mobile Number:	
Child(ren)'s Name(s):	
Amount of debt:	
Full period of debt:	

## School Meals Arrears Summary

**SCHOOL:** \_\_\_\_\_

**TERM:** \_\_\_\_\_

[illegible]