

Dinner Money Debt Policy



At Northfield, we are committed to ensuring equality of education and opportunity for all pupils, staff, parents and carers receiving services from the school, irrespective of race, gender, disability, faith or religion or socio-economic background. All staff are expected to uphold and promote the fundamental principles of British values, and as such, our school is fully committed to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of all our pupils including protection against radicalisation. We therefore aim to develop a culture of inclusion and diversity in which all those connected to the school feel proud of their identity and able to participate fully in school life. Our core purpose, values and ethos is embodied in our mission that everyone takes:

1. Background

The School Dinner Money Debt Policy has been adopted to ensure a consistent and fair approach to debt incurred by parents/carers whose children take school dinners.

2. Provision of School Meals

Parents/carers of pupils within the school have the choice of paying for a school lunch for their child or providing a healthy packed lunch. All school meals are prepared by cooks from Nottinghamshire County Council's School Catering team and meet the stringent guidelines laid down by the government regarding the provision of healthy school meals. We provide a main course each day* and work on a three-week menu cycle which changes in October and April each year.

*Daily menu choices are subject to change without notice.

Free School Meals are available to those who qualify and we believe it is important that those who are eligible take up their child's entitlement so that they can receive a cooked meal each day. Further information on entitlement to Free School Meals (FSM) may be obtained from the school office or online at

<http://www.nottinghamshire.gov.uk/education/school-meals/free-school-meals-and-milk> If

a child's entitlement to free school meals expires or the parents/carers' personal circumstances change, then the parent/carer **must** provide a packed lunch or make payment in advance for a school dinner. Any parent/carer requiring help with registering for a free school meal claim can request assistance from the school office team who will be happy to help.

Families that are moving into Nottinghamshire and are registered as Free School Meals in another Local Authority **must** make a new application to Nottinghamshire County Council. Entitlement does not automatically transfer from other authorities. Failure to apply could incur meal charges if meals are taken prior to a successful application, which you will be required to pay for in full. We are not able to back date FSM claims.

3. **Cost of School Meals**

School meals are available to children at a current cost of £2.95** per day or at no cost if

- a) the child is in Reception to Year 2 and therefore qualifies for a Universal Infant Free School Meal
- or
- b) the child qualifies for Free School Meals entitlement and the school has been notified by Nottinghamshire County Council's Grants and Benefits Team.

School meals **must** be paid for in advance. Any revision to the price of meals will be notified to parents/carers with sufficient notice to the new charge taking effect.

**Price at December 2023 - subject to change each year.

4. **Payment for School Meals**

Dinners may be paid on a weekly, half termly or termly basis online via EduSpot (School Money). Any parent/carer requiring help with registering for online payment systems can request support from the school office team.

The school will ensure that all dinner money collected is banked in a timely manner in accordance with the School's Financial Regulations which are periodically inspected by Nottinghamshire County Council's audit department.

5. **Management of School Meal Debt**

To ensure that the school's budget is not adversely affected by the cost of school meal debt the Governors consider the fairest system to all families is to pursue a 'Zero Tolerance' approach as we are unable to carry these unmet costs. Although this may seem harsh to some parents/carers it is important that the school budget is spent for the benefit of **all** our pupils and not to cover the debt of a small number. Therefore, if a child arrives at school without a packed lunch, sufficient money is not present in your child's online account, or if a child's entitlement to FSM has ceased, the school will send a text and telephone the parent/carer as a reminder, in the first instance, to establish if alternative arrangements have been made. In some instances, the school may allow a meal to be provided where it is felt that this is a temporary situation e.g. forgotten lunchbox.

If a child takes a school meal which has not been paid for, an email or text detailing how much is owed will be sent to the parent during the week requesting immediate payment to the school. 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 due to the parent/carer experiencing exceptional hardship, the parent/carer should either apply for FSM or speak confidentially to the Head Teacher or Office Manager. The school will support parents/carers as much as possible in these circumstances. However, if parents/carers make no attempt to contact or co-operate with the school then parents can expect no further assistance from the school.

When the debt exceeds £14.75 (five meals) for a child a formal letter (Appendix A) will be sent to the parent/carer immediately informing them to provide their child with a packed lunch to prevent further arrears accumulating. If the child is not provided with the requested packed lunch or the parent/carer cannot be contacted, the school will provide a simple lunch only for a maximum of **five** days which will be charged for.

If the debt exceeds £29.50 (five cooked meals and five simple lunches) for a child and/or action proves unsuccessful in securing dinner money arrears, the school will inform the local Safeguarding Team and other appropriate agencies. The school will then send a final letter (Appendix B) with an invoice for the total amount of debt stating that if the amount is not settled, advice will be sought from Nottinghamshire County Council's Legal Team for assistance with recovery of the debt. This may result in small claims court action.

6. Monitoring and Recovery of School Meal Debts

At each meeting of the Governing Body Finance & Personnel Committee, the Head Teacher or Office Manager will provide Governors with details of any outstanding dinner debt over £29.50 per child and the current position with regard to such debt. The aim of the school's dinner money policy is to support parents/carers in minimising any opportunity for debt balances to build up.

The school does, however, reserve the right to begin legal proceedings to recover outstanding school meal debt and inform the Local Authority that parents / carers are failing to provide a child with a suitable meal at lunchtime.

Where necessary the school, along with support from the Local Authority, will utilise the small claims court, in which case parents/carers will be liable for all costs incurred in addition to the original debt. Such measures will be taken even after a child no longer attends the school if they have left not having paid all money owed.

LA Policy Adopted by the Finance and Personnel Committee Oct 2023

Policy Reviewed Oct 2024

Appendix A

Insert address

Insert date

Dear Mr / Mrs

Notice Letter of School Meal Debt

In line with our Dinner Money Debt Policy we are writing to inform you that your child (Name) has now built up a debt of a full school week of school meals and you now owe £?? Due to this you need to contact the school office **as a matter of urgency** to discuss ways you can make the necessary arrangements to pay this amount off.

You will also need to provide your child with a packed lunch with immediate effect to avoid any further arrears accumulating, as school dinners have now been suspended until the account is settled.

We need to remind you of the details in our policy which is attached. If you make no attempt to either pay this in full or contact us to discuss payment arrangements with us, we will seek advice from Nottinghamshire County Council's Legal Team for assistance with recovery of the debt which may result in small claims court action.

You need to be very aware that school is not obliged to provide a school meal where advance payments or authorisation of Free School Meals have not been received. Failure by you to either provide a meal for your child, or contact us to discuss ways forward will automatically create a serious concern, and should the debt exceed £29.50, which is two weeks of meals (one week of school dinners and one week of a packed lunch) we will then discuss this with the Safeguarding Team.

Please be assured we are here to support you but it is essential you do make contact with us immediately in order to avoid it being necessary for any further action to be taken by us.

Many thanks for giving this matter your urgent attention.

Yours sincerely,

Enc. School Meals Debt Policy

Appendix B

Insert address

Insert date

Dear Mr / Mrs

Final Notice Letter of School Meal Debt

In line with our Dinner Money Debt Policy, we wrote to you on **???** (date of first letter) to inform you of an outstanding dinner money debt.

We are writing to inform you that the debt for your child (**Name**) is now **£??** (as detailed in the attached invoice). As you have failed to make contact with school to address this, and in accordance with section 5 of the Dinner Money Debt Policy (which was also sent to you with our last correspondence), the school will inform the local safeguarding team and will be contacting Nottinghamshire County Council's legal team for assistance with the recovery of the debt. This may result in small claims court action and / or further costs.

It is therefore strongly advisable that you contact the school immediately to settle your debt and prevent any further action.

Yours sincerely,

Enc. Invoice