

SUBJECT:	PRIMARY SCHOOL MEAL DEBT RECOVERY POLICY AND PROCEDURE
MEETING:	CABINET
DATE:	4TH JULY 2018
DIVISION/WARDS AFFECTED:	ALL

NON-PUBLICATION – not applicable

1. PURPOSE:

This report outlines the issues surrounding school meal debt management within primary schools. A report on the matter was considered at the Children and Young People Select Committee on the 17th May 2018 and feedback from the meeting is provided in this report.

This report seeks a Cabinet decision on how primary sector school meal debt should be managed and accounted for in the new academic year.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

2.1 That debt associated with the provision to primary sector children of school meals and other chargeable services (breakfast club, school trips etc.) be managed using the following policy and procedure.

1. That no action be taken to recover debt until the value of the debt has exceeded £10.
2. That the person responsible for paying for the service (likely the parent or guardian) receive written advice of the debt on 3 occasions over a period of 3 weeks.
3. In the event of the debt remaining outstanding that the person responsible for paying for the service be invited to a meeting to discuss why the debt exists.
4. That where appropriate the person be offered terms by which the debt might be settled over a period of time.
5. That the Chief Officer for CYP or Head of Operations be delegated authority, in consultation with the Cabinet member for CYP, to waive the debt or alternatively to withdraw the service, this action not to be taken until the person responsible for paying for the service has been advised and given one week to resolve the matter to the satisfaction of the council.

2.2 That any debt that is ultimately not recovered and subsequently written off for primary sector school meals and breakfast club (when it starts in the new academic year) be accounted for through the LEA budget rather than the individual school budget.

2.3 That all other debt be accounted for through the individual school budgets (e.g. school trips)

3. KEY ISSUES:

This matter was referred to the CYP Select Committee on the 17th May 2018. The link below opens the agenda, reports and drfat minutes for the committee:

<https://democracy.monmouthshire.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=136&MId=2533&Ver=4>

In summary the Select Committee acknowledged the sensitivity of the managing debt in these circumstances and felt that a child should not be denied a meal.

During the discussion officers confirmed that before the recommended process is instigated the school staff will contact the parent/guardian to seek to recover any debt. In the first instance it is quite likely that the school may have a more detailed knowledge of the child and family so will seek to resolve the problem informally.

4. OPTIONS APPRAISAL

There are options surrounding how debt management might be approached. These would be permutations on the speed and nature of the recovery policy and procedure. For example an alternative policy would be to not pursue debt recovery and at the other end of the spectrum would be to instigate formal debt recovery as soon as an account moves into deficit. No debt recovery might result in increased debt levels overall if it promoted a view amongst some parents that there are no implications of allowing their account to move into debt. Whilst moving to debt recovery at an early stage might appear unnecessarily draconian and resource hungry as accounts may dip in and out of debt but overall remain balanced.

The process recommended coupled with earlier intervention at school level is seen as an appropriate level of response to ensure debt does not escalate but also allows discretion to take account of circumstance surrounding individual cases.

5. EVALUATION CRITERIA

The level of debt will be monitored by officers with any major deterioration in debt levels being reported through the financial performance monitoring and reporting undertaken during the year.

6. REASONS:

In financial terms this matter should not be exaggerated. As at the 8th May 2018 the level of debt outstanding for primary school meals was £8,335 ranging from just over £1,000 in one school to £12 in another. The annual income generated by the primary school meal service is around £953,000 so the current debt level is less than 1% of gross income.

This policy and procedure is intended to offer a pragmatic and incremental approach to debt recovery offering several stages along with flexibility and discretion in arriving at an appropriate way forward for individual cases.

7. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

As at the 8th May 2018 the level of debt outstanding for primary school meals was £8,335 ranging from just over £1,000 in one school to £12 in another. The annual income generated by the primary school meal service is around £953,000 so the current debt level is less than 1% of gross income.

8. WELLBEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS IMPLICATIONS (INCORPORATING EQUALITIES, SUSTAINABILITY, SAFEGUARDING AND CORPORATE PARENTING):

APPENDIX 1

9. CONSULTEES:

CYP select committee
Cabinet
SLT

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS:

Report to CYP select committee on 17th May 2018

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