

Good Practice Principles for School Meal Debt Management

Purpose

These principles have been developed by COSLA, with partners from across Local Government (ADES, ADES Resources Network, ASSIST FM, Directors of Finance, and IRRV). The purpose of these principles is to promote good practice in the management of school meal debt, whilst retaining a level of flexibility to enable local authorities to design and implement approaches which align with the unique needs and circumstances of their communities. Decisions around school meal debt management, including all aspects of policy and practice, remain at the discretion of each local authority.

These principles may be useful for supporting the review and development of local authority school meal debt policy and practice, as well as supporting effective implementation on an ongoing basis. The intended audience for these principles is local authority staff across a range of departments (including, for example, education, catering, finance and debt collection) as well as Head Teachers, class teachers and other school staff.

Background and context

Aberlour research

In 2022, children's charity Aberlour conducted research into the prevalence of school meal debt in Scotland. They published a series of reports, authored by Professor Morag Treanor (Institute for Social Policy, Housing, Equalities Research at Heriot-Watt University), outlining their findings and conclusions based on returns they received from two Freedom of Information (FOI) requests made to Scottish Local Authorities. These FOI requests were made in December 2021 and April 2022.

Social Justice and Social Security Committee report

The FOI data informed Aberlour's written evidence to the Scottish Parliament's Social Justice and Social Security Committee's inquiry on low income and debt. The Committee's report, "Robbing Peter to Pay Paul: Low income and the debt trap", was published in early July 2022. Key findings, based on Aberlour's analysis, included:

- There are approximately 25,000 children in Scotland whose families are in some level of school meal debt because they cannot afford for their children to eat.
- Because most secondary schools use a cashless payment system, it is difficult for debt to accrue, and therefore the level of 'hidden hunger' that may exist amongst secondary pupils to be determined.
- Over £1m is owed in school meal debt across Scotland.

The report included the following key recommendations for Scottish Government, COSLA, and local authorities in relation to school meal debt:

- We recommend that the Scottish Government works with COSLA and local authorities to write-off individual school meal debt to allow families a clean slate as they move into the new school year and possible new school setting.
- We urge the Scottish Government to implement its free school meal expansion as soon as possible.
- We recommend that COSLA works with local authorities on a national school meal policy, which is founded on human rights and removes stigma, to ensure that children are treated with dignity in a consistent and fair way.

Local Government survey

COSLA, in partnership with ASSIST FM, ADES, ADES Resources Network, Directors of Finance, and IRRV, developed a survey for councils to complete on the subject of school meal debt, with the intention of gaining a better understanding of the situation and context surrounding school meal debt policy and practice; the level of need across the country; and the use of the power to grant discretionary free school meals. This survey was disseminated in early August 2022, with responses requested by the end of September.

28 local authorities responded, with key findings from this exercise including:

- Councils are aware of the issue of school meal debt, and many are currently actively considering how best to approach this in terms of policy and practice.
- A small number of local authorities have recently chosen to write off existing school meal debt in their area.
- School meal debt management spans departments. Education, catering, and finance departments within local authorities, as well as individual school staff, can play a role in how this is approached.
- Whilst in the majority of cases school meal debt accrues because families are experiencing financial hardship, it was identified that this is not the case in every situation. A number of other reasons behind the accrual of debt were highlighted, including pupils forgetting or losing money, and families waiting to make large, one-off payments to clear debt.
- Some councils exercise their ability to grant discretionary free school meals, in instances where a family does not meet the eligibility criteria but is in need. Cost and budgetary constraints were identified as barriers to this being used by some areas.

Development of principles

In November 2022, COSLA's Children and Young People Board considered the issue of school meal debt, including the research and reports outlined above and the findings from the Local Government survey, and agreed to the development of good practice principles.

Whilst Local Government is fully committed to ensuring positive and effective approaches are in place to support children, young people and their families, the current financial and budgetary pressures facing councils are severe and will necessarily impact on what is possible. The Scottish Government's Resource Spending Review presented a flat cash position for Local Government, with no additional core funding for Local

Government in the next three years, representing a 7% cut in real terms over that period. The 2023/24 Budget also indicates a continuation of the significant funding pressure faced by Local Government for at least the past decade (Local Government core settlement has seen a real terms reduction of 15.2% since 2013/14).

The pressure on core budgets as a result of these real-terms cuts and increased demand, compounded by inflation, the cost of living crisis and the impact of Covid-19, is becoming increasingly visible and leaves councils with no alternative than to make difficult choices about service funding levels. This will necessarily impact on what funds can be made available to support families in the context of school meal debt, though this remains a priority.

Good Practice Principles

- 1) Meeting the needs; upholding the rights; and supporting the welfare of children, young people, and their families in line with their individual circumstances should be of paramount concern in the design and implementation of local authorities' school meal debt policy and practice. Consideration should be given to how the views of children, young people and their families can be sought and drawn upon to help shape local authority policy and practice.
- 2) Local authorities' approaches to school meal debt management, including all aspects of policy and practice, should be compassionate, proportionate and seek to minimise as far as possible the stigmatisation of children, young people, and their families.
- 3) Processes for school meal debt management should be as clear and accessible as possible. Where barriers are identified, e.g. parents/carers face difficulty navigating online systems, consideration should be given to what support can be provided to address this.
- 4) A co-ordinated approach should be taken to designing and implementing school meal debt policy and practice. The appropriate role of relevant departments (e.g. education, catering, finance, and revenues & benefits) within local authorities, as well as individual school staff, should be considered, as well as how they should work together.
- 5) Local authorities should consider setting a threshold at which unpaid sums will formally become 'debt' and be treated as such. A threshold of around one month's worth of meals is suggested, based on the fact that some families choose to clear debt after each pay-day.
- 6) Local authorities should consider undertaking a routine review of families' summary debt position, to reduce the risk of families accumulating large debts without the authority or school being aware of this, and enable the timely provision of support where this is needed.

- 7) Consideration should be given to effective communication practices to ensure that parents/carers receive the right information, at the right time, in an accessible manner, from the most suitable person.
- 8) Consideration should be given and efforts made to promote, maximise and address any barriers to take-up of free school meals (and other available support e.g. the school clothing grant; free bus travel for under 22s) for those families who are eligible. A number of local authorities have auto-award systems in place whereby free school meals are automatically applied to families who receive other qualifying benefits, and this approach should be considered as a way to support access and take-up. The Child Poverty Action Group's [Cost Of The School Day](#) project also provides practical tips, training and materials to reduce costs for families.
- 9) When staff become aware that a household is facing financial or other difficulties, efforts should be made to ensure that wherever possible families are signposted to, and, if appropriate, supported to access, available sources of support which are relevant to their needs. This could include:
 - Financial advice and support services
 - Income maximisation/ welfare rights support
 - Cost of living support, including cash payments
 - Employability support
 - Social work or care support
 - Support for unpaid carers
- 10) All local authorities have the power to grant discretionary free school meals to pupils who do not meet the national eligibility criteria, where families are experiencing financial hardship. Consideration should be given to whether and/or how the local authority will use the provision of discretionary free school meals as a mechanism for supporting families facing financial hardship who are ineligible for free school meals. Further information on approaches to discretionary provision can be found in the annexe.
- 11) Decisions on clearing school meal debt across an authority should remain at the discretion of each local authority.
- 12) Consideration should be given to the range of approaches and mechanisms that could be used to support families or clear debts in particular cases where a need is identified, within the flexibilities and discretion afforded to local authorities and Head Teachers. For example, consideration could be given to:
 - Using school hardship funds or Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) to support discretionary meal provision or debt clearance in particular cases;
 - Flexible use of available free school meals, accounting for absence and take-up rates amongst pupils who are registered for FSM.

Annexe: Discretionary Free School Meals

Local authorities have the power to grant discretionary free school meals to pupils who do not meet the nationally set criteria for free school meal provision, but where financial hardship is identified. Decisions around the use of this power, including whether it is exercised; the process for decision-making; and the criteria that will be applied or circumstances in which discretionary meals will be awarded, remain at the discretion of each local authority, who are best-placed to develop their approach based on their knowledge of local needs.

This power is currently not exercised by every local authority, and differing approaches are in place amongst those authorities who do use it. It is also recognised that current approaches may need to be amended as a result of the challenging financial situation faced by councils. This annexe provides examples of criteria that is applied/ circumstances in which discretionary meals are or have previously been awarded in different areas. This is not intended to be prescriptive, but rather provide a reference point for local authorities to draw upon as they consider their approach.

To support the consistent and equitable use of discretionary free school meals, local authorities may wish to consider developing an LA-wide approach and/or policy, where this is not already in place. Consideration should be given to how partners – Head Teachers and other school staff, central local authority teams, and wider agencies – will work together to support the use of this power and what the process for decision making will be.

Examples

The following examples of circumstances in which discretionary free school meals are or have previously been awarded, were provided by local authorities within survey returns:

- Family income is only slightly over the national threshold for free school meal entitlement
- A pupil is living independently
- A pupil is living in supported accommodation
- Immigration status means the family cannot receive help from the government
- A pupil is a refugee
- Family is waiting for their first Universal Credit payment
- Parent/carer qualifies for Housing, Council Tax Benefit or school clothing grant
- Parent/carer qualifies for Pension Credit
- A kinship care arrangement is in place
- Recent death of a parent/carer or sibling
- Illness of a parent/carer or sibling
- Parent/carer has recently been made redundant



- Parent/carer has recently experienced a major unplanned loss of income
- Parent/carer has recently received a custodial prison sentence
- Parent/carer has vacated the family home in an emergency e.g. fire, domestic violence
- Family relationship breakdown impacting on income