Compassion Courage Cooperation

Draft Wittersham Church of England Primary School Meals Debt Policy 2026 (yet to be ratified by Governors)

We strive to cooperate and work alongside all members of our community to feel valued, nurtured, and empowered as they embark upon their journey to become the very best that God intended. Throughout their voyage of discovery with us, we ensure all children are provided with a rich curriculum, and experiences that promote courage and a strong moral purpose underpinned by our Christian values; preparing them to become compassionate citizens within our rural community and the wider world.

Revision History

Date	By	Description	Review date
Sept 2024	S Coulson	Update	Sept 2025
Sept 2025	S Coulson	Pricing update	Sept 2026
Sept 2026	S Coulson	Pricing update and revised debt procedures	September 2027

'On a voyage of discovery: learning and growing together in the light of God.'

Purpose of the Policy

This policy has been written to ensure that Wittersham Church of England Primary School has a clear, fair and consistent approach to the payment of school meals and the management of any outstanding school meal debt.

The school recognises that families can occasionally forget to make a payment and that financial circumstances can change unexpectedly. We will therefore seek to work sensitively and constructively with families while also ensuring that school funds intended for pupils' education are not routinely used to meet unpaid meal costs.

The policy aims to make expectations clear to parents and carers, ensure that debt is identified and addressed promptly, and provide a consistent process for the school to follow.

Free School Meals

Children who are entitled to Universal Infant Free School Meals in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 will continue to receive a school meal free of charge.

Children who are eligible for benefit-related Free School Meals will also continue to receive a school meal free of charge.

Parents and carers who believe their child may be eligible for benefit-related Free School Meals are encouraged to contact the school office for advice and support with checking eligibility and applying through the appropriate local authority process.

Payment for School Meals

From the start of Term 1 of the 2026-2027 academic year, the cost of a school meal is £3.00 per meal, equivalent to £15.00 for a full five-day week.

The revised price was approved by the Full Governing Board following consideration of increasing costs associated with providing high-quality school meals, including food prices, supplier costs and staffing expenses.

The school remains committed to providing nutritious, freshly prepared meals which offer good value for money and maintain the quality, variety and nutritional balance expected for our children.

The £3.00 charge applies only to children who pay for school meals. Children entitled to Universal Infant Free School Meals or benefit-related Free School Meals will continue to receive their meals free of charge.

Payments for school meals must be made through SCOPAY. Parents and carers are responsible for ensuring that sufficient funds are available on their child's account and are encouraged to keep the account in credit wherever possible.

Management of School Meal Debt

School meal balances will be monitored regularly. Where an account falls into arrears, the school will contact the parent or carer to advise them of the outstanding balance and request that the account is brought back into credit.

Before progressing debt action, the school will check that:

- The child is not entitled to Universal Infant Free School Meals or benefit-related Free School Meals for the relevant period.
- Payments made by the parent or carer have been correctly credited to the account.
- There is no known administrative error affecting the balance.
- Any communication or agreed payment arrangement with the family has been taken into account.

£20 School Meal Debt Limit

- A maximum school meal debt of £20 per child will be permitted.
- When a child's outstanding school meal balance reaches £20:
- The parent or carer will be contacted and informed that the £20 debt limit has been reached.
- No further paid school meals will normally be provided until the outstanding balance has been cleared or an agreed payment arrangement has been made with the school.
- Parents and carers will be asked to provide their child with a suitable packed lunch each day until the account is cleared or an agreed arrangement is in place.
- Once the outstanding balance has been cleared, the child may resume having paid school meals.
- Where a family is experiencing genuine financial difficulty, parents and carers are strongly encouraged to contact the school as soon as possible. Conversations will be handled sensitively and confidentially.
- In exceptional circumstances, the school may agree an appropriate repayment plan.
- Any arrangement must be agreed with the Headteacher or Finance Officer and adhered to.
- The school will support families to check whether their child may be eligible for benefit-related Free School Meals.

A child will not be left without food because of an outstanding debt. If a child arrives at school without a packed lunch after paid school meals have been suspended, the school will ensure that the child is provided with an appropriate lunch that day and will contact the parent or carer. The cost of any chargeable meal provided will remain

payable and will be added to the outstanding balance.

Debt Management Procedure

Stage 1 - Account falls into arrears

When an account first falls into arrears, the school will check the account and send or make a gentle reminder to the parent or carer, advising them of the outstanding balance and asking them to bring the account back into credit.

Stage 2 - Debt continues to increase

If payment is not received and the debt continues to increase, a further written reminder will be issued. Parents and carers will be encouraged to contact the school promptly if they are experiencing difficulty making payment.

Stage 3 - Debt reaches £20

When the balance reaches £20, the parent or carer will be informed that the school meal debt limit has been reached. Paid school meals will normally be suspended and a packed lunch will need to be provided until the debt is cleared or a repayment arrangement has been agreed.

Stage 4 - Continued or unresolved debt

Where a debt remains outstanding despite reminders and attempts by the school to resolve the matter:

- A formal written reminder will be issued requesting payment.
- The Headteacher or Finance Officer may contact the parent or carer directly to discuss the outstanding debt.
- Where appropriate, an agreed repayment arrangement may be put in place.
- If there is no engagement with the school and the debt remains unpaid, the matter may be escalated in accordance with the school's financial and debt-recovery procedures.
- The school reserves the right to take appropriate steps to recover outstanding monies.

At all stages, the school will seek to work constructively with families. The priority is to ensure that children are appropriately provided for while protecting school funds and applying this policy fairly and consistently.

Financial Difficulty and Support

The school understands that families may experience periods of financial difficulty. Parents and carers who are struggling to pay for school meals should contact the school

as early as possible rather than allowing debt to continue to increase.

The school will treat such conversations sensitively and confidentially and may, where appropriate:

- Check whether the child may be eligible for benefit-related Free School Meals.
- Signpost the family to appropriate sources of support.
- Agree a reasonable repayment arrangement in exceptional circumstances.
- Consider any relevant individual circumstances before further debt-recovery action is taken.

An agreed repayment arrangement does not remove the debt. Parents and carers are expected to maintain the agreed payments and keep in contact with the school if their circumstances change.

Monitoring

The Finance Officer will monitor school meal balances regularly and will communicate with parents and carers where accounts fall into arrears.

Significant or persistent debts may be brought to the attention of the Headteacher. The Governing Board will maintain appropriate oversight of the school's financial procedures.

Review

This policy will be reviewed annually, or sooner if there are changes to meal pricing, funding arrangements, school financial procedures or relevant statutory/local authority guidance.

Appendix A - Gentle Debt Reminder

Dear Parent / Carer,

This is a reminder that, according to our records, there is currently an outstanding balance of £[amount] on your child's school meal account.

School meals should be paid for through SCOPAY and we ask parents and carers to keep accounts in credit wherever possible. Please arrange payment of the outstanding balance as soon as possible.

Our School Meals Debt Policy sets a maximum debt limit of £20 per child. If the balance reaches £20, paid school meals will normally be suspended until the debt has been cleared or an agreed payment arrangement has been made with the school.

If you are experiencing any difficulty making payment, please contact the school office. We will be happy to discuss this with you sensitively and confidentially and can also help you check whether your child may be eligible for Free School Meals.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter.

Yours sincerely

Finance Officer
Wittersham Church of England Primary School

Appendix B - £20 Debt Limit / Formal Reminder

Dear Parent / Carer,

According to our records, the outstanding balance on your child's school meal account is £[amount]. The account has now reached or exceeded the school's £20 school meal debt limit.

In accordance with the School Meals Debt Policy, no further paid school meals will normally be provided until the outstanding balance has been cleared or an agreed payment arrangement has been made with the school.

Please therefore arrange payment through SCOPAY as soon as possible. Until the account has been cleared or an arrangement agreed, please provide your child with a suitable packed lunch each day.

If your child arrives at school without a packed lunch, they will not be left without food. The school will ensure that an appropriate lunch is provided that day; however, the cost of any chargeable meal will remain payable and will be added to the outstanding balance.

If you are experiencing financial difficulty, please contact the school office as soon as possible. We will treat the matter sensitively and confidentially and can discuss whether a repayment arrangement may be appropriate. We can also support you to check whether your child may be eligible for Free School Meals.

If the debt remains unpaid and there is no engagement with the school, the matter may be escalated in accordance with the school's financial and debt-recovery procedures.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter.

Yours sincerely

Mrs Stella Coulson
Headteacher