Item 4

28th September 2023

Glasgow City Council

Education Skills and Early Years Committee

Report by Executive Director of Education

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UPDATE ON SCHOOL MEAL DEBT PRINCIPLES

Purpose of Report:

To update members on the application of good practice principles for school meal debt management and how these principles are being applied within Glasgow schools.

Recommendations:

Committee is asked to note the update to members on the application of good practice principles for school meal debt management and how these principles are being applied within Glasgow schools.

Ward No(s): Citywide: ✓

Local member(s) advised: Yes ☐ No ☐ consulted: Yes ☐ No ☐

***PLEASE NOTE THE FOLLOWING**:*

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The aim of this report is to update members on the application of good practice principles for School meal debt management and how these principles are being applied within Glasgow Schools.

1.2 The good practice principles for school meal debt management were developed by COSLA, with partners from across Local Government (ADES, ADES Resources Network, ASSIST FM, Directors of Finance, and IRRV). The purpose of the principles was 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.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 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.

2.2 Social Justice and Social Security Committee report

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 that over £1m was owed in school meal debt across Scotland, with 25,000 children whose families were in some level of debt,

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

- 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.
- That free school meal expansion is expanded as soon as possible.
- 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.

2.4 Local Government Survey

A local government survey conducted in early August 2022 had the following amongst the key findings;

- A small number of local authorities have recently chosen to write off existing school meal debt in their area.
- 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 exercised their ability to grant discretionary free school meals, in instances where a family did not meet the eligibility criteria but was in need. Cost and budgetary constraints were identified as barriers to this being used by some areas.

3 DEVELOPMENT OF PRINCIPLES

3.1 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. Glasgow was heavily involved in the creation of the principles though the various networks.

3.2 Families are facing pressures due to the cost of living increases, and this compounded with increased demand for council services is becoming increasingly visible and leads to Council's having difficult decisions about service funding levels. This may have an impact on what funds can be made available to support families in the context of school meal debt, though helping those families most in need will remain a priority.

3.3 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.

4 GLASGOW

4.1 Our own principles in the management of debt are outlined below. Schools should run reports from ParentPay showing current balances per child, at least once per month. This housekeeping allows debt balances to be reviewed on a regular basis and to highlight issues at an early stage.

4.2 Headteacher / Admin discuss report and agree next actions. Records of these decisions should be maintained for audit purposes and to identify recurrent non-payment. Attention should be paid in terms of debt levels across sibling groups. This part of the process is devolved to schools as schools know their individual families best and know what individual actions may generate the best response.

4.3 When any debt reaches £20 a letter, or a text, will be sent out to the family from the school, At this stage the school should assess whether the family is experiencing any financial hardship. An offer of a meeting with a Financial Inclusion Service Officer (FISO) would be offered at this stage. It may also be useful to signpost parents to other appropriate agencies that may be able to assist them apply for relevant benefits/grants.

4.4 Our threshold is less than the month in order that services are offered at an earlier stage, and to hopefully stop larger levels of debt accruing.

4.5 If the child continues to arrive at school without money or the ParentPay account has not had any funds added to it within a reasonable time, a reminder will be issued and the schools would use all appropriate contacts/supports to help parent/carer to ensure that the debt does not escalate further. (A reasonable time should be determined on an individual basis by the head teacher and a record of the decision should be retained).

4.6 There will be another series of reminders between the school and the parent/carers until the debt reaches £100 and at this stage the debt will be referred to be raised as a corporate invoice from our Customer and Business Services. At this point, the head teacher is confirming to proceed. The school can ask for the debt to be considered as hardship and a process has been agreed for this which meets internal audit guidelines.

4.7 Some schools have followed this process and have asked for the debt to be considered for write off due to the death of a parent or carer or a delay in the receipt of benefit entitlement. These will be submitted by the school to Headquarters for agreement by the Head of Resources. The numbers applying for discretion have been relatively low, This may be as a result of schools sorting issues locally or the impact of the recent cancellation of all meal debt beyond one month in March 2023.

4.8 At no point will a child be refused a meal if they have no credit on their parent pay account.

4.9 Any parent who continues to accumulate debt and has not paid the GCC invoice will be indicated on debt reports with an increased debt level, i.e. £120, £140 etc. Schools should continue to monitor the balance.

4.10 It is important that once the debt level reaches the £100 threshold, and an invoice is issued, there is clear communication between the school, the parent and the CBS Hub on any payments received. All documented communication (ie emails and notes of telephone calls) should be maintained for audit purposes.

4.11 When a pupil leaves a school any outstanding debt should be cleared within Parentpay otherwise an invoice will be raised for all outstanding debt.

4.12 Sometimes language can be a barrier. Parentpay is only in English and schools use various apps to support the translation to the language of the parent/carers. This is devolved to schools as they will know best in terms of how to communicate with any families.

5 GLASGOW WRITE OFF

5.1 At Council on 30th March 2023 Council agreed to write off levels of debt held centrally. The use of reserves was used to write off debt where the debt is over and above the equivalent of the financial value of one month’s worth of meals.

5.2 Following on from this there was a renewed focus on ensuring that schools have in place the process for debt management to ensure that debt will not accumulate to the prior levels.

5.3 This write off was in line with principle 5 of COSLA's Good Practice Principles for School Meal Debt Management,

6 POLICY AND RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

Resource Implications:

Financial:	Any financial implications would have to be met from existing budgets.
Legal:	N/A
Personnel:	N/A
Procurement:	N/A

Council Strategic Plan: Specify which Grand Challenge (s) and Mission (s) the proposal supports. Where appropriate the relevant Commitment can also be listed.

Grand Challenge 1 - Reduce poverty and inequality in in our communities

Mission 2 – Meet the learning and care needs of children and their families before and through school

Grand Challenge 2 - Increase opportunity and prosperity for all our cities

Mission 3 - Raise attainment amongst children and young people

Equality and Socio-Economic Impacts:

Does the proposal support the Council's Equality Outcomes 2021-25? Please specify.	N/A
What are the potential equality impacts as a result of this report?	N/A

Please highlight if the policy/proposal will help address socio-economic disadvantage.	N/A

Climate Impacts:

Does the proposal support any Climate Plan actions? Please specify:	N/A
What are the potential climate impacts as a result of this proposal?	N/A
Will the proposal contribute to Glasgow's net zero carbon target?	N/A

Privacy and Data Protection Impacts:

Are there any potential data protection impacts as a result of this report	No
If Yes, please confirm that a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) has been carried out	

7 RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Committee is asked to note the update to members on the application of good practice principles for school meal debt management and how these principles are being applied within Glasgow schools.