

Three Counties Academy Trust



# School Meal Provisions and Debt Management Policy

## #F16

Last updated: 01 September 2023

Review Date: 31 August 2026

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## **Statement of intent**

Three Counties Academy Trust (TCAT) is committed to ensuring equal opportunities for all pupils, regardless of financial circumstances, and has established the following policy and procedures to ensure that no child is discriminated against in any TCAT school.

The Governing Board is responsible for ensuring that school meal provisions are accessible to all pupils and that procedures are in place for the recovery of any outstanding debt.

This policy has been adopted to ensure that there is a consistent and fair approach to debt incurred by parents whose children eat school meals. The responsibility falls on TCAT to pursue instances of non-payment.

The trust budget will be directly affected by any outstanding debts that cannot be recovered, thereby directly affecting all pupils in TCAT schools. We are confident that every parent will agree that this is unacceptable, and we encourage that all parents give this policy their full support.

## **1. Legal framework**

This policy has due regard to all relevant legislation and statutory guidance including, but not limited to, the following:

- The Education Act 1996
- The Requirements for School Food Regulations 2014
- DfE (2018) 'Charging for school activities'
- DfE (2020) 'Governance handbook'
- The trust's funding agreement

This policy operates in conjunction with the following TCAT and school policies:

- Complaints Procedures Policy
- Debt Recovery Policy
- Charging and Remissions Policy
- Whole-school Food Policy

## **2. Charging for school meals**

TCAT work with Black Pepper School Lunches within most of our schools. Where that is the case, payment will be made directly to Black Pepper School Lunches or via cash over the counter where that facility is offered.

Where a pupil is in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM) or Universal Free School Meals, TCAT makes payment to Black Pepper School Lunches from the funding it receives for those meals from government.

This policy does not account for debt relating to an arrangement made between a parent and Black Pepper School Lunches or between a pupil and Black Pepper School Lunches. It covers only arrangements where TCAT has provided funding for meals as an emergency measure for those not entitled to receive FSM.

Payments will be expected from parents for school meals supplied by Black Pepper School Lunches in advance of the meals being required or at the point of purchase.

Where a pupil's meal has been paid for in advance and they are absent on the day of the meal, the amount paid will be credited towards a future meal by Black Pepper School Lunches.

Where a pupil arrives at school without the funds to purchase a meal and where they are not entitled to FSM, either Black Pepper School Lunches, or TCAT, will provide the funds for a meal to be taken on that day. Where Black Pepper School Lunches enter into that arrangement, the pupil should repay monies owed to Black Pepper School Lunches at the earliest opportunity and directly. Where a TCAT school funds the meal as an emergency measure, repayment should be made to the school office as soon as possible.

### 3. Free school meals (FSM)

There is a statutory right to FSM for families who meet certain criteria. It is important that all parents who qualify take up their entitlement so that their child can receive a school meal each day.

Parents who receive one or more of the following support payments will be entitled to receive FSM (assuming the parent does not receive working tax credit):

- Universal Credit
- Income support
- Income-based jobseeker's allowance
- Income-related employment and support allowance
- Support under part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
- The guaranteed element of pension credit
- Child tax credit (provided they are not also entitled to working tax credit and have an annual gross income of no more than the current threshold)
- Working tax credit run-on – paid for four weeks after they stop qualifying for working tax credit

A pupil will only be eligible to receive FSM when a claim for FSM has been made on their behalf and their eligibility has been verified by TCAT. Parents will take responsibility for ensuring that they have claimed FSM for their child and will be aware that the entitlement to FSM cannot be backdated.

TCAT will check the eligibility of all applicants for FSM, working with partners wherever necessary, and will record the date on which they receive the initial application for FSM from a parent and the date on which eligibility is verified. Eligibility checks are carried out promptly to ensure that the most accurate and up-to-date information is being used.

All TCAT schools will regularly remind parents on the option to apply for FSM and the method by which to do so.

### 4. Management of school meal debts

Where there is an outstanding payment yet to be received by TCAT as outlined above, and the acceptable credit period has been surpassed, the Finance Office will create an invoice outlining the value and reason for the debt, as well as the identity of the parent who owes payment.

Upon creating the invoice and stipulating a date on which it must be paid by, the Chief Finance Officer will record in TCAT's records that the debt has been set up.

The steps of debt management are as follows:

- **Initial verbal reminder** – TCAT will initiate an informal correspondence, e.g., via telephone, notifying the parent of debt
- **First formal written reminder** – TCAT will send an official, dated letter addressed to the parent two weeks after the first informal reminder, acknowledging that the informal reminder took place

- **Second formal written reminder** – TCAT will send a second formal reminder two weeks after the first formal reminder, citing the details of both previous reminders and stating that concerted efforts have been made to make the parent aware that an outstanding debt is overdue

Where the parent does not respond to the above reminders, TCAT will send a follow-up letter to the parent advising them that the case has been referred to the TCAT's legal advisors and Governing Board.

TCAT will work with the parent to establish, and agree on, a timeframe for a repayment or, if necessary, a payment plan for separate instalments.

TCAT will inform parents that debts should be repaid as soon as possible, particularly after repeated reminders; however, delayed payments can be negotiated in exceptional circumstances at the discretion of the Governing Board.

If there is a case where the parent is deemed to be refusing to pay without sufficient reason, TCAT will consider involving their legal services to resolve the issue and recuperate owed funds.

TCAT will ensure that a written record is kept of the date and time all reminders are sent and any responses to those reminders, including informal reminders.

## **5. Exceptional circumstances and remissions**

TCAT will ensure that parents of pupils are aware of the help TCAT can extend to those in financial difficulty. Parents who may be eligible for remissions will be considered to be those in receipt of any of the benefits outlined in section 3 of this policy.

Where TCAT expects that a parent with an overdue debt may qualify for remissions, the Chief Finance Officer will contact them with details of the different types of bursaries available.

The Governing Board will consider, on a case-by-case basis, whether to waive or reduce the outstanding debt in these circumstances.

## **6. Monitoring and review**

This policy will be reviewed in line with the published schedule at the front of this document and at any point material changes require it by the Executive Headteacher/CEO and Executive Team in conjunction with Heads of School/Headteachers and the Governing Board. Any changes made to the policy will be amended by the Executive Headteacher/CEO and will be communicated to all members of staff.

The next scheduled review date for this policy is 31<sup>st</sup> August 2026.

Signed by:

_____	Executive Headteacher/CEO	Date: _____
_____	Chair of Governing Board	Date: _____

