**Family Debts and home-school relationships**

**Issue**

Head Teachers should never be required to pursue family debts accrued through school meals.

**Headline position**

Requiring Head Teachers to pursue arrears related to school meals or other costs risks damaging the crucial relationship between families and schools. Such debts should never be removed from school budgets.

**Full position**

In some areas, local authorities require Head Teachers to chase up school meals/nursery snack payment arrears with parents. In some of these areas, debts which remain outstanding at the year end are deducted from the school budget. This has two damaging effects:

* The parental/carer relationship – Parents/Carers who do not, or are unable, to pay for school meals (and who don’t provide packed lunches for children) are a key group that schools need to engage with. Schools are required to to meet the wellbeing needs of children and to take account of undue cost and expense for families from engaging with their child’s education (Cost of the School Day initiative). Asking Head Teachers to chase up arrears compromises opportunities to build those relationships by making them confrontational and relating to finance rather than the education and development of their child.
* School resources – While we understand that the unpaid school meals need to be budgeted for, it is not appropriate to compromise the already small degree of budgetary flexibility that school have by removing school meal arears from budget lines which are focussed on learning and teaching.

Schools may have a part to play in highlighting initial arrears to parents and in identifying potential child wellbeing issues but debt collection should be undertaken by specialist local authority officers.