



School support staff cost of living survey 2024

Introduction

UNISON is the largest union for education support staff in the UK, representing around 250,000 members of school support staff. These range from those on hand in lessons to offer vital help, such as supporting those with special needs, to site managers, cleaners and catering staff, all of whom deliver vital services to keep schools running smoothly.

UNISON carried out a survey of school support staff members in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland between 10 and 25 October 2024. Staff were asked about a range of issues, including pay, responsibilities, and pupil behaviour.

The survey received 7,811 responses. Most responses came from staff working in primary schools (64%), with 23% in secondary schools, 1% in all-through schools, 11% in special schools and 1% in pupil referral units.

The roles of the respondents were as follows:

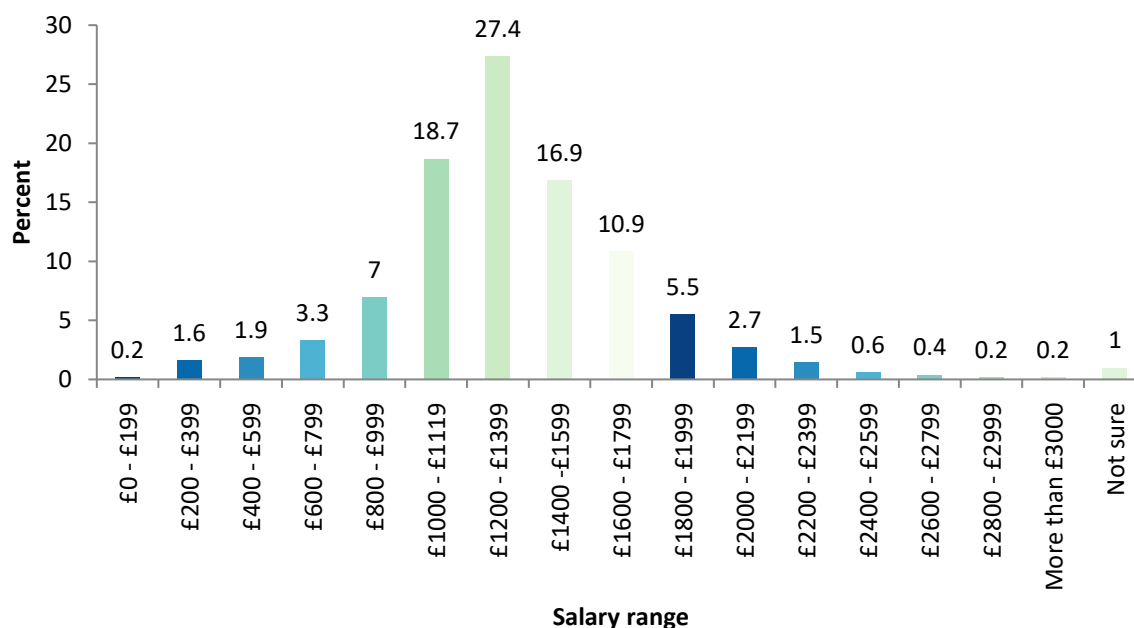
- 10% worked in administration & management (e.g. data, attendance, admin, finance)
- 6% worked in facilities (e.g. site staff, catering, cleaning)
- 61% worked in teaching and learning support (e.g. teaching assistant, cover supervisor)
- 6% worked in specialist and technical roles (e.g. librarian, technician, sports coach)
- 8% worked in pupil support and welfare (e.g. learning mentor, parent support adviser, lunchtime supervisor)
- 9% identified in roles outside of these categories

More than half (64%) said they were on a term-time contract; 33% on an all-year contract while the remainder were on various permutations, such as term-time plus ten days. Within these contract types, 67% work full time while 33% work part-time.

Pay data

Since pay data for support staff is not published by the government, we asked respondents to indicate their monthly take-home pay after tax. **The most common monthly take-home**

pay range is £1,200-£1,399 a month, with 27% earning within this range, regardless of contract type. The graph below shows the distribution of responses within other ranges:



Paying the bills

The overwhelming majority of respondents were anxious about paying essential bills. 79% were worried about meeting food costs; 78% were worried about paying energy bills and council tax; 53% were worried about paying the mortgage/rent.

	Yes	No	Not applicable
Mortgage/rent	53%	24%	23%
Childcare	11%	26%	63%
Energy bills	78%	18%	4%
Utility bills and council tax	76%	20%	4%
Travel to work	33%	45%	22%
Fuel	53%	31%	16%
Health costs (e.g. prescriptions)	46%	35%	19%
Debts	46%	28%	26%

Food costs	79%	19%	2%
TV/Internet package	57%	35%	8%
Telephone bills	53%	41%	6%
Clothing	63%	33%	4%

“Money is my main concern; can't afford to live and feed the family.”

“As someone with health issues I would like to reduce my hours some more but it's not affordable.”

“I only used my heating for 3 days, last year (a present for me at Xmas). Winter is grim without heating but I'd rather be able to eat...”

“I can barely afford to live. Even with Universal Credit I struggle to live, often going overdrawn in the last week of the month.”

“We have cut back as much as we can, we don't have any tv subscriptions any more, don't spend frivolously and only buy essentials but we are still finding it hard and I worry about money a lot; car mot and unexpected bills especially.”

“The cost of living is awful. I have so much debt because I have to put food bill on my credit card.”

“I don't have much disposable income after rent and bills are paid. I'm always short by the end of the month and struggle to pay for weekly shopping. I haven't had a holiday in over 10 years, this year I even struggle to have days out. I never have money for luxuries like dining out, take aways, new clothes, makeup and hair. I struggle to buy presents at Christmas and birthdays. I feel I am stuck in a vicious cycle just coping to be here but not living.”

“Currently living with parents as cannot afford to rent a place and live on my salary independently.”

“I rely on free food to survive.”

“I have large arrears on my rent. I have had to have various high interest loans to be able to pay my mandatory bills. I have had some ill health over the last two years so my prescription costs have risen a lot.”

Many of the respondents also pointed out in their comments that they were only able to cover essential costs because of a second income from a partner or spouse.

Workload

Four fifths (80%) said their workload had increased over the past year, with 60% reporting a reduction in the number of support staff at their school over that period. 85% said they were worried about the prospect of cuts to school budgets in the next 12 months.

Those whose workload had increased reported a wide range of additional duties:

- Behaviour management (54%)
- One to one support (48%)
- Looking after children with complex needs (47%)
- More interventions (47%)
- Medical support (41%)
- Class or lesson cover (40%)
- Lunchtime supervision (37%)
- Admin duties (32%)
- Toileting (31%)
- Planning and preparation (31%)
- Cleaning (22%)
- Managing children's dietary requirements/allergies (22%)
- Breakfast or after school clubs (14%)

Staff were asked about the effect of the additional workload on their core role. Responses included:

- Lack of preparation time
- Impact on mental health and patience
- Unable to complete work to a high standard
- No time for personal development
- Lack of time for interventions
- Unable to complete workload
- Less time available for children needing support.

A large number of staff mentioned stress in their response to this question, and the impact of their workload on both mental and physical health. Comments included:

"I am struggling to keep my head above water and feel I am only doing half a job as pulled in all directions. Regularly find myself crying at prospect of going to work."

"Less time to do all my duties, and feeling stressed and pressure from teacher as to why I am not in class or on time for groups."

"Causes lots of stress back pain skeletal pains sleepless nights."

"I'm exhausted so impacts my work life balance and ability to perform while at work."

"Overworked, stress related chest pains, sleepless nights."

Over half of those surveyed (67%) worked more than their contracted hours without getting paid overtime. The table below shows the breakdown of unpaid hours worked per week:

Do you ever work more than your contracted hours without getting paid overtime?	Percent
No	33%
1-2 hours per week	34%
2-3 hours per week	15%
3-4 hours per week	7%
4-5 hours per week	5%
5-6 hours per week	3%
6-7 hours per week	1%
More than 8 hours per week	2%

Value

The majority of staff did not feel valued by powerholders, with 94% feeling undervalued by the government, 89% by their trust or local authority, and more than half (59%) by school leaders. Conversely, nearly three quarters (74%) felt valued by pupils, and 84% by their colleagues.

Do you feel valued as a member of staff?		
	Yes	No
By school leaders	41%	59%
By colleagues	84%	16%
By pupils	74%	26%
By parents/carers	59%	41%
By the government	6%	94%
By the trust/local authority	11%	89%

Comments about value included:

“We feel like our jobs are on the line due to total lack of funding. If we get a pay rise, I worry where the money will come from as our school is in debt and our jobs will be the first to go.”

“Government and local authority do not pay us enough. Parents do not treat us with respect. School leaders expect more and more from us.”

“Our jobs are not considered important or they think anyone can do it! Which is just not true. We contribute to a child's education, we should be considered part of the team.”

“Feel like they expect more and more without any recognition or change in pay. The role is becoming increasingly demanding physically and mentally and its just expected that we ‘get on with it’.”

“The hourly rate is low for how hard we work.”

“Getting less and less staff but having to do more and more.”

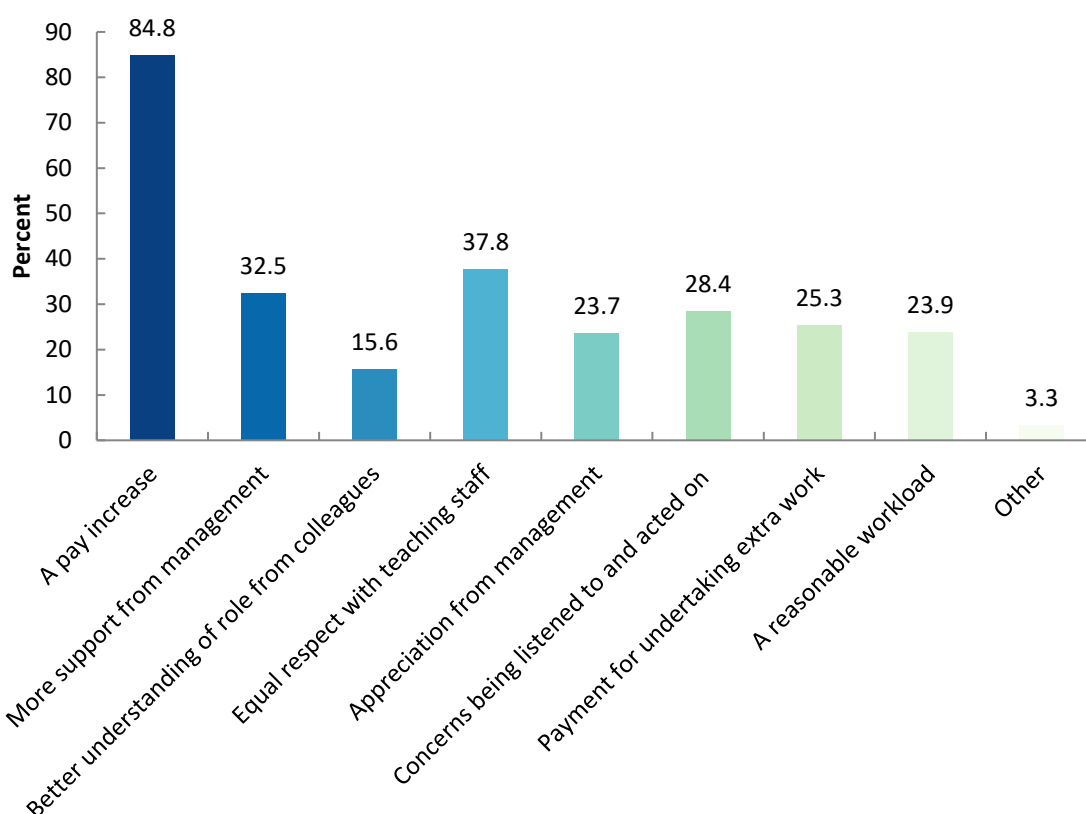
“I feel my role is not recognised or valued and set up for failure by local government and central government. This in turn filters through from SLT.”

“I feel like a dogsbody on minimum pay who does and can do everything from cleaner nurse to teacher. But not included in giving ideas or any of the fun stuff.”

“We are all working flat out emotional and mental health is at an all time low and nothing changes except more cuts and it is always on the shoulders of the support staff.”

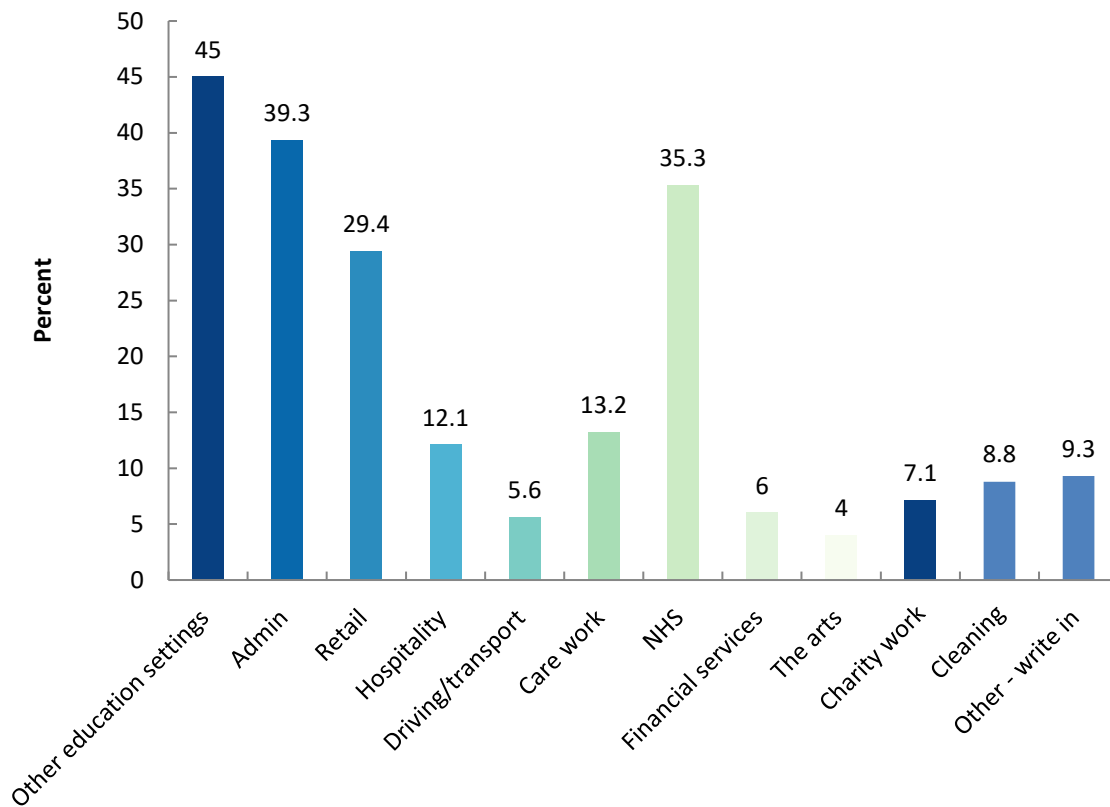
“The attitude of all the above is don't like it you can leave they never try to improve anything for staff who say they are leaving, the attitude is you are replaceable.”

Asked what three things would make them feel more valued, the overwhelming majority (85%) chose a pay increase. More than a third (38%) selected equal respect with teaching staff, while a third (33%) cited more support from management.



Looking for alternative work

Nearly half (46%) said they were actively looking for better paid work elsewhere. When asked what industries they had been looking in, the following responses were given:



Violence in schools

Almost two thirds (64%) of staff had witnessed violence at work in the last 12 months. Over a third (35%) witnessed verbal abuse at least daily, with a further third (33%) witnessing verbal abuse at least weekly. A third (34%) also witnessed pushing on a daily basis, while a quarter (26%) reported witnessing both daily kicking and throwing of objects or furniture. A shocking 3% witnessed attacks with a weapon on a daily basis.

98% of those witnessing violent behaviour said it was exhibited by pupils, but 14% had also witnessed violent behaviour from parents or carers, and 6% from other members of staff. Comments included:

“We have children that on a daily basis hit spit kick punch and throw objects at staff. We get no support at all from LA we are expected to deal with it.”

“In 2 and a half years of working in an infant school I was kicked, punched, bit, spat at, slapped around the face, punched, my hair pulled to the ground and had items thrown at me as small as stones to chairs and been verbally abused and sworn at. I have now moved up to year 5 (feeder school) where I no longer get hurt.”

“You are hurt regularly with any object that could be a weapon. Whipped with skipping ropes, balls thrown deliberately in faces, cutlery stolen from the dining hall. The list is endless.”

“Verbal abuse is out of control getting sworn at and shouted at. I can't think of many other jobs that this would be acceptable.”

Nearly half (48%) of staff had personally experienced violent behaviour from a pupil within the last 12 months, with almost a quarter (24%) experiencing verbal abuse on a daily basis and a further 31% at least weekly. Pushing and kicking were experienced weekly by around a quarter of staff, while 29% said they had weekly experience of having objects or furniture thrown at them.

	Never	Once	Every term	At least monthly	At least weekly	At least daily
Verbal abuse	11%	10%	12%	12%	31%	24%
Threats	38%	13%	10%	9%	18%	12%
Pushing	19%	15%	11%	10%	24%	21%
Kicking	21%	14%	11%	10%	25%	19%
Punching	31%	13%	10%	10%	21%	15%
Throwing of object/furniture	10%	13%	14%	12%	29%	22%
Spitting	39%	15%	9%	10%	15%	12%
Biting	40%	17%	9%	11%	14%	9%
Scratching	34%	12%	10%	10%	18%	16%
Attacked with a weapon	77%	9%	3%	4%	5%	2%
Sexual harassment	94%	3%	1%	0.5%	1%	0.5%

Examples included:

"In this past week I have had chairs thrown at me, Wellington boots, threatened with scissors, punched kicked verbal abuse. Jugs of water thrown over me, threatened to be stabbed."

"We are early years and still regularly get hit or scratched. We have to restrain children appropriately in a way that doesn't hurt or restrict them but it hurts and restricts me having to do this. My back, neck, arms and legs."

"Pupils seem to think is ok to talk to TA's like they are dirt."

"Support get physically attacked more then teachers as we the ones dealing with it."

"In the last 12 months I've been hit in the head with a bowl of fruit, had a jug thrown at my head, trainers thrown at me and I've also been punched in the side of my head."

"I've been hit with sports equipment, meter sticks, chairs and books thrown at me."

"Child throwing objects at me: sand/dirt, sticks and a large plastic hula hoop."

"Stabbed with pens ,electrical appliances swung around by leads, belts used as whips, sticks, poles, stones."

"I was bitten through 3 layers of clothing and needed a tetanus and antibiotics."

"The head butting lead to two chipped front teeth."

"Smacked across stomach with a plank of wood."

"I work with 5-7 year olds. In the last school year I ended up with a broken hand, bruised spleen, multiple bruises. I was kicked punched had school equipment thrown at me daily. I have children run at with scissors in their hands chairs thrown at me. Children completely trash classrooms."

"I have lost a tooth and have a fractured knuckle at the hands of a flying wooden block both in the space of 2 weeks."

"I have been punched, kicked, stabbed with a pencil, objects flung at me hitting my face and body, name calling, swearing and liquid thrown at me."

"I have been pushed, pulled, scratched bitten and nipped. I have also been targeted in the groin."

"Chased with a hockey stick. Threatened to be hit with it. Blocked doors with stick placing it across handles so doors couldn't be moved."

8% said they had experienced violence from a parent or carer, mostly in the form of verbal abuse. A further 2% had experienced violence from colleagues, again mainly in the form of verbal abuse.

Almost half (47%) of those surveyed said that if they had experienced a violent incident, they did not feel supported by their headteacher, while almost two-thirds (65%) had not been given training on how to deal with violent situations.

Conclusion

School support staff, who carry out hugely important, challenging and professional roles, continue to struggle with low wages, even as their workload and responsibilities increase.

The survey demonstrates an alarming prevalence of violence towards school support staff, with verbal abuse commonplace in school settings and many support staff both witnessing and experiencing regular violence.

At the same time, persistently low pay coupled with rising prices has left school support staff worried about meeting the costs of everyday life, such as food and heating. It is no surprise that so many school support staff are considering work elsewhere, citing better paid, less stressful roles in different industries.

Investment in education is urgently needed to pay school support staff the wages they deserve and to attract and retain a level of staffing that will make workloads manageable.