



## **SUPPORT STAFF PAY CLAIM FOR 2024/25**

### **SUBMITTED BY GMB, UNISON & UNITE TO ARK SCHOOLS TRUST**

#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

This pay claim is submitted by UNISON, GMB and UNITE on behalf of support staff working for Ark Schools Trust (ARK).

The claim is set at a level that we believe recognises the following key points:

- Substantial increases in the cost of living over recent years have significantly reduced the value of staff wages and the rise in prices facing workers has been running at a 40-year high
- Appropriate reward is needed to sustain the morale and productivity of employees in their crucial role of supporting the delivery of learning
- Appropriate reward is needed for the increased workload and stress placed on staff and to address building recruitment & retention pressures
- ARK support staff have worked tirelessly to support education recovery following the pandemic. They were also in schools throughout the pandemic supporting pupils and learning and keeping schools running; at times putting their own health, and their families' health, at risk, to maintain education
- Average pay settlements across the economy have been running ahead of those received by school employees over recent years, which is leading to a recruitment and retention crisis
- £15 an hour is fast becoming a new benchmark for the minimum level of decent pay across the UK and to tackle low pay, the claim is calling for employers to work towards this target within 2 years.

## **2. SUMMARY OF CLAIM**

### **Our claim is for:**

- An increase of at least £3,000 or 10% (whichever is greater) on all spinal column points

### **In addition:**

- Reviews of any gender, ethnicity and disability pay gaps
- A 2-hour reduction in the working week with no detriment
- An additional day of annual leave for personal or well-being purposes (with term-time only staff also receiving a full day rather than a pro rata amount, that they can use at any time, including term time)
- Action on support staff workload
- A phased approach to reaching a minimum pay rate of £15 an hour in a maximum of two years, sooner if possible

This claim is in line with that made by the joint Trade Union Side to the National Joint Council (NJC)<sup>[1]</sup> for pay and allowances in 2024/25.

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<sup>[1]</sup> The National Joint Council is the joint negotiating body that brings together local government employers and the recognised unions (UNISON, GMB and UNITE). NJC pay and conditions agreements (including annual pay awards and salary scales) are implemented by the overwhelming majority of councils.

### 3. FALLING VALUE OF PAY

Rapid inflation means that despite moves in the 2023/24 NJC pay settlement to cushion the impact on lower paid staff (and progress made on annual leave entitlements), staff continue to face real terms pay cuts across the whole spine – with up to 25% lost from the value of some members’ pay since 2010.

In contrast, prices for everyday goods continue to rise. Price changes to commodities that make up the RPI over the year to March 2024 are shown below<sup>1</sup>:

<b>Table 2: Rises in prices for everyday goods</b>	
Item	Average % increase to March 2024
Alcohol and tobacco	9.2
Personal expenditure	7.1
Travel and leisure	5.5
Food and catering	4.7
Consumer durables	3.2
Housing and household expenditure	2.2
All goods	3.4
All services	4.1
All items	4.3

Source: Office for National Statistics, Consumer Price Inflation Reference Tables, March 2024

The last two years have seen the steepest rises in the cost of living facing workers in over 40 years - 11.6% in 2022 and 9.7% in 2023<sup>2</sup>.

Inflation is still running at the substantial rate of 4.3%, led by major jumps in housing costs over the last year - mortgage interest payments surging by 36%<sup>3</sup> and private rent rising 9%<sup>4</sup>.

Furthermore, the last decade has seen enormous jumps in the basic costs shown below<sup>5</sup>.

Expenditure Item	House prices	Bus & coach fares	Electricity	Gas
Price rise 2009 – 23	65%	93%	180%	144%

<sup>1</sup> Office for National Statistics, Consumer Price Inflation Reference Tables, March 2024

<sup>2</sup> Office for National Statistics, Consumer Price Inflation Reference Tables, December 2023

<sup>3</sup> Office for National Statistics, UK Consumer Price Inflation, March 2024

<sup>4</sup> Office for National Statistics, Private Rent and House Prices UK, April 2024

<sup>5</sup> Office for National Statistics, UK Consumer Price Inflation Tables, January 2024, for bus /coach, electricity and gas prices, Acadata National Historic Series for house prices

#### 4. FALLING BEHIND AVERAGE PAY RATES

The ability of **ARK** to attract and retain staff in the long term will be damaged if the pay of its staff falls behind the going rate in the wider labour market.

Pay settlements have been averaging 6.0%<sup>6</sup> and the Bank of England's most recent survey found that companies are expecting a 4.9% increase in wages over the next year<sup>7</sup>.

These pay figures reflect the relatively low unemployment rates and high vacancy rates that have fuelled turnover running at almost 20% in 2023 and demonstrates the scale of alternative areas of employment available to staff.

#### 5. IMPACT OF LOW PAY – RECRUITMENT & RETENTION

Low pay is a chronic problem among school support staff roles. The inadequacies of basic pay rates are compounded by inconsistent approaches to calculating pay and allowances for workers employed on term-time only contracts. The impact of poverty pay was shown starkly In UNISON's latest (Nov 2023) survey of school support staff:

- 96% said they were concerned the rate of pay for their school job was not enough to cope with the rising cost of living
- 89% were worried about meeting utility bills
- 90% were worried about their food costs
- 45% had needed to borrow money to tide over family finances in the past year
- 26% said they had to take on a second or third job to make ends meet
- Nearly half (46%) said they were actively looking for better paid work elsewhere

This endemic low pay is leading to a growing recruitment and retention crisis among all school support staff roles. *ATES* investigation found that school leaders are struggling to fill vacancies, as staff find that they can earn more in retail roles <https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/general/support-staff-leave-supermarket-jobs-cost-living-crisis-bites>

Teaching assistants were also named as the role with the second worst shortage in late 2020 after HGV drivers, with retention issues are becoming acute for all support staff roles – (Tes, Support staff leave for supermarket jobs as cost-of-living crisis bites, 03 May 2022.)

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<sup>6</sup> Labour Research Department

<sup>7</sup> Bank of England, Decision Maker Panel, March 2024

In addition the unemployment rate had been in decline from a peak of 8.5% in 2011 to 4.2% in the three months to February 2024. Although the unemployment rate has edged up in recent months, it remains among the lowest rates in almost half a century.

Forecasters predict that the average unemployment rate will climb slightly to 4.4% over the course of 2024 – but again this would still leave the rate at levels only last consistently experienced in the early to mid-1970s.

Such a labour market background makes competitive wage rates ever more crucial.

The National Foundation for Educational Research warned last year that ‘the overwhelming majority of schools’ are ‘struggling to recruit teaching assistants and other support staff’. This research also found that large numbers of TA and other support staff vacancies remained vacant for more than two months, especially among special schools. Recent Freedom of Information research by GMB also revealed that schools continue to face recruitment and retention challenges, and that both vacancy and turnover rates for TA’s for example remain well above the national average for other occupations.

## **WORKLOAD**

UNISON’s latest (Nov 2023) survey of school support staff showed the extent of the immense workload pressures in schools

- Just under two-thirds (65%) said their workload had increased over the past year
- Over half of those surveyed (52%) worked more than their contracted hours without getting paid overtime

GMB’s latest survey (Feb 2023) highlighted a very similar picture of workload pressures for support staff members.

- 88% of those surveyed did not think their pay reflected the responsibilities of the job
- 89% said their job description had not been updated to reflect new responsibilities
- Over half of those surveyed (56%) reported that their job had become more stressful in the last twelve months
- 41% said that they were required to cover a class without a teacher present
- 41% reported that they were working mostly with SEND children of which the overwhelming majority (87%) did not receive an SEND allowance

Unite's latest survey (November 2023) equally showed:

- More than half of those surveyed (51%) did not believe they had sufficient resources to be able to do their job properly.
- The top three most common workplaces issues identified, besides pay, were: high workloads, short staffing and stress due to increased workplace pressure.

Schools have also increasingly become the first port of call for struggling families for immediate help and signposting. School support staff are increasingly playing a key role in picking up and helping deal with difficulties faced by children and their families including food poverty, physical and mental health issues, and behavioural issues.

An increasing number of organisations are recognising the impact of long hours and stress and taking urgent steps to reduce these pressures.

The Trade Union Side therefore believes that now is the time for the working week and leave entitlement of staff to be improved nationally and is therefore calling for:

- A 2-hour reduction in the working week with no detriment
- An additional day of annual leave for personal or well-being purposes - regardless of current entitlement (with term time only staff also receiving a full day rather than a pro rata amount, that they can use at any time, including term time)
- Joint review of 'ARK's workload principles' to ascertain their impact on support staffs' workload across the trust

## **6. A ROADMAP TO £15 MINIMUM WAGE**

In September 2023 the Low Pay Commission announced it had added teaching assistants to its list of low paying occupations. The system that the Low Pay Commission uses to create its list does not capture all support staff roles affected by term-time only contracts and pay.

£15 an hour is fast becoming a new benchmark for the minimum level of decent pay across the UK and to tackle low pay. Unions therefore, believe that the National Minimum Wage should be at least £15 an hour, and we support industrial £15 an hour demands on a sector or employer basis where it is supported by our members.

The claim is calling for ARK to work towards this £15 per hour minimum within 2 years.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

There can be no doubt that all ARK employees have seen the value of their earnings fall considerably over recent years and evidence suggests that they are also falling behind pay settlements for comparable jobs.

Combined with these developments, the last year has seen intensified pressure placed on employees at the same time as better paid job choices opening up in the labour market.

This pay claim represents a very reasonable estimate of the reward our members deserve for their dedication, skill and hard work and the minimum improvement in pay needed to maintain workforce morale for delivering consistently high-quality school support services.