PAY CLAIM FOR 2026/27

SUBMITTED BY GMB, UNISON & UNITE TO ARK SCHOOLS

1. INTRODUCTION

This pay claim is submitted by GMB, UNISON & Unite on behalf of support staff working for ARK.

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

- Over recent years, the cost of living has surged to a 40-year high, causing deep cuts in the value of staff wages which continue to hit the workforce hard. While the inflation rate has fallen back since those peaks, it is once more expected to surge in the coming months due to international events.
- 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 and retention pressures.
- Ark support staff continue to work tirelessly to support education, in the face of increasing workplace pressures, tight school finance and increasing demand for SEND provision.
- Average pay settlements across the economy have been running ahead of those received by Ark staff over recent years, which is bound to lead to recruitment and retention difficulties.
- £15 an hour is fast becoming a new benchmark for the minimum level of decent pay across the UK and to tackle low pay.

2. SUMMARY OF CLAIM

Our claim is for:

- An increase of at least £3,000 or 10% (whichever is greater) across all pay points
- A minimum pay rate of £15 an hour

In addition:

- A 2-hour reduction in the working week with no detriment
- The ability of all school support staff to take a day of paid leave during term time
- The trust to agree to become a Living Wage accredited employer and put in place measures to ensure that all contracted-out workers at ARK are paid at least the Foundation Living Wage.
- A review of Job Roles and Descriptions
- A move to year-round contracts for all support staff who want one
- A SEND allowance for those support staff working in a SEND school or unit or in a mainstream setting but working wholly or mainly with children with SEND
- Trust issued laptops for all support staff

This claim is in line with that made by the joint Trade Union side to the National Joint Council (NJC) for pay and allowances for 2026-27, but it also reflects the views and priorities of Unison, GMB and Unite members in Ark, obtained through extensive survey work.

3. FALLING VALUE OF PAY

Prices for everyday goods have continued to rise. Price changes to commodities that make up the RPI over the year to February 2025 are shown in table 1 below.

Table 1: Falling value of pay	
Year	Rise in cost of living[1] (as measured by Retail Prices Index)
2010	4.6%
2011	5.2%
2012	3.2%

[1] Office for National Statistics, Consumer Price Inflation Reference Tables, December 2025

2013	3.0%
2014	2.4%
2015	1.0%
2016	1.8%
2017	3.6%
2018	3.3%
2019	2.6%
2020	1.5%
2021	4.1%
2022	11.6%
2023	9.7%
2024	3.6%
2025	4.1%

Recent 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.[2]

And the latest figures show that inflation is still running at 3.6%, with many more core expenditures displaying much higher surges;[3]

- Water charges up 26.1%
- Vehicle tax and insurance up 13.3%
- Rail fares up 5.1%
- Food prices up 4.2%
- Mortgage interest payments up 5%
- Council tax / rates up 5.4%
- Nursery charges up 5%

However, these figures were assembled before the United States launched its war on Iran in late February, so a further escalation in prices is expected, and there is clearly great uncertainty about its scale and duration.

Looking over a longer timescale, the last decade and a half has seen enormous jumps in the basic costs shown below[4]

[2] Office for National Statistics, Consumer Price Inflation Reference Tables, December 2024

[3] Office for National Statistics, Consumer Price Inflation February 2026, published March 2026; Office for National Statistics, Private Rent and House Prices UK, March 2026; and Coram Family and Childcare, Childcare Survey, March 2026

[4] Office for National Statistics, UK Consumer Price Inflation Tables, December 2010 and December 2025

Table 2: Rises in basic costs since 2010				
Expenditure Item	House prices	Bus & coach fares	Electricity	Gas
Price rise 2010 - 24	73%	93%	144%	92%

The ability of Ark Trust 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.

The most recent figures show average earnings growing at 3.9%[5] across the economy and the Bank of England's most recent survey found that companies are expecting a 3.6% increase in wages over the next year.[6]

Unison, GMB and Unite school support staff members in Ark are also acutely conscious of the higher pay settlements that teachers have been awarded in recent years, compared to those for support staff. This is an inequity that Ark has a real opportunity to address in the offer it makes to support staff.

4. IMPACT OF LOW PAY - RECRUITMENT AND 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 contracts.

The impact of poverty pay was shown starkly in UNISON's 2024 survey of school support staff:[7]

- 78% were worried about meeting the costs of energy bills.
- 79% were worried about their food costs.
- 53% were worried about meeting their mortgage/rent.
- Nearly half (46%) said they were actively looking for better paid work elsewhere.

Additionally, in Unite's 2025 sector-wide survey:

- 68% felt financially worse off than they had been 12 months earlier.
- 68% also said they were struggling to pay bills, buy basics such as food or clothes, or had to cancel holiday plans due to costs.
- 70% said they did not feel valued by their employer.
- Nearly half (44%) said they were actively looking for better paid work elsewhere.

[5] Office for National Statistics, Labour Market Overview, March 2026
[6] Bank of England, Decision Maker Panel, March 2026
[7] UNISON, School support staff cost of living survey, November 2024

This endemic low pay is leading to a growing recruitment and retention crisis among all school support staff roles. Analysis by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) in their 2026 report on the School Support Staff Workforce in England indicates that 75% of school leaders are struggling to recruit teaching assistants.[8] The same report states that exit rates for school support staff have been increasing for three years in a row and have now reached the highest level since data collection began in 2011-12.

Although the proportion of employers expecting significant problems in filling vacancies has been falling, the biggest problems are heavily concentrated in the public sector, where 72% of "compulsory education" employers expect problems[9]. Such a labour market background makes competitive wage rates ever more crucial.

5. WORKLOAD

UNISON's latest survey of school support staff[10] showed the extent of the immense workload pressures in schools:

- 70% said their responsibilities have grown over the past year.
- 61% worked more than their contracted hours without getting paid overtime.
- 78% said there are not enough staff to meet pupils' needs.

GMB's latest survey findings (March 2026)[11] of support staff at Ark Trust closely align with the workload pressures raised in the UNISON report.

- 42% of respondents can't complete their workload within contracted hours.
- 58% have taken on extra responsibilities without pay.
- 51% said they are not able to take their full breaks without interruption

Unite's latest survey[12] also showed widespread problems with workload and stress:

- 71% said they were either regularly or occasionally having to work beyond their contracted hours without additional pay.
- 89% said they were either regularly or occasionally feeling stressed at work.

Furthermore, schools have increasingly become the first port of call for struggling families for immediate help and signposting. School support staff are 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.

We are currently facing an epidemic of stress and anxiety across the UK workforce. Analysis by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) of Labour Force Survey statistics shows that stress, depression or anxiety accounts for over 50% of all work-related ill health cases. The predominant cause of work-related stress, depression or anxiety

[8] NFER, The School Support Staff Workforce in England, Annual Report, March 2026
[9] CIPD, Labour Market Outlook, Winter 2025/26
[10] UNISON, Doing More With Less, November 2025
[11] GMB, Ark Schools Trust Schol Support Staff Pay Survey, 2026
[12] Unite the Union

from the Labour Force Survey was workload, in particular tight deadlines, too much work or too much pressure or responsibility - the biggest single cause of sick leave by some distance.

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

Unite, UNISON and GMB therefore believe that now is the time for the working week and leave entitlement of staff to be improved nationally and are therefore calling for:

- A 2-hour reduction in the working week with no detriment
- An increase of one day in annual leave
- The ability of all school support staff to take a day of paid leave during term time

6. LIVING WAGE

The (Foundation) Living Wage is an estimate of the minimum hourly rate of pay needed for a worker to cover the costs that most people would regard as necessary for a 'basic standard' of living.

Every year the Living Wage Foundation (https://www.livingwage.org.uk/) announces two new Living Wage rates - one for London and one for the rest of the UK. Unlike the legally enforceable National Minimum Wage, whether to pay the Living Wage is a voluntary decision for an employer.

These latest Foundation Living Wage rates mean that schools are now competing in a labour market where many comparable employers are paying more to entry level or low paid staff – with the bottom three NJC SCPs for outside London now falling below the £13.45 UK Foundation Living Wage rate. The Living Wage Foundation rate for London is £14.80.

Living Wage arrangements have now been reached with a significant number of councils, the Catholic Church, the Church of England, the Schools Cooperative Society and Multi Academy Trusts including Oasis Community Learning, Academies Enterprise Trust (AET), Reach 2 Academy Trust and many more.

Not only does the Living Wage help struggling low paid staff it also has clear benefits for employers, as studies have consistently found an increase in productivity and a reduction in staff turnover and absenteeism rates.

There are now over 16,000 employers accredited as Living Wage employers by the Living Wage Foundation, including almost half of the largest companies listed on the UK Stock Exchange and household names such as Aviva, Barclays, HSBC, Nationwide, Google and IKEA.

Even where employers are not accredited, the Living Wage appears to have played a major role in shaping pay rates in tandem with recruitment and retention pressures. In the retail sector, Aldi are pushing rates for store assistants to up to £14.71 an hour in London and £13.35 an hour outside London from March 2026. Similarly, Marks & Spencer have announced £14.74 in London and £13.41 outside London from April. While Amazon raised its rate for frontline operations staff to between £14.30 and £15.30 per hour from September 2025.

Within the public sector, the Living Wage has now long been set as the minimum pay rate across all Scotland's public sector organisations and this was extended to social care workers in Scotland's private and voluntary sector from October 2016. Similarly, the Welsh Government committed to achieving a Living Wage minimum in social care from 2022.

And almost half of UK universities have now become accredited Living Wage employers.

To become a Living Wage Employer, a school has to ensure that all directly employed staff are paid no less than the Living Wage and put a plan in place to ensure that all staff employed by contractors providing a service(s) to the school e.g. catering, are paid no less than the Foundation Living Wage.

It is important to note that the government has labelled the legally enforceable rate applicable to employees aged 21 or above as the "national living wage." However, in reality this rate is a higher version of the national minimum wage which is calculated without reference to the cost of living. The living wage announced annually by the Living Wage Foundation remains the most accurate indicator of the wage needed to achieve a basic standard of living.

7. ACHIEVING A £15 PER HOUR MINIMUM RATE

Years of rampant inflation and cost of living rises to core household outgoings (including food, housing and energy) mean that calls for a £15 per hour minimum rate are stronger than ever. For school support staff, this would bring many benefits, including a significant boost to those struggling with low pay, lifting people out of in-work poverty and providing a direct boost to the lowest paid workers. This level of increase would lead to higher job satisfaction, reducing turnover rates and the costs associated with hiring and training new employees.

The £15 an hour element of our claim for 2026-27 would lift the lowest pay point to around £28,860.

8. Teaching Assistants

We know that Ark Trust will agree with the unions about the importance of ensuring that support staff job roles accurately reflect the duties and work that employees actually carry out.

However, many of our members increasingly find that they are working outside of their roles and taking on extra responsibilities with no extra pay. We are therefore calling for a joint review of job roles and descriptions.

In the GMB Ark Trust support staff survey 58% of members said they have taken on extra responsibilities without pay.[13]

There has been a significant increase in the number of children in school with SEND[14] and it is teaching assistants who bridge the gap between classroom teaching and student understanding, delivering targeted interventions whilst nurturing self-esteem. The role involves navigating high-pressure environments, offering crucial emotional, behavioural and personal care that goes beyond simple academic support. Skilled teaching assistants translate complex needs into accessible learning, making a profound long-term impact on a child's academic progress and emotional well-being and we believe there should be financial recognition for this and so we call for a SEND allowance to be introduced.

The GMB Ark Trust school support staff survey of members found:

- 70% of children work with children with SEND
- 97% do not receive additional SEND-related pay.
- 80% said that they want to see the introduction of SEND payments bringing them in line with their teacher colleagues

In addition, the greatest inequity between teaching and support staff in Ark Trust is the fact that teachers are paid on a year-round basis, while support staff are paid on a term-time only basis. This causes genuine hardship and financial insecurity, and so we are calling for a move to year-round contracts for all support staff who want one.

It was identified within the GMB support staff survey that a quarter of respondents said they did not have the tools, technology and resources needed to do their jobs. When asked what tools, resources or technology are missing, members reported not having a laptop or having to share one leading to staff not being able to provide resources, create interventions, or even report incidents.

We therefore request that the trust provide a standard issue, functional laptop for every permanent school support staff member, alongside necessary secure remote access

[13] GMB, Ark Schools Trust Schol Support Staff Pay Survey, 2026
[14] NAO, Support for children with special educational needs, 2024

ensuring the same level of digital access as teaching staff. All staff deserve the same equipment to do their work, and the benefits to the trust are that it will enhance efficiency, increase safety as they will no longer need to share equipment that holds sensitive school data and It will contribute to greater wellbeing as it will reduce stress caused by inefficient, shared equipment.

Working against a background of tight budgets, staff have been facing greater workload pressures. The resulting increased stress puts the morale of the workforce at risk and poses a long-term threat to Ark's ability to provide a consistent quality of service.

9. CONCLUSION

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

Combined with these developments, the last year has seen intensified pressures placed on staff and continued historically low unemployment rates that indicate alternative employment opportunities for staff.

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