



PAY CLAIM FOR 2025/26

SUBMITTED BY UNISON and GMB TO UNITED LEARNING TRUST

1. INTRODUCTION

This pay claim is submitted by UNISON and GMB on behalf of support staff working for **United Learning Trust**.

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
- 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.
- Average pay settlements across the economy have been running ahead of those received by **United Learning** 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.
- Support staff at United Learning need to feel treated equitably and valued as much as the teaching staff.
- The causes of excessive workload amongst support staff need to be tackled urgently

2. SUMMARY OF CLAIM

Our claim is for:

- An increase of at least £3,000 on all spinal column points

In addition:

- A 2-hour reduction in the working week with no detriment
- The trust agree to become a Living Wage accredited employer, and put a plan in place to ensure that all contracted-out workers at United learning are paid at least the Foundation Living Wage
- A clear plan to reach a minimum pay rate of £15 per hour in a maximum of 2 years, sooner if possible
- PPA time for classroom-based staff in line with the levels that teachers receive in ULT schools
- Limits to the amount of cover a teaching assistant is asked to undertake

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

^[1] 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

Prices for everyday goods continue to rise. Price changes to commodities that make up the RPI over the year to February 2025 are shown below¹:

Item	Average % increase to February 2025
Alcohol and tobacco	5.3
Personal expenditure	4.3
Housing and household expenditure	3.8
Food and catering	3.6
Consumer durables	2.3
Travel and leisure	1.8
All goods	2.7
All services	3.4
All items	3.4

Source: Office for National Statistics, Consumer Price Inflation Reference Tables, February 2025

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 2023².

Inflation is still running at 3.4%, led by major jumps in housing costs – mortgage interest payments have jumped by 13.7%³ and average monthly rent was up 8%⁴, taking average private rents to £1,326 per month.

Added to this bus/coach fares are up 9.3%, phone services 8.6%, water charges 8.1%, rail fares 5.5% and council tax / rates 4.9% on last year⁵. The energy price cap is set to rise a further 6.4% from April⁶ and the average increase in water bills is expected to be 26%.⁷ [this is the figure for England and Wales, in Scotland replace with 9.9%⁸, in Northern Ireland domestic charges are not funded through separate water bills]

¹ Office for National Statistics, Consumer Price Inflation Reference Tables, June 2023

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

³ Office for National Statistics, UK Consumer Price Inflation, March 2025

⁴ Office for National Statistics, Private Rent and House Prices UK, March 2025

⁵ Office for National Statistics, UK Consumer Price Inflation, March 2025

⁶ OFGEM, Energy price cap will rise by 6.4% from April. February 2025

⁷ Water UK, Annual average bill changes 2025 -2026

⁸ BBC, Scottish Water bills set to rise 9.9% in April, January 2025

Furthermore, the last decade and a half has seen enormous jumps in the basic costs shown below⁹.

Expenditure Item	House prices	Bus & coach fares	Electricity	Gas
Price rise 2010 – 24	73%	93%	144%	92%

Forecasts for inflation over 2025 have also seen a major upturn over recent months, with the predicted rate now set at 3.8%¹⁰.

For the value of staff wages not to fall back even further, they must at least keep pace with rises in the cost of living.

4. FALLING BEHIND AVERAGE PAY RATES

The ability of **United Learning 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. Maintaining competitiveness is given added urgency by average earnings across the UK economy starting 2025 at a growth rate of 5.8%¹¹.

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 on support staff is shown in two surveys:

UNISON’s latest survey (Nov 2024) of school support staff:

- 78% were worried about meeting energy bills;
- 79% were worried about their food costs;
- Many of the respondents said they were only able to cover essential costs because of a second income from a partner.

Nearly half (46%) said they were actively looking for better paid work elsewhere

GMB’s latest survey (Feb 2025) of support staff at United Learning Trust:

- 64% of ULT support staff said they had considered leaving in the last 6 months

The reasons for considering leaving and the percentage of members reporting that reason are displayed in the table below.

⁹ Office for National Statistics, UK Consumer Price Inflation Tables, December 2024, for bus /coach, electricity and gas prices, HM Land Registry Index, House Price Index, November 2024 for house prices

¹⁰ HM Treasury, Forecasts for the UK Economy, March 2025

¹¹ Office for National Statistics, Labour Market Overview, March 2025

Increase in SEND/behaviour concerns	14.3%
Lack of training	28.6%
Low levels of job satisfaction/morale	85.7%
Low levels of pay	42.9%
No career progression	28.6%
Poor mental health or burnout	57.1%
Stressful working environment	71.4%
Unmanageable workload/demand	57.1%
Verbal/physical assaults	14.3%
Other - lack of training	14.3%

This endemic low pay is leading to a growing recruitment and retention crisis among all school support staff roles. A TES investigation found that school leaders are struggling to fill vacancies, as staff find that they can earn more in retail roles where they are paid similar hourly rates but can work longer shifts and have year-round contracts.

<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, while 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).

In addition, the Use of Teaching Assistants in Schools survey and report conducted by CFE Research for the Department for Education and published in September 2024 found that:

- Three-quarters (75%) of leaders taking part in the survey found it either 'fairly' or 'extremely' difficult to recruit TAs; secondary school leaders found it especially difficult (82%). Retention was less of a concern, but still difficult for under a third (29%) of leaders and the challenges were again greater for secondary leaders (47%) compared to those leading primary schools (25%);
- The survey found low pay was a key reason why some TAs considered leaving the role;

These developments take place against the background of unemployment rate in decline from a peak of 8.5% in 2011 to 4.4% in the three months to January 2025, putting the rate among the lowest in half a century.

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

WORKLOAD

UNISON's latest (Nov 2024) survey of school support staff showed the extent of the immense workload pressures in schools

- 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;
- Two thirds of those surveyed (67%) worked more than their contracted hours without getting paid overtime. This was up from 52% in 2023.

GMB's Survey of ULT support staff indicated that 57% of members reported unmanageable workload/demand as a reason for considering leaving their job.

When asked, is there anything you would like to see incorporated into your contract that would be of benefit to you in your role?

A recurring theme was "PPA time"

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.

Teaching assistants in United Learning schools report being taken away from their duties in order to cover for absent teachers, usually be left alone in a classroom with no support. They also report being contacted outside of working hours when cover needs to be arranged. UNISON guidance states that HLTAs should only provide cover as a small part of their role, and that a TA should have skills and knowledge at NVQ3, or equivalent, for this type of work. Further action is needed at United Learning to ensure that TAs are only covering whole classes rarely, with maximum limits in place, and cover is only given to TAs commensurate with their pay grade. Currently, classroom-based staff are not given enough time to plan, prepare and assess interventions for groups of learners or given time to jointly plan lessons with the teachers that they are supporting. Building in specific PPA time into teaching assistants' timetables is vital to ensuring that they are deployed most effectively in supporting learners and will go a long way to making them feel better valued and recognised for the important work they do at United Learning Trust.

The Trade Union Side therefore believes that real action is needed on support staff workload:

- A two-hour reduction in the working week
- PPA time for classroom-based staff
- Trust-wide guidance on cover

6. FOUNDATION 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 <https://www.livingwage.org.uk/> .

These latest Foundation Living Wage are £12.60 or £13.85 in London.

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, LIFT Schools, Reach 2 Academy Trust and many more.

It is particularly important to contracted-out staff at United Learning that the Trust should be a Living Wage Employer so all staff working in United Learning schools feel valued equally. This would require a plan is put in place to ensure that all staff employed by contractors providing a service(s) to your schools are paid no less than the Foundation Living Wage.

ACHIEVING A £15 PER HOUR MINIMUM RATE

Despite the legal National Minimum Wage increasing to £12.21 per hour in April 2025, years of rampant inflation and cost of living rises to core household outgoings (like food, housing and energy) mean that calls for a £15 per hour minimum rate are stronger than ever. For United Learning Trust support staff, this would bring many benefits, including a significant boost to those struggling with low pay, lifting them 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, in turn reducing turnover rates – of the members in ULT surveyed by GMB who had considered leaving their jobs in the last six months, 85.7% cited low job satisfaction or morale as a reason to leave. GMB's wider school membership supports a real living wage of at least £15 per hour for the lowest paid workers, with 91% of members surveyed supporting this claim and 90.3% believing their pay was not keeping pace with the cost of living (GMB survey January 2025).

7. CONCLUSION

There can be no doubt that all **United Learning** employees have seen the value of their earnings fall considerably over recent years.

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.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "L Powell". The letters are cursive and somewhat stylized.

Leigh Powell
National Officer
UNISON

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "S Booth". The signature is highly stylized and cursive.

Stacey Booth
National Officer
GMB