



PAY CLAIM FOR 2025

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.
- 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 Ark 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 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)
- A clear plan to reach a minimum pay rate of £15 an hour in a maximum of two years, sooner if possible.
- Improvements to 'maternity pay'
- Negotiations on support staff 'flexible working policy'

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 2025/26.

^[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]

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

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

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

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 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. Maintaining competitiveness is given added urgency by average earnings across the UK economy starting 2025 at a growth rate of 5.8%.

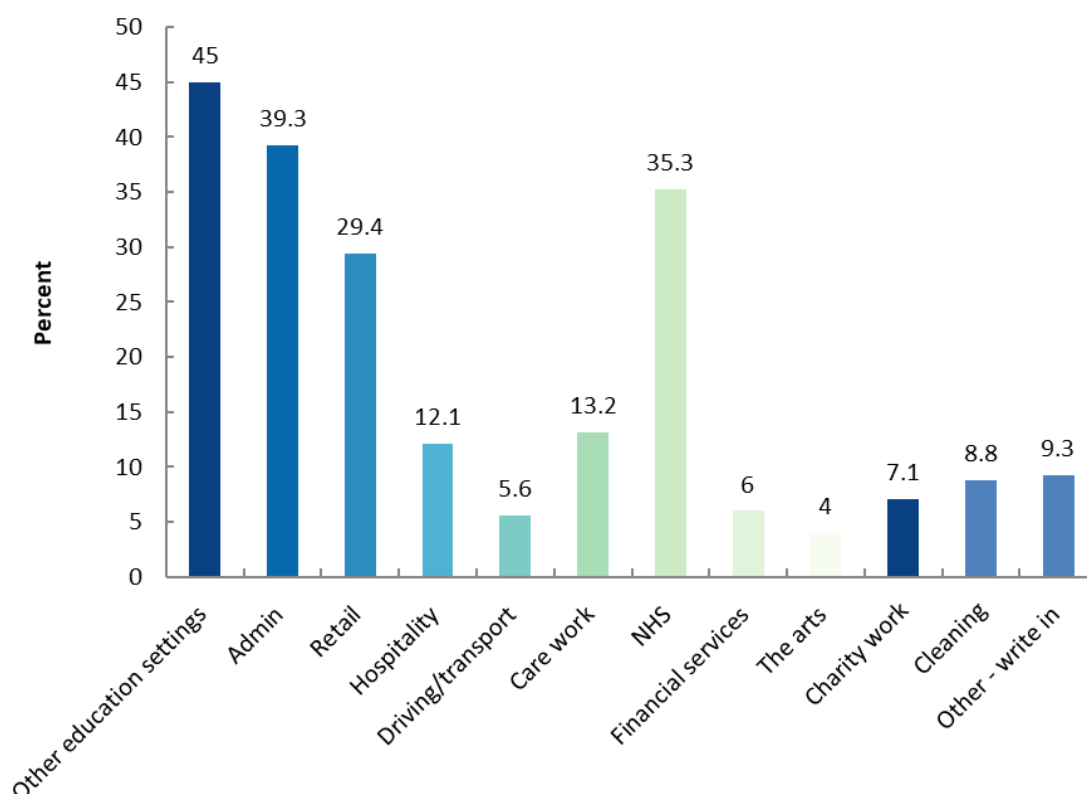
5. IMPACT OF LOW PAY – RECRUITMENT & RETENTION

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 2024) survey 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;
- Outside of other education settings, the graph below shows that by far the most popular sectors staff were considering were admin, retail and health

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

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



GMB's latest Survey (Feb 2025) of support staff at Ark Trust.

- 68% of support staff at Ark Trust said they had considered leaving in the last 6 months.

The reasons for leaving and the percentage of members are displayed in the table below.

Reason for considering leaving	Frequency
High levels of staff turnover	26.7%
Increase in SEND/behaviour concerns	60.0%
Lack of training	20.0%
Low levels of job satisfaction/morale	53.3%
Low levels of pay	46.7%
No career progression	46.7%
Poor equipment	20.0%
Poor mental health or burnout	46.7%
Problems with workplace culture (eg. bullying, racism, sexism or harassment)	13.3%
Staff shortages	66.7%
Stressful working environment	66.7%
Unmanageable workload/demand	33.3%
Verbal/physical assaults	13.3%
Other - lack of appreciation	6.7%

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 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.

6. 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.

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:

- Most TAs and leaders believe the roles and responsibilities of TAs have increased significantly in recent years.

Most leaders think the TA pay scale and their support budgets do not now reflect changes to the TA role over the past years, nor recognise the value of the most highly skilled and knowledgeable TAs.

73% of Unite members in schools and local authorities do not feel valued by their employer (January 2025) 89% regularly or occasionally struggle with stress at work (January 2025).

GMB's survey of Ark support staff demonstrates the pressure with (67%) reporting a stressful working environment as a reason for considering leaving and (67%) reporting staff shortages as a main contributory factor.

When asked, "is there anything you would like to see incorporated into your contract that would be of benefit in your role" there were two recurring themes, "additional staff" and "well-being day".

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.

We are currently facing an epidemic of stress and anxiety across the UK economy. 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 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.

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

- A two-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)

7. ACHIEVING A £15 PER HOUR MINIMUM RATE

Despite the legal National Minimum Wage increasing to £12.21 per hour in April 2025, and the UK Foundation Living Wage increasing to £12.60 and £13.85 in London, 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 Ark 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 Ark Trust surveyed by GMB who had considered leaving their jobs in the last six months, 47% cited low levels of pay as a reason for considering leaving. 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). 90% of Unite members in the sector support the demand for a minimum rate of £15 per hour (January 2025) and it is fully endorsed by UNISON.

8. IMPROVEMENTS TO MATERNITY PAY

As part of last year's pay negotiations ARK agreed to address our call for improved 'Maternity Pay Provisions' in this year's pay round. The urgent need for this is driven by the extent to which maternity pay in schools for both support staff and teachers has fallen so far behind other sectors of the economy [Exodus of new mums fuels teacher shortage in schools - BBC News](#)

9. NEGOTIATE A FLEXIBLE WORKING POLICY

For school support staff in Unite, after pay and progression, flexible working was most frequently cited as a priority for negotiation (Survey, December 2024).

Improvements to flexible working would enable Ark support staff to better balance their professional and personal responsibilities, leading to improved mental health,

increased job satisfaction, and higher productivity. Flexible working models enable staff to manage other responsibilities such as caregiving duties or health conditions, and a commitment to more flexible working would therefore promote inclusivity as well as support retention. We call on Ark to open negotiations for a new flexible working policy.

10 CONCLUSION

There can be no doubt that all Ark support staff 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.