

UNISON school catering staff survey 2017

Introduction

As the UK's largest union in schools, UNISON represents over 250,000 people in support staff roles¹, across all types of schools and special units, including academies.

In November and December 2017 UNISON surveyed 1,220 kitchen staff working across England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. Those who responded include kitchen and catering assistants (42%), cooks/chefs (17%), kitchen supervisors (10%), and catering managers (16%). Respondents work in primary schools (66%), secondary schools (27%), as well as special schools and pupil referral units.

The majority work in local authority controlled funded schools (54%), with 27% working in multi-academy trusts or stand alone academies. The majority (70%) are employed directly by the school, and 23% by catering contractors.

Findings

Encouragingly, most school kitchen staff enjoy their work with 64% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement 'I enjoy my job'. However, just over a quarter (27%) admitted they didn't feel valued within the school meals team, while just over a third (35%) felt excluded as a member of the school as a whole. Among the serious problems highlighted by the survey, 13% of respondents were concerned about bullying at work from managers, while one on ten (10%) were concerned about bullying from colleagues.

Other serious concerns include workload (46%), pay (41%) and job security (25%).

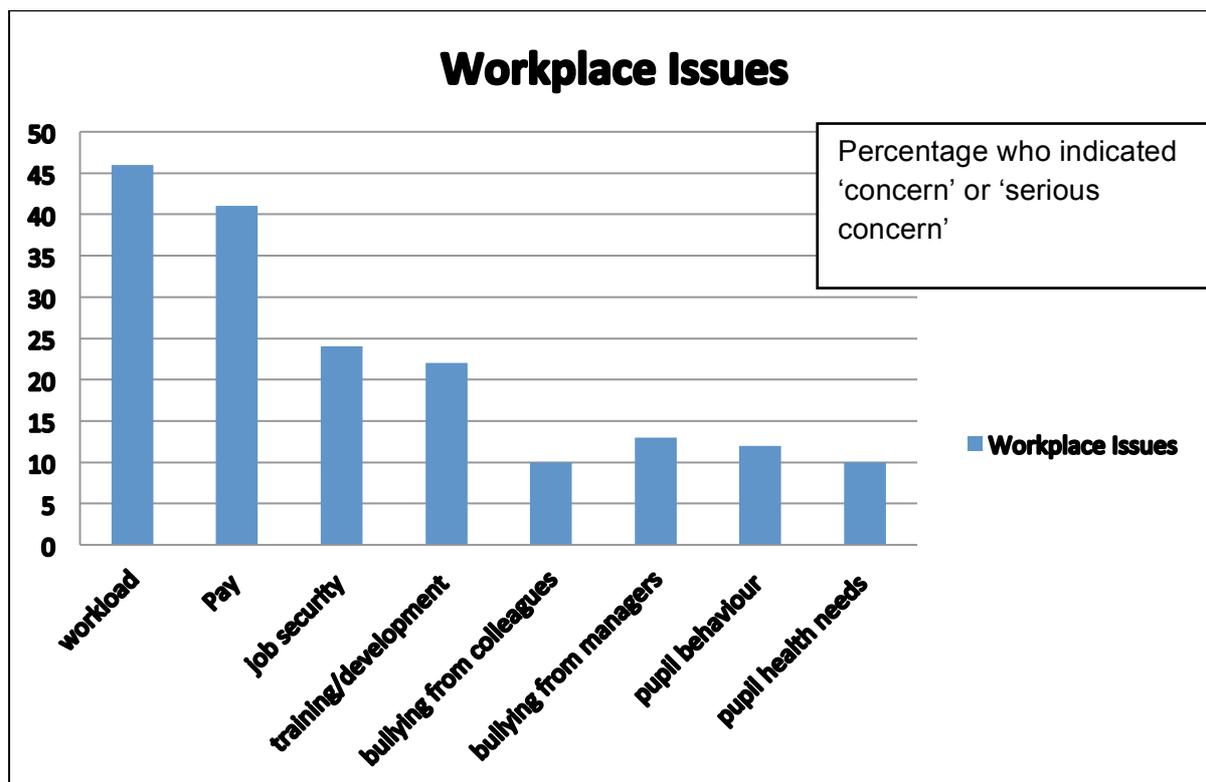
Some of the responses received included:

"I once loved my job and now feel overwhelmed."

"My manager is very abrupt...I don't like to use the word [but] I would class her as a bully..."

"We don't feel part of the school as a whole. We have to cook for two schools, one of which is not our own, to keep our jobs and the department financially viable."

Workplace issues:



Stress at work

Alarmingly, half (50%) of the school kitchen staff report facing stress at work at least half the time, while a quarter (25%) feel stressed at work most or all of the time. Workload, understaffing and an absence of training featured highly as key contributing factors. Lack of time to complete the job was also repeatedly cited by staff, as were issues with unsupportive management. Worryingly, a number of respondents cited a lack of suitable equipment, a shortage of ingredients, which meant they were frequently running out of stock.

Respondents said their stress was caused by:

“Staff hours cut, increased workload, lack of support and training.”

“Managers making me take on tasks I have had no training for.”

“The lack of equipment or staff to cover sickness is an issue.”

Hours and money

More than four in ten respondents (46%) complained that they don't have enough time to complete their work within their contracted hours. Consequently, staff regularly work extra hours for free to ensure that sufficient meals are prepared, served and cleared away.

One in three (33%) respondents work between two and five hours of unpaid overtime each week to complete their duties. Almost one in ten (9%) of school catering staff regularly work five hours or more unpaid overtime each week.

The regular practice of unpaid overtime is particularly shocking as a fifth (20%) of respondents said they earn the national minimum wage², and 20% of kitchen staff have a second job to make ends meet. Four in ten (43%) of kitchen staff are in debt (excluding mortgages), whilst one in five (21%) have had to borrow from friends or family over the past two years to make ends meet.

Training

Kitchen staff raised serious concerns about the lack of training available. One third (33%) state they hadn't received any training in the past year. We asked respondents what training they'd like to have and the most common responses were (in order of popularity) first aid, food hygiene, health and safety, management, food allergies, cooking skills and nutrition.

Comments on training included:

"No training opportunities available – no money available. Every day more children with allergies are coming into school...we are expected to deal with all situations with no training."

"We are expected to do mandatory training in our own time."

"Training is poor I feel in some aspects of the job that I do...[those] responsible for monitoring children at lunchtimes have had little training – I would have thought first aid would be a necessity."

School food standards – nutrition and workforce development

In 2013 the government published school food standards³ for most state funded schools in England. These give clear guidance on the nutrition that school meals should provide. Survey respondents were asked if they have seen a copy of the standards. Just over four in ten (46%) stated that they had, while one in five (23%) were not sure if they had seen the standards or not.

When asked if the school food standards are followed in their workplace 6% said not, and 36% weren't sure.

Alongside the nutritional standards, *Professional standards for the school food workforce*⁴ were also developed for employers to use. Standards exist for the following roles: catering manager/head chef, school cook, assistant cook, kitchen/catering assistant, and midday supervisor.

School kitchen staff were asked if they were aware of these professional workforce standards – but only 20% are (59% have not heard of them, and 21% aren't sure). Only 16% have had any training towards the professional workforce standards.

What needs to change?

UNISON is calling for all those staff involved in the provision of school meals to be trained in the school food standards to ensure that all schools are providing nutritious and healthy meals. Whether meals are provided by staff working for schools, local authorities or private contractors, they should all be working to ensure that every child benefits from the nutritional guidelines.

UNISON wants to see all employers responsible for school meals to stop over-burdening kitchen staff, leaving them with no choice but to do unpaid overtime to get their work done. This far too common practice has a direct impact on morale and can trap lower paid staff in a cycle of debt, says UNISON.

UNISON's survey reveals the need for employers to provide well-resourced training and development for school meals staff to ensure a confident and content workforce that is well equipped to meet modern demands.

UNISON wants employers to provide well-resourced training and development in line with the professional standards for school catering workforce. This would begin to address the lack of investment and training, and ensure that all staff are aware of the required nutritional standards.

¹ UNISON members work in a variety of roles including teaching assistants, school business managers, catering and cleaning staff, IT, HR and finance staff, librarians, technicians, caretakers, facilities and maintenance staff, and administrators.

² The national minimum wage for over 25's is currently £7.50 per hour.

³ The nutritional requirements for food and drink in schools (Scotland) regulations 2008 were introduced in Scottish primary schools in August 2008 and secondary schools in August 2009. The regulations set strict nutritional standards for all food and drink being served in schools. In Wales the healthy eating in schools (nutritional standards and requirements) regulations 2013 state the type of food that can and can't be provided by schools.

This survey and report only asked questions about the school food standards (England) published by the Department for Education in July 2013, which set out seventeen actions to transform what children eat in schools and how they learn about food.

⁴ The professional standards for the school catering workforce clearly define the requirements that underpin the delivery of quality school food and help to create a consistent standard for the industry. The standards state the knowledge, skills and behaviours that an individual needs to achieve the best industry standard of performance in their job role.