



School support staff cost-of-living survey 2022

Introduction

School support staff are vital to the efficient running of the education system. From teaching assistants to librarians, all play a crucial role in ensuring every child and young person has the best chance possible to learn.

Many contribute to the welfare and development of students, and are on hand in lessons to offer vital help, such as supporting those with special needs.

However, school support staff are low paid and struggling with the soaring cost of living like other public sector workers.

To uncover the full impact of this, UNISON carried out a survey of school support staff members in the UK.

The research was carried out from 20 October to 1 November. Staff were asked about pay, how they were coping with the cost-of-living crisis and the impact of the crisis on their school community.

The survey received 6,672 responses with the majority from staff working in primary schools (59%), followed by secondary schools (24%), special schools (11%), nurseries (5%) and pupil referral units (1%).

The roles of the respondents were as follows:

- 69% teaching and learning support (e.g. teaching assistant, cover supervisor)
- 9% administration and management (e.g. data, attendance, admin, finance)
- 7% facilities (e.g. site staff, catering, cleaning)
- 6% pupil support and welfare (e.g. learning mentor, parent support adviser, lunchtime supervisor)
- 5% specialist and technical roles (e.g. librarian, technician, sports coach)
- 4% other roles

Cost of living

The overwhelming majority (98%) said they were concerned the rate of pay for their school job was not enough to cope with the rising cost of living.

We had thousands of comments in response to this question including the following:

"I can't afford to put my heating on right now and am cutting down on food by skipping meals for myself so I can feed my 10-month-old."

"My rent has increased by £300, and my pay is really stretched. My husband and I want to have children, but it's likely I'll have to leave work to care for them because childcare costs more than my monthly income."

"I'm renting a single room because I can't afford proper accommodation. With the rising cost of living, I might even struggle to pay for where I live currently."

"I've been trying to get a mortgage but I don't earn enough money. If I don't get a different, better-paid job by September, I'll have to sell my home. I'm now looking to leave the job after 16 years"

Around one in eight (13%) said they had needed to use a food bank in the past year. Many commented they may need to do so later in the year or were relying on parents for help with meals.

"I use a food bank to help me as I could no longer rely on 0% credit cards to get me through the month."

"I am too ashamed to use a food bank."

Helping pupils/families

Many staff are helping out with costs or providing items to pupils whose families are struggling financially. More than a third (35%) said they had helped with the provision of food/packed lunches, 30% had helped with uniforms and 23% with books/stationery.

"I've given up my lunch for a pupil who hadn't eaten any breakfast. Staff at school now buy extra loaves of bread in their shopping to feed hungry children. I've donated my children's old school clothes and PE kits to parents in need."

"I earn very little, but I always have food available in my library at my own personal cost. I buy books for the library because there's no school budget to replenish stock. I also help to make second-hand clothes available for families."

Additional jobs

Over a quarter (27%) said they had to take on a second or third job to make ends meet.

The survey found 23% had one additional job and 4% had two additional jobs. Jobs included security, supermarket work, delivery driving, bar work, beauty, tuition, cleaning, care work and additional school roles such as lunch-time supervision. The impact of extra jobs on mental and physical health, and work-life balance, is a concern.

Paying the bills

The overwhelming majority of respondents were anxious about paying essential bills. A total of 92% were worried about meeting food costs; 91% were worried about paying utility bills and council tax; and 63% were worried about paying the mortgage/rent.

To help meet rising energy costs, the following measures had been taken:

- 55% had bought additional blankets
- 31% were only heating one room
- 30% were not using heating despite needing it for health reasons
- 8% were going into public spaces to avoid using their own heating
- 63% were limiting oven use
- 53% were only having showers (no baths)
- 41% were cutting down on showers

Borrowing money

More than two fifths (42%) said they had to borrow money to tide over family finances in the past year.

Workload

Two thirds (67%) said their workload had increased over the past year, with 49% reporting a reduction in the number of support staff at their school over that period.

When asked what extra tasks they had taken on, there was a wide range of responses including:

- Making up food bags
- Cleaning
- First aid
- Writing reports/paperwork
- Cover
- Welfare checks
- Additional support for families
- Extra interventions

Looking for alternative work

Nearly half (49%) said they were actively looking for better-paid work elsewhere with retail the most popular (51%) alternative to education.

Conclusion

School support staff, who carry out hugely important, challenging and professional roles, were already struggling with low wages before being hit with the cost-of-living crisis.

Now, for many, worry and stress about paying bills and feeding their families is leading to them actively looking to leave the education sector for better pay elsewhere. This is inevitably causing a knock-on effect for the colleagues and children they support.

As well as the personal difficulties they face, the survey demonstrates the key role support staff play in supporting pupils and their families as they battle the cost of living crisis.

It is crucial that schools - and those who work in them - have the investment they need, since they are at the heart of our country's recovery.