



## School support staff cost of living survey 2023

### Introduction

UNISON represents around 250,000 members of school support staff. 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 are struggling with the soaring cost of living like other public sector workers.

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

The research was carried out from 19 October to 5 November. Staff were asked about how they were coping with the cost-of-living crisis and the impact of the crisis on their school community.

The survey received 13,063 responses. Most responses came from staff working in primary schools (62%), with 24% in secondary schools, 2% in all-through schools, 11% in special schools and 1% in pupil referral units.

The roles of the respondents were as follows:

- 11% worked in administration & management (data, attendance, admin, finance etc)
- 11% worked in facilities (site staff, catering, cleaning etc)
- 64% worked in teaching and learning support (teaching assistant, cover supervisor etc)
- 4% worked in specialist and technical roles (librarian, technician, sports coach etc)
- 7% worked in pupil support and welfare (learning mentor, parent support adviser, lunchtime supervisor etc)
- 3% identified in roles outside of these categories

Just under two-thirds (62%) said they were on a term-time contract; 35% on an all-year contract. The remainder were on various permutations, such as term-time plus ten days. Within these contract types, 64% work full-time while 36% work part-time.

## **Cost of living**

**The overwhelming majority (96%) 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. A selection is below:

*The job is becoming increasingly unaffordable.*

*I don't have any spare cash at the end of the month and I can't afford to do anything nice with my children.*

*Despite working 35 hours a week I've had to take on a second job for another 10 hours as I was unable to pay my bills. I am permanently exhausted.*

*Overdrawn every month. Not enough to cover the basics. Even after cutting everything right down. No luxury items, no holidays or socialising.*

*I'm struggling to make ends meet and dread an unplanned expense like car or household item breaking.*

One in seven (14%) said they had needed to use a foodbank in the last year. Many said in the comments that they expected they would need to use one this year or were relying on parents for help with meals. Many spoke of feeling embarrassed or ashamed of having to use a food bank. Others spoke of using community larders or apps to obtain food close to its sell-by-date.

*I am helped by family otherwise I would have to use a food bank.*

*I use a local food pantry each week and during the school holidays I often get help from a local food bank*

*We're lucky that our school has a community hub that we are allowed to use. I have taken advantage of this on numerous occasions*

*I have no other option but to use it*

*I regularly use food banks, clothing banks and have had to sell my furniture. I am dependent on benefits to supplement my income. My pay is also so low that the job centre is making me attend weekly appointments to find another job. I just cannot continue like this.*

## **Additional jobs**

**Over a quarter (26%) said they had to take on a second or third job to make ends meet.** Of these respondents, 86% had one additional job and 14% had two additional jobs. A huge array of roles were listed, including bar work, supermarket work, beauty, tuition, cleaning, care work and additional school roles such as lunch-time supervision.

## Paying the bills

The overwhelming majority of respondents were anxious about paying essential bills. 90% were worried about meeting food costs, 89% were worried about meeting energy bills and 58% were worried about paying the mortgage/rent.

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Not applicable</b>
<b>Mortgage/rent</b>	58%	20%	22%
<b>Childcare</b>	9%	19%	72%
<b>Energy bills</b>	89%	9%	2%
<b>Utility bills and council tax</b>	84%	13%	3%
<b>Travel to work</b>	42%	33%	25%
<b>Fuel</b>	68%	17%	15%
<b>Health costs (e.g. prescriptions)</b>	39%	27%	34%
<b>Debts</b>	54%	18%	28%
<b>Food costs</b>	90%	9%	1%
<b>TV/Internet package</b>	67%	24%	9%
<b>Telephone bills</b>	63%	29%	8%
<b>Clothing</b>	75%	21%	4%

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

- 41% had bought additional blankets
- 65% not using the heating
- 20% were only heating one room
- 5% were going into public spaces to avoid using own heating
- 48% were limiting use of oven
- 49% were only having showers (no baths)
- 19% were using alternative light sources e.g. candles, battery lamps
- 31% were cutting down number of showers
- 67% had turned down their thermostat

### **Borrowing money**

**45% said they had needed to borrow money to tide over family finances in the past year.**

### **Workload**

**Just under two-thirds (65%) said their workload had increased over the past year, with 52% reporting a reduction in the number of support staff at their school over that period.**

Those whose workload had increased were asked what extra tasks had been taken on.  
Answers included:

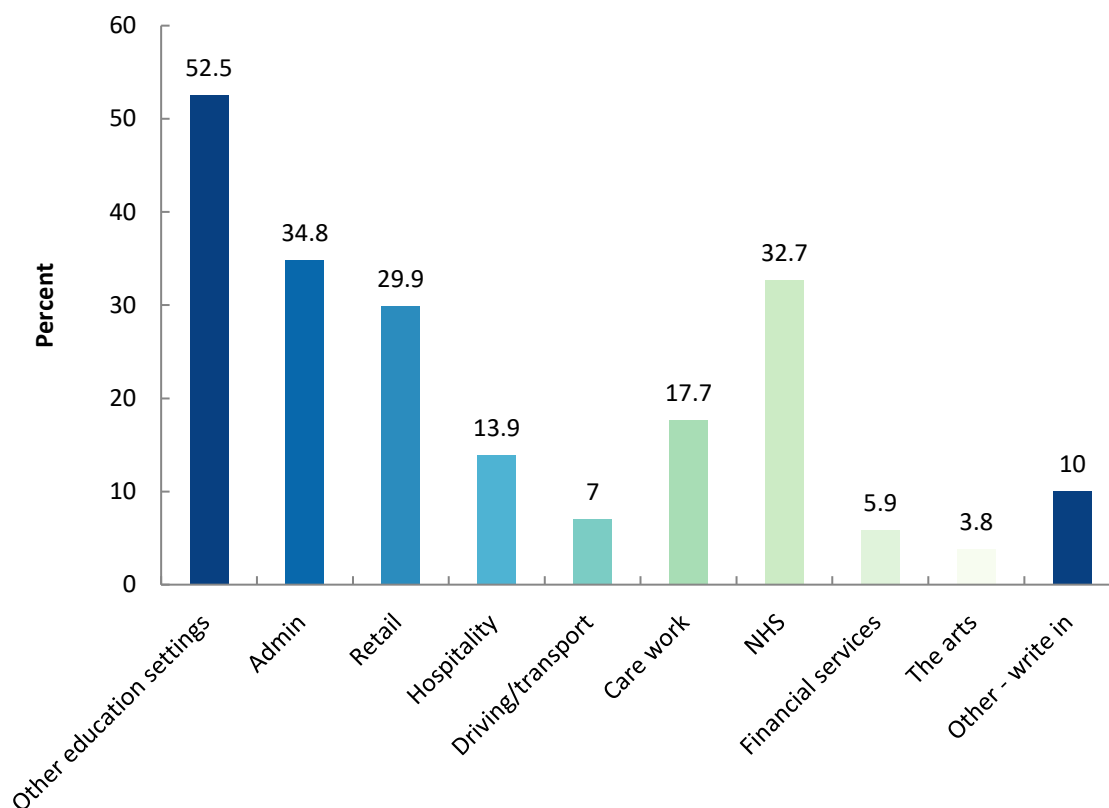
- Taking on new interventions
- First aid
- Working 1:3 or 1:4 with children instead of 1:1
- More admin tasks associated with helping families due to cost-of-living increases
- Covering classes and lunch breaks
- Cleaning
- Writing reports/paperwork
- Welfare checks
- Supporting refugees
- Administering medication

Over half of those surveyed (52%) worked more than their contracted hours without getting paid overtime. The table below shows the breakdown of unpaid hours worked per week:

<b>Do you ever work more than your contracted hours without getting paid overtime?</b>	<b>Percent</b>
No	48%
1-2 hours a week	27%
2-3 hours a week	11%
3-4 hours a week	5%
4-5 hours a week	4%
5-6 hours a week	2%
7-8 hours a week	1%
More than 8 hours a week	2%

### Looking for alternative work

Nearly half (46%) said they were actively looking for better paid work elsewhere. When asked what industries they had been looking in, the following responses were given:



### Impact of the cost of living crisis at school

The survey asked if respondents had noticed an increase in a range of pupil-related issues at their school over the last year. The following answers were given:

	Yes	No
Parents needing financial support	82%	18%
Parents needing emotional support	87%	13%
Children showing signs of neglect	73%	27%
Children arriving hungry	81%	19%
Children appearing sleep-deprived	80%	20%

Children saying they are cold at home	32%	68%
Children unable to take part in extra curricular activities due to cost	62%	38%
Children absent from the setting	74%	26%
Children experiencing mental health problems	82%	18%
Children experiencing physical health problems	52%	48%
Children experiencing behavioural difficulties	91%	9%
Children disclosing abuse	24%	76%

Comments included:

*We have to provide a lot of emotional support to kids at after school club - lots come every day so parents can work and it seems like parents are too tired to provide this support at home.*

*Children arriving hungry and unclean and in clothes that aren't appropriate for the weather is a huge problem.*

*Heartbreaking when you see these kids five days a week struggling to cope with everyday life. You know they aren't getting enough food and sleep.*

*Neglect, hunger, tiredness are so common. The school feels like behaviour unit.*

### **Helping pupils/families**

Respondents were asked if they had personally helped a child, family or their school with the cost or provision of a number of items over the last year. Given the financial pressures faced by support staff themselves, it stood out that over a third (36%) had helped with the provision of food/packed lunches, 34% had helped with uniform, and 22% with books and stationery. The full results were as follows:

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
Books/stationery	22%	78%
Coats	22%	78%
Uniform/clothes	34%	67%

Shoes	20%	80%
Sports kit or equipment	18%	83%
Lunch money	15%	85%
Utility bills	3%	97%
School trips	11%	89%
IT equipment	6%	95%
Food / packed lunch	36%	65%
Childcare	6%	94%
Transport	9%	91%

Many said that, whilst it was against school policy to help individuals, they would refer cases to senior leadership and the school often made provision for those in need.

### **Conclusion**

School support staff, who carry out hugely important, challenging and professional roles, continue to struggle with low wages, exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis.

Worries about paying the bills and feeding their families is leading many to consider leaving the education sector for better pay elsewhere. This would inevitably have an impact on the colleagues and children they support.

The survey demonstrates the key role support staff play in picking up and dealing with difficulties faced by children and their families including food poverty, physical and mental health issues and behavioural issues. Schools have become the first port of call for struggling families for immediate help and signposting, while schools themselves are trying to manage with less.

The situation is not sustainable – it is vital that education receives the investment it needs to pay a decent wage which attracts and retains staff and allows schools to deliver the standard of education that all children deserve.

For more information about the survey, contact [education@unison.co.uk](mailto:education@unison.co.uk).