



School support staff pay survey 2021

Introduction

UNISON is the largest union for education support staff in the UK with almost 350,000 members, around 250,000 of whom work in schools. UNISON members are critical to the smooth running of all sections of the education system and make a vital contribution to delivering improved education outcomes for children and young people. The whole school team is a range of professional, technical, managerial and site staff.

UNISON carried out a survey of school support staff members in England and Wales in November 2021, which aimed to monitor support staff pay and highlight key concerns around this issue.

The survey received 6,938 responses. Most responses came from staff working in primary schools (59%), with 27% in secondary schools, 10% in special schools, 3% in nurseries and 1% in pupil referral units.

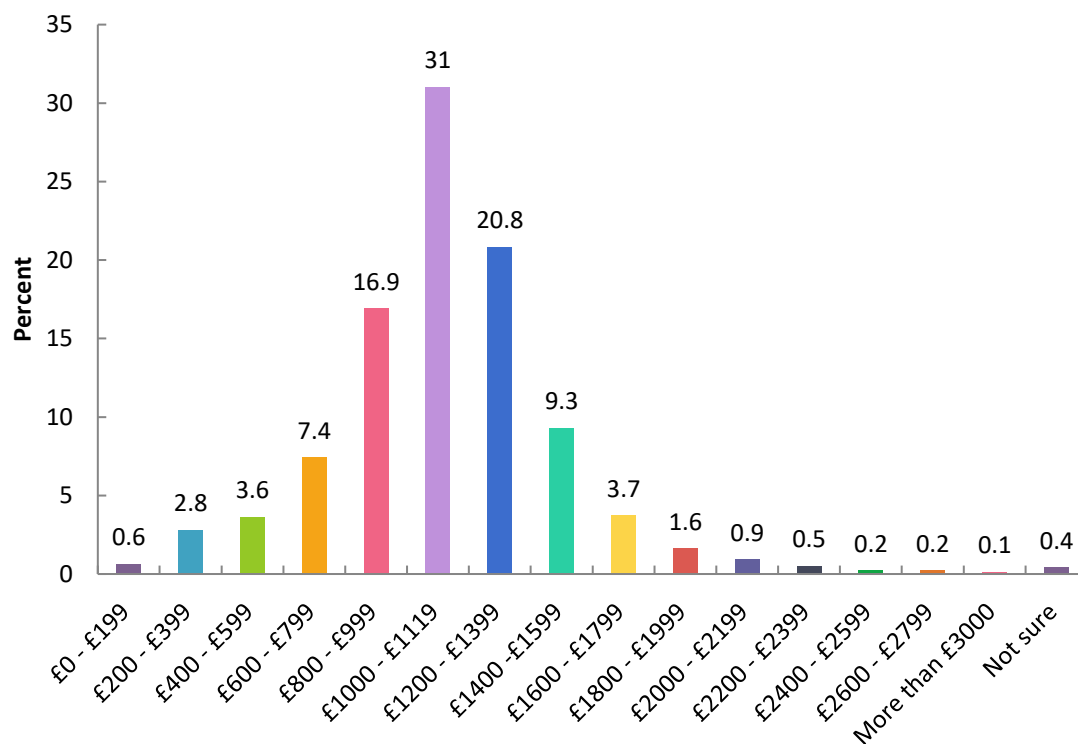
The roles of the respondents were as follows:

- Administration & management (e.g. data, attendance, admin, finance) – 13%
- Facilities (e.g. site staff, catering, cleaning) – 10%
- Teaching and learning support (e.g. teaching assistant, cover supervisor) – 65%
- Specialist and technical (e.g. librarian, technician, sports coach) – 6%
- Pupil support and welfare (e.g. learning mentor, parent support adviser, lunchtime supervisor) – 6%

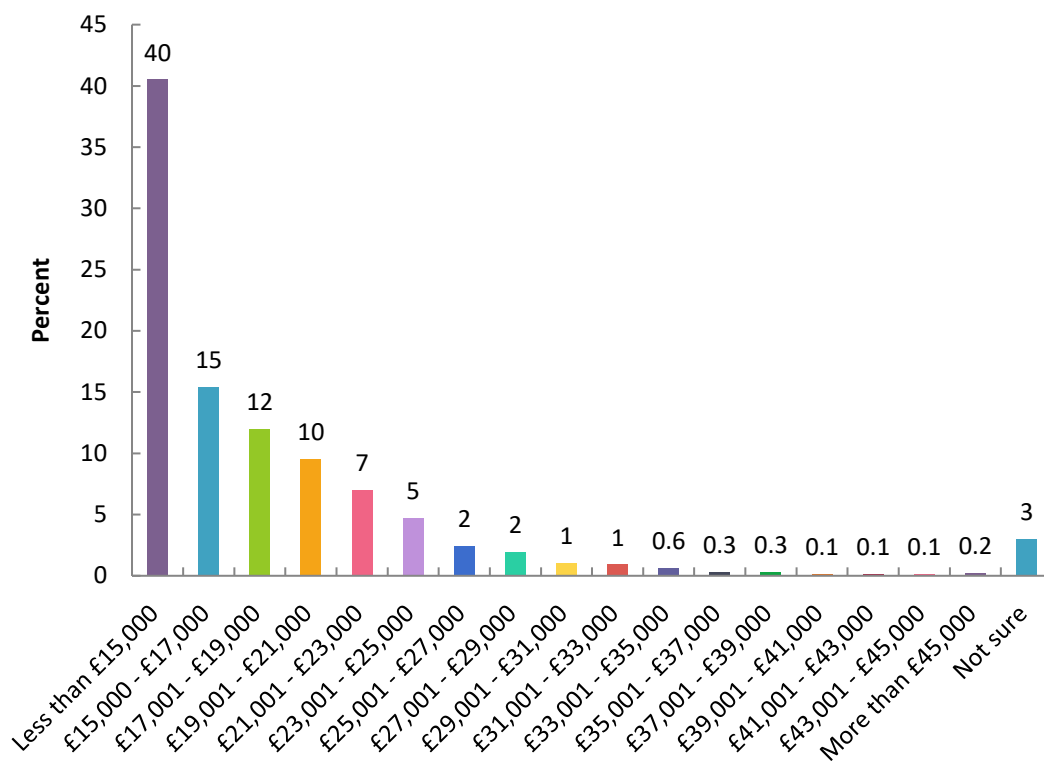
More than half (56%) said they were on a term-time contract; 40% on an all-year contract while the remainder were on various permutations, such as term-time plus ten days.

Pay data

Since pay data for support staff is not collected by the government, we asked respondents to indicate their monthly take-home pay after tax. **The most common monthly take-home pay range is £1,000-£1,199 a month, with 31% earning within this range**, regardless of contract type. The graph below shows the distribution of responses within other ranges:



To compare support staff salaries to other jobs, we also asked all respondents to give their full-time equivalent (FTE) salary. **Two fifths (40%) earn less than £15,000 a year FTE**, as shown in the graph below (however, with 56% on term time contracts, their actual wage will be reduced).



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 are below:

“I could not even pay rent on my wages. At present I am renting a tiny two-bed for £1,100 a month with my husband who has cancer and cannot work full time. If he is unable to contribute, my monthly wage does not even pay our rent.”

“As a single person, I am just over the threshold for any financial help from the government and struggle to keep on top of bills. I panic when I have to visit the dentist or optician.”

“The rate of inflation increases dramatically year on year, but the salary I get does not reflect this at all. Year on year my salary gets further and further away from the cost of living.”

“It's not so much a concern, it's a fact – it's not enough.”

“We are barely above the national minimum wage. For the position we hold in education, our salary is not reflective of our responsibility.”

“Once all the bills are paid there's hardly anything to live off for the rest of the month, especially with children and the rising cost of petrol and council tax. It's always a struggle.”

“Childcare is half of my wages. Plus with everything else increasing I can't even cover the bills.”

“I will be receiving a £30 a month pay cut from March. I will earn less than I did seven years ago, and we haven't had a decent pay rise for ages.”

“I can't survive with this wage.”

“I only cope financially as my youngest son, who is 25, is still living at home. He contributes 50% towards all bills, groceries etc. When he eventually moves out, I have serious fears about my financial well-being.”

“We seem to do one of the hardest jobs, yet we're on low pay. After fighting a pay freeze, especially during a scary pandemic and being on the frontline with no choice, we never feel valued. Even if we get a cost-of-living increase, because of the rise in utility bills, food and cost of living, we are still taking a pay cut.”

“I am struggling to keep my home, pay bills and feed my children as I'm a single mother. I'm living on a credit card I can't afford to pay.”

“The cost of nursery for my baby is exactly the same as my salary – even working 32.5 hours a week and doing hard work. I will have to resign from my role.”

“It is impossible to employ new people within schools at what is now becoming a very low-paid job compared to the wages I could be earning in Tesco, Aldi or Lidl.”

“It's very much a salary for someone wanting to top up the family income, not a salary to support a single person easily, or one with family commitments. My income is in addition to a pension of my own and income from my husband. I cannot imagine having to rely on it for day-to-day living. It's just not enough.”

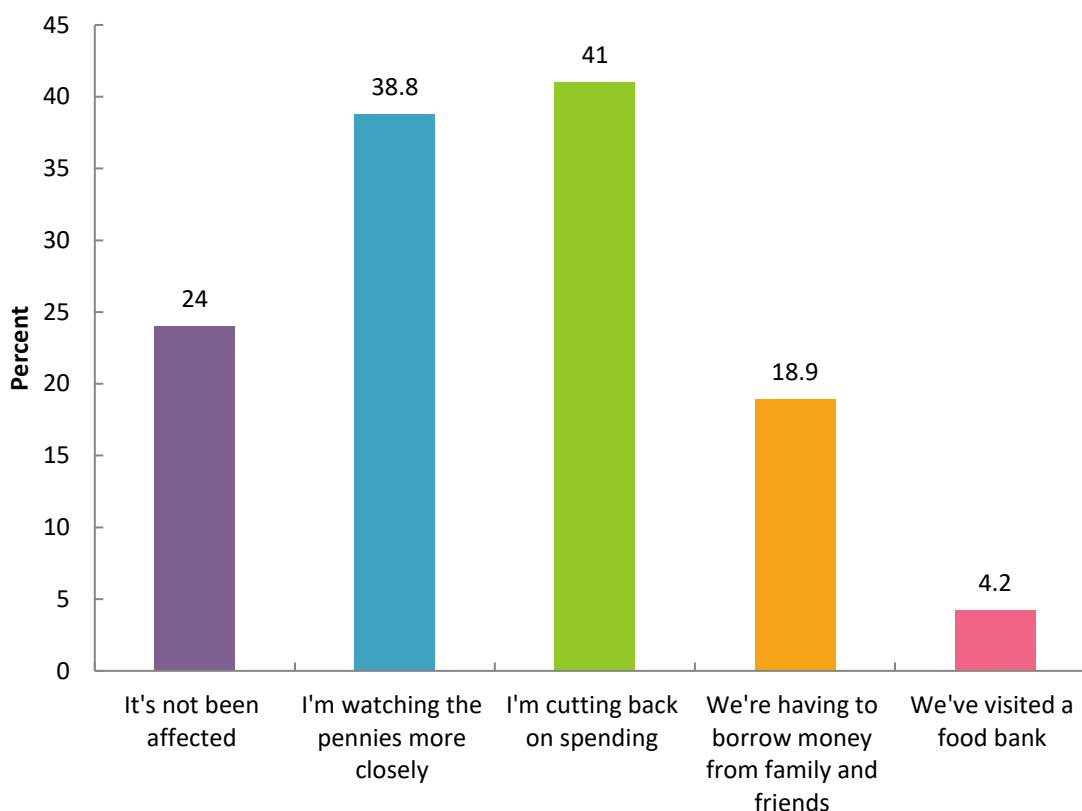
Additional jobs

A quarter (25%) said they had to take on a second or third job to make ends meet. Most (22% of the total) had one additional job and 3% had two additional jobs. A huge array of roles were listed, including bar work, nail technician, guitar tuition, cleaning, care work, extended school services, deliveries, call centres, dog-walking, admin, language tuition, additional school roles such as lunch-time supervision, book-keeping, proof-reading, waitressing, translation, supermarket work, Ebay trading, market research and upcycling furniture. A respondent commented:

“I have taken on jobs in the gig economy, primarily food delivery. Often I can spend all weekend working to earn about an additional £100, without which I cannot sustain my family. The knock-on effect of that has been me neglecting my child and their needs. It has put strains on my relationship and is having a heavy impact on my mental health.”

Benefits

More than one in ten (11%) qualified for in-work benefits such as Universal Credit or tax credits. Of these respondents, the following graph shows the impact of how the recent cut to Universal Credit has affected their family spending:



Comments on how the recent cut to Universal Credit had affected family spending included:

"I am being more careful with heating and buying food. I have told the kids they won't be getting as much this year as can't afford it."

"Having separated from my husband during the pandemic and becoming a single parent to my two children, the £20 uplift per week is something that I have received on Universal Credit from the word go. Its removal was quite daunting because it covered a week's food and petrol. I just know things are going to be a lot tighter."

"I've had to reduce all spending and visit shops that sell near end-date food to get it at reduced prices."

"I'm reliant on a community pantry for my weekly shop."

"I borrow money from my sons but it is so embarrassing."

"I have always lived within my means. However, I haven't had the use of a boiler since June. But now the colder weather is arriving and I can't afford a new boiler. So it's extra jumpers, no hot water, no heating. Once the children are out of a school setting I will have to take on extra jobs or find a new job."

"A food bank visit could be needed soon. Everything has gone up so much. We will go without any luxuries before I ask for help. My son may have to leave the clubs he attends. Even if I earn more, it is deducted from my Universal Credit and stops me getting help with council tax. I can't seem to win. When I take cover work, we're given less Universal Credit a month after my bigger pay check, which makes budgeting really difficult."

“If I didn't have support from family I would have to use food banks, although I usually do without as it makes me feel like a failure.”

Paying the bills

More than two thirds (71%) were worried about paying utility bills and council tax; 47% worried about paying the mortgage/rent.

	Yes	No	Not applicable
Mortgage/rent	47%	28%	25%
Childcare	7%	25%	68%
Utility bills and council tax	71%	23%	6%
Health costs (e.g. prescriptions)	41%	32%	27%
Travel to work	41%	40%	19%
Debts	46%	26%	28%

Borrowing money

More than a third (35%) said they had needed to borrow money to tide over family finances in the past year.

Unpaid overtime

When asked if they ever worked over their contracted hours without getting paid overtime (and how long) each week, the following responses were given:

- 34% worked no extra unpaid hours
- 33% worked 1-2 hours
- 15% worked 2-3 hours
- 7% worked 3-4 hours
- 5% worked 4-5 hours
- 3% worked 5-6 hours
- 3% worked more than 6 hours

There were a range of comments on this issue with key themes emerging about the impossibility of getting the job done in the contracted hours, but also the erosion of goodwill:

“We are never able to finish on time and it is classed as goodwill – not sure why this is – but it is expected.”

“Time has been removed at the start and end of the school day, but very often I am asked to dismiss the class at the end of the day when I should have already left.”

“Unpaid overtime is just expected and if you refuse you’re looked down on or even questioned about it. They get annoyed if you don’t start early, even when you’re on time.”

“In the role of site manager, I am expected to stay and work extra hours to sort out any problems as and when they occur.”

“I cannot do my job in the hours paid. I frequently have to give up part of breaks as well to cover or take work home. Majority of planning and training done in own time.”

“I used to do unpaid overtime, but since pay cuts, I won't do this anymore.”

“The leadership team acknowledges there’s inadequate support staffing, but only recruit teachers. There’s no budget for more support staff.”

“I'm contracted 9am to 3.30pm. The lunch hour is unpaid. I need to be in school by 8.15 to be prepared for my job. If I'm in for a full day I do at least another hour at the end of the day. In addition to this I do planning and research at home for at least three hours a week.”

“Goodwill has turned in to running a school without paying staff. Money is found for some things, but not for paying support staff the actual hours they work.”

Workload

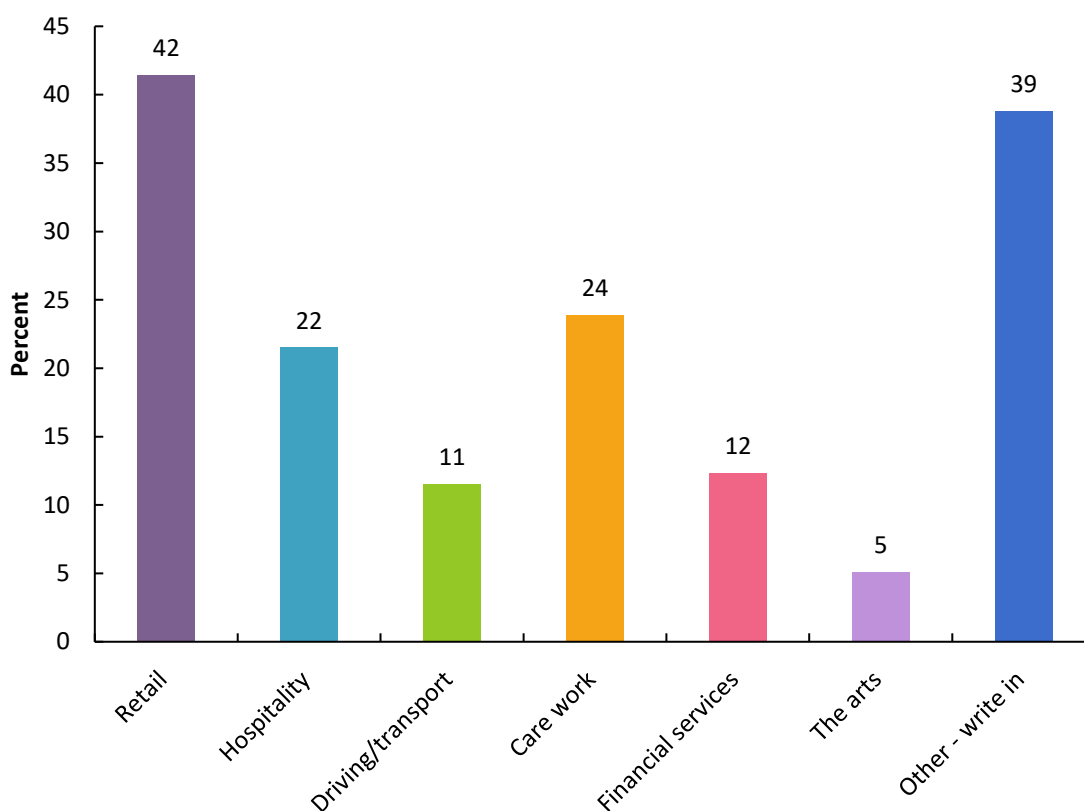
Two thirds (66%) said their workload had increased over the past year, during the pandemic, with 43% reporting a reduction in the number of support staff at their school over that period.

When asked what extra tasks had been taken on, the most common responses were:

- Cleaning
- Cover for isolating teachers
- Welfare checks
- Additional support for families
- Covid data reporting
- Extra interventions

Looking for alternative work

More than two fifths (42%) said they were actively looking for better paid work elsewhere. When asked what industries they had been looking in, the following responses were given:



The 'other – write in' category included a lot of comments about looking for alternative roles within the local council or in admin work.

Feeling valued at work

More than half (51%) said they did not feel valued at work while 49% said they did. The comments backed this up with many saying that while they felt valued by colleagues, this was not reflected in their pay:

"I do feel valued on a personal level, but not valued in the salary – it does not reflect or assist with feelings of self-worth."

"By the teacher and support staff I work with, yes I feel valued. But some others in school, no!"

"We work in a building that's falling apart, is absolutely freezing and is being held together with wooden sheets."

"Sometimes higher levels of management and governors lose sight of the work that goes on behind the scenes."

"Support staff are very much treated as second-class citizens when it comes to things like training etc. Teaching staff are given coaching and other types of professional development whilst support staff are given little or none."

"We have a fabulous new head who is trying to put right many things I have previously been unhappy about."

"I have a very supportive headteacher and I feel valued in school. But I feel invisible to the local authority and government. My goodwill is rapidly depleting."

"I am actually a school rep and all union reps get to lunch with the head teacher regularly to see if there are any issues. An open-door policy is positively encouraged here with any concerns."

"I do not feel appreciated. They always say when I've done things wrong, but never when I've done something right or gone above and beyond my job role."

"I feel valued by my colleagues but not by the powers that determine my salary."

"Lots of people have left and senior managers don't seem to look at why they have just blamed Covid when it's not that at all."

"Finance feels like a completely unappreciated department as we don't really have direct contact with pupils. I would look for a higher-paid job if my children were not at school."

"I feel valued at work but not by the government regarding pay."

"I feel valued, but I don't think the pay for any support staff is enough for what we do. I often work in the holidays, but don't get paid for it (answering emails etc)."

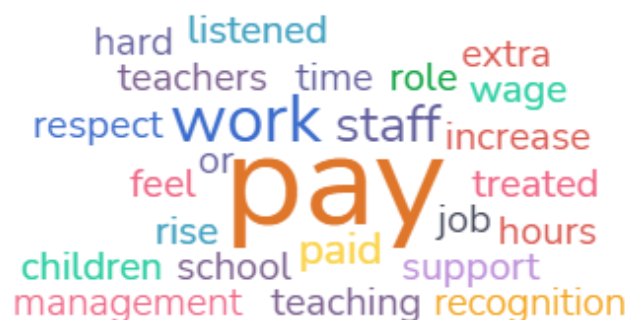
"My position has just been altered and throughout the entire process I have been made to feel very insignificant, even though it is me and my pay that is being affected."

"Some teachers really do value teaching assistants and we feel part of the team."

"I do feel valued, but warm wishes and high regard won't pay my bills."

"We have recently been taken over by a trust and so much has changed. The school only appears to be interested in getting a good Ofsted result. While I appreciate that this is important, it shouldn't be the total focus. I feel very much like a number. I could be any number as long as I am in the right place at the right time."

When asked what one thing would make them feel more valued at work, many commented that acknowledgement from managers, and a thank you for their work, would go a long way to making them feel more valued. **However, the vast majority of respondents responded with 'better pay', as reflected in the word cloud below.**



Conclusion

School support staff carry out hugely important, challenging and professional roles – schools could not run without them. Yet it is clear their low levels of pay cause significant personal difficulties and nowhere near reflect the value of their crucial work. With 42% of school staff actively looking for alternative roles, it is vital that the government takes action to make work in schools pay fairly – or risk further damaging an already fragile, fragmented and demoralised workforce.

For more information about the survey, contact education@unison.co.uk.