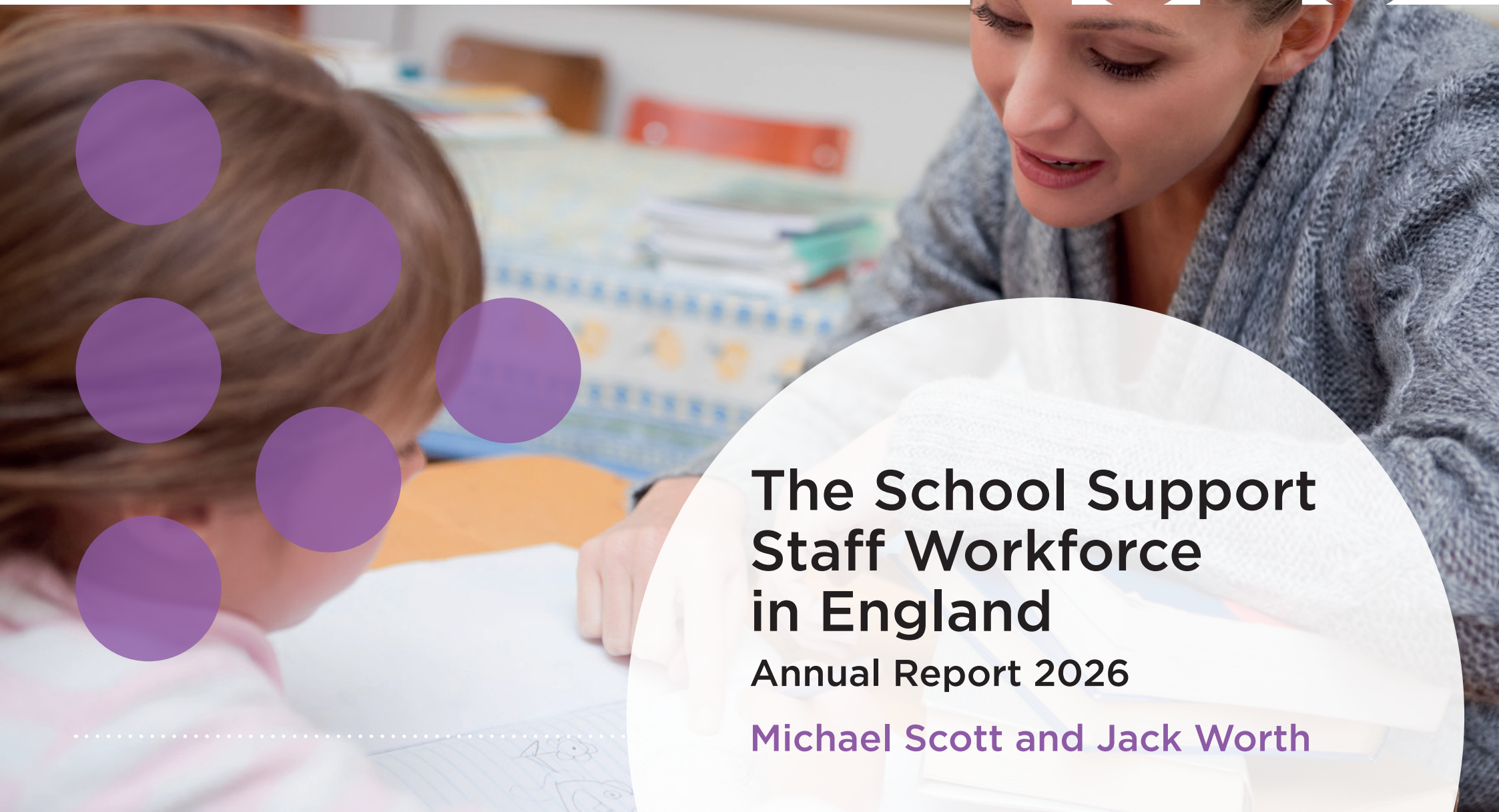
NFER
National Foundation for Educational Research

This report was updated in September 2026 following the discovery of a coding error which impacted our analysis of support staff attrition rates. Page 13, the relevant key finding, and other references to this evidence in the report have been revised.

2026



The School Support Staff Workforce in England

Annual Report 2026

Michael Scott and Jack Worth

Contents

Introduction	3
Key findings and recommendations	4
Policy context	7
The school support staff workforce	8
SEND as a driver of demand	11
Shortages	12
Retention	13
Reasons support staff consider leaving	14
Career progression	15
Working hours	16
Pay	18
Conclusions and recommendations	22
References	25

Nuffield Foundation

The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. It funds and undertakes rigorous research, encourages innovation and supports the use of sound evidence to inform social and economic policy, and improve people's lives. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, the Ada Lovelace Institute and the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory. This project has been funded by the Nuffield Foundation, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation. Find out more at: nuffieldfoundation.org.

Bluesky: @nuffieldfoundation.org
LinkedIn: Nuffield Foundation

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Sarah Tang and Juan Manuel Del Pozo Segura for the analysis they did for this project and to Jude Hillary and Dan Keel for their helpful comments on early drafts. We would also like representatives from various organisations for their thoughtful insights and feedback on this report.

Some of this work was undertaken in the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Secure Research Service (SRS) using data from ONS and other owners and does not imply the endorsement of the ONS or other data owners.

Introduction

Support staff make up more than half of the school workforce in England, yet compared to teachers relatively little research has been done into the labour force dynamics of this diverse group. NFER is seeking to address that gap with a series of annual workforce reports looking at school support staff.

Support staff play an important role in enabling schools to provide a high-quality education. For example, in a 2023 survey, 95 per cent of school leaders said teaching assistants (TAs) have a positive impact on their schools' ability to improve academic outcomes for pupils while 92 per cent said they improve pupil behaviour and engagement (CFE Research, 2024). Of course, support staff includes other types of workers: administrators, auxiliary staff, technicians, school business professionals and various other categories of support staff also make essential contributions to school life.

The aim of the National Foundation for Educational Research's (NFER) annual series of reports on the education workforce, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, is to monitor progress towards meeting workforce supply challenges. This report summarises the latest research and key trends in support staff numbers, recruitment, retention, pay and working conditions and explores how policy changes may affect these trends and challenges, where they exist.

In this first report, we look at support staff as a whole – see the methodology for precise definitions and how they differ in each dataset, We also focus on TAs as part of the wider group. This choice partially reflects the data available. In future reports, we will develop this analysis further to look more specifically at the different parts of the support staff workforce, where data allows.

DfE collects less data through the School Workforce Census (SWC) on support staff than it does for teachers, but the data that is collected allows us to look at how support staff numbers have changed over time and trends in support staff retention.

For this report, we have also utilised data from various surveys:

1. To measure how easy or difficult schools find the recruitment of support staff, we surveyed school leaders in autumn term 2025, and compared their responses to those of a similar survey in 2023.

2. We look at how support staff earnings are distributed, and how they have changed over time, using the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE).

3. We look at trends in working hours and working conditions using the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and the Annual Population Survey (APS). In these datasets, we can compare support staff to workers with similar age, gender, qualification level and region profiles.

Finally, to gather the voice of support staff in schools, we have used data from Edurio, a provider of surveys to schools, particularly those in trusts. (We explore how this sample compares to the national population in our methodology document).

edurio

Key findings and recommendations

Support staff make up more than half of the school workforce and this workforce continues to grow year-on-year.

Most of the growth in recent years is driven by the number of TAs in secondary and special schools. In primary schools, support staff numbers are largely flat, which is notable given that the number of pupils (and teachers) in primary schools has started falling.

Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) appear to be a driver of demand for TAs, but are far from the only factor.

We found some evidence that demand for TAs across different areas is driven by variations in SEND needs, but this relationship is not particularly strong. A 2023 survey suggests SEND support is a common role for TAs, but general learning support was even more common.

Despite some improvement since 2023, three in four school leaders surveyed said they found it difficult to recruit TAs in 2025.

More leaders said they found it difficult to recruit TAs than teachers. This emphasises the challenge schools face in recruiting TAs to support their students. Despite this, DfE does not systematically collect data on TA shortages or those of other support staff.

Experimental data suggests support staff exit rates peaked following the pandemic.

NFER analysis for this report suggests approximately one in six support staff left the school system between 2023/24 and 2024/25. This is down from the post-pandemic peak but is still higher than pre-pandemic levels.

Among support staff who are considering leaving their jobs, the most common reason is that they do not feel valued.

Edurio asks support staff who are considering leaving their jobs why they are doing so. As well as feeling undervalued, low staff morale, a lack of staffing, and financial reasons were amongst the other common reasons given.

Support staff are less likely to agree that their employer offers good opportunities for career progression compared to workers with similar characteristics, such as qualification levels.

In contrast, they are more likely to think the things they do in life are worthwhile than those similar workers.

Support staff tend to work less hours per week than similar workers in England.

This may be because support staff are more likely to work part-time than other workers, although the proportion working part-time has slowly been falling over time. Support staff are also less likely to want to work fewer hours and work evenings than similar workers, meaning there is limited evidence the typical support staff worker is overworked.

A significant minority (15 per cent) of support staff say they would like to work more than they currently do.

While a relatively small percentage, this is more common amongst support staff than it is similar workers and is important context when considering the relatively low rates of pay that support staff receive.

Almost all school support staff cannot work from home, but around 30 per cent of similar workers now do so.

Whilst many support staff will be attracted to the job because of flexibilities around term-time working, the increased prevalence of home working in alternative jobs may be making recruitment and retention harder.

Support staff are generally low paid compared to similar workers.

Average support staff pay is comfortably in the bottom half of pay in the wider labour market in England and pay for TAs is even lower. The weekly pay of support staff is around 30 to 35 per cent less than workers with similar characteristics, such as qualification levels. Differences in working hours account for around half of this, leaving a significant pay gap remaining. These differences have not changed much over the last fifteen years.

Support staff pay has grown significantly in recent years, both in real terms and relative to average UK earnings.

ASHE data suggests support staff pay has increased considerably in the last three years. This is a result of recent outcomes from the National Joint Council (NJC) negotiation process and strong growth in the National Living Wage. The government is currently in the process of replacing the NJC process for support staff in England with a new body, the School Support Staff Negotiating Body (SSSNB).

Key recommendations

1. The Government needs to do more to help schools recruit support staff, particularly TAs. Given SEND skills shortages are commonly cited by schools as a key recruitment challenge, there should be more focus on ensuring training is available to both prospective and current TAs to fill this gap.
2. The Government and SSSNB should strongly consider whether low pay levels are driving the recruitment and retention challenges we have identified. While there has been some progress recently, they should consider what further action needs to be taken over the medium term to make support staff pay, particularly in TA roles, more attractive.
3. The Government and SSSNB should explore what can be done to improve career progression opportunities for school support staff, who are much less likely than similar workers to agree they have good opportunities at present.
4. DfE should make a detailed assessment of the costs and benefits of collecting annual data on support staff vacancies through the SWC, including consideration and acknowledgement of which schools and pupils are most disadvantaged by a lack of support staff, particularly TAs.
5. DfE should consult on whether staff who work in central teams in trusts should be part of the SWC, or captured through a supplementary data collection.

Policy context

Despite making up more than half of the school workforce, policymaking rarely focuses on support staff or the role they play, particularly compared to the attention placed on teachers.

A recent exception is the Employment Rights Act, which makes specific provision for the establishment of a School Support Staff Negotiating Body (SSSNB) in England. This will move the process for negotiating and setting support staff's pay and working conditions away from national collective bargaining through the National Joint Council for Local Government Services (NJC). The NJC is the national collective bargaining framework for local government and comprise national employers and three recognised trade unions: Unison, GMB and Unite. It will continue to agree pay awards for other types of local government workers (and school support staff in Wales and Northern Ireland).

It is expected that the SSSNB will make its first decisions for the 2027/28 financial year, with the NJC continuing to make decisions before then. In the meantime, the DfE has been consulting on the role and scope of the SSSNB, specifically about which roles will be covered by the new body (DfE, 2026c). It is possible that the Government may launch further consultations in future.

DfE has said the SSSNB will mean that support staff employed by local authorities and academy trusts, and working both in maintained schools and academies in England, will be entitled to the statutory minimums for pay and working conditions agreed by the body. This could include entitlements to things like training and career progression for support staff. DfE also recently announced that maternity pay for support staff would be improved through the SSSNB's negotiation process in its first year (DfE, 2026a).

In recent years, support staff pay has seen some significant increases, at least in nominal terms, as shown later in this report. Schools have not always been funded to increase support staff pay in the same way they often have been given additional funding to increase teacher pay. However, this appears to have changed in recent years. It will be interesting to see whether this continues as the SSSNB takes shape.

Finally, the government has long been promising reforms to the SEND system and it announced its proposals as part of its "Every child achieving and thriving" policy paper, shortly before this report was finalised (DfE, 2026b). The work of support staff, and particularly TAs, is often shaped by the needs of SEND students. Reforms could therefore change the nature of demand for support staff in the long-term. Given that the government has said that children will not lose existing support and has placed a large focus on mainstream schools being able to support a wider range of needs, the medium term effects are more likely to be an expansion, rather than a reduction, in demand for support staff.

We will look at the likely implications of the reforms for school support staff in future iterations of this report.

The support staff workforce has been growing in England, driven by increases in the number of TAs

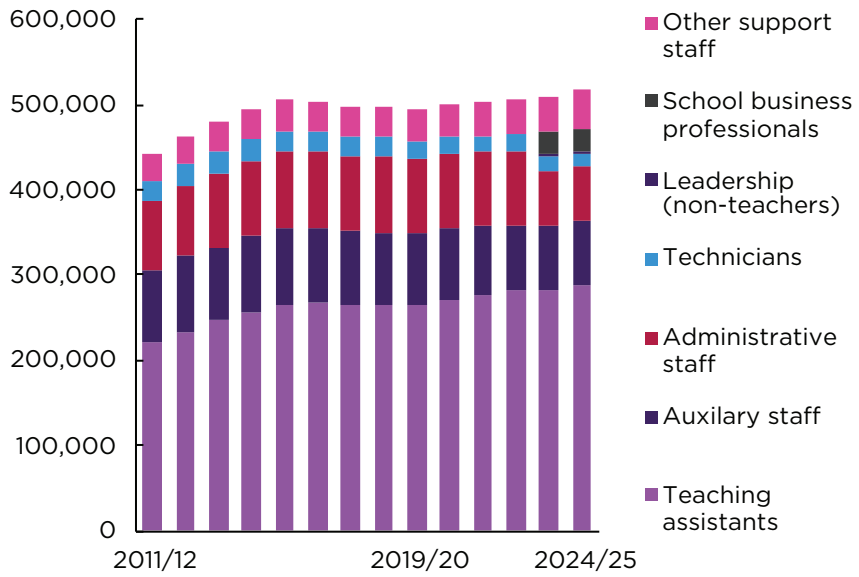
There are more than 500,000 people working in the school support staff workforce in state schools in England. The latest data the 2024/25 academic year shows that there are around 517,500 full time equivalent (FTE) or 850,000 (headcount - the number of people in posts regardless of working pattern) support staff positions. This compares to 468,000 school teachers (FTE), meaning support staff make up just over half the school workforce in FTE terms.

In 2024/25, TAs make up 56 per cent of the support staff workforce. The next largest categories are auxiliary staff (14 per cent) and administrative staff (12 per cent).

The support staff workforce has grown slowly in recent years and this growth is entirely driven by increases in TAs. In 2019/20 (collected before the pandemic) there were 498,500 FTE support staff, so schools have added around 22,000 FTE since then. There were 23,000 more TAs in state-funded schools in England in 2024/25 compared to 2019/20 levels, an increase of around ten per cent. Total FTE in other roles has shrunk slightly in that time.

A possible explanation – at least a partial one - for the disproportionate growth in the proportion of support staff who are in TA posts is schools joining academy trusts. Staff that work in a central team in a trust are not counted in the SWC data, unlike those who work directly for a school. Insofar as these roles are more likely to be administrative or business roles, any growth in these types of jobs would not be detected in the SWC data. This may mean that there is a widening gap between the statistics and the overall size of support staff workforce (including those in trusts). It may also mean the extent to which the growth of TA roles is unusual, relative to other support staff posts, is exaggerated.

Support staff (FTE) in state funded schools in England, by role



Source: SWC (2011/12-2024/25). Two new categories introduced in 2023/24 means caution should be used when comparing with previous data.

Recent growth in support staff numbers has been concentrated in secondary and special schools

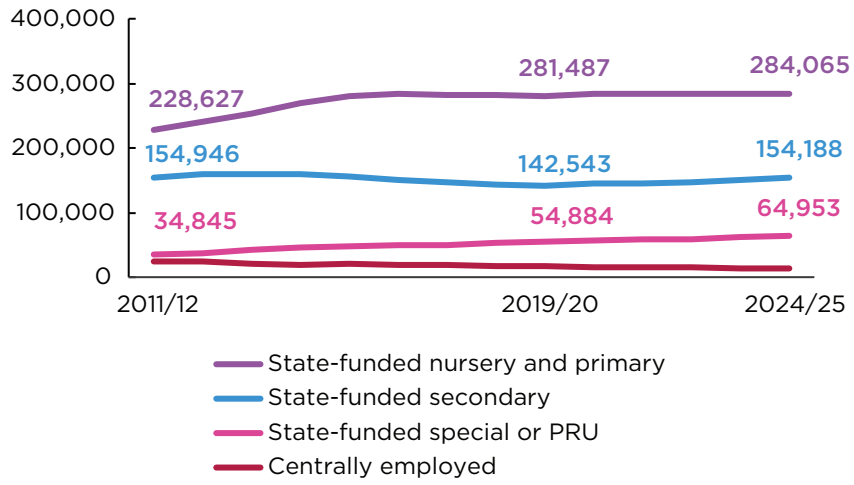
The increase in support staff numbers in the last five years has largely occurred in secondary schools and special schools, as an increasing number of 11 to 16 year olds and rising demand for SEND provision has increased the number of pupils in these types of schools. There are now ten per cent more support staff working in secondary schools than there were five years ago, and 20 per cent more in special schools.

Support staff numbers in primary schools increased markedly from around 2011/12 to 2016/17, a trend which is also linked to rising pupil numbers. Since then, despite a fall in pupil numbers in primary schools over the last decade, the number of support staff working in state funded primary schools and nurseries has not fallen. Indeed, TA numbers in primary schools have grown by five per cent in this period. (See also Iocco, Kuhn and Julius, 2025.)

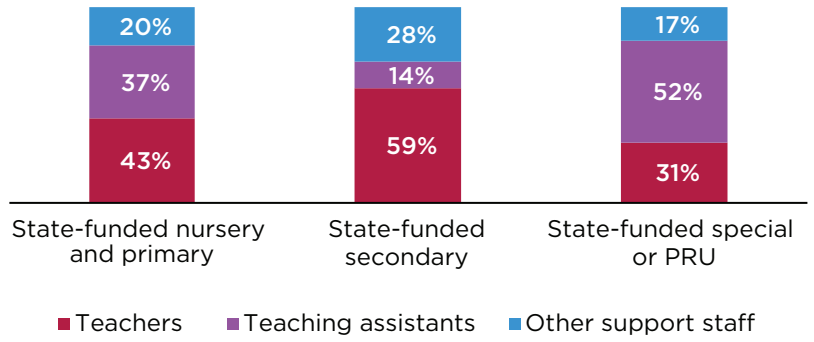
Support staff are particularly prevalent in primary schools. Around 57 per cent of all staff in primary schools are support staff, compared to 41 per cent in secondary schools. Special schools are particularly reliant on support staff, and over half of all staff in special schools are TAs. NFER has previously highlighted the role of support staff in special schools (Scott, 2025a).

Unlike teachers, the majority of school support staff are employed in primary schools. Over half (55 per cent) of all support staff work in primary schools (or state-funded nurseries) while 46 per cent of all teachers do so.

Support staff (FTE) in state funded schools in England, by school type



Composition of the school workforce in 2024/25 by school type



Source: SWC (2011/12-2024/25)

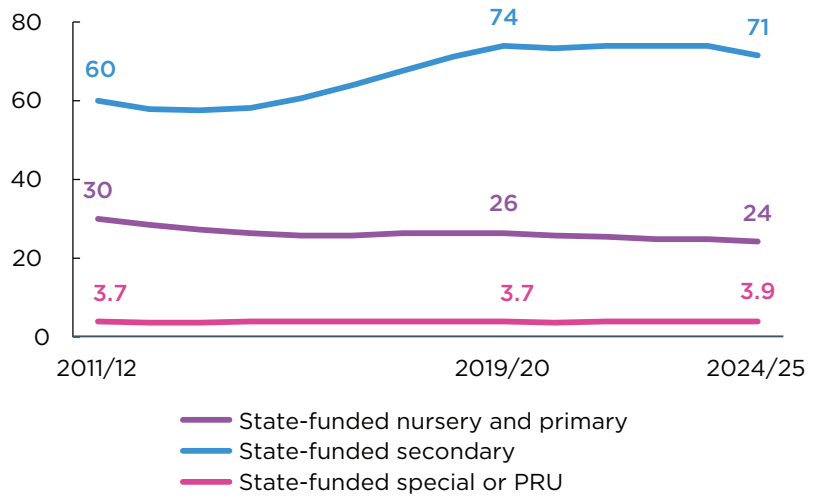
The ratio of pupils to TAs continues to fall in primary schools, whilst it has remained flat in secondary schools and special schools in recent years.

Looking at the ratio of pupils to TAs gives us additional context to how the workforce has changed over time. In primary schools, the average number of TAs per pupil has consistently fallen over the last fifteen years. In 2011/12, there were around 30 pupils per TA in primary schools. By 2024/25, this had fallen by around 20 per cent to 24 pupils per TA.

In secondary schools, the pattern is quite different. Between 2014/15 and 2019/20, the ratio of pupils to TAs in secondary schools increased substantially. This roughly coincided with a period where the number of pupils in secondary schools was growing rapidly while the number of TAs employed in secondary schools fell. Since then, the ratio has stabilised: pupil numbers are still growing in secondary schools, but schools are employing more TAs to keep pace. Nevertheless, ratios are still substantially higher than they were in the early 2010s.

The ratio of pupils to TAs in special schools and pupil referral units (PRUs) is far lower than it is in other school types. This amounts to considerable growth in the number of TAs, considering that the number of pupils in these types of settings has more than doubled between 2011/12 and 2024/25. NFER research has shown that the ratio of pupils to staff is lower in special schools than it is in PRUs and other forms of AP, and it is particularly low for schools which specialise in sensory and/or physical needs (Scott, 2025a). These ratios reflect the challenges special schools face in providing for children with severe needs, as well as the costs of delivering the level of provision their pupils need.

The ratio of pupils to teaching assistants in state funded schools in England, by school type



Source: SWC (2011/12-2024/25)

Special educational needs and disabilities appear to be a driver of increased demand for TAs, but are not the only factor

The growth in TA numbers in recent years has occurred alongside growth in the number of pupils identified as having special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). SEND needs have grown by around a quarter in the state school system over five years, from 1.27 million pupils in 2019/20 to 1.62 million in 2024/25. Given this focus, it is important to ask to what extent demand for TAs is driven by SEND.

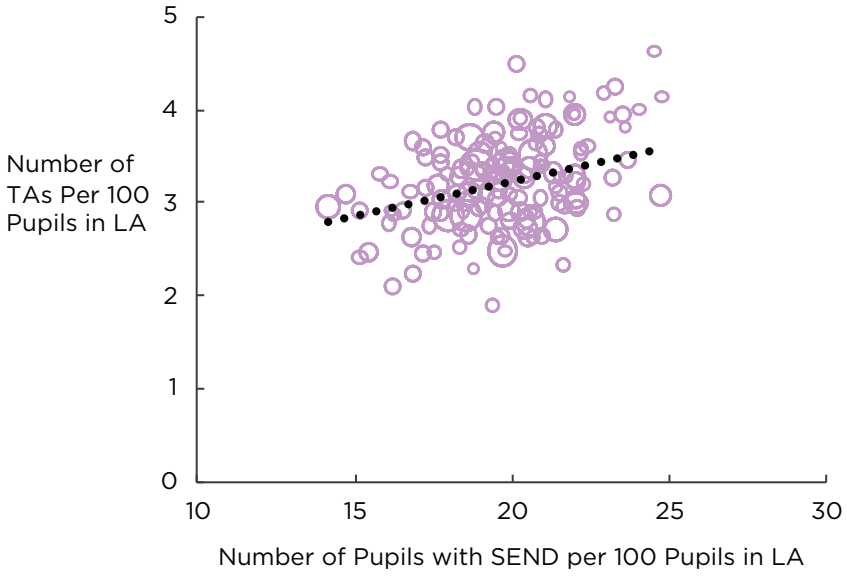
Many TAs work directly with SEND pupils, particularly in special schools but also throughout the system. A DfE-funded report found that providing one-to-one support for pupils with SEND or who have barriers to learning was one of the most common uses of TAs in schools (CFE Research, 2024). Likewise, it found schools regularly fund TA provision using extra high needs funding and that senior leaders who were planning to increase the number of TAs they employ were likely to say this is due to SEND needs.

On the other hand, the existing evidence suggests demand for TAs is also driven by wider factors. In the 2024 CFE report, providing general teaching and learning support was the most common task TAs were asked to do.

To take a preliminary, additional look at this, we mapped how the number of TAs in schools in each Local Authority (LA) relates to the number of SEND students in those schools. There is a positive relationship between the two measures, meaning those LAs with more SEND children also employ more TAs, on average (although this is not to say one thing necessarily causes the other). However, there is considerable variation across LAs, suggesting that other factors also drive demand and recruitment of TAs across schools. We will aim to examine this relationship further in future versions of this report.

Overall, the evidence suggests SEND is a key driver in demand for TAs, and may even be the main driver of the growth in demand in recent years. Nevertheless, schools need TAs for a variety of wider reasons and this will motivate demand too.

2024/25 SEND Pupils and Number of TAs in LAs



Source: NFER analysis of SWC and NPD (2024/25)

Around three in four primary and secondary schools find it difficult to recruit TAs

In recent years, schools have reported significant difficulties in recruiting support staff, particularly TAs. For example, a 2023 NFER survey, collected at a time when school costs were increasing rapidly and there were a large number of vacancies in the wider labour market, found that 84 per cent of primary leaders reported that recruiting TAs was 'difficult' or 'very difficult' (Lucas et al., 2023). Rates were similar for secondary and special school leaders, at 85 and 87 per cent respectively.

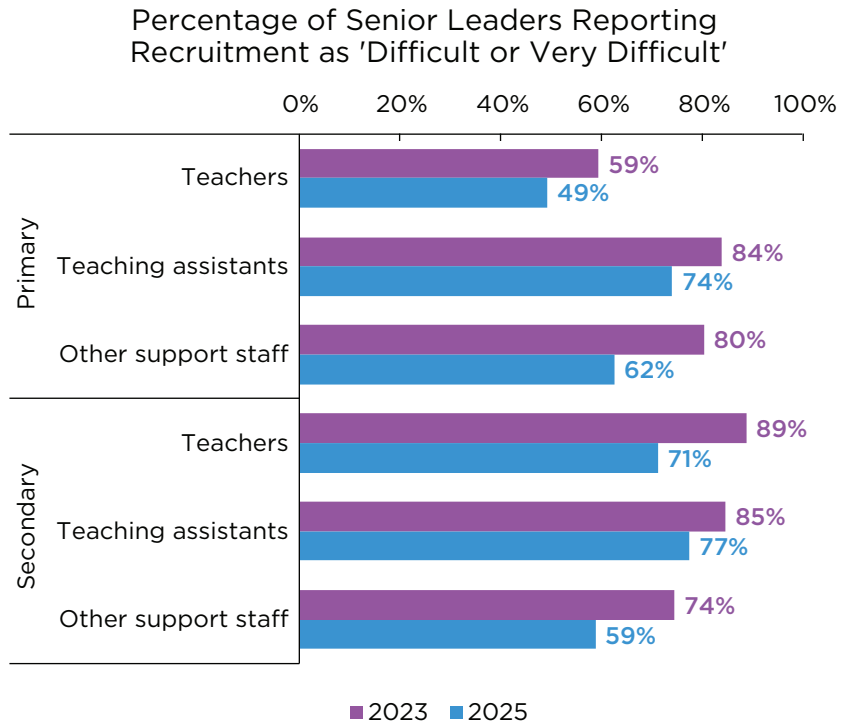
This evidence chimes with a different survey, also collected in 2023 (CFE Research, 2024). Three quarters (75 per cent) of leaders surveyed said they found TA recruitment 'fairly' or 'extremely' challenging, with higher rates among secondary school leaders. Skills shortages were commonly cited as a key challenge, particularly in areas related to teaching children with SEND.

For this report, NFER surveyed primary and secondary school leaders in Autumn 2025 to see how recruitment challenges have changed. We use responses from at least 212 senior leaders in primary schools and 126 in secondary schools. (The sample sizes in the 2023 survey were larger than this.) We were unable to survey special schools this time. See methodology for full details.

In the 2025 survey, around three in four leaders from both primary and secondary schools said they found recruiting TAs 'difficult' or 'very difficult'. Around 60 per cent of leaders said they found recruiting other support staff difficult. Primary leaders were more likely to say they found support staff recruitment difficult than teacher recruitment – this result was statistically significant. Secondary leaders also reported more difficulties recruiting TAs than recruiting teachers, but this was not statistically significant.

Comparing results from the 2023 and 2025 surveys suggests that, on average, primary and secondary leaders find recruitment easier now than they did in 2023. The change here is statistically significant for all groups, except for secondary schools recruitment of TAs. The general trend that leaders find support staff recruitment easier now than they did two years ago may be partially explained by the fact that pay has increased since 2023 (see later discussion on support staff pay), as well as the wider labour market slowing down (ONS, 2026). It may also be possible that schools are finding ways to adapt their recruitment to find more TAs, but there is no data on this.

Nonetheless, policy makers should be concerned that the majority of school leaders still say support staff recruitment is difficult, with TAs being particularly difficult to recruit. It suggests more action is needed to ensure schools have the staff they need in their classrooms to deliver for their students. To start with, DfE should develop a better understanding of the extent and nature of support staff shortages.



Source: NFER surveys of school leaders (2023 and 2025)

The text and charts on this page were updated in September 2026 following the discovery of a coding error which impacted our analysis of support staff attrition rates.

Support staff attrition rates remain above pre-Covid levels, but are trending downwards

As well as recruitment difficulties, schools appear to face difficulties in retaining support staff.

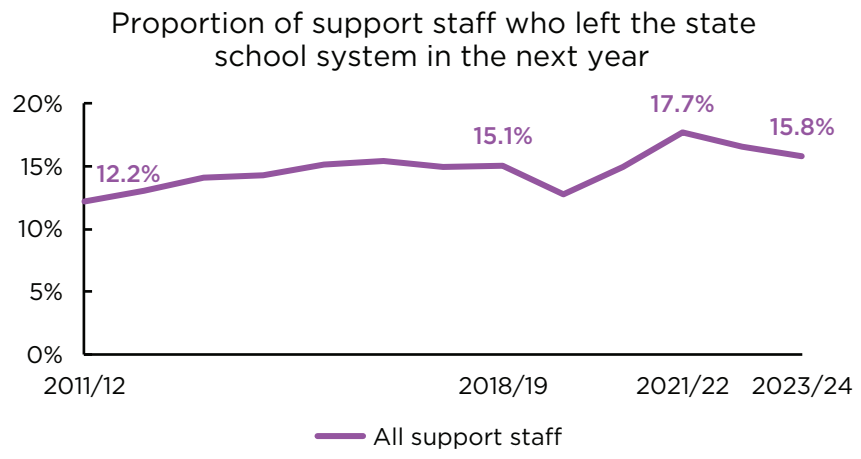
For this report, we conducted new analysis using SWC data to measure support staff attrition rates. It should be noted that this is an experimental series given some of the limitations in the data. In particular, this is a headcount measure because of challenges using FTE. The series cannot be directly compared to statistics on teacher attrition, which uses FTE values. The data counts support staff who left to work in a trust's central team as leaving the system, because such teams are not included in the SWC data collection and therefore will look like they left the system in the data. This may mean the percentages are biased upwards very slightly. Please see the methodology for more details.

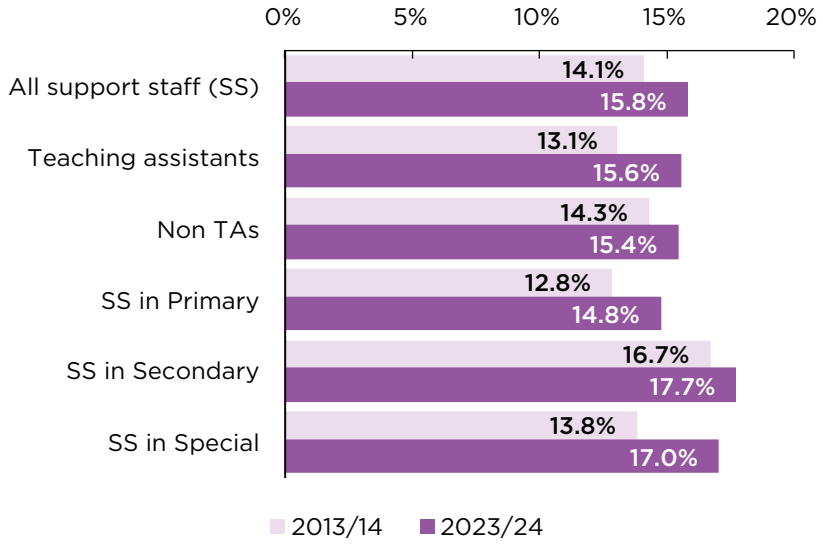
The emerging data suggests just under 16 per cent of support staff left the state funded school sector between 2023/24 and 2024/25. The exit rate peaked in 2021/22, following a dip during the pandemic. Since then, the exit rate has slowly come down. In the latest data, the attrition rate is still slightly higher than pre-pandemic levels.

High attrition is damaging for schools. Knowledge and experience will be lost when support staff leave. Exits put more pressure on recruitment, which we have already seen schools find difficult.

The data also suggests that the exit rate of support staff is higher in secondary and special schools, compared to primary schools. Whilst this has historically been the case for secondary schools, the data suggests that exit rates in special schools are increasing, relative to the national picture. This is particularly concerning given that we have already seen that many schools struggle to recruit TAs with skills in SEND provision.

Finally, we found limited differences between the exit rates of TAs and other support staff. This has been true over time, although this does not mean exits for both groups look the same. For example, other support staff posts like administrators and business professionals are more likely to have moved to central teams than TAs who work in classrooms.





Source for both: NFER analysis of SWC (2011/12-2023/24)

The most common reason support staff say they are considering leaving their jobs is that they do not feel valued

With support staff exit rates still above pre-pandemic levels, schools and wider stakeholders will want to consider why they are leaving and take action to lower exit rates, where possible. To help address this, we looked at why support staff say they are considering leaving in recent Edurio survey evidence. In this data, around 40 per cent of all support staff in the survey said they considered leaving at least 'sometimes' in the last three months. Of course, not all support staff who are considering leaving will do so, and the reasons they give for considering doing so may not be reason they actually leave. Data is not collected on why support staff leave their jobs.

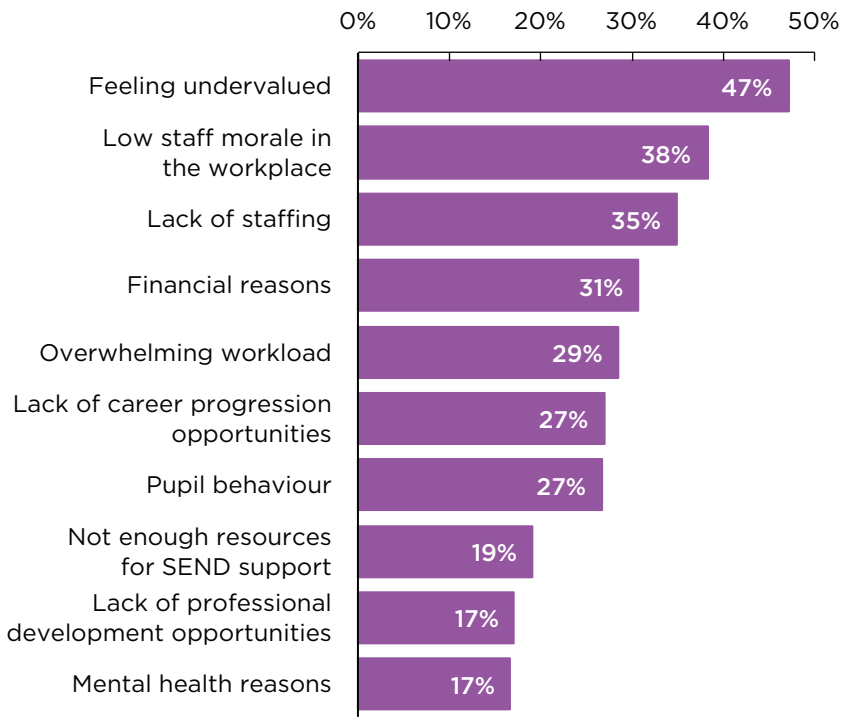
The most commonly-cited reason was 'feeling undervalued', with almost half of all relevant respondents saying this. The next most common reason for considering leaving was 'low staff morale in the workplace'. Of course, it is likely that these factors are related – morale could be low throughout a staff body because many members of staff do not feel valued.

It is also notable that so many support staff are likely to say they are considering leaving due to lack of staffing – teachers put less emphasis on this factor in the equivalent data. It is likely this is linked to evidence which finds some schools are deploying TAs to cover classes and teach lessons because their school does not have enough teachers and/or is unable to bring in supply teachers (Webster, 2024).

Support staff are also more likely to say they are considering leaving due to financial reasons than teachers. At face value, this is unsurprising given support staff are paid, on average, significantly less than teachers.

Finally, TAs are more likely to cite pupil behaviour as motivating them to consider leaving than other support staff. This is also a commonly cited reason among teachers in the same survey. Again, this is not surprising, given TAs' day jobs will be more affected by poor behaviour than other support staff. The evidence suggests making meaningful improvements to pupil behaviour could help improve retention amongst TAs, as well as teachers.

Most common reasons for support staff considering resigning in 2024/25 Edurio data



Source: Edurio survey 2024/25 with 8,269 unique responses.

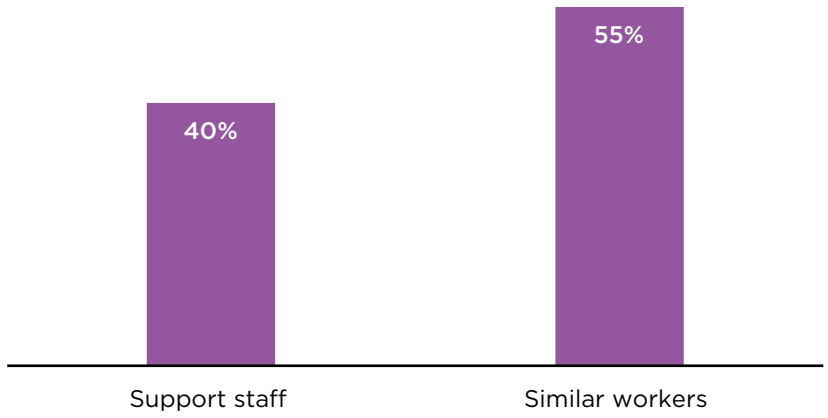
Support staff do not think they have good career progression pathways compared to other workers

In the survey evidence on the previous page, school support staff who are considering leaving commonly cited a lack of career progression opportunities, with around a quarter of supply staff who are considering leaving their jobs saying this was a factor. Responses from all support staff to a separate question in the Edurio survey suggests 36 per cent of all support staff are satisfied with their opportunities for career progression in 2024/25, 23 per cent are dissatisfied and 42 per cent are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, which may suggest there is a group for whom career progression is not a priority.

The perceived lack of career progression opportunities for school support staff is present in other data. NFER analysis of national survey data (the APS) also picks this up. In the 2024 academic year, 40 per cent of respondents working in school support staff posts agreed with the sentiment that their workplace offers them good opportunities for career progression. More than half (55 per cent) of similar workers (with similar age, gender, qualification level, and region profiles) were likely to agree with the statement. This gap has been consistent and statistically significant over time, going to back to 2020.

DfE has said the new SSSNB will have a remit to advise on support staff training and career progression, as well as pay and working conditions. The body may want to consider what routes schools can offer support staff to progress their careers, and how long-term improvements can be made in this area, in order to help improve retention, particularly of experienced staff and those do care about this issue.

Proportion who agree that they have opportunities for career progression, 2024



Source: NFER analysis of APS (2024)

Support staff work fewer hours each week than similar workers and are more likely to express a desire to work more hours

SWC data shows that a large proportion of the support staff workforce works less than a full-time schedule. For example, statistics show that support staff number around 520,000 FTE or 850,000 headcount, suggesting the average FTE per headcount is around 0.6.

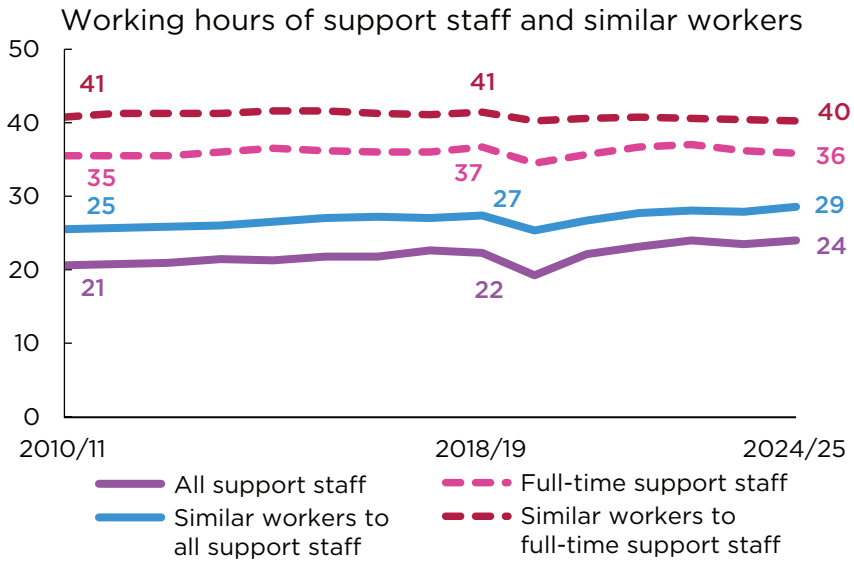
This evidence is backed up by LFS data, where – on average – support staff worked around 24 hours per week in the 2024/25 academic year. This is around 15 per cent less than the average number of hours worked by similar workers, which is calculated accounting for differences in working patterns between the two groups. The estimate of 24 hours per week is an average across the year; support staff who do not work in the summer holidays, for example, will bring this average down.

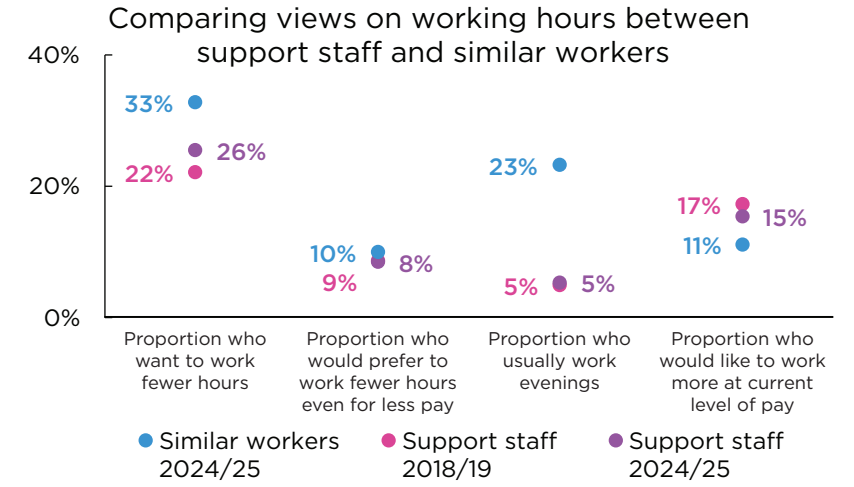
However, we also find that full-time support staff work fewer hours on average than similar full-time workers – around 10 per cent less in the latest year. Crucially, this is the average working week for full-time workers; this measure excludes non-working weeks such as during school holidays. In addition, support staff report working fewer usual hours (a separate question in the LFS) than similar workers too.

This picture is changing over time. The number of hours support staff work each week has increased over time. This appears to be driven by fewer people working part-time and the same is true for similar workers. For full-time support staff, the average number of hours in a working week has been much more stable since 2010/11.

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the number of hours they work, support staff are less likely than similar workers to suggest their hours are too long for them. Around one in four (26 per cent) support staff want to work fewer hours in 2024/25, compared to one in three (33 per cent) similar workers. Only five per cent of support staff want to work fewer hours with less pay. Evening working is also rare in comparison. The overall impression is that support staff are not typically feeling overworked, relative to other workers. This is reinforced by the 2023 survey of TAs, which suggests that being able to have time off during the summer holidays, and being able to work flexibly around other commitments, are two of the most common reasons for becoming a TA (CFE Research, 2024).

In contrast, a significant minority of support staff say they want to work more, either working longer hours or taking on an additional job. Around 15 per cent of support staff expressed this view in the 2024/25 survey, compared to 11 per cent of similar workers. It is important to remember when considering policies like support staff pay that not all support staff can work as many hours as they would like.





Source for both: NFER analysis of LFS (2010/11-2024/25)

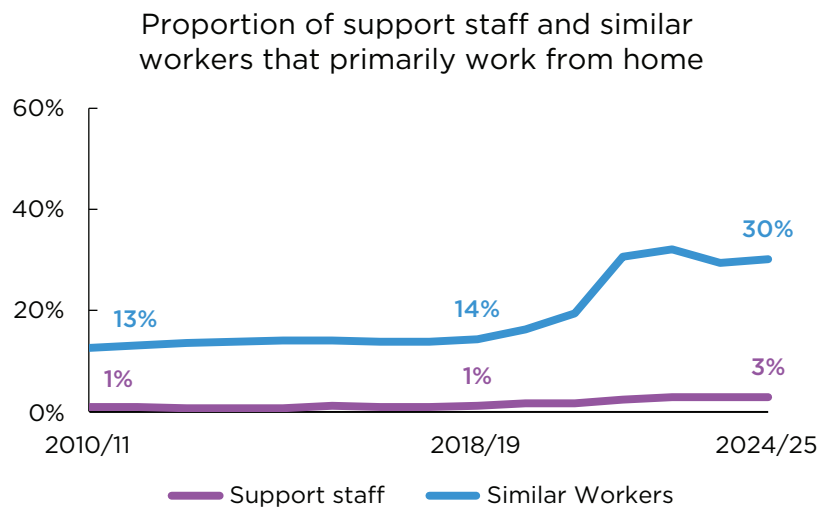
Support staff do not work from home, but around a third of similar workers do

Whilst support staff work fewer hours than similar workers, they are much less likely work from home. This is hardly surprising. Many support staff are TAs whose main job is to work directly with pupils in the classroom. But homeworking does not appear to be widespread amongst other types of support staff either.[1]

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a step change in the proportion of workers in England who work from home. This is seen amongst similar workers to support staff (those with similar characteristics, including qualification levels). Before the Covid-19 pandemic, around 15 per cent of these workers were working mainly from home. That rate has since doubled to 30 per cent.

One difference here between teachers and support staff is the rate of similar workers that work from home, and how that has changed since Covid. For teachers, around 42 per cent of similar graduates are estimated to work from home in the latest year, up from 12 per cent in 2018/19. For support staff, only around 30 per cent of similar workers do so, up from 14 per cent before Covid. This is because higher qualified people, such as graduates, are more likely to work from home since Covid, as are those who work full-time (as opposed to part-time). Both these characteristics are more prevalent amongst teachers than support staff and drive differences in our estimates for similar workers to both groups (ONS, 2025).

Nevertheless, the prevalence of home working among similar workers to support staff suggests that many prospective or current support staff would also be able to work from home if they did a different job. While we have already seen that many people are attracted to support staff work because it can be flexible and is often done in term times only, the increase in home working in alternative jobs during the pandemic may be posing a new challenge to schools who are trying to recruit and retain enough staff.



Source: NFER analysis of LFS (2010/11-2024/25)

1 It is possible challenges with identifying support staff in the LFS data may affect this result. Workers who class themselves as support staff but for whatever reason are not recorded as working in the primary or secondary education industry would not be counted here. See methodology for more details.

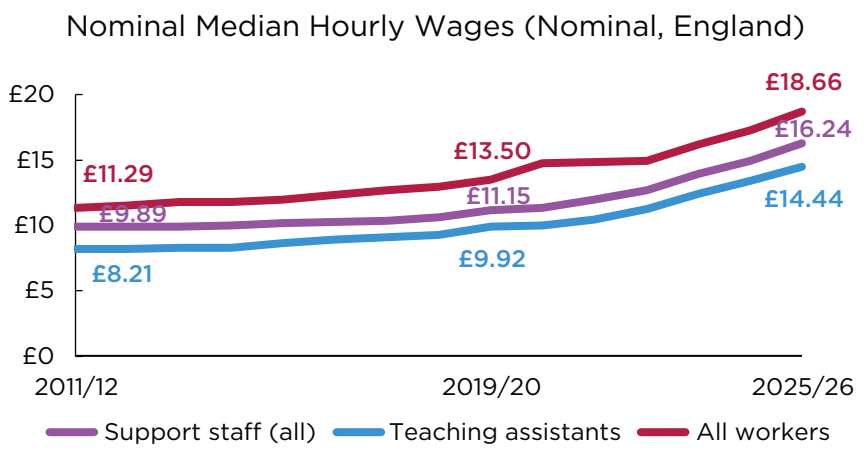
After a decade of very slow growth, support staff wages have grown more quickly over the last five years

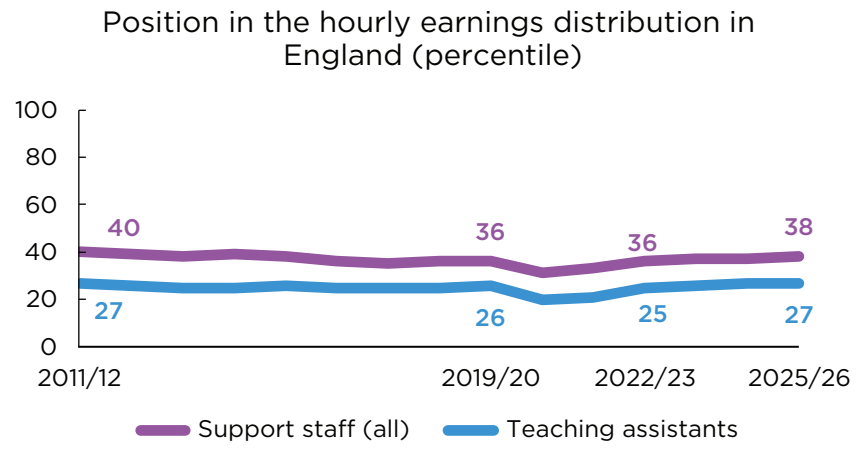
It is widely acknowledged that many school support staff are low paid. For example, the Low Pay Commission identify various support staff occupations as 'low-paying occupations' (Low Pay Commission, 2023). To review this further, we look at average pay in the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE), a large, national survey of employees' earnings. In it, we find the average wage of support staff in 2025 was around £16.20 per hour. For TAs, the average was lower, at £14.40.

Both averages are considerably lower than the median wage among all employees in England, which is £18.70 per hour. Indeed, the average support staff's hourly pay is on the 38th percentile of the earnings distribution in England, which means that 62 per cent of employees in England earn more per hour. For TAs, average pay is around the 27th percentile.

In nominal terms, support staff pay has increased over time, and these increases have broadly been in line with pay in the wider economy. Looking more closely, we can see three distinct periods. Between 2011 and 2019, support staff pay grew more slowly than median average pay in the economy. Average support staff pay dropped from around the 40th percentile in 2011 to the 36th percentile in 2019. The drop for TAs was smaller, from a lower base.

Between 2019 and 2022, during the pandemic, support staff pay started to grow more quickly but lagged behind average earnings in England temporarily during this period, with a dip in the earnings distribution. Since 2022, both support staff pay and average earnings in England have continued to increase at an accelerated rate. The data suggests that average hourly earnings have increased quicker for support staff than for all workers, as we can see in the earnings distribution. The net result is that support staff earnings have regained some of the ground lost during the 2010s. Average TA wages have returned to where they were in the earnings distribution in 2011.





Source for both: NFER analysis of ASHE (2011/12-2025/26)

Support staff pay growth has been stronger at the lower end of the pay distribution, linked to changes in the National Living Wage

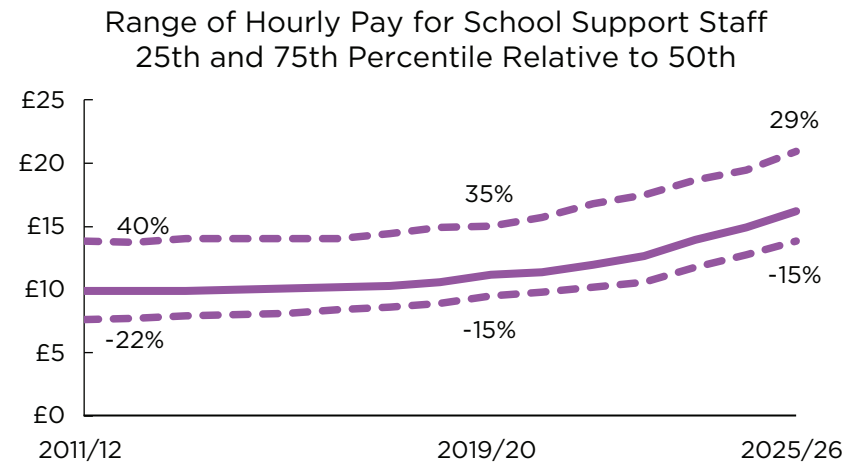
Our analysis of the ASHE data shows that the distribution of support staff pay has tended to narrow over time. In 2011/12, the lower quartile of support staff pay was more than 20 per cent less than the median for the group. By 2019/20, it was around 15 per cent less, where it has stayed since. We also see the distribution narrowing in the top half.

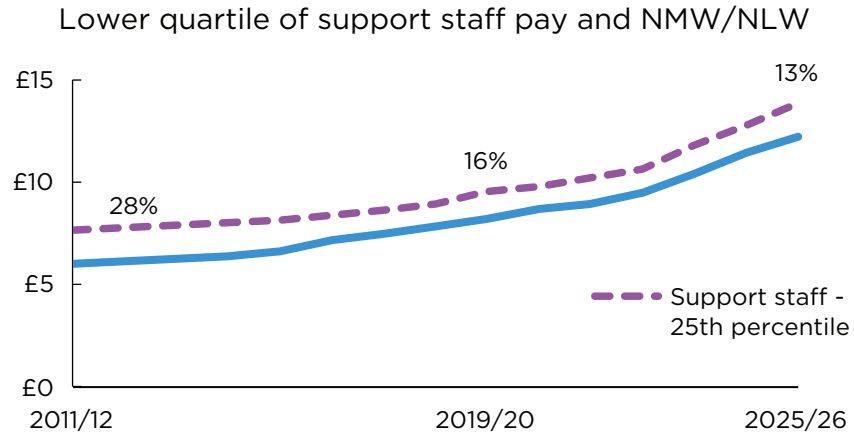
A likely driver of this narrowing in the bottom half of the pay distribution is the national living wage (NLW, formerly the national minimum wage). The NLW has increased substantially in nominal terms over the last few years. At £12.21 per hour in 2025/26, it is now double what it was in 2011/12. (Minimum wages vary by age. We use the highest rate of the national minimum wage in each year. Those aged 25 and over have always been in scope for this rate since 2011/12 and it currently includes those 21 and over.)

As it has increased, the gap between the level of the minimum wage and the lower quartile of support staff pay narrowed considerably over time. In 2011/12, a member of support staff on the lower quartile was paid around £7.70, around 28 per cent more than the national minimum wage at the time. By 2025/26, this gap had narrowed to just 13 per cent.

This data also suggests that the increases in the NLW, coupled with schools' affordability concerns, have dampened wage growth for support staff at the higher end of the earnings distribution. In recent years, decision makers have had to prioritise increases for those at or near the NLW to remain compliant with it. This may reduce the potential to reward experienced or more highly qualified staff.

Finally, the analysis also suggests the NLW is going to become an increasingly important determinant of schools' costs. If more staff are paid at or near the existing minimum then DfE, trusts and schools will find their ability to determine the rates they pay is reduced. The new SSSNB will need to grapple with this issue, as the current NJC does, when setting support staff pay frameworks.





Source for both: NFER analysis of ASHE (2011/12-2025/26)

In real terms, average support staff pay has increased by about 10 per cent in the last five years

As well as nominal terms, it is important to consider how support staff pay has changed relative to prices and inflation – this is called a 'real terms' comparison. To see how real terms pay has developed over time, we look at changes since 2011/12.

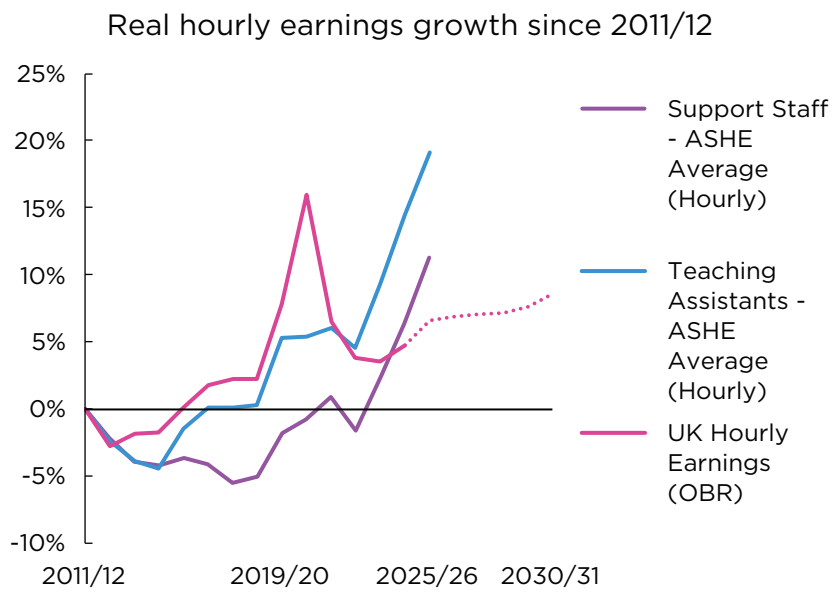
Throughout most of the 2010s, median support staff pay declined in real terms and fell behind UK average earnings growth. Indeed, up until around 2021/22, average support staff pay was lower in real terms than in 2011/12. Average UK hourly earnings also declined in real terms for the first few years of this period, but recovered more quickly than support staff pay. TA pay also recovered faster than wider support staff pay, probably because of changes to the minimum wage discussed above. Nonetheless, pay growth for TAs also lagged behind wider UK earnings growth.

In the last few years, we have seen a reversal of these trends. Support staff have seen large real-terms increases in their pay. Since about 2023/24, median hourly pay for support staff has increased by around 13 percentage points in real terms. For TAs, the equivalent figure is 14 percentage points. These pay increases are significantly greater than the increases in real average UK hourly earnings growth in this period. This is set to increase by around three percentage points between 2023/24 and 2025/26.

The result is that, compared to 2010/11 levels, support staff pay has grown by more in real terms compared to average UK earnings growth. Again, this is likely to be partially explained by growth in the NLW. This result is important, but it does not negate the fact that growth in support staff pay has lagged behind wider earnings growth for the majority of this period.

Beyond 2025/26, the OBR expects real hourly earnings growth to moderate considerably.[2] Given the recruitment and retention challenges outlined above, it is important that recent gains in support staff pay are, at a minimum, consolidated over the medium term. That means tracking average earnings growth, which the NLW is also broadly expected to do.

2 This was OBR's forecast from November 2025. The Spring 2026 forecast was not yet published at the time of finalising this report.



Source: NFER analysis combining ASHE (2011/12-2025/26) and OBR (2011/12-2030/31)

Support staff earn less than workers with similar characteristics, including qualification levels

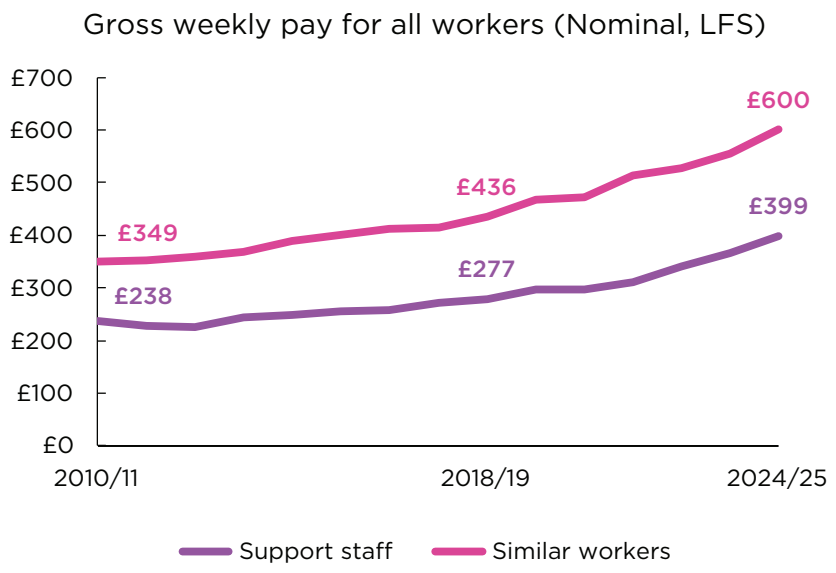
We also conducted experimental analysis using a different data source to compare how support staff pay compares to similar workers. Doing this allows us to get a better estimate of what support staff may be able to earn in other jobs in the wider economy than simply looking at average earnings, albeit there are some factors we cannot control for. (See methodology for full details.)

The data suggests that the weekly earnings of support staff – both full-time workers and those who work any working pattern – are around 30 to 35 per cent less compared to similar workers.

It is important to note that a significant portion of this gap will be driven by differences in working hours. Previously we saw that, on average, support staff work 10 to 15 per cent less than similar workers each week.[3]

As such, perhaps as much as half the gap in weekly earning is driven by differences in working hours.[4] The rest is driven by underlying differences in the rates of pay for these groups.

Finally, Edurio survey data suggests many support staff are not content with their pay. Just under 40 per cent of surveyed support staff say their pay is 'not very fair' or 'unfair' compared to similar roles in their organisation. This is a considerably higher proportion than teachers, at 14 per cent.



Source: NFER analysis of LFS (2010/11-2024/25)

3 Again, it should be noted that the average for similar workers is weighted specifically so the distribution of working patterns – whether workers are full time or part time – in that group resembles the distribution of working patterns amongst support staff. However, in this initial analysis we have not specifically controlled for differences in working hours and we will review this methodology in future reports.

4 For workers with any working pattern, this may be due to differences in term-time working. However, for full-time workers, because we only included workers who worked a full week, this should not be related to term-time working. As such, term-time working appears to be a driver of differences in pay, but it is not the only one.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

Support staff play a vital role in schools. They make up more than half the school workforce, without including those that work in Support staff play a vital role in schools. They make up more than half the school workforce, without including those that work in central teams in trusts. TA numbers have grown strongly in the last few years, particularly in secondary and special schools.

Despite this growth, the existing data points to significant recruitment and retention challenges in the labour market for support staff. Three in four schools report finding it difficult to recruit TAs in 2025. The existing evidence suggests skills shortages in areas like SEND provision are a key challenge. On retention, experimental analysis for this report suggests that support staff exit rates have slowly come down but are still slightly higher than pre-pandemic levels.

Edurio staff survey data suggests many support staff consider leaving because they do not feel valued or because of low staff morale in the workplace. A lack of staffing, financial reasons and an overwhelming workload are also often cited as reasons to consider leaving. National survey data clearly suggests many support staff are much less likely to see opportunities to progress their career, compared to similar workers.

These recruitment and retention challenges are related to the issue of low pay. Support staff are paid less than similar workers, even after accounting for them working fewer hours. Support staff pay has grown more quickly at the lower end of the distribution than it has at the middle and the top. Whilst this trend is positive for those near the bottom, it has been accompanied by a squeeze on earnings growth for better paid support staff. Given these workers are likely to be the more experienced, better qualified or more specialised support staff, it raises the risk that long-serving support staff will not feel valued for the work they do.

While support staff work fewer hours than similar workers and may enjoy other flexibilities like term-time working not available elsewhere, a significant minority say they want to work longer hours or take on an additional job. Shorter schedules are likely to squeeze support staff earnings and reduce the competitiveness of the pay offered to them, an issue compounded by the growth in home working in alternative jobs.

As SSSNB comes online this year, it is important they consider all these challenges, not only on pay, but also on issues around working conditions and career progression. Action is needed to ensure schools can recruit and retain the support staff they so vitally need.

Recommendations

1. The Government needs to do more to help schools recruit support staff, particularly TAs. Given SEND skills shortages are commonly cited by schools as key recruitment challenge, there should be more focus on ensuring training is available to both prospective and current TAs to fill this gap.
2. Schools should take action to ensure their support staff feel more valued in their day-to-day roles as the data suggests this a key driver of support staff considering leaving.
3. The NJC and SSSNB should strongly consider whether low pay levels are driving the recruitment and retention challenges we have identified. While there has been some progress recently, they should consider what further action needs to be taken over the medium term to make support staff pay, particularly in TA roles, more attractive.
4. The Government and SSSNB should explore what can be done to improve career progression opportunities for school support staff, who are much less likely than similar workers to agree they have good opportunities at present.

Research and data recommendations

DfE collects less data about support staff than it does about teachers in the SWC. It also publishes fewer statistics about support staff, even with the existing data it has. While it is important to remain mindful of the pressure placed on schools through data collection, there are some key data needs that are not currently being met.

Firstly, DfE does not collect data about the number of support staff vacancies like it does for teachers. Regularly collecting this data would mean it could properly assess the shortfall in support staff recruitment across England and investigate which schools are particularly affected. For example, NFER has previously highlighted that special schools may be most affected by TA shortages, because they rely on these staff more than other schools (Scott, 2025a). We also know that teacher vacancy rates are highest in schools with the most disadvantaged students, but we cannot assess, using existing data, whether this is also true for support staff shortages (Scott, 2025b).

Secondly, DfE does not collect data on the staffing of central teams in trusts in the same way it does for schools. Starting to do so would help DfE measure school support staff numbers properly and fill gaps in retention data (for teachers and senior leaders as well as support staff).

Given the existing limitations of the SWC, it is welcome that DfE has commissioned a survey of support staff roles, experiences and perspectives to support the SSSNB decision making progress. This will help fill some of the key evidence gaps. Given our experimental data suggests support staff exit rates have slowly come down but are still slightly higher than pre-pandemic levels, it would be helpful for DfE to start reporting this data and for the research to focus on what is driving the trends. The evidence in this report suggests support staff consider leaving because they do not feel valued – what can schools and trusts do to rectify this?

Finally, as SEND reforms continue to gather pace following the publication of the white paper (DfE, 2026b), it is important the sector has a clear view of what the implications of those changes are for the demand for support staff, including the how these jobs are likely to change in future and the skills workers will therefore need in such posts.

Recommendations

1. DfE should make a detailed assessment of the costs and benefits of collecting annual data on support staff vacancies through the SWC, including consideration and acknowledgement of which schools and pupils are most disadvantaged by a lack of support staff, particularly TAs.
2. DfE should consult on whether staff who work in central teams in trusts should be part of the SWC, or captured through a supplementary data collection.
3. DfE should consider adding statistics on the retention rates of support staff to its annual publication on the school workforce.
4. More research is needed into why support staff leave schools, including what schools and trusts can do to help them feel valued.
5. More research and analysis is needed into how the use of support staff relates to support for pupils with SEND. This should include how the White Paper reforms are likely to change how support staff are used in schools, particularly to identify and support pupils with SEND, and what skills those staff will need in future.

References and data sources

CFE Research (2024) *Use of teaching assistants in schools*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/use-of-teaching-assistants-in-schools (Accessed: 23 February 2026).

DfE (2026a) *6,500 additional teachers delivery plan*. CP 1508-II. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/every-child-achieving-and-thriving/6500-additional-teachers-delivery-plan-html-version (Accessed: 25 February 2026).

DfE (2026b) *Every child achieving and thriving, GOV.UK*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/every-child-achieving-and-thriving/every-child-achieving-and-thriving-html-version (Accessed: 25 February 2026).

DfE (2026c) *School Support Staff Negotiating Body (SSSNB), GOV.UK*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/school-support-staff-negotiating-body-sssnb (Accessed: 25 February 2026).

Iocco, M.P., Kuhn, L. and Julius, J. (2025) 'Pupil numbers and school finances: What do we know about how demographic change is impacting on schools?', *NFER*, 23 October. Available at: https://www.nfer.ac.uk/blogs/pupil-numbers-and-school-finances-what-do-we-know-about-how-demographic-change-is-impacting-on-schools/ (Accessed: 23 February 2026).

Low Pay Commission (2023) *Low-paying sectors review, GOV.UK*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/low-paying-sectors-review (Accessed: 23 February 2026).

Lucas, M., Classick, R., Skipp, A. and Julius, J. (2023) *Cost-of-living crisis: impact on schools*. School staff. Available at: https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/bxhl2w2m/cost_of_living_impact_on_schools_school_staff.pdf (Accessed: 23 February 2026).

ONS (2025) *Who has access to hybrid work in Great Britain?* Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/whohasaccesstohybridworkingreatbritain/2025-06-11 (Accessed: 12 February 2026).

ONS (2026) *Labour market overview, UK: January 2026*. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/uklabourmarket/january2026 (Accessed: 23 February 2026).

Scott, M. (2025a) 'Exploring the special schools workforce: what's the current picture?', *NFER*, 25 February. Available at: https://www.nfer.ac.uk/blogs/exploring-the-special-schools-workforce-what-s-the-current-picture/ (Accessed: 23 February 2026).

Scott, M. (2025b) *NFER dashboard highlights why teacher shortages are a key challenge facing Government's opportunity mission, NFER*. Available at: https://www.nfer.ac.uk/blogs/nfer-dashboard-highlights-why-teacher-shortages-are-a-key-challenge-facing-government-s-opportunity-mission/ (Accessed: 23 February 2026).

Webster, R. (2024) 'Teaching on the cheap? The extent and impact of teaching assistants covering classes and leading lessons', *BERA*, 16 July. Available at: https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/teaching-on-the-cheap-the-extent-and-impact-of-teaching-assistants-covering-classes-and-leading-lessons (Accessed: 23 February 2026).

NFER
National Foundation for Educational Research

Evidence for excellence in education

© National Foundation for Educational Research 2026

All rights reserved. No part of this document may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, or otherwise, without prior written permission of NFER.

How to cite this publication: Scott, M. and Worth, J. (2026). *The School Support Staff Workforce in England: Annual Report 2026*. Slough: NFER.

NFER ref. NUWC
ISBN 978-1-916567-52-8

Published in March 2026 by
National Foundation for Educational Research
The Mere, Upton Park, Slough, Berks SL1 2DQ

T: 01753 574123
E: enquiries@nfer.ac.uk

www.nfer.ac.uk
@TheNFER

Registered Charity No. 313392

P