



31 March 2026

Further Education England Joint Trade Unions Claim 2026/27

Dear Gerry,

We are pleased to submit our joint claim on behalf of the five FE England trade unions and look forward to progressing the demands under the National Joint Forum talks in June and July.

Headlines of the claim

Binding national bargaining

- Agree a new national pay agreement in FE that has binding outcomes.
- The AoC to agree to time-limited talks in Autumn 2026 with the aim of defining a workable interim agreement ahead of any funding sought through a national pay agreement.

Pay

- A 10% or £3,000 increase in pay, whichever is greater, as a first step to restore the significant real-terms cuts of the past 15 years.
- All colleges to become accredited Foundation Living Wage employers, with the minimum rate set at no less than £13.45 per hour outside London and £14.80 per hour in London.
- A demand for pay parity between FE and schoolteachers' pay within three years.
- The minimum starting salary for an FE lecturer to be set at the same level as the schoolteacher starting salary (currently £31,650 in England).
- Parity of college support staff pay with school support staff pay.
- The AoC to agree to time-limited talks on the introduction of a standardised national pay scale with incremental progression, with no detriment and headroom for all staff on migration. These talks should commence no later than January 2027.
- The national pay spine will also address issues of grade drift and workloads.

- A joint work with a commitment to close gender, ethnic and disability pay gaps.

Workload

- Maximum weekly and annual teaching hours and evening and weekend work.
- Agreement on the definition of a 'teaching hour'.
- The resourcing of more support and non-teaching staff.
- Nationally agreed class size recommendations.
- Agreed national policy on the delivery of guided learning hours.
- A set of agreed boundaries for contacting staff by email or phone.
- A set of agreed workload and wellbeing protocols.
- A 35-hour working week for all full-time equivalent staff.

Summary of the context

- The loss in the value of staff pay in recent years has not been addressed by the NJF non-binding recommendations.
- The spending review funding allocation for FE must result in above inflation pay rises for staff. Any additional funding must be ringfenced and committed to a road map towards pay parity schools and tackle the retention and recruitment crisis.
- The post 16 skills agenda requires additional FE funding to be delivered. The combination of skills shortages within Construction, Engineering and Digital and the pay differential with both industry and other educational roles places FE at a disadvantage for both recruitment and retention.
- Due to predicted increases in student numbers arising from an increase in 18 to 21 years olds the priorities identified in the white paper will not be achieved unless funding of the sector is increased.
- The STRB and Education select committee reports highlight the need for specific investment, pay review reform and additional funding in FE.
- The sector has fallen behind inflation by more than 40% since 2009/10. FE pay increases need to be implemented in all colleges to keep up with inflation and start to close the pay gap with schoolteachers pay.
- There should be minimum guaranteed starting salaries for teachers in FE in line with schools and sixth form teachers in England.
- There should be agreed model national pay spine with a normal expectation of progression to under pin it.
- There should be joint work on recognising and monitoring the scale of, and movement to close, the gender, ethnic and disability pay gaps in FE;
- Action is needed to tackle unsustainable increases in workload and the stress and wellbeing of staff.
- There should be standard annual and weekly maximums for FE teachers.
- Nobody should be paid less than the nationally recognised Living Wage rate, which has become a benchmark for the minimum level of decent pay across the UK and is now paid by large sections of the public services and many major private companies.

- Meaningful national bargaining with binding outcomes must now be progressed.
- In the next 3 years there will be 60,000 more students entering FE; 50 % of lecturing staff leave within the first three years.
- Adult education and skills cuts must be reversed.

UK GOVERNMENT AMBITIONS FOR FE

At the 2025 Spending Review, the government announced an increase in day-to-day funding for further education and skills that implies a real-terms rise of just over £300 million between 2025–26 and 2028–29. This settlement covers the main components of the further education and skills budget – 16–19 education, adult skills and apprenticeships – which together account for around £14 billion of public spending in 2025–26.

However, the Spending Review did not set out how this additional funding will be allocated across the different parts of the further education and skills system, leaving scope for it to be distributed in different ways.

Responsibility for adult education and apprenticeships was transferred from the Department for Education to the Department for Work and Pensions. The government has published the Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper setting out proposals for the organisation, governance and funding of the post-16 system.

The role of adult education and skills and lifelong learning opportunities are critical to the success of the growth and skills strategy at the heart of UK government ambitions. Adult education needs strategic investment and the cuts to the Adult Skills Fund must be reversed.

FE is central to the delivery of this strategy. The demands in our claim are essential to the delivery of the strategy. It is critical that we use this time to change FE for the better for staff and learners alike.

FULLY FUNDED AND NATIONAL BARGAINING

The lack of a binding national bargaining system within further education is one of the biggest threats to industrial harmony within the sector. The FE sector can no longer function without a proper national bargaining framework. The NJF non-binding recommendation process has demonstrably failed: it has not kept pace with inflation, it has not closed the pay gap with schools, and its non-binding nature means that even its inadequate recommendations are not universally implemented.

We are asking for a joint position to bring fully funded national bargaining, with binding outcomes to the FE sector.

The FE sector can no longer ignore the need for proper national bargaining. Only through fully funded, binding national agreements can we:

- Close the pay gap between schools and colleges.
- Ensure college teachers' starting salaries are comparable to those of schoolteachers as well as sixth form college teachers.
- Recognise the vital contribution of FE support staff, similar to how school support staff are recognised by the SSSNB
- Provide starting salaries that enable staff to live with dignity.
- Ensure salaries reflect the skills and experience that staff bring to colleges

Meaningful national bargaining outcomes that are funded and implemented by all colleges will mean that FE staff will re-establish professional respect and parity of esteem with other educational professionals. By raising the level of pay and improving terms and conditions for all in the sector an even playing field is established.

A new national bargaining framework means issues of pay and workload in the sector are addressed so that a level playing field with consistency in the process and accountability regarding implementation of outcomes is transparent.

We need functioning national pay bargaining at sector level with fully funded outcomes. That is why we ask that the AoC to work with us to develop a joint approach to government. We need a new joint endeavour set up with the aim of developing a new sector level framework for FE. We need to take a clear position to government with a joint voice for addressing pay, recruitment and retention in Further Education colleges.

Models of pay bargaining already exist in FE in Scotland and Wales, and within sixth form colleges in England. English colleges risk becoming a serious outlier in pay and conditions, even with the work that can be achieved through Improving Education Together. We call for fully funded binding single table national bargaining.

We nevertheless recognise that the route to full government funding of a national bargaining framework will take time and believe that both sides should make every effort to improve upon the current position. We note that in the instance of sixth form college national negotiations via their National Joint Council, pay recommendations are implemented by all member colleges without specified additional funding from government. On this basis, it should be wholly achievable for the AoC to seek maximum support and adherence to the pay recommendations arrived at through the national joint machinery, where they are set out as a minimum pay floor.

We therefore additionally call upon the AoC to agree to time-limited talks in Autumn 2026 with the aim of defining a workable interim agreement to ensure that NJF pay recommendations are met by all member colleges as a minimum, ahead of any funding sought through a national pay agreement.'

PAY

The loss in the value of staff pay in recent years has not been addressed by the NJF non-binding recommendations. It has not kept pace with the School Teacher Review Body (STRB) recommendations. Pay outcomes in FE have not moved with the cost of living increases as measured by inflation. Between 2018 and 2021, approximately 30% of colleges awarded no pay increases.¹

To begin to address this, a 10% pay increase (or £3,000, whichever is greater) is urgently needed. This initial pay rise must exceed the pay increase for teachers in schools as recommended by the STRB. Closing the growing pay gap between schools and colleges is the crucial first step in tackling the current recruitment and retention crisis. This pay disparity is the key factor driving the challenges colleges face in attracting and retaining high-quality staff. We need a jointly agreed strategy to eradicate the gap entirely within three years. Fully funded and binding national bargaining is critical to securing pay parity between FE and schools.

Pay in the sector has fallen in real terms by more than 40% since 2009/10. FE pay increases need to be implemented in all colleges to keep up with inflation and start to close the pay gap with schools. Our analysis of the ASHE data shows that, in 2011, median earnings for FE teachers were around 19 per cent lower than other education occupations, compared to 23 per cent in 2021.²

Since 2019, additional funding has been allocated to further education. However, rising student numbers and inflation have limited the extent to which this has translated into increases in funding per student. Growth in student numbers has been particularly pronounced in further education colleges in recent years.

See Appendix 1, which illustrates the real-terms decline in FE pay.

While a wage keeping pace with the cost of living each year would have risen by 88.6% since 2010, AoC pay recommendations have totalled a fraction of that figure, resulting in thousands of pounds being cut from the real value of FE staff wages. Between 2018 and 2021, approximately 30% of colleges awarded no pay increases at all.

The steepest rises in the cost of living in over 40 years, 11.6% in 2022 and 9.7% in 2023, accelerated a decline that was already entrenched. Inflation remains at 4.2% (RPI, December 2025), with many core costs rising considerably faster:

- Water charges: up 26.1%
- Vehicle tax and insurance: up 11.7%
- Mortgage interest payments: up 6.2%
- Food prices: up 5.5%
- Council tax / rates: up 5.4%

¹ [What-has-happened-to-college-teacher-pay-in-England.pdf](#)

² https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/ms5olfqv/building_a_stronger_fe_college_workforce.pdf

- Bus and coach fares: up 5.3%
- Nursery charges: up 5%

See Appendix 2, which shows the rise in household costs since 2010.

FE pay has not only fallen behind schoolteachers' pay, it has also fallen behind the wider economy.

See Appendix 3 which shows average pay settlements across the economy since 2010, against which AoC recommendations have consistently fallen short.

While average economy-wide pay settlements have seen cumulative growth of 55.5% since 2010, AoC recommended increases have fallen well short of this. Current average earnings growth across the economy stands at 4.7%, and the forecast RPI for 2026 is 3.6%. Any settlement below these figures will represent further real terms cut to FE staff pay.

PAY PARITY AND FAIR STARTING SALARIES

There should be minimum guaranteed starting salaries for teachers in FE. Nobody should be paid less than the nationally recognized Living Wage rate, which has become a benchmark for the minimum level of decent pay across the UK and is now paid by large sections of the public services and many major private companies.

Unlike the rest of the UK, England FE does not have a guaranteed starting salary for teachers in FE. In Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales FE teacher starting salaries are now more than £30,000.

See Appendix 4, which shows the difference between the notional FE pay scale and the national teachers' pay scale updated by the outcomes of the STRB since 2010.

NATIONAL PAY STRUCTURES AND PROGRESSION

There should be agreed national pay spines with progression and headroom in England. This is established practice in FE in the rest of the UK. With the low levels of pay in FE England and the high levels of working hours because of no national agreement on teaching hours, the hourly rate of pay in FE for teachers is more closely aligned to the national minimum wage than the UK median annual salary.

We need to begin time-limited talks on introducing a standardized national pay scale, with the minimum point for support staff being the Foundation Living Wage and the minimum point for teachers being set at the same level as the minimum for schoolteachers. This pay scale should include standardized increments, ensuring that never again do we allow the compression of pay,

particularly for staff at the lower end of the pay scale, that has led to plummeting staff morale. We should produce a model of the new national pay scale with costings. The principles that underpin it will be no detriment and headroom for all staff on migration to it.

PAY EQUALITY

There should be joint work on recognizing and monitoring the scale of, and movement to close, the gender, ethnic and disability pay gaps in FE. It is important that colleges lead the way in championing diversity and inclusion in the current climate. We know that women in FE are paid less than their male counterparts and that there are too few Black leaders. In addition, we need more data on the disability pay gap in the FE sector to enable us to work towards meaningful change. This is an area where unions and employers could and should be working together to make a real impact.

ACTION ON WORKLOAD

- Maximum weekly and annual teaching hours and evening and weekend work.
- Agreement on the definition of a 'teaching hour'.
- The resourcing of more administration staff.
- Nationally agreed class size recommendations.
- Agreed national policy on the delivery of guided learning hours.
- A set of agreed boundaries for contacting staff by email or phone.
- A set of agreed workload and wellbeing protocols.

Not enough action and not enough leadership on workload at sector level has resulted on significant workload management issues in colleges for teachers and support staff. This has led to increased stress, poor wellbeing and further contributes to recruitment and retention issues in the sector.

We note that the AoC have explicitly set out in the Improving Education Together (IET) FE sub-group that you are willing to work on a workload toolkit which would become agreed guidance. We would suggest that talks begin this Autumn term with the aim of developing agreed guidance as a minimum in this coming academic year.

We are therefore calling for better workload planning across the sector, supported at national level by agreed workload and wellbeing protocols, policy on the delivery of guided learning hours, maximum weekly and annual teaching hours (including evening and weekend work), a definition of a 'teaching hour' and class size recommendations, for example:

- A 35-hour working week

- Annual teaching hours
 - Maximum of 800 teaching hours in any one academic year
- Weekly teaching hours
 - Maximum of 22 teaching hours in any teaching week
 - A maximum of 5 evenings or weekend days in the teaching year
- Agreement on the definition of a 'teaching hour',
- Remission from teaching for teaching staff with additional responsibilities
- Targeting reduction in class sizes & teaching hours.

Since 2018, the number of 16-18-year-olds has grown 13%, by 230,000. A further 5% increase is anticipated by 2028, meaning an extra 60,000 students in colleges and sixth form colleges by 2028. The increase in student numbers will inevitably lead to an increase in workload pressures for staff: **See Appendix 5.** The trade union claim aligns with the action that needed to be taken at sector and college level and the latest sector level research. Based on research by the Gatsby Foundation: the [KEY ISSUES FOR FE³](#) **See Appendix 6.**

CONCLUSION

The joint trade unions call for a 10%/£3000 pay rise, a functioning national bargaining mechanism and concrete action on workload are essential if we are to make colleges a vibrant and attractive place to work.

We are keen to work with you to find solutions that will address the underlying issues that leave colleges struggling to recruit and retain the staff they need and look forward to your prompt response to this claim.

Paul Bridge Head of Further Education UCU and Jack Robinson National Officer UNISON

Joint Trade Union Side Secretary Joint Trade Union Side Secretary

³ <https://www.gatsby.org.uk/app/uploads/sites/2/2025/07/2024-09-13-nfer-building-a-stronger-fe-college-workforce-clean.pdf>

Appendices

Appendix 1

The table shows yearly recommended AoC and STRB pay recommendations, alongside average yearly inflation index figures. N.B. Inflation index figures are for the first part of the year (so, 2011-12 shows the 2011 inflation figure). CPIH, CPI, and RPI figures are taken from the ONS.

AOC and STRB recommendations, and price index inflation figures since 2011					
Year	AOC	STRB	CPIH Index	CPI	RPI
2011-12	0.40%	0%	3.80%	4.50%	5%
2012-13	0.70%	0%	2.60%	2.80%	3%
2013-14	0.70%	1%	2.30%	2.60%	3%
2014-15	1.00%	1%	1.50%	1.50%	3%
2015-16	0.00%	1%	0.40%	0.00%	1%
2016-17	1.00%	1%	1.00%	0.70%	2%
2017-18	1.00%	<u>2%</u>	2.60%	2.70%	4%
2018-19	1.00%	3.50%	2.30%	2.50%	4%
2019-20	1.00%	2.75%	1.70%	1.80%	3%
2020-21	1.00%	<u>2.50%</u>	1.00%	0.90%	2%
2021-22	1.00%	<u>0%</u>	2.50%	2.60%	5%
2022-23	2.50%	5%	7.90%	9.10%	12%
2023-24	6.5%	6.5%	6.8%	7.3%	9.1%
2024-25	2.5%	5.5%	3.3%	2.5%	3.7%
2025-26	4.0%	4.0%	3.9%	3.4%	4.1%

Appendix 2

The rise in basic household costs have risen enormously since 2010:

Expenditure Item	Price Rise 2010–2025
Mortgage interest payments	140%
Electricity	148%
Bus & coach fares	108%
Gas	98%

- Source: ONS, UK Consumer Price Inflation Tables, December 2010 and December 2025.

Appendix 3

The table below shows average pay settlements across the economy since 2010, against which AoC recommendations have consistently fallen short.

Year	AoC Recommended Increase	Economy Average Settlement
2010	—	2.0%
2011	0.40%	2.5%
2012	0.70%	2.5%
2013	0.70%	2.5%
2014	1.00%	2.5%
2015	0.00%	2.2%
2016	1.00%	2.0%
2017	1.00%	2.0%
2018	1.00%	2.5%
2019	1.00%	2.5%
2020	1.00%	2.3%
2021	1.00%	2.0%
2022	2.50%	4.0%
2023	6.50%	5.6%
2024	2.50%	4.5%
2025	4.00%	3.25%

Source: Incomes Data Research; AoC pay recommendations.

Appendix 4

Based on the notional FE pay scale and the national teachers' pay scale updated by the outcomes of the STRB, the table below uses the 2010 salary for Teacher Spine Point M6 and FE

Spine Point 30 as a baseline and shows the percentage point change in the salary (based on the recommended pay increases).

	Salary	%age Point Change from 2010 Salary					
	2010-11	2020-21	2021-22	2022-32	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26
FE Spine Point 30	28599	8%	9%	12%	19%	22%	27%
Teacher Spine M6	31552	17%	17%	23%	31%	38%	44%
Difference		9%	8%	11%	12%	16%	17%

Appendix 5

Population Projections of 16-18 year olds based on 2021 Census								
	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029
16-18	2330852	2382398	2453955	2511327	2555858	2575423	2598583	2595664
Year on Year % Change	0%	2%	3%	2%	2%	1%	1%	0%
% change from 2022 baseline	0%	2%	5%	8%	10%	10%	11%	11%

Appendix 6

- The combination of skills shortages within Construction, Engineering and Digital and the pay differential with both industry and other education roles places FE at a disadvantage for both recruitment and retention.
- The financial responsibilities of younger workers mean they are generally less able to take the pay cut to move from industry into FE, driving an ageing workforce.
- FE salary bands are narrow, limiting opportunities for pay progression – particularly where unqualified teachers are recruited straight from industry at the top of the band to reduce the pay gap.
- Offering higher pay to support recruitment feeds poor retention by creating pay inequalities that lower staff morale.
- FE teachers consider their workload to be excessive and inappropriately centred on unfulfilling administrative work.
- The pressures placed on new recruits with inadequate support drives high turnover in the initial period after entering the FE sector.
- Student behaviour and mental health can be a challenge for retaining new FE teachers, and this has been exacerbated by the pandemic.

And the solutions proposed reinforce the reasonableness and timelessness of our demands:

- [FOCUS FOR GOVERNMENT](#)⁴
 - We recommend that Government continue to increase funding to the FE sector to help colleges, at a minimum, match FE teacher pay with that of school teachers.

- Colleges should consider how they can help recruit and retain more teaching staff from industry, by improving onboarding procedures for new staff and by better promoting the positive lifestyle benefits of the role to potential recruits.
- We recommend that Government devise a long-term evidence-based strategy and concrete resources to help reduce FE teacher workload, similar to what exists for schools. This strategy should be informed by further research on how improving working conditions can help support FE teacher supply, including by collecting qualitative and quantitative data on teacher workload.
- The long-awaited FE Workforce Data Collection is a welcome new source of data on the FE teaching workforce. We recommend that Government continue to support improvements to future waves of data.

¹ <https://www.gatsby.org.uk/app/uploads/sites/2/2025/07/2024-09-13-nfer-building-a-stronger-fe-college-workforce-clean.pdf>

¹ <https://www.gatsby.org.uk/app/uploads/sites/2/2025/07/2024-09-13-nfer-building-a-stronger-fe-college-workforce-clean.pdf>