

# Rethinking Staff Benefits in Education

19 August 2025



## What Schools Must Consider in 2025/26

As schools prepare for the 2025/26 academic year, staff wellbeing, recruitment, and retention remain high on the strategic agenda. With changes in national policy, growing pressures on pay and pensions, and shifting expectations from the education workforce, school leaders are being called to rethink how they design, deliver, and communicate employee benefits.

This article offers a fresh perspective on what schools need to know—and do—when it comes to building a sustainable, competitive, and values-driven approach to staff benefits in the year ahead.

### The Policy and Workforce Landscape

Across both state and independent sectors, schools face mounting expectations to support staff not only professionally, but personally. Recent debates around flexible working, pay structures, and pensions highlight how deeply benefits now influence morale, performance, and long-term career decisions.

Key trends include:

- **Flexible and Remote Working:** The Department for Education has endorsed expanding flexible working in schools, including home-based

marking and planning. This shift, if implemented strategically, could drive retention—particularly among early-career teachers and working parents.

- **Pension and Pay Innovation:** Several independent school groups are trialling new remuneration models that trade enhanced take-home pay for reduced pension contributions. While controversial, these models aim to rebalance affordability with recruitment competitiveness.
- **Mental Health and Wellbeing Pressures:** Increasing levels of stress and burnout have placed wellbeing at the centre of workforce policy. Schools are now expected to provide meaningful, ongoing mental health support beyond basic Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs).
- **Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI):** Benefit schemes that reflect the diverse needs of the education workforce—such as enhanced family leave, fertility support, or culturally responsive wellness initiatives—are gaining momentum as both an ethical and strategic priority.

## **Building a Fit-for-Purpose Benefits Strategy**

Rather than relying on outdated or generic packages, school leaders are encouraged to take a more intentional, evidence-led approach to employee benefits. A strong benefits strategy can:

- Improve recruitment and staff retention
- Enhance workplace satisfaction and reduce absenteeism
- Demonstrate alignment with school values and staff wellbeing goals
- Support Ofsted and DfE benchmarks on leadership, management, and staff development

## **Key Areas for Development in 2025/26**

### **1. Wellbeing Beyond the Basics**

- Offer comprehensive mental health provision—such as access to counselling, mindfulness sessions, or resilience training.
- Include support for physical health, including wellbeing app subscriptions, flu vaccinations, or fitness incentives.

### **2. Flexible Work Design**

- Review job design to accommodate part-time, job-share, or remote preparation where pedagogically appropriate.
- Ensure policies align with union guidance and are practically

deliverable at scale.

### 3. **Financial Wellness Support**

- Introduce tools and sessions for financial planning, savings, and debt support.
- Consider salary sacrifice schemes, cycle-to-work plans, and budget-planning resources tailored to education staff.

### 4. **Family and Life Stage Benefits**

- Enhance parental leave entitlements, provide access to fertility support or caregiver guidance.
- Design benefits that cater to the unique needs of mid-career and late-career educators, including phased retirement or eldercare perks.

### 5. **Community and Localised Perks**

- Partner with local businesses to offer discounts or services that add value without increasing costs.
- Explore virtual GP services or subsidised transport for staff in rural or high-cost areas.

## **Strategic Considerations for School Leaders**

- **Conduct a Staff Needs Analysis:** Engage your workforce through surveys or focus groups to determine what benefits are most valued—and what gaps exist.
- **Work with a Specialist:** Tailored, expert-led benefits planning can help schools balance cost, compliance, and competitive positioning. Outsourcing to specialists ensures access to best practices and innovation.
- **Think Long-Term:** Benefits should not be seen as an annual checkbox. Build a 3–5 year strategy that evolves with staff needs, school growth, and sector benchmarks.
- **Communicate Proactively:** Even the best benefits fail if staff are unaware or unclear about them. Build awareness through onboarding, CPD, and regular updates.

## **Looking Ahead: From Transactional to Transformational**

The most forward-thinking schools are moving away from transactional HR models toward people-first cultures where benefits are integrated into every layer

of the employee experience. In 2025/26, this will be a key differentiator—not just for recruitment and retention, but for creating the kind of school environments where staff thrive and students succeed.

For school leaders, the call is clear: design benefit programmes that are strategic, human-centred, and prepared for the future. Because when we invest in those who teach, we invest in the success of every learner.

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