



Pay Claim for 2026/2027

Submitted by the Tonbridge and Malling Branch of UNISON
to Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council

1. Introduction

This pay claim is made on behalf of all UNISON members employed at Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council (TMBC).

Our members have consistently shown commitment and dedication in delivering essential services to residents, often under conditions of high workload, recruitment challenges and increasing financial pressures.

Despite recent pay awards, pay has rarely kept pace with inflation over the past decade, leaving staff significantly worse off in real terms. The cumulative erosion of pay compared with the Retail Price Index has exceeded 30% over the last decade [1]. While the inflation rate has fallen back since the highest peaks, it has risen once again this year.

The 2026/2027 pay claim reflects:

- The continuing cost of living pressures faced by our members and their families.
- The need to maintain fair and competitive pay to retain skilled staff and recruit into hard-to-fill posts.

Appropriate reward is needed to sustain the morale and productivity of staff in their crucial role of delivering high quality services.

2. Summary of Claim

UNISON is seeking the following from TMBC:

- **A 4.5% increase on all salary points and allowances.**
- **Permanent adoption of the Real Living Wage (RLW),** with the Council seeking accreditation as a Living Wage Employer.
- A clear commitment to **maintain pay differentials** across the pay scale when raising the lowest grades to RLW levels.

The background and justification for this claim is detailed within the following sections.

3. Pay Award 2025/2026

The Council's pay award for April 2024 provided a 2.9% increase across all grades, except for the lowest spinal column point, which was uplifted to align with the Real Living Wage equivalent of £12.60 per hour.

While this adjustment was welcomed for ensuring that the lowest-paid employees received the Real Living Wage, it was **disappointing** that the remainder of staff saw their proposed increase **reduced by 0.1%** to offset the modest £14,000 cost of implementing this change, particularly given that TMBC remains in a **relatively strong financial position.**

It was also regrettable that the Council did not consider formally adopting the Real Living Wage as part of its ongoing pay policy.

Only 50% of UNISON members voted to accept this pay award, with the remaining **50% wanting us to decline the offer.** This outcome underlines the importance of ensuring that this year's pay offer genuinely addresses members' concerns and delivers a meaningful, material benefit for all employees.

4. Economic & Public Sector Context

Public sector pay awards across the UK in 2024/25 were in the range of **4.75% to 6%**, with an average of **5.7%** [2]. Despite these pay awards, the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) notes that public sector pay has fallen behind the private sector in recent years, eroding recruitment competitiveness [3].

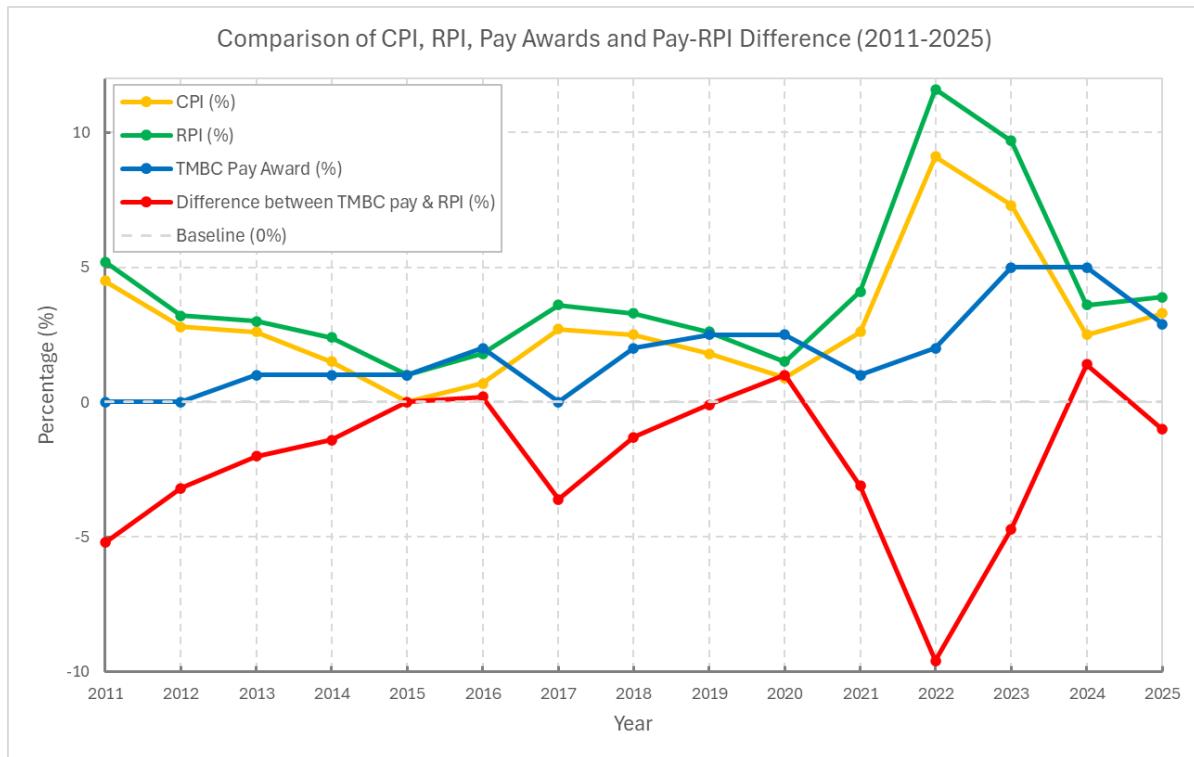
TMBC's pay awards have historically lagged behind inflation almost every year, over many years, leading to a **cumulative decline in the value of TMBC earnings** and a **fall in living standards** suffered by staff. Recent years have seen the steepest rises in the cost of living facing workers in over 40 years, being 11.6% in 2022 and 9.7% in 2023 [17]. Table 1 and Chart 1 illustrate the trends of TMBC pay awards.

Table 1: Comparison of TMBC pay awards vs cost of living (2011-2024) [17]

2011	CPI%	RPI%	TMBC Pay Award %	Difference between TMBC pay & RPI %
2011	4.5	5.2	0	-5.2
2012	2.8	3.2	0	-3.2
2013	2.6	3.0	1	-2.0
2014	1.5	2.4	1	-1.4
2015	0	1.0	1	0
2016	0.7	1.8	2	+0.2
2017	2.7	3.6	0	-3.6
2018	2.5	3.3	2	-1.3
2019	1.8	2.6	2.5	-0.1
2020	0.9	1.5	2.5	+1.0
2021	2.6	4.1	1	-3.1
2022	9.1	11.6	2	-9.6
2023	7.3	9.7	5	-4.7
2024	2.5	3.6	£1,900 up to SO 5% for M grade (Varies per grade) +1.4 (M grade)	
2025	3.3	3.9	2.9% Lowest spinal column increased to align with the Real Living Wage equivalent to £12.60 per hour	-1
Cumulative Total				-32.6

Chart 1: Comparison of TMBC pay awards vs cost of living (2011-2024) [17]

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This means that, while a wage keeping pace with the cost of living each year would have risen by 60.5% since 2011, pay at TMBC has risen by just 27.9%, resulting in **the value of staff wages falling by 32.6%**, which represents a drop worth thousands of pounds. This pay erosion affects everyone, but is most felt by those who have previously reached the top of their grade, who will not receive any further pay increments.

Inflation has moderated from the double-digit peaks of 2022–23, however the Retail Price Index (RPI, which is the most realistic measure of inflation (because it includes housing costs), is still running at 4.5% (in September 2025), with many core expenditures showing much higher surges [18]:

- Water charges up 26.1%
- Gas charges up 13.3%
- Electricity charges up 8%
- Phone services up 7.8%
- Mortgage interest payments up 7.7%
- Rail fares up 7.6%
- Bus/coach fares up 7.3%
- Food prices up 5.9%
- Rent up 5.7%
- Council tax / rates up 5.4%
- Nursery charges up 5%

It should also be noted that:

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- The ONS reports that food and non-alcoholic drink prices rose by **30% between 2021 and 2023** [1].
- Ofgem's latest data confirms that domestic energy bills are still **~50% higher than in 2021**, even after recent reductions in the price cap [4].
- The Coram Childcare Survey (2024) shows that childcare costs in the UK have risen **over 5% year-on-year**, leaving the UK with some of the **highest childcare costs in the OECD** [5].

Furthermore, the last decade and a half has seen enormous jumps in the basic costs shown below [19].

Expenditure Item	House Prices	Bus & Coach Fares	Electricity	Gas
Price rise 2010 – 24	73%	93%	144%	92%

For the value of staff wages not to fall back even further, they must at least keep pace with rises in the cost of living. In light of the above economic and public sector context, without a fair increase, **TMBC risks losing staff** to better-paying councils and private employers in Kent and beyond, especially given that **average earnings continue to grow at an average of 4.7%** across the economy [20]

Our 2025 survey of UNISON members revealed that **7 people were struggling financially, with 6 of those even struggling to pay their utility bills**. Respondents gave examples of cutting back on social and leisure activities, including exercise necessary for their wellbeing, along with adjusting food shopping habits and cutting back on treats for children. Overall, the trend indicates a strong shift away from non-essential spending, **impacting social experiences and family life**.

5. Recruitment, Retention & Pay Competition

Recruitment and retention remain ongoing challenges across local government, and TMBC is no exception.

- **National evidence:** ONS figures show that public sector vacancies remain higher than pre-pandemic levels, with local government facing particular difficulties filling professional and technical roles [1].
- **Pay competition:** CIPD research found that average pay settlements across the UK economy are running at around **4–5%**, with Southeast employers often having to pay even higher to secure talent in a competitive job market [6]. This is because being **close to London** offers the opportunity for many people in our area to earn a higher salary with London weighting, which has been accelerated with the recent trend of many jobs now being available to work from home, with a short commute to London for 'in office' days.
- **Local government reports:** The Local Government Association (LGA) has highlighted "**critical staff shortages**" in planning, environmental health, legal, and housing across councils nationwide [7].
- **Retention pressures:** UNISON's national survey of local government workers found that **over half had considered leaving their jobs in the past year due to pay and workload pressures** [7].

Without competitive pay, TMBC will likely suffer from:

- Losing experienced staff to neighbouring councils or the private sector.
- Increasing reliance on costly agency staff and market supplements to fill gaps.
- Reduced morale among remaining staff, who face higher workloads and increased pressure when vacancies remain unfilled.

6. Workload Pressures

Staff across the Council have been facing sustained and increasing workload pressures. Our 2025 UNISON pay survey revealed that **87% of respondents reported an increase in workload** over the past year.

It appears that service demands continue to grow while staffing levels remain the same or have reduced.

This imbalance between expectations and capacity is unsustainable. These pressures could contribute to stress, fatigue, falling morale, and the potential for increased sickness absence, higher staff turnover, and declining service standards. It poses a long-term **threat to the Council's ability to maintain consistent, high-quality services.**

Our members deserve to be compensated for these additional pressures.

7. Justification for a 4.5% reasonable pay rise

The majority of our members initially called for a **5% increase**. However, after careful consideration, we have moderated this claim to **4.5%**.

This figure is reasonable because:

- It is **below the average public sector settlement in 2024/25 (5.7%)** [2], demonstrating restraint.
- It is **in line with current inflation (RPI)** and slightly above future inflation forecasts, ensuring staff do not lose further ground in real terms [2].
- The Council is in a relatively healthy financial position.
- It strikes a balance between affordability for the Council and fairness for staff, recognising the financial pressures on both.

By setting our claim at 4.5%, we are deliberately asking for less than the national norm, positioning TMBC as **fair but not excessive**.



8. The Hidden Cost of Not Acting

If TMBC fails to invest in staff pay, this will result in the issues identified above, which may create costs elsewhere, with the potential to impact the council's budgets:

- **Recruitment costs:** The LGA estimates the average cost of replacing a council employee (including advertising, HR time, and onboarding) can exceed **£6,000 per role** [7].
- **Agency staff:** Councils often pay **30–40% more per hour** for temporary staff than permanent employees [7].
- **Productivity & morale:** High turnover leads to disrupted service delivery, loss of institutional knowledge, and increased pressure on remaining staff, which has financial implications.

In practice, ***paying staff fairly is often cheaper than the issues that arise as a result of being an employer that pays less.***

A modest investment in pay today will save the Council money tomorrow by reducing recruitment churn, reliance on agency cover, and the risk of service shortfalls.

9. The Real Living Wage – A Chance for TMBC to Lead Locally

The **National Living Wage** (set by government) is currently £12.21 [8] and is expected to rise to **£12.71** from April 2026.

The **Real Living Wage (RLW)**, which is independently calculated by the Living Wage Foundation, is currently £12.60 and set to rise to **£13.45** for 2026/27, with those in London earning £14.80 [9].

The Real Living Wage has become a standard benchmark for the minimum needed for low-paid staff to have a “**basic but acceptable**” standard of living.

There are now over 16,000 employers accredited as Real Living Wage employers by the Living Wage Foundation, including half of the largest companies listed on the UK Stock Exchange and household names such as Aviva, Barclays, HSBC, Nationwide, Google and IKEA are among them.

The precedent of the Real Living Wage, in tandem with recruitment and retention pressures, has also pushed major employers of low-paid staff in the retail sector to increase pay. Sainsbury's and Argos workers received a rise from £12 to £12.45 per hour in March 2025 before a further increase to £12.60 in August. Tesco followed suit, taking employees from £12.02 to £12.45 in March, then £12.64 in August, with London workers going to £14.36 per hour. Lidl and Aldi have also pushed rates for customer service roles in stores to up to £14 an hour. Similarly, Amazon raised its rate for frontline operations staff to between £13.50 and £14.50 per hour, depending on location, toward the end of 2024.

TMBC is competing in a labour market where the Real Living Wage has become an increasingly common starting point for other employers.

Within the public sector, the Real Living Wage has now long been set as the minimum pay rate across all Scotland's public sector organisations, and this was extended to social care workers in Scotland's private and voluntary sector from October 2016.

Kent County Council states in its Pay Policy Statement that its *lowest grade is set “marginally above the equivalent of the Living Wage Foundation's Real Living Wage”* [10]. While this is a good initial step, this is not the same as full accreditation, nor does it extend to all staff or contractors.

TMBC is in a similar situation, as the Council is currently paying an equivalent to the RLW following last year's pay award, however, has **not formally adopted the Real Living Wage for the future**.

No other borough or district council in Kent is currently an accredited Real Living Wage employer [9]. This presents TMBC with a clear **opportunity to lead the way locally**:

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- By **adopting the RLW permanently and seeking accreditation, TMBC could be the first Borough council in Kent to take this step.**
- Several Parish Councils in Kent are already Real Living Wage employers, including Kings Hill Parish Council and two Parish Council's in Ashford [11].
- **Accreditation** would not only benefit the lowest-paid staff, but also send a strong signal to the local community and our contractors that TMBC values fairness, equality, and staff wellbeing.
- A study of 2,000 workers conducted by the Living Wage Foundation in 2025 found that 75% of staff on the Real Living Wage believe that their work has a positive impact on their job satisfaction compared to 61% of low-paid staff [14].
- Notwithstanding the above morale points, there would also be economic benefits to TMBC from adopting the RLW. Around 40% of employers who have become accredited Real Living Wage employers have seen major or moderate **improvements to recruitment and retention** [12].
- When introduced by KPMG among its facilities management contract provided by ISS, the policy led to a 40% drop in turnover [13].
- KPMG has stated that their spend on hiring was cut so dramatically that they saved £75,000 in the first year of paying the Real Living Wage [13].
- A study of 2,000 workers conducted by the Living Wage Foundation in 2025 found that 65% of low paid were more likely to stay if their employer offered a Real Living Wage, while 75% stated that they were more likely to leave if another employer offered a Real Living Wage [14]
- Various studies have demonstrated improved productivity and reduced sickness absence [13].
- Around 86% of employers that have introduced the Real Living Wage have reported reputational benefits through increased consumer awareness of their commitment to being an ethical employer [15].
- Employers are competing for staff in a labour market where the RLW is an increasingly common starting wage, especially in the public sector, therefore offering this will provide enhance competitiveness [13].

Councils elsewhere (including Cambridge, Sunderland, South Swindon Parish, and Chiseldon Parish) have already demonstrated that RLW adoption is practical, affordable, and beneficial [9]. There is therefore no justifiable reason why TMBC should not adopt the RLW.

10. Conclusion

There can be no doubt that all TMBC staff have seen the value of their earnings fall considerably over recent years.

We are seeking a **4.5% pay increase**, despite our members asking for a 5% increase, because we understand and appreciate the budget constraints faced by TMBC. We believe this pay claim is however fair, realistic, and essential for sustaining service delivery at TMBC.

We further call for the **permanent adoption of the Real Living Wage - with accreditation** - to demonstrate TMBC's commitment to fair pay and to seize the chance to lead locally.

By investing in staff pay now, TMBC will reduce turnover, improve morale, and strengthen recruitment – ultimately safeguarding the high-quality services our residents expect.

Submitted on behalf of UNISON members

Carolyn Mell

Branch Chair

Jack Lee

Membership Officer

Andrew Longman

Treasurer

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