

Single Status background & overview

Equal pay between men and women is a legal right under both UK and European law, yet, 32 years on from the Equal Pay Act, and despite the unions' best efforts, women in local government continue to be underpaid compared to men. Women on the same grade as men often earn less and women's jobs have been undervalued in terms of basic pay.

"At least the government is - albeit slowly - starting to get its house in order over pay equality, thanks to union pressure. Overall, the public sector suffers a gender pay gap of 13.3%, still better though than the 22.5% divide between men and women working in the private sector. The biggest pay modernisation system across the NHS, Agenda for Change, ensured for the first time that men and women receive equal pay for work of equal value." H el ene Mulholland, The Guardian, Wednesday September 6th 2006

Single Status is an initiative to arrive at a fair and equitable pay structure across the whole local council, to remove significant differences between council employees. The scheme was agreed last century (1997) with a ten year timetable which expired in April 2007. Many local authorities are still dragging their heels on implementation. While they dawdle, no-win no-fee lawyers come in and take on equal pay cases, albeit for a hefty fee.

Insofar as they have relevance to schools, Single Status Agreements focus on support staff to ensure compliance for local authorities' employer responsibilities under equal pay legislation. When appointing support staff, schools should ensure that these roles are appropriately graded and advice should be sought from the local authority.

The Single Status Agreement was groundbreaking because it placed the principles of equal value at the heart of the new grading structure through equal pay-based and jointly agreed job evaluation. This process has been rendered less effective than it should have been because of the cost of eliminating widespread historic discrimination.

Councils get inadequate government financial help to fund single status. Chronic under-funding and efficiency reviews means there is a crisis in local government over equal pay. 75% of women in local government are still not receiving equal pay. Councils are paying out large amounts of money defending equal pay cases rather than carrying out systematic pay and grading reviews. The government made a significant investment in the NHS to achieve equal pay and a new job evaluated structure which led to higher pay for women. The government must do the same for women in local government.

The 2004 NJC pay implementation agreement set out a timetable for the completion and implementation of pay and grading reviews, to be completed by 1 April 2007. UNISON's policy is to secure implementation of new pay and grading structures and, with it, pay equality, through negotiation. However, where negotiation is not proving effective the union is prepared, where appropriate, to pursue equal pay claims on behalf of the members through employment tribunals and the courts.

UNISON has taken legal action against a range of authorities where there has been insufficient progress towards single status or equal pay difficulties with new pay and grading systems. UNISON has agreed a joint protocol for pursuing mass litigation with the GMB and T&G.

A useful website for background reading is <http://www.supportequalpay.co.uk/home.aspx> although do remember that it's aim is to get your business in taking an equal pay claim on your behalf. ATL does not recommend this route!

Where are we in Sandwell?

Sandwell is attempting to complete its single status process by April 2008, although it's doubtful if it can be achieved by then.

Each support staff job has been re-evaluated in order to arrive at a determination of its value.

It is inevitable that some staff will receive increases in pay, whilst other will receive a cut.

Those receiving an increase will also receive back pay, although the length of time for this has yet to be determined.

Those receiving a cut will be "safeguarded" – which means that their pay cut will not be implemented immediately, giving staff time to make adjustments.

All the figures in the single status exercise have yet to be determined, so no one at the moment knows the impact. Sandwell council has produced some financial forecasts, based on a variety of possible scenarios. These figures are only serving to add fuel to speculation, which is unsettling for staff.

Many employees are fearing that:

- their jobs may be undervalued
- they may lose pay
- they may be made redundant as schools struggle to meet increased pay bills.

ATL, as with all other unions, opposes all of these, believing that job security, fair job grading and an equitable salary are essential to enable staff to focus on the care of students and raising standards.

Ironically, single status is an attempt to eradicate the inequalities of pay within local councils, and particularly those which have historically existed between men and woman.

In a double irony, whilst undergoing the upheaval of single status, the government is planning a national pay scale for school support staff, which is something unions have campaigned for over many years. However, if and when it is implemented, it is likely to lead to further changes to support staff pay rates.

What should I do – in the midst of all this chaos?

1. Don't panic. You can only take one step at a time. There is nothing to be gained by useless speculation. In the absence of hard facts, rumour and confusion abounds, and this often leads to staffroom discord.
2. Keep in touch with the latest information by signing up to ATL Sandwell's regular email news update subscribe@atlsandwell.org.uk Include your name and school in your email to us.
3. Don't over commit yourself financially. For example, taking on a large mortgage when you may face a pay cut, is perhaps unwise. Instead, you may like to open a savings account which could be very useful in the future, whatever happens. Remember that ATL members can get financial advice through Frizzell, part of the Liverpool Victoria group: <http://www.frizzell.co.uk/atl> To find out about the range of services on offer, call Frizzell free on 0800 982289, quoting reference WRNU. 8am–8pm Monday to Friday and 9am–1pm Saturday.
4. Consider ways to add value to your professionalism by taking further courses and qualifications. For more information from Sandwell local authority ring Kim Whiting 0121 569 8339 and from ATL, the excellent Training Programme is available to download or read on screen: http://www.atl.org.uk/atl_en/resources/training_programme.asp
5. If you have particular concerns, contact the branch office 0845 370 2213 No call to the branch office is considered trivial. 24/7 message service. Leave a home or mobile number and we will endeavour to contact you as soon as we are available. Remember that all ATL Sandwell officers are education professionals, so although they are well placed to understand your concerns, they have other commitments!
6. Copy this sheet for any concerned friends, whether ATL members or not. You may be doing them a favour.

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Friday 9th November 2007