



ASSOCIATION  
OF COLLEGES



The Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson  
Secretary of State for Education  
Department for Education  
Sent via: [sec-of-state.ps@education.gov.uk](mailto:sec-of-state.ps@education.gov.uk)

16 June 2026

Dear Bridget,

Last week, further education employers, represented by the Association of Colleges met with sector unions in the first National Joint Forum (NJF) for the 2026/27 college pay round.

The discussion was open and productive. Everyone was in full agreement: college staff need a pay rise that addresses cost of living pressures and, crucially, allows our sector to continue to deliver the government's missions. The £12,500 pay gap between colleges and schools, combined with the gap to industry, is making it impossible for colleges to recruit and retain the staff needed to meet the rising demand for vocational and technical skills and training. We need a longer-term plan to close these gaps.

We recognise and appreciate that some additional funding that has been made available for further education in recent years, however taken in the round this is piecemeal and wholly insufficient. Core funding rates for 16 to 18-year-olds will rise by just 0.55% next year and the rate for adults and apprenticeships remains frozen. If current funding levels were sufficient, colleges would be able to recruit and retain the staff they need and employers would be in a position to make a meaningful pay recommendation. The fact that neither is true demonstrates the scale of the challenge facing the sector.

At the meeting, AoC was clear that any pay recommendation for the committee must be bounded by the financial constraints the sector is now facing. Given this backdrop, employers were clear about the challenges that colleges will face, once again, heading into 2026/27. Their message to unions was that unless there is a material change in the funding envelope for next year, a very low pay award, possibly zero, may be the limit of affordability, and in many colleges, efficiencies will have to be made.

The trade unions were also clear that their members will not put up with another year of a disappointing pay recommendation. College staff have experienced years of pay restraint, and worsening recruitment and retention problems. Yet once again they are being told that they may have to go without a meaningful pay award. Nobody wants to see further disruption in the sector, but the present situation on pay will have inevitable consequences.



ASSOCIATION  
OF COLLEGES



Despite the injustice of college funding, and therefore pay, the sector is committed to work with you and deliver on your and the nation's priorities. Colleges are full of expert staff who are passionate and dedicated. But the messages they hear from your government on the importance of further education do not match the reality in their pay packets.

No one is naive about the current fiscal national outlook and global situation. We understand that the government will have competing calls on public funds. However, if it is serious in its commitment to further education and wants to meet its own targets, now is the time to act.

You cannot build more homes, expand net zero retrofit programmes or grow digital capability while underfunding further education. With more than one million young people not in education, employment, or training, it is inexcusable that colleges are being forced to turn away students who want to learn due to a lack of funding.

The government has spoken about the importance of further education many times, but we are yet to see the serious investment to match this. We are urgently calling on to you to commit the funding colleges need to make a meaningful pay award.

The NJF is available at your convenience to discuss this critical issue.

Yours sincerely,

David Hughes CBE,  
Chief Executive, Association of Colleges

Gerry McDonald CBE,  
Chair, Association of Colleges  
Employment Policy Committee and  
CEO, New City College

Jo Grady  
General Secretary, University and  
College Union

Andrea Egan  
General Secretary, UNISON