PEOPLE & PAYROLL / OUR APPROACH

Every payslip has a person behind it.

The Keystone Pay payroll philosophy
Our approach to payroll for schools and trusts

Payroll is a promise to the people who work for you. Keeping that promise takes more than a system that produces payslips. It takes sound information, careful judgement and people who take responsibility for getting the detail right.

For a school business manager, it should mean a manageable process and a dependable answer. For a central team, it should mean visibility across schools. For every employee, it should mean confidence in their pay and somewhere to turn when something needs explaining.

OUR VIEW

Accurate, timely payroll depends on the whole process: the contract, the change, the approval, the calculation and the checks that follow.

This document sets out what we believe a payroll partner should bring to that process, and the principles behind the service we provide.

Good payroll earns confidence.

People should be able to trust their pay. Leaders should be able to understand and oversee the process that delivers it.

An incorrect payslip can create an immediate problem for someone's household. A late answer can turn a straightforward question into worry. The consequences are personal, even when the cause sits in a spreadsheet, an approval or an effective date.

Schools and trusts also need confidence in the figures behind their staffing costs. Payroll affects management accounts, pension records, budgets and decisions about the workforce. Our philosophy starts with that wider responsibility.

THREE PRINCIPLES THAT SHAPE THE SERVICE

Accuracy starts before the calculation.

Reliable payroll begins with a clear record of what has been agreed. Contract terms, hours, dates and approvals need to be understood before a change is processed. Where the information is unclear, the right response is to resolve the question and make any deadline risk visible.

Responsibility must be clear.

Clients should know who is dealing with a query, what is needed to resolve it and what happens next. A response is useful when it moves the issue towards an answer. Passing it between teams without ownership adds work for the school and uncertainty for the employee.

The answer should be understandable.

A calculation may be technically correct and still need explaining. We believe schools should receive clear reasons for adjustments, accessible reporting and enough context to make an informed approval.

THE FOUNDATION: KNOW THE SECTOR

Education expertise means understanding the employment arrangements behind the numbers and how a payroll decision affects the rest of the school or trust.

A dependable monthly process.

A clear timetable gives everyone the space to supply information, check the result and resolve questions before payment.

01 Understand the organisation

Start with the schools, employee groups, contracts, pay arrangements and reporting needs. Identify who can instruct changes, who approves payroll and which responsibilities sit with each party.

02 Agree the calendar

Set out submission dates, review time, approvals and payment responsibilities. Plan for holidays, pay awards and other known pressures. Everyone should understand the consequences of information arriving late.

03 Make changes traceable

Use a controlled route for starters, leavers, variations and absence. Link instructions to the relevant evidence and approval so there is a clear record of what changed and why.

04 Review the result

Make meaningful changes and unusual movements visible. Review should consider individual exceptions as well as totals: a broadly stable pay bill can still conceal an error affecting one person.

05 Secure approval and complete the run

Give the authorised client approver the information needed to review payroll. Carry out the processing, reporting and submission tasks agreed within the service, with payment responsibilities clearly allocated.

06 Resolve and improve

Follow queries through to a clear outcome. When something goes wrong, explain the effect, agree the correction and consider whether the underlying process needs to change.

THE OUTPUT

A pay run that can be reviewed, an approval that means something and a record that supports the next stage of reporting and reconciliation.

03 / THE WHOLE PICTURE

Payroll connects people and finance.

A change to one employee's record can affect pay, pensions, staffing costs and the information leaders use to make decisions.

Education employment arrangements

Term-time working, several posts held by one employee and retrospective pay changes need careful interpretation. The starting point is the actual employment arrangement and the approved instruction. A familiar label is not enough to establish the correct treatment.

Pensions and the employee record

Pension information forms part of the employee's longer-term record. Pay, membership and service changes need to be considered together, with queries followed through across payroll and the relevant scheme processes. An unexplained difference should remain visible until it has been resolved.

Finance and management information

Finance teams need to understand what has moved and why. Journals, cost allocations and payroll reports should support reconciliation and make staffing expenditure easier to explain. Where a correction affects an earlier period, its reporting impact needs to be understood as well as its effect on pay.

HR information and approvals

Keystone Pay brings HR and payroll together in one database. The purpose is to reduce repeated entry and make the connection between an approved employment change and its payroll treatment clearer. The quality of the source information and the authority to change it still matter.

HOW IT CONNECTS

If an employee changes role across two schools, the question extends beyond the new salary. Hours, effective dates, pension treatment, approvals and cost allocation all need to follow the same agreed change.

Our role is to recognise those connections and agree who will deal with them. The service specification should make the scope of payroll, HR advice and finance support explicit.

Expertise where it is needed.

Technology supports a good service. Professional judgement and a working relationship make it useful.

A practical understanding of schools

Keystone's wider team includes people who have led schools and trusts. That perspective matters when a payroll issue arrives alongside a budget deadline, a restructure or a difficult staffing decision. Advice should recognise the operational pressures without allowing them to obscure the controls needed.

Access to payroll knowledge

Our first-line support includes CIPP-qualified education payroll specialists. We believe the person receiving a question should understand its context and be able to progress it. Where further advice is needed, responsibility for the query should remain clear.

Connected information with visible control

A shared HR and payroll record can remove unnecessary duplication. Its value depends on controlled changes, appropriate access and a usable history. We judge a process by whether people can follow an instruction through to the result and explain the decisions along the way.

Honesty when something needs attention

A provider should be clear about missing information, an unresolved interpretation or a risk to the timetable. If an error occurs, the immediate priority is its effect on the employee and the action needed to correct it. The explanation should also address the cause and any wider consequences.

OUR TEST

Does the school spend less time chasing, re-entering and explaining information? Can its leaders see what has been agreed, what has been checked and what still needs a decision?

That is the practical standard behind our approach: a service that supports the people running the organisation and the people being paid.

Accountability at every stage.

Outsourcing payroll brings specialist support. Employers still need the information and oversight to discharge their own responsibilities.

Statutory and scheme requirements

Payroll operates within tax, employment and pension requirements that can change. The applicable rules, scheme arrangements and contractual terms need to be considered for the employee concerned. Questions about entitlement or interpretation should be escalated to the appropriate expertise rather than resolved through an unsupported assumption.

Employer oversight

HMRC makes clear that an employer remains legally responsible for its PAYE tasks even where a provider carries them out. The service therefore needs a defined division of responsibilities, with clear authority for instructions, payroll approval, payments and submissions. Outsourcing should give leaders a stronger basis for oversight.

Confidential information

Payroll information is sensitive. Our approach is to make appropriate access, secure handling and agreed routes for sharing data part of the service design. People should be able to obtain the information needed for their role without creating unnecessary copies or circulation.

Evidence and continuity

Important decisions should be recorded so that an absence, a handover or a change in personnel does not remove the explanation. Supporting records, review evidence and clear responsibilities help the service remain dependable beyond any one individual.

WHERE THE PRINCIPLES SHOW UP

Authorised instructions. Recorded checks. Clear approvals. Explained exceptions. Defined responsibilities for completion and follow-up.

The service agreement sets out the activities, responsibilities and service levels for each client. This philosophy describes the approach behind those arrangements; it does not replace them.

Further reading: HMRC, “Choose how to run payroll” — gov.uk/paye-for-employers/choose-payroll. Keystone Pay service information — keystoneknowledge.com/products/payroll. Reviewed November 2026.

What you should expect from us.

A worthwhile payroll partnership gives people confidence in their pay and gives leaders a process they can oversee.

A clear answer and a responsible person

You should know how to raise a query, who is progressing it and when you can expect the next update. Where a decision or further information is needed, the request should be specific enough for you to act on it.

A process your team can work with

Deadlines, instructions and review requirements should be clear. Your approval should be supported by useful information, with exceptions and unresolved matters visible before a decision is made.

Care when the circumstances change

A new school, a restructure or a change of provider deserves a plan. Switching should begin with an understanding of the current arrangements, the records to transfer and the responsibilities at each stage. Inherited queries and differences need owners rather than being lost between the outgoing and incoming service.

A relationship that improves the work

Recurring problems deserve attention beyond the immediate correction. We want the conversation to lead to clearer instructions, better information and fewer avoidable problems for the next pay run.

THE KEYSTONE DIFFERENCE

Education expertise, connected information and people who take responsibility for helping you reach an answer.

If you are reviewing your current arrangements or considering a change, we would welcome a conversation about what your school or trust needs from its payroll partner.

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