

## Fairness Commissions

Authors: Janet Sillett and Carol O'Donnell, LGiU associate

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### Summary

- A number of councils have established Fairness Commissions over the last three years. Although they vary according to local circumstances, there are some shared characteristics. The briefing considers the context in which the commissions have been set up and how they compare with previous initiatives.
- We give a brief description of each of these – their structure and membership, the motivation behind them, and, where they have published their reports, a look at their recommendations and how councils are taking these forward.
- The information for the briefing has come mainly from council and commission websites – see links at the end. In some cases there has not been much published – especially where the commission is relatively new.
- This briefing will be of particular interest to those councils thinking of setting up a Fairness Commission and to others that may want to look at different approaches (which the briefing also refers to).

### Briefing in full

#### Introduction

The London Borough of Islington was the first council to set up a Fairness Commission – in June 2010. The latest is Oldham's – on 18 July 2013. We have identified to date 11 commissions, 12 if the more focussed commission in Bristol is included.

All of the councils, except Bristol (where the commission was set up by the independent Mayor), are Labour. None of them are district councils. There is nothing, however, inherent in the concept that rules out a district (or a group of districts or a district with a county council) establishing a commission.

Although there are different emphases in the motivation for setting up each of the commissions, they clearly share certain characteristics. They have been established at arms length from the councils, have the objectives of developing a clearer understanding of what equality gaps exist in their areas and of proposing tangible ways of reducing local inequalities.

All stress the importance of engaging local people, promoting collaboration and building community capacity. They are, though, built on localist principles and have adopted different approaches to how they work.

What is the wider context? The effects of austerity on local communities, the impact of welfare reforms and the serious cuts to local government must all have influenced the current spate of Fairness Commissions, as well as local government taking on public health, and increased responsibilities to tackle health inequalities and to promoting wellbeing. The Commissions reflect the central role councils can play in addressing inequalities between areas and between their own communities.

Having to meet growing demands whilst facing major budget cuts mean that it is even more important for councils to prioritise their resources effectively and to try and influence how resources are used in the wider local public sector. These councils have chosen to establish commissions as one of their key ways of addressing these challenges – other councils, of course, will have different priorities, approaches and solutions.

## The work of Fairness Commissions

The Commissions are in various stages of development, some having completed final reports whilst others are in the process of setting themselves up and putting in place the frameworks needed for them to begin their work.

Most have followed a parliamentary select committee model, enquiry based, taking evidence and producing a final report.

Of those commissions that have currently produced final reports the difference in their stage of development and approaches can be seen most clearly between Islington and Newcastle. The former taking a highly practical approach to the implementation of its recommendations, the latter producing a toolkit for decision making and asking the city council to take the debate forward.

## Individual Commissions

The Fairness Commission in **Islington** was chaired by Professor Richard Wilkinson, one of the co authors of *The Spirit Level: Why more equal societies almost always do better*. *The Spirit Level* is cited by several of the Commissions as influencing the council's decision to set up a commission.

Islington's Commission was composed of 20 cross sector, cross party commissioners, including nine councillors with diverse backgrounds (and from all three of the major political parties) and the leader and the chief executive of the council. There were leaders from the NHS, the police and the Chamber of Commerce, two academics and a college principle, a trade unionist, a director of a charitable foundation, a community activist and the Chairman of Islington Conservatives.

The Commission held a year-long listening exercise to shape Islington's overall strategy and its budget for the next four years. Over 500 local people took part, with evidence from expert witnesses and submissions from hundreds of local groups. A cross departmental problem solving team of council staff was formed.

The Commission published its final report, *Closing the gap*, in June 2011. Seven priority areas were identified with key recommendations in each area, including ones on council services, such as housing and education.

A key recommendation related to wages: that the council should pay all their directly employed staff as a minimum the London Living Wage and "employers should also review their procurement contract and best value policies to ensure that, as far as possible within UK and EU law, the London Living Wage is the minimum paid to all their contracted staff".

A topical recommendation (not that topical probably when made, but certainly now) covers debt and payday loans:

"Islington Council should explore the possibility of passing a by-law to prevent payday loan companies from operating in the borough. And it should vigorously use its enforcement powers and those of its partners to take action against illegal activity by loan sharks who prey on vulnerable Islington residents".

In its response, the council partially accepted the recommendation, but pointed out that legal advice confirmed that Islington does not have the power to pass a bylaw prohibiting payday loan companies from operating in the borough.

Islington published a summary of the actions they would take in response to the commission's recommendations and they form part of the council's corporate plan, published alongside the delivery plan.

Implementation ranged from being the first accredited living wage local authority in the UK to cutting the salary of the CEO by £50,000 as part of wider work on pay differentials. There has been action on a wide range of issues, including on tackling problem debt, increasing local employment levels and tackling social isolation.

Ongoing accountability is achieved through public reporting on progress towards delivering the Commission's recommendations to the communities review committee every six months and to full council annually.

Islington on its website provided some advice to other councils thinking of setting up a fairness commission (see link below), such as being clear about why you are

setting one up and addressing issues that impact on your community and having a clear way of investigating them and establishing a clear timetable. On membership they stress that commissioners should come from a wide range of external organisations and should also represent the makeup of the council, including both officers and members.

The council says that the total cost of the commission, excluding officer time, was £13,990 and required the use of three full time equivalent members of staff for six months.

The **Newcastle** Fairness Commission set up in the summer of 2011 published its final report *Fair Share, Fair Play, Fair go, Fair Say* in July 2012.

Newcastle's Fairness Commission is completely independent of the local authority, composed of local faith and BME groups and the voluntary and community sectors, with no councillor commissioners. While the impetus to setting up the commission was like most others - the social and economic inequalities leading to deprivation in the area, the emphasis was on promoting a sense of fairness in the city by showing the true picture of inequality in order that decision making around tackling inequality was understood.

Introducing the report, the chair of the Commission, Professor Chris Brink, Vice-Chancellor of Newcastle University, said:

"The city faces some tough choices and it is important that those choices are made fairly. As a Commission, our approach has been to define some of the principles which we hope will improve decision-making, and provide guidance on how those principles might be applied to real-life situations. Our aim has been to influence the way the Council thinks, rather than to tell them what to do."

The Commission calls the report a toolkit for decision making. There were 10 principles of fairness that could be applied to difficult decisions and led to high level recommendations. They made clear that although there had been public involvement in the creation of the report it should not be seen as full consultation and that they wanted to take the report forward in order to involve the city in a wider civic debate.

The **York** Fairness Commission was set up in July 2011 by the City of York Council as an independent advisory body to recommend ways the council can increase fairness and reduce inequality in York. There were no councillors on the Commission. It had six independent commissioners, including its sponsor, Dr John Sentamu, the Archbishop of York, now the Chair of the newly formed national Living Wage Commission.

The Commission's aim was to put forward a vision for York "that could inform, influence and inspire the council and others, including the public and local employers, to lead by example and work for change that will improve the quality of life in York".

The Commission's focus was on social and economic inequalities of income, education and occupation.

Phase 1 from July to November 2011 included an open public consultation with residents and groups about inequality issues in the city; an analysis of independent research evidence about inequality; and a review of the City of York Council's budget, strategies and priorities.

The second phase of work focused on a series of themed 'select committee' style meetings that took place in March and April 2012. The themes chosen reflected the most significant areas that emerged from the first phase of work, including health and wellbeing; incomes, economy and jobs; and housing and homelessness.

The university and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation provided some support to the Commission – the university, for example, provided facilities and JRF grants to support some of the consultation work.

The final report 'A better York for everyone' was published in September 2012. It proposed 10 Fairness Principles, "to help inform, steer and fairness proof all decision making in the city", makes seven headline recommendations and brings together Ideas for Action. The report stresses that the recommendations work as a set, with equality and diversity cutting across all of them.

What conclusions did the Commission reach? Crucial issues were the degree of health inequalities locally, the need for a living wage and the scale of acute housing need in the city.

The Commission has now finished its work and the council is taking the lead in delivering its recommendations. The council, for example, is working towards a living wage for all council employed staff and creating a single advice and information hub for customers with the council and its partners, including the Citizens Advice Bureau. There is not a specific committee that is monitoring progress – the responsibility of monitoring is spread amongst different bodies. The LSP fairness and equalities board, for example, has the responsibility to see how the fairness principles are being implemented in the city and for promoting the living wage.

NB We would like to thank Jane Collingwood from York Council for additional information about their commission and implementation.

The **Liverpool** Fairness Commission, set up in April 2011, was an independent body established by the council, with support and funding from the University of Liverpool. The commission says that Liverpool is the most deprived local authority in England.

Liverpool, like York, had a relatively low number on their panel of ten, including representatives from Liverpool Hope University, Unison, and an ex MP. The Chair was the chief executive of a Women's Technology and Education Centre,

The final report called *Come Together* was published in May 2012, making recommendations in many areas including health, housing and education, ranging from proposals for a living wage for Liverpool and promoting entrepreneurialism.

The related campaign Come2gether is to get business, organisations and people to sign up to fairness principles and a charter. This campaign is ongoing and is continuing to work with the Mayor and other stakeholders to get the Commission's recommendations implemented.

The **Sheffield** Fairness Commission, set up in January 2012, had 23 commissioners and aimed to produce a framework for decision makers and citizens around eight themes, including access to benefits and credits, a safe city and housing and a better environment. It took evidence and produced key outcomes and specific actions and a ten point framework for fairness. The final report was published in January 2013 and produced 90 recommendations, the large number due possibly to the nature and extent of inequality in the city. The emphasis in these recommendations was on prevention, such as access to credit for poor families, health promotion and increasing the number of food banks and the communication and coordination across sectors.

The **Blackpool** Fairness Commission started in May 2012 and seems to have drawn its membership very widely. It has a 16 member steering panel, with quite a spread of roles and most of them are Blackpool based. Members include the council leader and the CEO, two police representatives including a divisional commander who is the Chair, three people from health, and a representative from the Chamber of Commerce. There are eight community representatives who have been elected by the other panel members, including the chair of the young people's council.

The motivation for Blackpool was the levels of deprivation in the area and inspiration from the ideas expressed in the *Spirit Level*. Blackpool is the sixth most deprived borough in the UK. The Steering panel published a report in October 2012 setting out the situation in Blackpool and ideas for tackling inequality. It continues to meet and the Commission is ongoing. Events for 2013 are currently being advertised on their website.

The **Newport** Fairness Commission is currently the only Commission set up in Wales - it began in September 2012, has 14 members and expects to report in September/October 2013.

The **Tower Hamlets** Fairness Commission was set up by the Mayor of Tower Hamlets, Lutfur Rahman. There are 13 members and it is chaired by Giles Fraser, currently the parish priest at St Mary's, Newington in the Elephant and Castle and previously Canon Chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral. The Bishop of Stepney is also a member. Other members include a group of people local to the borough, such as a head teacher, an editor of a Bangladeshi newspaper, the director a Somali Network, the chair of a Muslim Women's Collective, and a director of a user led organisation. A representative from CPAG and a director with Barclays Bank are also members.



Between November 2012 and March 2013 they gathered evidence and a 50 page evidence pack was produced. They held their last public meeting in March this year and their report on the findings will be published later this year.

The **Plymouth** Fairness Commission was set up as an independent body in April 2013. There are 21 commissioners, with representatives from a variety of organisations, including the police, health, private companies, charities and community groups. It is chaired by Dame Suzi Leather, a previous chair of the Charity Commission.

The **Southampton** Fairness Commission was set up on 27 June 2013 and expects to report finally in April 2014. Interestingly at the same time as agreeing the setting up of the Commission the council also agreed to start work on introducing a living wage for staff employed by the Council.

The **Oldham** Fairness Commission was launched on 18 July 2013 by Debbie Abrahams the MP for Oldham East and Saddleworth. It is supported by a range of leaders from the public and private sector and will look at socio – economic inequalities.

In **Bristol** in May 2013 the Independent Mayor, George Ferguson, set up four Commissions, one of which was a Fairness Commission which is currently looking at the case for the living wage and the city's ability to cope with benefit cuts.

## Other related work

Many local authorities are tackling similar issues to those that have set up Fairness Commissions but have different approaches. This Briefing includes only some of the work being done.

The **Kirklees** Tackling Poverty Strategy has an explicit aim to reduce inequality and improve life chances in the Borough. One example is that its work has increased awareness of the contributory factors to infant mortality in some BME communities, reducing the numbers of deaths in some areas that experienced particularly high incidences. In **Leicester** the Council set up a Child Poverty Commission, its motivator the statistic that one third of children in the city live in poverty. Sixty-six recommendations have been made which emphasise the need for interventions to make the most of available resources and be joined up between local and central government. The **Greater Manchester** Poverty Commission reported in January 2013. Its 16 Commissioners made recommendations including ones relating to fuel, food, access to services and jobs. A key recommendation they made was the all the commissions relating to poverty and inequality should come together to campaign on common issues.

There are numerous other examples of work being done to tackle poverty and reduce inequalities which is not being done through stand alone commissions, including the work in the **London Borough of Newham** to build resilience across all council services which has informed investment in a range of areas. In **Knowsley**

priority is given to the development and implementation of a 'Social Growth' policy – growing the social sector so that it can play an active role in supporting residents to tackle the issues they face.

**Camden** established an equality taskforce in July 2012, aimed at exploring the local authority's role in tackling inequality in Camden. ['An insight into the impact of the cuts on some of the most vulnerable in Camden. A Young Foundation report for the London Borough of Camden'](#) was also published in July 2012

**Birmingham City Council** set up a social inclusion consultation process, as opposed to a Fairness Commission, on 17 March 2012. The [Giving Hope Changing Lives](#) consultation examined diversity of place, diversity of people, inclusive growth, well being and young people. Seven social inclusion commitments were developed with tangible recommendations for the key agencies in the city.

The commitments and recommendations are set out in the White Paper, [Making Birmingham an inclusive city](#).

## Comment

The very difficult challenges that the Fairness Commissions have been set up to address have many and complex causes and, of course, cannot be addressed just by local action and policy. However the councils that have set them up would insist that each area has different problems and circumstances and each requires answers which have been reached by working with local people and where communities feel a sense of ownership of them.

Councils addressing issues such as inequality and poverty is clearly not new. The 1980s, for example, saw the growth of equal opportunities policies and then of anti poverty strategies. However, Fairness Commissions have a wider brief, beyond tackling discrimination. They also reflect the way in which partnership working has become the norm in local government and the belief that there has to be a breakdown of silo working within the council and between the council and other public sector agencies. It may be too early to draw conclusions about how successful they will all be in this respect.

There have also been national initiatives examining inequality and its impact, for example, the 1980 Black report into health inequalities. The council led fairness commissions, however, although reflecting some of the rationale behind national commissions, are steeped in localism.

Independence from the council is key. Having independent commissioners (and often an independent chair) underlines the commitment to cross sector and organisational collaboration and, of course, sends out the message that the Commission is not owned by the council. It also reinforces the message that the



Commission's recommendations are relevant to the council's partners and not just to the council itself.

They also seem more explicitly about delivery than previous equalities strategies – with the commissions meant to lead to changes in policy, service delivery and budget allocations. Although most of the commissions were motivated by a shared concept of equality and fairness, their tone is largely pragmatic. Several of the commissions recommend, for example, promoting the living wage in their final recommendations and several of the councils are working towards implementation or have done so. The commissions have been able to pull together evidence from other groups and agencies that have been campaigning for a living wage. However, although the commissions stress the prime importance of local implementation, members also in some cases want to influence national policy – such as making the case for a living wage nationally and promoting it from the bottom up.

They all embrace the concept of engagement with local people and in some cases go further – into co-production and delivery. Unlike the equalities and anti-poverty strategies of the 1980s and 1990s fairness commissions can make extensive use of the internet and social media to involve a wide group of local people in their work.

Although, so far, being largely associated with Labour councils (that is, it is Labour councils that established them - the commissions themselves are not party political), some of the recommendations clearly echo the Big Society concept, stressing the value of volunteering and residents being involved in service planning and delivery, such as Islington's Good Neighbours project, piloted on the New River Green estate to tackle social isolation and where funding has been made available to help local residents to reclaim disused public spaces for the community.

Fairness Commissions are at different stages – some have published final reports, such as Islington, Newcastle, York, Liverpool and Sheffield; others are very new. It is probably too early to assess their success in meeting their own objectives. The Manchester Poverty Commission specifically called for all Fairness Commissions to work together to draw out common themes - which will be increasingly interesting when all the existing commissions have reported and councils are starting to implement their recommendations.

Of course, setting up this kind of body would not be appropriate for every council. Some councils would argue that they already have the information they need to tackle these kinds of issues without establishing new structures; others that their priorities are different. Those councils who do set up a fairness commission have to justify the resources needed to do so and when the commission has reported, ensure there is ongoing public scrutiny of how the council is implementing whatever policies it decides to adopt.

The commissions are unlikely to result in radical changes to policy in the councils that have established them, but if they are based on hard evidence and resident involvement, they can bring a new focus to policy and delivery locally and possibly influence national policy. The commission can raise issues higher up the agenda

locally and provide the information to back up their recommendations. They can influence what kind of priority the council will give to specific issues and can accelerate what may have been happening but at a slow pace. They provide an arena for public debate and dialogue and a view from outside that can refresh the council's own direction and policy.

The report from York's cabinet in response to the Commission's findings reflects what must be common to most, if not all, of the Commissions:

"In many areas the Commission's recommendations reinforce a commitment to the existing priorities and initiatives that the Council has already started work on...In other areas the Commission has highlighted gaps in those priorities or in our plans to deliver them and challenged us to do more and to take a different approach".

## Links

[Blackpool Fairness Commission](#)

[www.islington.gov.uk/about/fairness-commission](http://www.islington.gov.uk/about/fairness-commission)

[www.newcastle.gov.uk](http://www.newcastle.gov.uk)

[Newcastle final report](#)

[www.yorkfairnesscommission.org.uk](http://www.yorkfairnesscommission.org.uk)

[Liverpool Fairness Commission](#)

[Sheffield Fairness Commission](#)[www.blackpoolfairness.wordpress.com](http://www.blackpoolfairness.wordpress.com)

[www.plymouthfairnesscommission.co.uk](http://www.plymouthfairnesscommission.co.uk)

[www.southampton.gov.uk](http://www.southampton.gov.uk)

[www.towerhamlets.gov.uk](http://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk)

[Fairness Commission Tower Hamlets](#)

[www.newport.gov.uk](http://www.newport.gov.uk)

[Oldham Commission launch](#)[www.bristol.gov.uk](http://www.bristol.gov.uk)

[www.povertymanchester.org](http://www.povertymanchester.org)

[Camden Equality Taskforce](#)

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