



Fairness Commissions:

Understanding how local authorities can have an impact on inequality and poverty



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Summary

In the face of severe spending cuts, many local authorities are struggling to tackle growing levels of inequality and poverty. Others are exploring fresh and participative approaches to improving the lives of their residents in difficult financial circumstances.

Over the last five years, Fairness Commissions and similar bodies were established in 23 places across the UK. Each commission set out to tackle inequality and poverty at a local level in a context of national government spending cuts.

Achievements of commissions to date include: raising thousands of people from minimum wage to living wage, exposing and limiting the activities of payday loan companies, boosting membership of credit unions, improving accessibility of advice services, and changing the practices of private landlords on tenancy agreements and housing quality.

What is a Fairness Commission?

Commissions usually follow a process similar to a parliamentary select committee. The commission hears from local people, gathers evidence, analyses it, and produces a report which makes recommendations to the local authority and its partners. They do not have to be called Fairness Commissions. Others used the language of equality (Camden Equality Taskforce), poverty (Greater Manchester Poverty Commission), and social inclusion (Birmingham Social Inclusion Process).

Our research identifies ten stages in the process of holding a local commission on inequality and poverty:

- 1.** Scope: Decide what and whom you are targeting with the commission.
- 2.** Language: Decide what to call the commission and define its purpose.
- 3.** Resource: Decide on a proportionate budget and allocation of staff time.
- 4.** Leadership: Invite commissioners to participate and appoint chairs.
- 5.** Communication: Start talking about the commission locally and invite people to participate.
- 6.** Participation: Gather evidence and solutions through a range of methods.
- 7.** Analysis: Develop recommendations based on the evidence and possible solutions.
- 8.** Recommendations: Make recommendations for change to the relevant organisations.
- 9.** Implementation: Put the recommendations into action.
- 10.** Evaluation: Monitor progress, measure change, and report on it.

The advantages to holding a commission include:

- Providing an opportunity to speak to residents about the topics that most matter to them, such as wages and housing, and to bridge the gap between electoral and participative democracy;
- Generating a mandate to tackle inequality and poverty for the local authority and its partners;
- Developing a 'total place' approach, through which the local authority and its partners define shared goals and pool budgets;
- Building fresh insights and developing initiatives that can lead to real change.

Holding a commission involves particular challenges:

- Engaging businesses and keeping them involved in implementing recommendations (something that was difficult and time-consuming for a number of commissions);
- Involving people on the lowest incomes, which the commission model of consultative meetings makes especially challenging.

Which approaches generated the most progress?

Certain approaches resulting from commissions led to significant progress towards reducing inequality and poverty. The approaches that generated most progress are:

- Supporting social justice campaigns such as the Living Wage Campaign, Just Money, Sharkstoppers, and Timewise;
- Exposing and ending injustices, for example in housing, employment, and debt;
- Brokering and supporting collective activities in order to reduce the cost of living and encourage mutual support;
- Improving local services, particularly the availability and accessibility of childcare and advice services.

Two approaches – focusing solely on local authority employment practices without putting pressure on other local employers to change their practices, too, and calling for policy reviews and needs assessments without making specific recommendations – did not achieve much progress.

Which achievements could galvanise national action?

The achievements of commissions give local councillors a platform to advocate for policy ideas that were implemented locally as part of commissions and would have the greatest impact if introduced on a national level. Such policies include: incentivising Living Wage employers, requiring companies to publish their pay ratio of highest to lowest earner, establishing

a national landlord register to improve the standard of privately rented homes, offering free school meals for children, and investing in enterprise to create good jobs.

Recommendations

We recommend that local authorities run participative processes focusing on inequality and poverty, and apply the most effective approaches and innovations from existing commissions to their local areas.

With the potential for government to devolve more to regions in the form of particular budgets, administrative functions and decision-making powers, there is also scope for commissions to be held across larger areas to develop recommendations for regional institutions. By linking up regionally, local authorities have shown that they can speak with a louder, collective voice nationally. This can be used to make a stronger case for national government action on issues such as good job creation, private rentals standards, social housing, and the cost of credit.

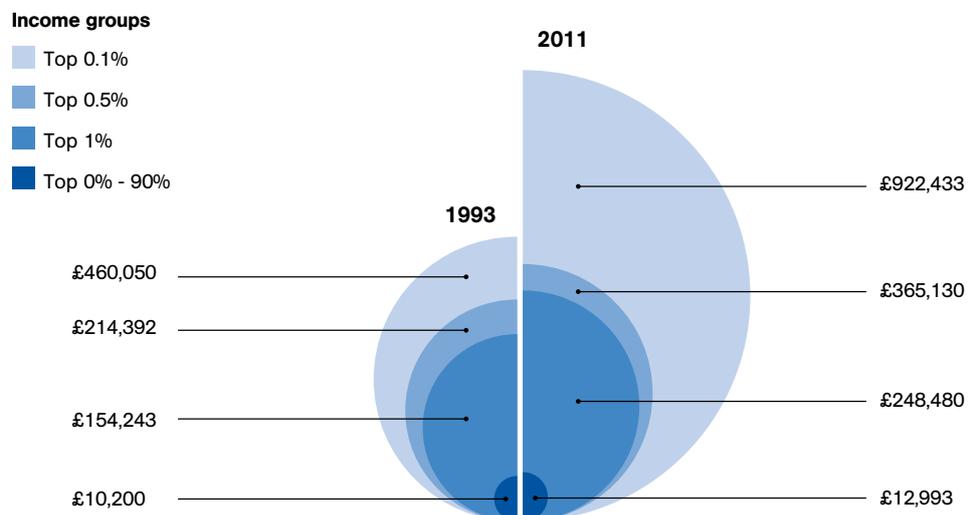
1. Introduction

Poverty is rising in the UK and the gap between highest and lowest earnings is growing. Inspired by the evidence in the best-selling book *The Spirit Level* that greater equality is better for everyone,¹ local authorities and their partners have set up Fairness Commissions and similar participative bodies to reduce inequality and poverty.

It is difficult to address poverty without also addressing inequality. Income and wealth inequality negatively affect social mobility, which makes escaping poverty more difficult for people. Evidence from the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission shows that children from disadvantaged family backgrounds are less able than children from advantaged backgrounds to convert high attainment at the age of 5 into later labour market success. In the UK, children from advantaged social class backgrounds are four times more likely to be in high-income employment in adulthood than children from disadvantaged backgrounds.² Low pay is also partly a problem born out of inequality. Over the last two decades pay increases were concentrated on those already earning the highest incomes, while middle and low incomes fell.³

Figure 1 shows how wages for different income groups have changed since 1990 in the UK. It demonstrates how ordinary workers making up 90% of the total have enjoyed a modest wage increase compared with the topmost fraction of earners who have doubled their incomes over the period, and from a much greater starting point.

Figure 1. Average incomes for selected groups in the uk



Source: BBC The Wealth Gap Analysis, updated with the latest data from the World Top Incomes Database.

The global recession resulted in a brief period of falling income inequality because wages fell across the board but those on low incomes were partially shielded by cash transfers, which until 2012 increased with prices.⁴ Since then the upward trend in inequality has continued. 2013–2014 saw a return to rising income inequality: real earnings for the top 10% rose by 3.9% while earnings for the bottom 90% fell by 2.4%.⁵

Looking ahead, child and working age poverty are projected to be higher in 2014–2015 than in 2012–2013, with further increases forecast to 2020–2021.⁶ Over the 15 years up to 2030, incomes are expected to rise 11 times as fast for high-income households as for low-income households.⁷

There is some variation between parts of the country in terms of the local experience of rising inequality and poverty. For example, in most regions, wages for the lowest-paid fell faster than at the median from 2007 to 2013, but they fell most for low-paid men in London – falling by more than 9%.⁸ As a result, pay inequality is greatest for men in London, with the ratio of high paid to low paid (90th percentile to 10th percentile) rising the most out of any region. Disposable incomes in London were affected by rapidly rising house prices, but London was less affected by job losses during the recession than other regions. The average drop in full-time employment in England from 2006–2008 to 2013 was 3.1 percentage points, with London falling by the smallest margin, 1.8 points. The North West and the South West experienced the biggest drops, with falls of 5.6 points and 4.6 points respectively.⁹

Local commissions on inequality and poverty

From 2010, some local authorities decided to be part of a national movement to halt the rise of inequality. Fairness Commissions drew inspiration from *The Spirit Level*, which demonstrates the negative social effects of income inequality on educational outcomes, social mobility, crime, health, and wellbeing and argues that more equal societies are better for everyone.¹⁰

Fairness Commissions draw experts, organisations, and local residents into discussions about inequality and poverty with a specific goal in mind: to come up with recommendations for reducing inequality and poverty that can be implemented by key partners, usually the local authority, private and public sector partners, and sometimes national government to chip away at structures that create and re-create inequality and poverty.

The context of government spending cuts adds to the challenge because it means that local authority budgets are especially tight and that low incomes are getting lower due to cuts to cash transfers.¹¹ Austerity is also part of the motivation for holding commissions, as local authorities and their partners recognise the importance of using scarce resources effectively, to have the biggest possible impact.

Previous research into Fairness Commissions¹² established several findings:

- Fairness Commissions did not have difficulty in gathering evidence, data, and information about the negative impacts of inequality and poverty in cities and other areas across the UK. The effects on household incomes, debt, housing, employment, and access to labour markets are evident. This analysis provides a strong rationale for taking action to address inequality and poverty.
- An important part of the process for commissions is creating political traction: making sure local politicians are authorised and even obliged to act on and support actions to reduce poverty and address inequality through high-profile public discussions and decisions.
- Commissions are faced with limits to what they can achieve due to national policies in areas which include housing, taxes and benefits, and local government funding.
- Commissions came up with useful recommendations for local action on inequality and poverty thanks to the process of taking a broader perspective and looking at how a range of local activities could help to reduce the gap between rich and poor.
- There is an opportunity for citizens, local groups, and institutions to use the work of these commissions to have a public debate about inequality and poverty and hold government (local and national) to account for progress made in addressing such issues.

This research extends what we know about Fairness Commissions by looking at what they have achieved as they move to implementing recommendations.

We consider:

- The advantages and challenges of holding a commission, and the elements which make a commission process most effective at generating action and progress;
- Approaches to addressing inequality and poverty that generated the most action and progress in places that had commissions, and what can be learned from this for future commissions;
- What more could have been achieved and how, through what approaches, drawing on examples from other local authorities that took steps to reduce inequality and poverty without holding a commission;
- The local actions and stories which could be used to hold government to account for its activities and policies in the area of inequality and poverty.

Purpose

This research draws out lessons learned from the commissions in terms of how they run most effectively to achieve the greatest progress in reducing inequality and poverty.

We structure our analysis around approaches to tackling inequality and poverty rather than around particular policy areas such as housing or employment because, as commission reports describe, the impacts of inequality and poverty are not the same in every location, leading to different issues requiring action as a matter of priority. For example, providing low-cost housing is a major challenge for local authorities in London and the South East,¹³ whereas the bigger issue in parts of the North East is the provision of good jobs – not to say that housing supply is not also important.¹⁴

For each approach we provide several case studies which relate to topics such as employment, childcare, education, economic development, housing, and planning. These are indicative of what can be achieved through different approaches and can be used to support innovation among local authorities striving to have a greater impact on the reduction of inequality and poverty.

Research methods

We mapped the recommendations of all 16 commissions that had made concrete recommendations by March 2015 and conducted interviews with external commissioners and local authority councillors and officers from eight of the commissions (Islington, Liverpool, Newcastle, Greater Manchester, Camden, Sheffield, Tower Hamlets, and Plymouth). While our sample does not cover all of the completed commissions, it focuses on those where there is evidence that some progress has been made towards reducing inequality and poverty. We analysed the achievements of these commissions, looking at which recommendations have been implemented and discussing with commissioners, local authority councillors, and local authority officers the approaches that generated most action and progress.

2. What is a Fairness Commission?

Fairness Commissions provide a way for local authorities to open a conversation with residents about how the council and local partners can reduce inequality and poverty.

Between June 2010 and June 2015 Fairness Commissions and similar bodies were established in 23 places, often led by local authorities with academic, trade union, voluntary and charitable sector, and private sector partners. Sixteen have reported and set out concrete recommendations, and are now in the process of implementing changes. Other commissions are still in progress. The map shows the locations of the 23 commissions, and a list of commissions and dates is provided in Appendix 1.

While most commissions were initiated by local authorities or locally elected mayors, a few were set up by other local groups. For example, the Greater Manchester Poverty Commission was initiated by a group of local MPs and made possible by the voluntary and community sector, with charitable funding. The London Fairness Commission was established by Toynbee Hall and My Fair London.¹⁵ Other local and regional bodies such as Combined Authorities, Health and Wellbeing Boards, and Clinical Commissioning Groups may be instigators of local commissions in the future.

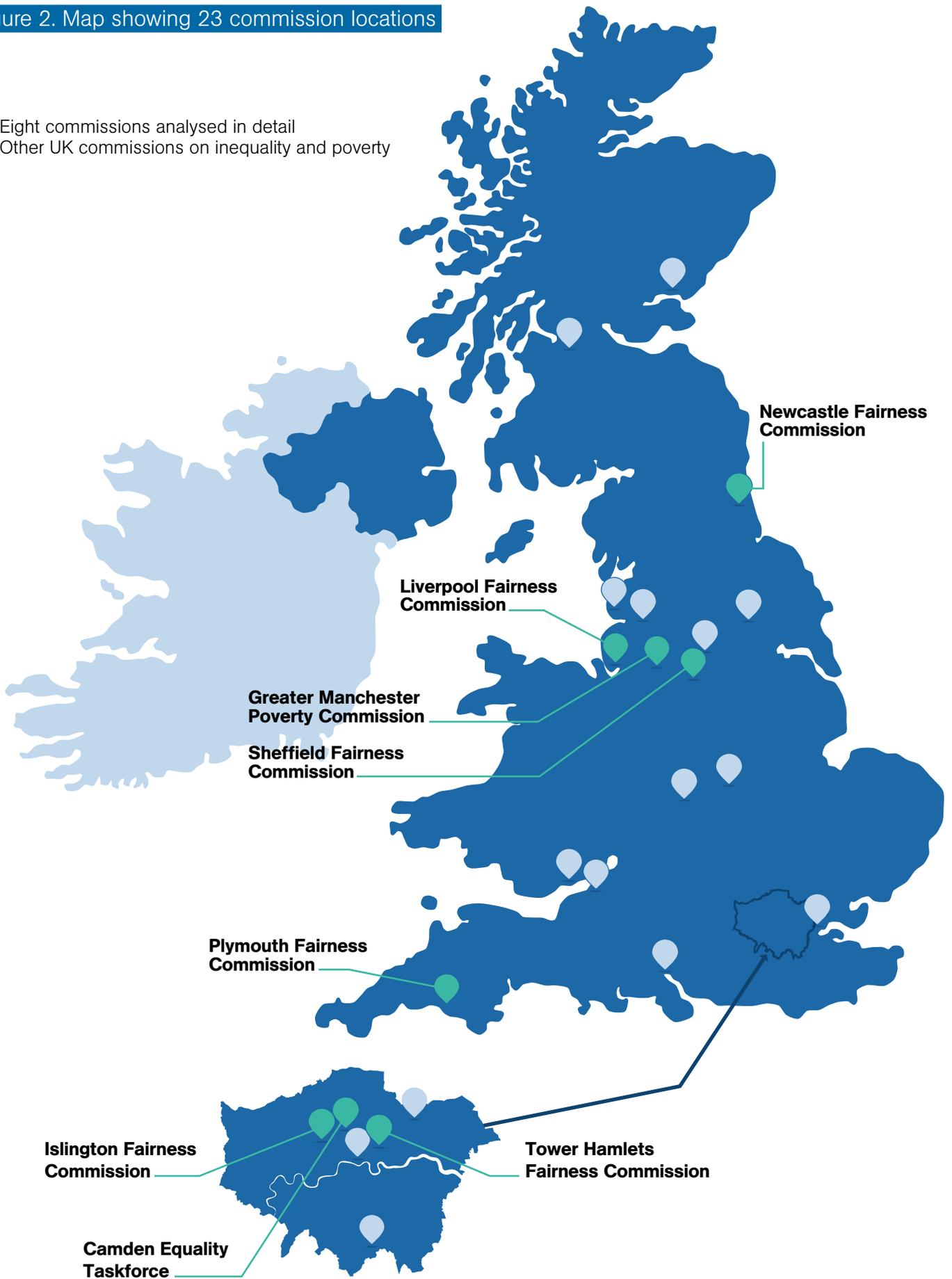
Commissions took place in numerous Labour-led local authorities, but often only with a slim majority and usually with cross-party support. They have potential to be a cross-party project. For example, Camden had representatives from Labour, Liberal Democrat, and Conservative parties on its taskforce. The Sheffield Fairness Commission involved Labour and Liberal Democrat councillors. As David Willetts explored in a paper for Demos, the Conservative Party did not historically seek to address inequality but there is now a case for Conservatives acting to reduce inequality, founded on the evidence of the problems inequality causes for social cohesion, social mobility, and wellbeing.¹⁶ The Liberal Democrat Party has also emphasised social mobility and stated that the goals of reduced inequality and poverty, while not synonymous with increase social mobility, are overlapping.¹⁷

How to hold a commission

Commissions usually follow a process similar to a parliamentary select committee. The commission hears from local people, gathers evidence, analyses it, and produces a report which makes recommendations to the local authority and its partners. The timescale for a commission, from first public meetings to submitting recommendations, is usually a year.

Figure 2. Map showing 23 commission locations

- Eight commissions analysed in detail
- Other UK commissions on inequality and poverty



The process has a series of stages and involves making several decisions about scope, leadership, and the responsibilities of each stakeholder involved.

The following model for holding a commission was developed with the help of Councillor Andrew Hull, who co-chaired the first UK Fairness Commission – in Islington, London. It is also informed by examples from other commissions around the country and the reflections of officers and commissioners whom we interviewed. There are broadly ten stages involved in holding a commission:

1. Scope: Decide what and who you are targeting with the commission.
2. Language: Decide what to call the commission and define its purpose.
3. Resource: Decide on a proportionate budget and allocation of staff time.
4. Leadership: Invite commissioners to participate and appoint chairs.
5. Communication: Start talking about the commission locally and invite people to participate.
6. Participation: Gather evidence and solutions through a range of methods.
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10. Evaluation: Monitor progress, measure change and report on it.

1. Scope: Decide what and who you are targeting with the commission.

The scope needs to be set at the start and can vary according to what the local authority wants to achieve through the commission. Camden's Equality Taskforce was given the role of focusing on how local services could be used to increase equality. Tower Hamlets set out to address money, jobs, and homes. By contrast, the remit of the Newcastle Fairness Commission was to set out principles for ensuring fairness in the city in preparation for the council's budget consultation process, and to make only a small number of critical policy recommendations. The scope of the commission affects whether recommendations are best pitched at local level, national level, or a mixture of the two. The Islington Fairness Commission set out to make only recommendations that could be implemented locally but commissioners later commented that they 'missed a trick' in not also making a handful of national recommendations for policy changes on issues such as affordable credit and housing.

We asked the Fairness Commission to identify the principles of fair decision making, then set up a three-year budget process through which those principles were turned into concrete decisions within the Council.

Newcastle Council Officer

2. Language: Decide what to call the commission and define its purpose.

The commission does not have to be called a 'Fairness Commission'. This is simply the language chosen by the first commission, initiated by Islington Council. Commissions set up to address inequality and poverty in the future could use different conceptual language – for example, the language of social and economic justice. Or they could situate the commission in a wider agenda – such as transitioning to a low-carbon society, as with the Haringey Carbon Commission. The choice will depend on the aims of the commission, its scope, and whom it most hopes to engage in the process.

Early on, most likely in the first commission meeting, it is important to agree what is meant by whatever words are used and therefore set out what falls into the commission's remit and what is excluded. While this may seem an academic point, it helps focus the commission and prevent it being diverted from its main purpose. If meanings of key terms can be clearly established from the start, they can be used to frame all conversations of the commission – in public and in private.

The Islington Fairness Commission defined fairness in the following way:

To make Islington fairer means reducing poverty and inequality in the areas that matter most to Islington people's life chances.

The commission focused on the areas of income, work, families, community, safety, housing, and health.¹⁸ The definition of increased fairness encompassed reducing income inequality along with addressing inequalities in access to employment, non-financial resources, and support.

The Newcastle Fairness Commission defined four dimensions of fairness:

- *Fair outcomes* – in terms of fair allocation of resources
- *Fair process* – in terms of transparent, inclusive decision-making
- *Fair opportunity* – in terms of people having an equal chance to realise their full potential
- *Fair participation* – in terms of being heard and having the opportunity to make your own contribution to society

This definition differs from the Islington example, because fairness is conceived of as distinct from income inequality and poverty, and focused on as a goal in itself. As the Newcastle Fairness Commission stated:

We could say that fairness will flourish best where conditions of equality, social justice, democracy, tolerance, good citizenship and social cohesion exist, and that all of these remain, and should remain, common goals of civil society. However, that still leaves us with the task of understanding and implementing fairness itself.¹⁹

Newcastle Fairness Commission report

The Sheffield Fairness Commission brought together reducing inequalities with fair participation in its definition:

A Fair Sheffield will be when the major inequalities have been substantially reduced, when there are no barriers to prevent people from participating as fully as possible in the social and economic life of the city, according to their abilities and preferences, and where a sense of fair play governs.²⁰

Sheffield Fairness Commission report

The Camden Equality Taskforce focused on improving outcomes for disadvantaged groups across seven domains of life; tackling inequalities in each of these areas. Its remit therefore included:

A wide range of areas of life not just income and wealth.

The seven life domains are:

- *To live in safety and security*
- *To be healthy*
- *To be knowledgeable and to have the skills to participate in society*
- *To enjoy a comfortable standard of living, with independence and security*
- *To engage in productive and valued activities*
- *To enjoy individual, family and social life*
- *To participate in decision-making, have a voice and influence²¹*

Camden Equality Taskforce report

3. Resource: Decide on a proportionate budget and allocation of staff time. Most local authorities have allocated a budget of around £20,000 for running the commission. This covers the costs of holding public events and meetings but does not include staff time. All commissioners have been volunteers who have not been paid for their time, but most commissions have required the support of at least one local authority officer often working full-time on the project for 6–12 months. The Islington Fairness Commission was supported by one full-time policy officer, along with regular input from the Chief Executive and communications and partnerships staff. The Greater Manchester Poverty Commission was not funded by a local authority. It received financial support from The Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Oxfam, the Manchester Airport Community Fund, the Church Urban Fund, the Diocese of Manchester, and from a number of Greater Manchester Housing Associations. The Diocese of Manchester also seconded its Diocesan Secretary to establish and run the commission.

Decisions about resources need to take account of the implementation of commission recommendations, particularly over the first year following the submission of recommendations. This may involve allocating an indicative budget for implementation but this is difficult to do before recommendations are made. More likely, it will involve ensuring that there will be enough dedicated staff time to support, drive, and monitor implementation.

4. Leadership: Invite commissioners to participate and appoint chairs.

A number of local authority officers and members commented on the importance of senior leadership in achieving progress on reducing inequality and poverty through local commissions.

Commissioners need to be people from a range of organisations who are able to dedicate sufficient time to understanding the issues and to building relationships. It is useful to consider what sectors within the area need to be represented, but this does not necessarily mean asking the heads of hierarchies. People with vision, energy, and time are likely to make the best commissioners. Commissioners commented that the diversity of commissioners was especially positive in ensuring that issues such as employment and housing were considered from a range of perspectives. It is important therefore to encourage representation on the commission from people who can reflect on issues and their solutions from the perspective of, for example, a single parent, a disabled person, or a young person, as these groups especially have been acutely affected by public spending cuts.

Most commissions appointed chairs who were external to the local authority, commonly a senior individual from a local charity, social enterprise, or university. For example, the Liverpool Fairness Commission was chaired by the Chief Executive of a training and education social enterprise. Some sought out particular expertise from further afield. For example, the Plymouth Fairness Commission was led by Dame Suzi Leather who was previously Chair of the Charity Commission and the School Food Trust. The Camden Equality Taskforce was chaired by Naomi Eisenstadt who is an expert in education and social policy at the University of Oxford. A few commissions also appointed a local councillor as a co-chair. This was formally the case in the Islington and Redbridge Fairness Commissions, but other commissions like the Camden Equality Taskforce also involved partnerships between an external chair and an active member – in the case of Camden it was the Council Leader, Sarah Hayward.

The roles played by commissioners recruited from within the local area are usually different from those of external commissioners. External commissioners who command respect due to their knowledge or expertise can help raise the profile of the commission, establish it as a trustworthy and independent body, and gain the support of council officers. Their involvement provides visibility, access to networks, and specialist knowledge but their role usually ends after the commission submits recommendations because they may not live locally. Commissioners recruited locally and from among councillors know the local situation, can advise on internal matters such as the powers and levers available to the local authority, and can drive implementation after the commission finishes because they remain involved.

We had a combination of external expertise and internal clout. Naomi Eisenstadt provided intellectual rigour and narrative. Councillor Sarah Hayward was a driving force throughout and played a significant role in developing the Council's response to recommendations. It would be difficult to do a commission well without very senior leadership.

Camden Council Officer

5. Communication: Start talking about the commission locally and invite people to participate. This matters a great deal if the commission aims to involve a range of local people. Communications tend to involve sending invitations around council contacts and networks, and personally contacting partners from the voluntary and community sector, the private sector, and other public bodies. To engage residents, councillors have gone door-knocking and visited community groups. Commissioners often have networks across different sectors that could be mobilised to encourage engagement.

Commissions have been successful in engaging the local media and sometimes the national press. The Liverpool Fairness Commission appeared in national news when launching its final recommendations to the council²² and again when the Liverpool Poverty Action Group released a report called *Getting by?* which followed the lives of 30 low-income Liverpoolian families over the course of a year.²³

Local authority officers involved in commissions commented that keeping up communications was challenging, due to resources and access to the press.

Communication was our biggest challenge – keeping the commission in the media, keeping it live. We needed to give it more attention.

Plymouth Council Officer

The Sheffield Fairness Commission benefited from the expertise of one of its commissioners who is editor of *The Star* in Sheffield and ran a series in the paper on the Fairness Commission,²⁴ which was also reported on nationally.²⁵

With media communications, having a clear narrative about the value of the commission becomes especially important. The Croydon Opportunity and Fairness Commission budget was reported to be £200,000, which appreciably caused consternation in the local media and allegations that the Council was spending large amounts on public consultation in times of austerity.²⁶ The Council then had to expend significant effort in addressing the miscommunication, explaining that the budget was indicative and included existing staff costs, and that the commission would produce meaningful changes, not just create an expensive talking shop.²⁷

6. Participation: Gather evidence and solutions through a range of methods. Commissions encourage participation in multiple ways, with the aim of encouraging as many people and local organisations as possible to contribute. During this part of the process the aim is to collect evidence about both the nature of and problems with inequality and poverty locally, and ideas about how best to address these issues.

The process of gathering evidence and ideas can include:

- Calls for evidence: The commission asks for submissions of evidence through a variety of channels (online, by post, over email) and formats (written, as a short video).
- Public meetings: These are the most common format for commission participation and evidence gathering, usually involving the commission calling expert witnesses and testimonies in public forums, with commissioners and residents who attend the meeting responding and asking questions.
- Satellite or bilateral meetings: Individual commissioners visit local places, organisations, and groups to gather further comments and ideas.
- Policy roundtables: Academics, policymakers, and think-tanks are brought together to discuss the policy implications of the evidence emerging from the commission.²⁸
- Other forms of research: These include methods such as door-knocking, street surveys,²⁹ and peer research,³⁰ which are useful for hearing from a broad sample of residents.

The format of public meetings varies and affects the levels of participation. The Islington Fairness Commission held its meetings at different locations around the borough with the aim of drawing in different groups and demonstrating the contrasts between affluent and deprived parts of the area. One meeting

was held in a school, another in a community centre within an estate, and another in a city law firm. It also issued a brief press release after each meeting to generate momentum and illustrate the findings of the commission as it progressed. Commissioners commented that meetings in which local residents could ask questions and make contributions from near the beginning of the meeting were most effective at encouraging people to stay and to come back for the next commission session. The extent to which the commission is able to draw on a variety of methods to engage people will also affect levels of engagement and the breadth of involvement from local people. The Plymouth Fairness Commission used street surveys:

We held a Summer of Listening during which the university conducted street surveys. The richest information actually came from conversations the researchers had after they'd asked the survey questions, when people spoke freely about what they think.

Plymouth City Council Officer

Throughout the participation phase, it is useful to keep in touch with residents and partner organisations who have contributed to let them know how their contributions are being received, how they are having an impact, and (latterly) whom they can hold to account for taking action.

The participatory format of commissions has great potential to shift local authority systems by embedding participation and the principles of co-design and co-production in their processes.³¹ As Jessica Studdert from the Local Government Association (LGA) commented:

The Fairness Commission approach is pioneering how local institutions and people can blur rigid boundaries, interactively understand problems and agree priorities together so that social change can happen and be sustainable.

Jessica Studdert, the LGA Labour Group

7. Analysis: Develop recommendations based on the evidence and possible solutions. Recommendations are usually developed in the context of commissioner meetings in which the commission reflects on evidence and discusses the emerging suggestions. Much of the data analysis is conducted in advance by council members and officers. Some commissioners also had commissioner working groups which were organised around particular themes and met to analyse evidence and recommendations for that theme. Over the course of two or three commission meetings, the aim is to settle on a set of recommendations, often grouped in categories.

8. Recommendations: Make recommendations for change to the relevant organisations. At the end of the evidence gathering and analysis process, most commissions produce written reports which set out the case for change and make recommendations to the local authority, local stakeholders, and sometimes regional and national bodies, too. The approach may vary depending on the target audience for the recommendations. Council reporting processes mean that written reports are useful for implementing recommendations and monitoring progress. Written documents can also be a useful reference point in negotiations with other local partners. Summaries,

short blogs, and videos may be more effective for feeding back to residents and organisations that submitted evidence to the commission.

The most productive recommendations are specific, measurable, and achievable. In reality, commission recommendations vary from generic recommendations that point the local authority to particular issues of inequality or poverty, to specific ideas about changes that can be introduced. To illustrate, 'Annual anti-debt pre-Christmas planning with money advice services, banks, trade unions, credit unions and council departments' is a specific recommendation, compared to the general advice to 'Promote expansion of credit unions'. Our research suggests that specific ideas are easier to work with in the implementation phase. Even if the idea is not implemented in its entirety, more specific recommendations can be more inspirational – offering advice on where to start and possible approaches to tackling the issue in hand.

It is useful to identify a couple of recommendations that can be implemented in the immediate term and generate momentum. For example, the Islington Fairness Commission made a recommendation on reducing income inequality within the council in its final report in June 2011. Changes were implemented almost immediately because the appointment of a new Chief Executive that month gave them the opportunity to reduce incoming pay by £50,000. This reduced the gap between the highest and lowest paid in the council and also generated a saving that was invested in bringing the lowest paid staff up to the London Living Wage.³²

9. Implementation: Put the recommendations into action. As most commissions are set up by local authorities, the majority also implement recommendations through the local authority, with an officer in the policy team given responsibility for driving progress. This can be a lot for one person to undertake. An alternative approach is to require different departments to take responsibility for particular recommendations, although this still requires coordination from within the council.

The Mayor of Liverpool took the step of creating a new post in the Council Cabinet with responsibility for overseeing follow-up of the commission. The Plymouth Fairness Commission took another approach: to implement the commission's recommendations through city partners. The local authority asked partners from the public and private sectors to respond in writing to the Fairness Commission, pledging to make changes in line with its recommendations. This in itself was not enough to ensure implementation, so a coalition of private and public organisations in the city are considering co-funding with Plymouth Council a part-time worker who would coordinate implementation.

Implementation usually involves using influence and persuasion, often through relationships. The challenge for an externally appointed coordinator is that they may not have existing relationships across local stakeholders or a place within existing hierarchies. They may struggle to drive action from the local authority unless they also have an internal supporter. The potential benefit of implementing through partners is that more action may be taken on issues over which the private or voluntary and community sector have influence.

At the end of the process you are left with the question of who owns the implementation. You can have an area-wide group but you usually end up with reliance on one single agency. It tends to go back to a lead officer in the Council who runs with it. But you have to remember that you cannot address poverty through local authority means alone. Only a couple of issues can be solved by one agency.

Plymouth City Council Officer

10. Evaluation: Monitor progress, measure change, and report on it.

Most commissions monitored progress on implementation of recommendations through reports to Cabinet on a yearly or twice-yearly basis. Not many tracked impact or applied progress indicators beyond those already collected by the local authority. There are some exceptions.

Camden Council is tracking a particular set of outcomes relating to maternal employment, which was a focus of its Equality Taskforce. The Greater Manchester Poverty Action Group developed a set of indicators to track issues relevant to the recommendations of the Greater Manchester Poverty Commission. Its 'Poverty Monitor' was developed by researchers at the University of Manchester, working in partnership with the Greater Manchester Poverty Action Group, with university staff donating their time for free. They developed 'local benefits data' for comparing Greater Manchester with England as a whole on poverty rates for different groups (children, pensioners, adults in and out of work) and on the causes and consequences of poverty. The Monitor includes an update on citizen's personal experiences of poverty, based on qualitative interviews with 81 residents living in 8 local authority areas across Greater Manchester, nearly 2 years on from the Commission's final report. The quantitative measures include interesting data on housing – landlord repossessions and the ratio of house prices to earnings – and Jobseekers Allowance sanctions. It is not clear whether the data will be updated regularly and a downside to the format of the current Monitor is that it will require manual updates by a group of academics who may not always be able to provide this support.

Evaluating what has been achieved as a result of a local commission does not need to be laborious or necessarily involve tracking a wide range of quantitative outcomes. Local poverty and inequality are worth following in local data but it is hard to attribute change to a particular policy change, given that measures like unemployment are also greatly affected by national changes. To evaluate their success, commissions may take a case study approach, working with five to ten households covering a range of family types to develop an understanding of how local changes recommended by the commission have affected them. Case studies help develop an understanding of *outcomes* for targeted groups, such as changes to wages, housing situations, and debt levels. Data collected on *outputs* from programmes that have been set up following the commission can then be used to estimate the number of people who will have experienced similar improvements in their lives. The difference between outputs and outcomes is described in Appendix 2.

If commissions did more to track and evaluate their progress, they could communicate outcomes more effectively to residents and contributors who want to know whether the commission was worthwhile. Commissions could discuss the impact of their recommendations in their reports and media

communications. While most commissions produced their main report when issuing recommendations, it would also be possible to wait until the end of the first year of implementation before producing a final report. That way, the final report could detail the impact of the commission in the changes it has made and the outcomes it has affected.

Advantages of holding a commission

Some of the ideas for addressing inequality and poverty detailed in this report can be implemented without the stimulus of a local commission. Local authorities in other places have drawn on the advice and recommendations coming from these bodies without themselves running a commission. For example, in January 2015 Brent Council became the first local authority in the UK to offer firms in the borough up to £5,000 off their business rates if they become Living Wage accredited employers.³³ It did not hold a commission. Instead it worked with the Living Wage Foundation.³⁴

However, there are specific advantages to running a commission. Depending on the local and political context in an area, these may include:

- Providing an opportunity to speak to residents about topics that matter to their daily lives, such as housing, wages, and the cost of living. This can help build a stronger relationship between residents and the local authority. Place-based approaches help make the concept of fairness more concrete, something everyone has a stake in.
- Bridging the gap between representative democracy and participative democracy. If involvement of local people is encouraged and has a meaningful impact, then it can create levels of participation in politics usually absent except during peak periods in the election cycle.

Over 500 people attended public meetings in Islington, many coming more than once, and a large number staying involved in local politics after the commission. It had a major democratic benefit.

Commissioner from the Islington Fairness Commission

- Raising the sights of local authorities and partners, beyond their immediate concerns, to what they could achieve with regard to increasing equality. This can result in new ideas and fresh initiatives being developed.

The Commission came out with the concept of a Fairness Test for every decision, broadening out equality impact assessments to include a test covering social and economic characteristics. This is leading to better decision making, ensuring our activities have a progressive impact.

Newcastle City Council Officer

- Catalysing a culture shift within the local authority to bring about a renewed focus on tackling inequality and poverty. Commissions gave local authorities a clear mandate to act on inequality and poverty, with the narrative shifting from elected representatives doing what they believe in, to members acting on recommendations from a process that involved hundreds of people. This can lead to an agenda that cuts across different services, with departments all working to common priorities.

It has been absolutely worthwhile. You need to commit a lot of time and effort to make it a satisfactory process but it has led to lots of services collaborating and working together on issues of inequality in a way that would be difficult without the stimulus of the Taskforce. The Taskforce provided a clear focus which allows us to concentrate on achieving those outcomes

Camden Council Officer

- Building a 'total place' approach, with local authorities as leaders of place. Through commissions, local authorities often take a leading role in convening productive conversations between local stakeholders and the council. Different partners have an opportunity to learn how to define shared goals and pool budgets, with local authorities developing their role as the key local institution with a formal, democratic mandate for the good of the area.

People have used the original commission research to inform activities. For example, the food poverty breakfast clubs that were set up across the city by Kellogg's, which is based in Manchester, were partly informed by data in the Poverty Commission's work.

Greater Manchester Poverty Action Group member

Challenges involved in holding a commission

- Engaging businesses and keeping them involved in implementing recommendations. Several local authority officers who supported Fairness Commissions commented that this is difficult and time-consuming, despite being an important aim of their local commission. The Tower Hamlets Fairness Commission wanted to engage the banking sector in its access to credit initiatives but found links with banks difficult to maintain. A participant in the Camden Equality Taskforce also said this was a struggle. Camden Council was challenged to think more about how it could demonstrate how approaches such as spending council budgets locally can create tangible opportunities for businesses in the area.

It's difficult to get businesses to engage with issues not directly relevant at firm level. They won't engage even at level of the local and regional economy. Although employment was a key area identified by the Taskforce, it was at a level of abstraction that made it hard to engage business interests. Similarly, businesses are supportive of procurement to support local enterprise, but cynical about the extent to which these aspirations will become a reality. They need to hear how policy intent by the Council translates into meaningful opportunities for local businesses.

Camden Council Officer

- Involving people on the lowest incomes is difficult within the commission model because consultative meetings are a time commitment which people experiencing poverty may not be able to afford. Some commissions used methods such as peer research in order to hear from people in poverty, but commissioners still felt they were unable to engage people on the lowest incomes in meaningful ways, for example to suggest changes and make decisions.

People from poorer areas in Manchester were involved in a consultative way but they understandably have a lot on their plate apart from developing recommendations so the extent to which those people were driving the process was low.

Commissioner from the Greater Manchester Poverty Commission

What have commissions achieved?

Based on local and national evidence of the impacts of inequality and poverty, commissions made recommendations about the following issues:

- Job creation and job quality
- Low wages and pay ratios between highest and lowest paid
- Debt and access to credit
- Advice provision
- Supply, affordability and quality of housing
- Cost and availability of nutritious food
- Cost of household energy
- Availability and affordability of childcare

Some commissions also looked at digital inclusion, access to green space, transport affordability, and co-production of public services, but such themes were less common.

Achievements of commissions to date include:

- Raising thousands of people from minimum wage to living wage;
- Exposing and limiting the activities of payday loan companies;
- Boosting membership of credit unions;
- Improving accessibility of advice services;
- Changing the practices of private landlords on tenancy agreements, rents, levels of furnishing and security.

The greatest progress has been achieved on addressing low wages, debt and access to credit, and advice provision. Some progress has been made on job quality, the cost and availability of nutritious food, the cost of household energy, and housing quality. The least progress has been achieved on job creation and job quality, supply and affordability of housing, and availability and affordability of childcare. Commissions have also taken less action on reducing income and wealth inequalities, compared to reducing poverty and second-run effects of inequality such as debt and housing inequality.

Variation in what has been achieved in different policy areas is partly due to the challenge of achieving impact on matters which are strongly affected by national policies. Several commission reports commented on the difficulty of reducing income inequality without national buy-in.³⁵ Islington and Plymouth were the only councils to reduce the salary of their Chief Executives following their Fairness Commissions in order to close the gap between the highest and lowest paid. In Islington this made a difference to pay ratios within the council and sent a signal about the council's commitment to greater equality but Islington Council decided to focus on getting Living Wage commitments from

other local employers rather than commitments on reducing pay differentials.³⁶ This suggests that reducing income inequality is still a harder issue to discuss publically than reducing poverty, which is less politically contentious. Another explanation is that some local areas are affected more by inequality in the form of low pay and poverty, than high pay and high housing costs. While this may be true for some places, Manchester and Portsmouth both rank in the top ten most unequal cities in the UK on the basis of wage inequality (gini coefficient), as well as experiencing problems with low pay and high poverty rates.³⁷

Housing supply is an area in which many commissions struggled because of the limits on borrowing and spending to which local authorities adhere. While this presents a major obstacle to building housing, some commissions nonetheless were able to impact housing supply through approaches which aim to reduce the number of empty homes. This demonstrates the value of exploring lateral solutions to problems and considering fresh approaches. Certain fresh approaches have potential for impact at the local level, as the next section explores.

Summary

To summarise:

1. Local commissions provide a way for local authorities to open a conversation with residents and people with other kinds of expertise about how the council and local partners can reduce inequality and poverty.
2. To succeed from the outset, commissions require a clear scope and purpose, senior leadership, appropriate resources, and well-considered strategies for communication and participation.
3. Some commissions were successful in engaging a wide range of people across the income spectrum. In order to do this, they used methods that are typically under-utilised by local authorities, such as door-knocking and street surveys.
4. In making recommendations, commissions developed a range of fresh approaches to the role of local authorities in issues of inequality and poverty by looking at a range of local activities through the lens of how they could reduce the gap between rich and poor.
5. Commissions have led to new kinds of partnerships between departments within local authorities, and with a range of external stakeholders.
6. In implementation, commissions have made the greatest progress on issues of wages, debt, and advice provision; some progress on food and energy; and the least progress on high pay and wealth inequalities, job creation, housing, and childcare.
7. Commissions could do more to track and evaluate their progress, allowing them to communicate outcomes more effectively to residents and contributors, as well as increasing their potential influence at the national level.

3. Which approaches generated the most progress?

In local areas that held commissions on inequality and poverty, certain approaches led to real progress. We describe four effective approaches: supporting social justice campaigns, exposing and ending injustices against disadvantaged groups, supporting collective activities, and improving the reach and accessibility of local services.

For each approach we outline a couple of examples in practice. Our research shows that by acting in these ways, local authorities and their partners can see action and change at the local level and take steps to reduce inequality and poverty.

Supporting social justice campaigns

Commissions helped local authorities identify campaigners and activists who are also working to address inequality and poverty. This led to local authorities contributing to campaigns such as:

- **Sharkstoppers:** a lobbying campaign against loan sharks and payday loan companies, which helped achieve a cap on the cost of credit and is campaigning for better regulations on payday loan advertising.
- **Just Money:** a campaign against exploitative practices in the financial sector and for the promotion of ethical credit.
- **Living Wage Campaign:** the most well-known of recent campaigns, which lobbies for public and private sector employers to raise their wages to meet a defined level (set through academic research) that allows employees to avoid poverty and have a decent standard of life.
- **Timewise Foundation:** a community interest company that works to increase the provision of quality part-time and flexible employment.
- **UNISON's Ethical Care Charter:** part of the trade union led 'Save Care Now' campaign which seeks to amplify the voices of homecare workers to improve dignity and quality of life for people working in the sector and receiving care.
- **Pay Compare:** an online tool which provides public information about pay ratios – the gap between the highest and lowest pay in an organisation. It requests that local authorities and partners share this information about their organisations on the Pay Compare site.

Supporting campaigns is not a common function of local authorities, which are evaluated on their ability to manage and deliver services within finite resources rather than on their involvement in broader social change. Commissions on inequality and poverty helped councils participate in campaigns in a range of ways that were in keeping with their roles and responsibilities:

- For campaigns like Sharkstoppers, local authorities were able to endorse its campaign asks by **contributing evidence** of, for example, the impact of payday loans on local people and issuing press releases to local and national media.
- Local councillors also **joined protests** related to particular campaigns such as Sharkstoppers and the Living Wage Campaign, but it was not appropriate for local authority officers to do this in a professional capacity.
- Another means available to local authorities is **using place-based powers** over, for example, high streets and planning permissions in relation to campaigns against payday loan companies.
- Finally, for a number of campaigns relating to job quality, local authorities supported them by agreeing to **change their own employment practices** and to use local authority contracts to negotiate change among other organisations serving the authority. This was the case with Living Wage, Timewise, and UNISON Ethical Care campaigns.

Joining protests in Islington

Councillors involved in commissions recognise that certain issues such as job quality will not be properly addressed by local action unless there are corresponding changes in national policy. Councillor Andy Hull points out that paying the Living Wage in Islington only helps residents who also work in the area, and many travel outside of the borough for work. It therefore made sense for him to join the Living Wage and Sharkstoppers campaigns in their protests in order to see changes beyond the authority boundary. Andy Hull is now on the elected national committee of Movement for Change, which is responsible for the Sharkstoppers campaign.

In response to the Sharkstoppers campaign, the government asked the Financial Conduct Authority to introduce a cap on the cost of credit. In January 2015 a price cap of 0.8% per day on credit lender charges was introduced, along with a cap on default fees of £15 and a cap on the total cost of credit at 100% of what was borrowed. This means that credit users will never pay back more than twice what they borrowed. Sharkstoppers argue that the government could go further by restricting advertising of payday products.

Using place-based powers in Tower Hamlets

Tower Hamlets Council responded favourably to a petition from the Just Money campaign to ban advertising for payday loan companies from council-owned property and billboards, and to prevent new loan companies opening in the borough through planning restrictions – in line with the recommendations of its Fairness Commission. Achieving cooperation like this can boost the reputation and clout of campaigns and enable them to call for more significant changes to national policy.

Changing employment practices in Camden

Following the recommendations of the Camden Equality Taskforce that the council offer opportunities for flexible working to all staff, Camden Council became accredited by the Timewise Foundation which lobbies employers to increase the provision of quality part-time and flexible employment. In the five months since it has achieved accreditation, Camden has agreed to advertise all jobs as open to part-time or flexible hours unless there was a strong business case not to; 100% of requests have been granted with over 25 jobs being advertised as part-time or flexible that otherwise would not have been. Camden has trained all its human resources team in flexible job design and has provided guidance on flexible working to 11,000 businesses in the borough. It has developed a website to provide free job postings for local part-time jobs.

Having signed up to the UNISON Ethical Care Charter, Camden Council has also made progress towards improving practices in homecare and has set up a task group including representation from the homecare workforce to further improve working practices.

Changing employment practices through the Living Wage Campaign

The impact of this campaign has been particularly impressive. Following their commissions:

- Islington Council introduced the London Living Wage for its entire in-house staff. A Living Wage requirement was also introduced for contractors, covering 98% of contracts and benefitting over 1,000 external staff including home care workers.³⁸ In addition, 85 local employers have become accredited since 2011 and Islington now has the highest number of Living Wage employers of any local authority in the country.³⁹
- York Council introduced the Living Wage, benefitting 573 employees, 75% of whom were women.⁴⁰ It extended this to casual workers in 2014 thereby covering a further 120 staff. The council established the York Living Wage Coalition, which has secured Living Wage agreements from the local hospital trust, York University, and Nestlé.

At national level, the impacts include:

- **Increases in Living Wage accreditation.** By 2013, 350,000 people across the UK were employed by an accredited organisation. Between 2005 and 2013 this resulted in 34,327 workers receiving a pay increase; 20,596 of these in London.⁴¹
- Pay increases amounting to an estimated:
 - £31 million additional funds for low-paid workers;
 - £20 million additional funds to low-paid contracted workers;
 - £11 million additional funds to low-paid in house workers.⁴²
- **Central government savings.** An evaluation estimates that the implementation of the Living Wage across London would save the government £823 million in increased tax and National Insurance payments and reduced benefit payments.⁴³

- **Increases in employee wellbeing.** Living Wage employees have significantly higher wellbeing scores than those on the national minimum wage.⁴⁴

Recommendations for future commissions

1. Help broker relationships between campaign groups working on topics of social justice and the local authority by developing common cause on issues of inequality and poverty.
2. Develop recommendations for supporting local and national campaigns that can be undertaken by local authorities and their partners: for example, on contributing evidence, using place-based powers, and changing internal employment practices.

Exposing and ending injustices

The evidence brought together by local commissions was powerful in exposing the excesses of inequality and local experiences of poverty and injustice that would otherwise remain hidden. Several commissions gave visibility to systemic injustices that were helping to perpetuate inequality, such as rogue landlords in the private rental sector charging high rents for sub-standard properties; homes being left empty in areas of housing shortage; and employers offering people no choice but to take low-paid, insecure, short-term contracts for work. It has been pointed out before that commissions and local authorities prefer to take a soft approach to such issues, using consensus-building strategies which do not always have the desired impact.⁴⁵ Several of the commissions, however, used bolder and more adversarial strategies, sometimes using regulatory powers. Actions included exposing employers' use of zero hours contracts in the local press, introducing protection for private leaseholders and, in the case of empty homes, threatening to use compulsory purchase orders (which allow local authorities to purchase land or property without the owners' consent).

Tackling unjust employment practices in Plymouth and Camden

The Plymouth Fairness Commission recommended a series of measures against the local use of zero hours contracts. Through a local newspaper, the commission named and shamed organisations using such contracts. It also recommended monitoring the use of zero hours contracts across the city, that the council review its policy on contractors using zero hours contracts, and that an end be put to advertising zero hours contracts by recruitment agencies or job centres in Plymouth. Although some important local organisations such as Plymouth Jobcentre Plus and the Plymouth Chamber of Commerce have not yet responded to the recommendations, there have been successes, such as:

- Written commitments to stop using zero hours contracts from local organisations including the Clinical Commissioning Group, City Bus, City College, and a major housing association;⁴⁶

- A commitment by the Plymouth Growth Board (a private-sector-led partnership) to implement recommendations through the Local Economic Strategy;⁴⁷
- A commitment by Plymouth City Council to use its procurement regulations to prevent contractors from using zero hours contracts.⁴⁸

Following the Camden Equality Taskforce, Camden Council revised terms and conditions for suppliers to prohibit future blacklisting amongst its contractors and protect whistle-blowers. This practice whereby firms exchange databases of workers they see as problematic is especially prevalent in the construction industry. Employees can be blacklisted and denied work for speaking up about health and safety concerns, asking for unpaid wages, or having a relative who is involved in activism. Firms such as the Consultancy Association, which kept a blacklist of more than 3,000 workers, have collapsed since there has been greater national exposure of the practice and firms such as Balfour Beatty, Kier, and Laing O'Rourke have issued formal apologies for using blacklists.⁴⁹ Camden Council now refuses to grant contracts to firms unless they can prove they have abandoned the practice.

Improving private housing in Blackpool

The work of the Fairness Commission in Blackpool led to the council taking action to improve conditions for private sector tenants. Blackpool City Council adopted a selective licensing policy, allowing the council to adopt compulsory landlord registration in specific areas. Landlords require a licence for any properties they rent out within the designated areas. Licences contain conditions relating to the management of the property, fire safety, and antisocial behaviour. Blackpool City Council has implemented five-year schemes in two significant areas of the city that were suffering from deteriorating housing conditions and antisocial behaviour, particularly in poorly managed houses with multiple occupation.

Putting empty property back into use in Islington

The Islington Fairness Commission had an important influence on shaping the council's housing policy. This resulted in action to tackle the problem of empty homes. Islington's Empty Property Strategy enables the council to target empty homes and bring them into occupation, through compulsory purchase orders if necessary. By 2013 this approach had led to 300 homes being brought back into use.⁵⁰ Islington Council continues to explore measures that can be taken against owners of empty homes, such as fines on 'buy-to-leave' properties.⁵¹

Recommendations for future commissions

1. Seek to uncover and expose unjust practices which drive and perpetuate inequalities between different income groups in their area.
2. Explore with the local authority their regulatory and procurement powers and whether these could be used to restrict and end such practices.

Brokering and supporting collective activities

Some commissions led to local authorities and partners organising collective activities which use the power of collective action as opposed to individual action to achieve change. Most collective projects have focused on reducing the cost of living for low-income groups. Goods such as food, energy, furniture, and clothes come with a 'poverty premium' because the means by which people on low incomes are able to purchase goods tend to make them more expensive. For example, household energy purchased using a pay-as-you-go meter is more expensive per unit than energy purchased at a monthly rate on direct debit. The same is true for the cost of finance, as payday loans charge significantly higher interest rates than most bank overdrafts which are accessible to people only on a certain level of income.⁵²

Collective activities include bulk-buying schemes for food, collective energy switches, and community energy-generation projects. Food and fuel are goods for which prices have risen faster than general inflation over the last decade.⁵³ These have impacted living costs and affected the numbers of households experiencing poverty. As such, reducing poverty necessarily involves action on both wages and living costs, because of the impact of both on household budgets.⁵⁴ Rising costs cannot be *solved* by people coming together to share resources, but collective activities can certainly *help*. Some issues such as housing require specific action from government, but collective action locally can lower the cost of certain goods and services. Local authorities that held commissions played an important role in brokering these activities and helped groups of residents interested in setting up collective projects with small amounts of funding, promotion, and administrative support.

Bulk-buying food in Manchester

Following the Greater Manchester Poverty Commission, the housing association Bolton at Home aims to set up a food cooperative to benefit its tenants. Residents will put in a few pounds a week to become 'stakeholders' in the supply of food, similar to the Parkwood bulk-buying project in Kent⁵⁵ that brought local residents together to address the challenge of buying groceries on the Parkwood estate, which has few local shops and lacks affordable transport links to shopping areas. Four core families now coordinate 'R Shop' which operates out of a school and bulk buys goods on behalf of residents, including nappies and cleaning supplies. The project reduced the cost of a select basket of goods by £31 a month and over £500 a year. Such initiatives could be extended with communal composting and food-growing projects, which have attracted interest from councils and Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) due to the health benefits of growing food together.⁵⁶

Credit unions in Liverpool and Manchester

As a result of local commissions, local authorities and their partners took robust steps to strengthen credit unions. Credit unions are an example of collective action because they offer a mechanism for credit union members to pool their financial resources and create affordable loans and other banking products such as tax-free savings accounts. Liverpool City Council invested a share of £1 million in Merseyside Credit Unions to enable them to develop products accessible to new credit union members who have not been saving long enough to qualify for a standard loan. Similarly, Tower Hamlet's financial

inclusion network developed a new credit union product to enable people who receive housing benefit to ring-fence money for rent. In Greater Manchester, the Centre for Voluntary Organisation and the Church of England Diocese worked together to map the services that credit unions provide throughout Greater Manchester and set up a network to enable greater coordination. The Diocese produced a short film to promote membership of credit unions, seeking to change assumptions about credit unions and encourage more middle-income people to join, thereby increasing the pool of shared resources.

Collective energy switches in Sheffield and Tower Hamlets

Sheffield and Tower Hamlets both held collective energy switches for residents following their Fairness Commissions. These have the potential to reduce fuel costs by leveraging the power of collective consumption. In Tower Hamlets, four energy auctions have been held so far with an average saving for households of £150 per annum. This is achieved through Tower Hamlets Energy (THE) Community Power, a cooperative set up by the Mayor of Tower Hamlets in 2012.

Parent-led nurseries in Tower Hamlets

The Tower Hamlets Fairness Commission advised setting targets for childcare expansion and extending cooperative provision. The local authority has yet to make progress on this recommendation, but the potential is there. Tower Hamlets is home to a rare example of parent-led childcare in England. Situated in Bethnal Green, Scallywags' childcare costs around half the amount charged in other London nurseries because parents each take turns helping to staff the nursery, in collaboration with professionals. Parents work 'duty' shifts and encourage all family members to do shifts (mothers, fathers, and grandparents). Scallywags has a long waiting list and a strong reputation. The model means that many more parents, particularly single mothers, can afford to work. At the moment Scallywags can only take 16 children at a time. If it was extended or franchised it could create a high-quality, affordable alternative to commercial and informal childcare arrangements that combines the best of home-based and social childcare.

Recommendations for future commissions

- 1.** Aim to unlock the power of collective action to reduce living costs.
- 2.** Prompt the local authority to develop and extend projects that provide collective solutions to challenges that are otherwise seen as individual problems – for example, debt, housing, and childcare.

Improving local services

Commissions recognised the power of services to reduce inequalities and tackle poverty. This led to local authorities making improvements to the availability of services such as childcare or the affordability of public transport, and policy changes to increase the numbers of local primary school children eligible for free school meals. Given the need to support people when numerous changes to taxes and benefits are affecting their incomes along with rising costs and stagnant wages, improving access to advice services was also common.

Childcare and maternal employment in Camden

Prior to the Camden Equality Taskforce, the Council extended universal childcare for 3- and 4-year-olds to 25 hours, 10 hours on top of the government's 15-hour provision. The taskforce built on this by recommending that the council increases the quality of provision and uses employment services to encourage higher levels of employment among mothers in the borough. The council commissioned two projects to raise the profile of maternal employment and provide innovative support to mothers to move towards and access work. These projects are delivered by *Women Like Us*, which is developing a universal service for mothers seeking employment, and *Hopscotch*, which is supporting long-term unemployed mothers with complex barriers to employment. Both are tracking their outcomes and are being evaluated for their impact on employment and wage inequality.

Advice services in Liverpool

Liverpool residents have been hit harder by the bedroom tax than residents of any other UK city except Manchester. The Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) was struggling to meet demand from people asking for help with their housing. The council worked with CAB to develop an 'advice on prescription' programme which Liverpool CCG is funding. The CCG is investing £1 million over three years in the programme.⁵⁷

'Advice on prescription' means that GPs can refer patients directly to a dedicated CAB staff member for immediate advice, information, and support, often located in the GP surgery. Following a successful pilot, the programme became available to all GP surgeries and Primary Care Practitioners in Liverpool in April 2014. Evaluations so far find positive impacts on clients and GPs. The specialist advice is proving effective in maximising household income for low-income clients by helping them reduce their debts and claim available benefits.⁵⁸

Recommendations for future commissions

- 1.** Recognise the power of services to reduce inequalities and tackle poverty.
- 2.** Support the local authority to take the bold step of investing in local services such as childcare to help prevent poverty.
- 3.** Work with the local authority and its partners to improve the accessibility and funding for advice services, using innovative approaches such as 'advice on prescription'.

Approaches that were less effective

Some approaches taken by commissions were less effective at generating progress:

- **Focusing solely on local authority employment practices:** Local authorities that raised their minimum wage to the living wage and expected that other local employers would follow them without pressure and negotiation did not see much broader local change. Leading by example in employment practices has a positive impact on council employees but will only impact other employers when combined with campaigns, negotiations, and exposure of employer practices. To see real change, local authorities targeted the boards of local companies and entered into robust negotiations over contracts and business ethics.
- **Calling for reviews and assessments:** While policy reviews and needs assessments are part of the remit of local authorities, broad recommendations on reviewing existing policies or assessing the capacity of the voluntary sector did not lead to concrete action on issues of inequality and poverty. When constructing their recommendations, commissions need to focus on clear and achievable actions.

4. What more can be achieved?

The approaches developed by commissions do not cover all that local authorities and local partner organisations can achieve. Examples from elsewhere show that they can also reduce inequality and poverty by influencing the flow of money and wealth in a local area, supporting new enterprises, and strengthening democracy.

This section considers approaches that were not developed by Fairness Commissions or similar bodies, but can help local authorities to make meaningful progress towards reducing inequality and poverty. We focus on approaches that complement the work of commissions by addressing issues that commissions struggled to tackle, such as wealth inequality, job creation and inequality in voter turnout.

Creating fairer money flows

Local authorities have for some time been considering how they spend money in order to generate the best results for local people in terms of good jobs and higher wellbeing. Increasing the flow of money in a place – so that it moves between local people and remains in the area – can help support local businesses, create space in the market for new enterprises, and be a step towards reducing poverty. In local authority areas with high levels of income inequality, steps can be taken to connect affluent parts of the area to poorer parts and stimulate money flows between the two.

Community currencies can help encourage affluent residents to spend locally. Changing the procurement practices of the local authority can help increase the benefits of public spending to local people by ensuring that patterns of contracts and investment include local businesses.

NEF's *Plugging the Leaks* framework and toolkit enables individuals and organisations to map the way in which spending circulates within their local economy, and how far it benefits different stakeholders as it is spent. It can be used as part of a process to maximise the impact of local spending power, by for example supporting local businesses to meet a local need where previously residents had to go outside the area to buy that produce or service.⁵⁹

Pumping money into an area is pointless if it flows straight back out again. Yet this is precisely what happens with national currency. This leakage occurs because, if high streets are dominated by multinational corporations with non-local supply chains and there is no geographical restriction on where the currency can be spent, profits will not remain within the locality.⁶⁰

Community Currencies in Action (CCIA)

Bristol Pound

The Bristol Pound was set up in 2014 by the Bristol Pound Community Interest Company and Bristol Credit Union. It is the first citywide community currency in the UK and can be used in over 700 businesses in Bristol, with the aim of creating a thriving independent business sector. More than £300,000 has been converted from sterling to Bristol Pounds and the biggest transport provider in Bristol accepts the paper Bristol Pound on local buses.⁶¹ The currency encourages the continual circulation of money within the local economy because the Bristol Pound cannot be accumulated in ‘tax havens, in big executive pay packets or with distant shareholders’.⁶² This can help to reduce inequalities.

In March 2015, Bristol City Council became the first local authority in Britain to accept a community currency as a means of paying council tax and business rates. The local authority’s announcement essentially guarantees that anyone holding Bristol Pounds will always have a spending opportunity. Gaining this level of participation from the council helps in building trust in the currency and establishing belief in its value.⁶³ Bristol City Council is also considering using the Bristol Pound in procurement.⁶⁴

As well as supporting local money flow, the Bristol Pound has positive social impacts. Research from the University of Bristol and Brunel University found that transactions using the Bristol Pound help people make connections to others and to the environments they move through, while developing feelings of trust and opening up new kinds of interaction. The conscious choice of businesses and consumers to conduct economic exchanges via a medium that explicitly values and supports the local area can lead to gains in community cohesion and reconfigure social relations.

Manchester’s money flows

Research by the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES) mapped how Manchester City Council spent its budget across Manchester City. CLES tracked the council’s spend and supplier re-spend across the 300 top suppliers of goods and services.⁶⁵ Based on these findings, Manchester City Council identified the impact of its spending and changed its procurement process in order to generate new opportunities for people in poorer areas. Over five years, the council transitioned from spending 52% of its budget within the local authority boundary to 65% by 2013–2014.⁶⁶ It recommends that other local authorities should:

- Quantitatively assess current spend and their local economic impact.
- Qualitatively explore the practices of the supply chain and their social and environmental impacts.
- Identify gaps in provision and target support accordingly.
- Set long-term sustainable procurement policy aims and objectives.
- Work with the supply chain to develop policy and enable benefit.⁶⁷

Recommendations for future commissions

1. Consider using a framework to analyse how money flows around the local area as part of evidence gathering.
2. Recommend ways that local partners could stimulate fairer flows of money – from affluent areas to poorer ones – and circulate around the area rather than flow out of it.

Setting up new enterprises

Several local authorities decided to invest in setting up enterprises following their commissions, in spite of tight funding. This is possible because enterprises such as a Heat and Power Network require capital funding at the start but generate returns over time. As local authorities are not profit-making bodies, they do not require high returns – just that the capital investment is paid back over the long term. Some local authorities have therefore played an important role in investing in projects for which there is demand, but which do not attract conventional business investment because the returns are low and long term. In particular, the low return on investment typically available for alternative energy supply schemes, resulting from the current energy market regulation which disadvantages smaller energy producers and suppliers, means that local authorities have an essential role. They can lead on the development of these enterprises using their planning powers, providing access to low-cost finance, and offering public sector contracts to kick start development.⁶⁸

Combined heat and power networks in Islington and Enfield

Islington's Bunhill Energy Centre uses combined heat and power technology. Unlike normal electricity production that wastes up to two-thirds of the fuel used to make it, Bunhill Energy Centre uses waste power (including power from the Northern Line of the Tube) to provide cheaper, greener heat to residents and local leisure centres. Launched in November 2012, the heat network is now bringing cheaper energy to over 700 homes.⁶⁹ The Lee Valley Heat Network has similarly been set up in Enfield, as an enterprise wholly owned by Enfield Council. These enterprises help reduce the cost of energy to local households, thus helping those who struggle with living costs, as well as ultimately generating returns for the local authority that can be reinvested in the area.

Recommendation for future commissions

1. Consider whether there is potential for the local authority to invest in projects for which there is demand and a clear social value but which conventional businesses will not lead because the returns are low and/or long term.

Diversifying ownership of assets and wealth

Some local authorities are looking at how wealth from physical assets and business investment is owned, concentrated, and distributed locally. They aim to open up opportunities to own assets and share in profits to a wider group of people, in order to reduce wealth and income inequalities.

The approach recognises that income is not only generated through wages – it is also generated through ownership of physical assets, businesses, and rent-generating capital. The aim is to structurally shift how wealth is produced locally and where that wealth accrues.

Guild Cooperative Network in Lancashire

Preston City Council, working closely with CLES, is spearheading a new approach to community wealth through fostering local enterprise and worker cooperatives.⁷⁰ They are drawing inspiration from the Evergreen Cooperative initiative in Cleveland, Ohio, USA, which successfully catalysed a network of green new businesses, owned by its employees.⁷¹

The council worked with a group of anchor institutions in Preston to develop a shared commitment to supporting local businesses when they purchase resources and services. The group of anchor institutions includes Lancashire County Council, Lancashire Constabulary, and the University of Central Lancashire. Along with Preston City Council, this group spent an estimated £750 million on goods and services in 2012–2013, which they aim to channel towards local and ethical providers in future. To ensure the anchor institutions are able to spend locally, Preston City Council is supporting new local cooperatives to set up and fill gaps in supply for the biggest public sector contracts including catering, building, cleaning, and maintenance. A local 'Guild Cooperative Network' has been established to bring together members of existing and prospective cooperatives to provide mutual support and advice.⁷²

RetrofitWorks Cooperative in Haringey

Following the Haringey Carbon Commission, which ran from 2011 to 2012, Haringey Council worked with local tradespeople to develop a cooperative network to install energy efficiency measures in buildings. They have committed to reducing CO₂ emissions by 40% whilst also reducing economic inequality. Cooperative ownership is helping achieve this goal. The RetrofitWorks Cooperative, launched in June 2013, is owned and governed by its membership, which includes builders, installers, and energy advisers, as well as organisations such as the local authority, and its partners that want to purchase energy efficiency installations.⁷³

Community Land Trusts in London

A Community Land Trust (CLT) is a non-profit, membership organisation, run by local people to develop permanently affordable housing for long-term community benefit. In a CLT, the community owns the land, meaning it is able to remove the inflationary impact of land values from house prices and sell homes at a much lower price. In London, it is estimated that more than half the cost of a home is the cost of the land on which it is built. A CLT can make it easier for a local authority to transfer land to small housing initiatives it wants to support but does not have the resources to negotiate with individually.⁷⁴

In 2012, the derelict site of St Clements Hospital in Mile End, East London, became the UK's first urban CLT.⁷⁵ The Greater London Authority (GLA) transferred the freehold for the entire site to East London CLT in order to create homes that cost half as much as comparable properties in the area. Twenty-three homes will be made available to local East Londoners, using a

house price formula linked to median income rather than to market prices. The formula is reapplied every time a house within the Trust is sold, creating what organisers describe as ‘genuinely and permanently affordable housing’.⁷⁶ Membership of the Trust is open to anyone who lives, works, or has active ties to a social institution in the area and it costs £1 to buy a share in the not-for-profit company.⁷⁷

Community-owned energy and food in Bath and North East Somerset

Community energy and food projects have been supported by Bath and North East Somerset Council as part of the work of its public services board.⁷⁸ The council is working with the Public Service Transformation Network in order to address the local low-wage economy, tackle food and fuel poverty, and reduce health inequalities.⁷⁹ It actively promotes local cooperative ownership as part of its local strategy.

Bath and West Community Energy keeps the economic benefits of renewable energy local through share ownership and reinvestment of revenue back into the area through an independent community fund. The local authority supported the development of this model through:

- Community development and capacity building for local residents to start community energy use;
- Use of regulatory powers afforded in the Local Government Act 2000 and the Localism Act 2011 to set up a cooperation agreement between the council and the energy company;
- A council start-up grant and provision of land for the initial projects;
- Continued investment through the Green Investment and Jobs Fund.

Bath and West Community Energy has installed 1.7MW of solar panels with a further 4.5MW mid-construction, and raised nearly £10 million through seven community share offers. It has hydro and wind energy projects in the pipeline.⁸⁰

Recommendations for future commissions

1. Investigate the role not just of wages, but of assets and wealth in driving inequality.
2. Recommend cooperative and community ownership as a way of shifting how wealth is produced locally and where that wealth accrues.

Strengthening democracy

The word ‘power’ is conspicuously absent in most Fairness Commission reports.⁸¹ Only one commission (Newcastle) resulted in a drive to strengthen democracy by increasing the level of voter registration. This is regrettable given the links between low voter turnout and inequalities between groups: if one section of the population is much more likely to vote, then their interests are more likely to be promoted by political representatives and some citizens will be under represented compared to others. The fact that elections do not accurately reflect the preferences of the citizenry due to unequal participation has been described as ‘democracy’s unresolved dilemma’.⁸²

The rise in economic inequality over the last three decades has corresponded with a decline in voter participation across the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations and there is some evidence that political inequality and economic inequality form a vicious cycle.⁸³ In the UK, voter turnout declined disproportionately among low-income groups meaning that people who have the greatest need for policies that tackle inequality and poverty are not as well represented. If this changed, and voter turnout increased, it could have a dramatic effect on public policy. For example, in Australia the introduction of compulsory voting resulted in increased turnout from lower income groups. Interestingly, political parties also became more likely to talk about wage stagnation and social spending than they were before.⁸⁴

To engage a more diverse group of people in politics, so that more people know how to make their voice heard in decision-making and have a wider range of options for doing this, local authorities can:

- Lead voter registration drives, for example among 18-year-olds and those who dropped off the electoral register due to the introduction of individual voter registration in December 2014;
- Support political organising and develop alliances around emerging issues;
- Train people experiencing poverty and disadvantage to speak within the political arena.

Voter registration drive in Newcastle

The Newcastle Fairness Commission recommended that the local authority undertake a renewed drive to encourage voter registration, with a target to significantly increase the numbers of votes cast in 2014 council elections and the 2015 general election. Together with Newcastle's two universities, the Council ran a campaign to boost electoral registration, particularly among those who needed to re-register after the introduction of individual voter registration which particularly affects student halls of residence and young people. The drive succeeded in registering at least 12,000 of the missing 18,000 individuals,⁸⁵ and there were small increases in voter turnout in the 2015 general election compared to 2010 in Newcastle North and Central, but a decrease in Newcastle East.⁸⁶

Organising and building alliances in London

Some campaigns undertaken for the cause of increasing economic inequality have had the added benefit of engaging people in politics for the first time. In the Living Wage Campaign, cleaning staff that campaigned and won the Living Wage for themselves and their colleagues were from a section of the labour market (low-paid contract workers) whose involvement in politics is otherwise low. Research highlights how London Citizens (the London branch of Citizens UK) worked with trade unions to enable participants to fuse their different identities as cleaners, migrants, religious adherents, parents, Londoners, and trade unionists, and demonstrate the relevance of politics to their lives.⁸⁷

Like Citizens UK, local authorities can build new political alliances on emerging issues such as affordable housing, air quality in congested and deprived areas, or the fair treatment of people attending Jobcentres. Alliances with faith groups, trade unions, and community organisations are a way for local authorities to broaden opportunities to participate for people who are currently politically marginalised.

For example, Lambeth Council contributed to Skills Network (a community organisation in Lambeth) and its 'We Count!' programme, which provides ways for mothers to engage politically on issues that matter to them.⁸⁸ Lambeth Council's Associate Director and an elected member attended a meeting set up by Skills Network in which local women, mainly from low-income families, asked questions about local employment and childcare policies.⁸⁹ Such experiences, alongside many others at Skills Network, led to increased political engagement among the women involved. As one Skills Network member commented:

Since joining Skills Network I have started getting more politically involved and now I am going to meetings and participating and starting to argue politically about the injustices I see with my child.

Skills Network member⁹⁰

Poverty Truth Commissions in Scotland and Leeds

Poverty Truth Commissions took place in Scotland and in Leeds, with the aim of bringing public and private sector leaders together with people who are experiencing poverty first-hand, to build a better understanding of the reality of poverty. Civic leaders from the Scottish government were mentored over a two-year period by people 'at the sharp end of poverty', working together to find solutions to poverty. The Scottish Poverty Truth Commission supported 15 people from disadvantaged areas to become skilled at speaking about issues of poverty, and trained 12 others to become active listeners.

In Leeds, the Poverty Truth Challenge formed a 'challenge team' made up of testifiers (people who have lived experience of poverty), civic leaders, and business leaders. Together they produced blogs, radio shows, and a YouTube video about their emerging understanding of the nature of poverty in the city.⁹¹

Recommendations for future commissions

- 1.** Build new political alliances on topics such as affordable housing, air quality, and the treatment of people attending Jobcentres, to stimulate broader political engagement.
- 2.** Include work on power and related issues such as the stigma associated with poverty, and grow the capacity of people who have experience of poverty to speak about it, lead on issues, and influence public and private sector leaders.

5. Which achievements could galvanise national action?

Many of the commissions recognised that in order to see substantial progress on reducing inequality and poverty, action is required nationally as well as locally. Some commissions made recommendations to national government and many are using their local achievements to push for change.

Making recommendations to national government

On several issues, local commissions found there were limits to what they could recommend by way of policies for reducing inequality and tackle poverty. In particular, increasing the supply of housing especially low-cost and social housing is difficult without support from national government because of the need for capital investment and interactions with housing benefit levels set nationally. Similarly, local authorities can introduce some measures to prevent high-cost loan companies operating locally but alone they cannot alter the cost of credit or address the drivers of increased household debt.

As a result, many commissions made recommendations to national government about how they should fulfil their duties with regard to poverty and support efforts to reduce inequality.

On housing, commissions called for:

- Changes to the rules applied to local authorities seeking to build social housing, which would give councils more freedom to borrow in order invest in housing assets.⁹² The Camden Equality Taskforce and the Tower Hamlets Fairness Commission made this recommendation to national government.^{93,94}
- An increase in grant-funding for housing that meets the needs of low- and middle-income groups, with options for capped rents on some tenancies. This was previously funded by the Greater London Authority but was not part of their 2011–2015 programme.^{95,96} It was recommended by the York Fairness Commission and the Camden Equality Taskforce.⁹⁷

On personal finances, debt, and credit, commissions called for:

- More power to local authorities to limit gambling and payday companies. If specific planning use classes were created for these kinds of businesses, local authorities would be able to categorise them separately from other kinds of shops and restrict numbers of payday companies opening on high streets. This was recommended by the Tower Hamlets and Plymouth Fairness Commissions.^{98,99}

- The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to address delays in cash transfers and inappropriate use of sanctions by Jobcentre Plus, which lead to increased use of high-cost loan products. The Plymouth Fairness Commission recommended this in its report¹⁰⁰ and Liverpool Council had a series of ‘robust discussions’ with the DWP about the local impact of benefit cuts and benefit sanctions following the findings of its Fairness Commission.¹⁰¹

In order to make their voice heard on such policy issues, local authorities could join up more at a regional level, making use of the opportunities afforded by the devolution agenda and the creation of Combined Authorities. Membership bodies like the Local Government Association and London Councils can play a key role in supporting alliances between local authorities and gathering the evidence base for policy change.

Inspiring national government to act

Local achievements give local authorities a platform to advocate for policy ideas that they have implemented locally. Local authorities could inspire national government to scale up from local successes, ensuring that more people benefit from these innovations.

Policy ideas that could be implemented nationally include:

- Incentivising Living Wage employers through tax reductions;
- Requiring companies to publish their internal pay ratio;
- Establishing a national landlord register subject to rent stabilisation which prevents rent rises above inflation
- Offering free school meals for all primary school children;
- Investing in enterprise to create good jobs.

In some instances, policies would be significantly more effective if they could be secured nationally because they could be combined with complementary measures over which national government has power. For example, investment in new and existing enterprises to create good jobs could be part of a broader industrial strategy for the UK, connecting to the British Investment Bank, environmental policies on retrofitting homes, and improvements in public transport infrastructure.

Some recommendations of local commissions have been echoed by political parties in the UK, suggesting a degree of influence over national policy development. In the 2015 party manifestos:

- The Liberal Democrat Party said it would provide **free school meals** to all children in primary education. This policy is already in place in Southwark, Newham, and Islington – funded locally by each authority.¹⁰²
- The Labour Party said it would require publicly listed companies to report on whether or not they pay the **Living Wage** and introduce ‘Make Work Pay’ contracts that give tax rebates to businesses who sign up to paying the Living Wage.¹⁰³ This approach draws on the successes of local authorities in Islington, York, and Plymouth at securing Living Wage commitments from public and private sector organisations, using council contracts as an important mechanism.

- The Liberal Democrat Party said it would extend rules requiring companies with more than 250 employees to publish details of the different pay levels of men and women to include publishing the number of people paid less than the Living Wage and the **pay ratio** between top and median pay.¹⁰⁴
- The Green Party said it would want to see a **maximum pay ratio** of 10:1 between the highest and lowest paid in every organisation. The Islington, Newcastle, Sheffield, and Plymouth Fairness Commissions all included pay ratios in the codes of conduct they developed for employers.¹⁰⁵
- Most of the parties (Liberal Democrat, Labour, Conservative, Green, and Scottish Nationalist) said they would **extend childcare** beyond the current free entitlement of 15 hours for 3- and 4-year-olds. Camden Council has provided 25 hours of free childcare to this age group since September 2013. The Camden Equality Taskforce endorsed this as a key way of reducing the cost of living for parents and increasing maternal employment to address child poverty, but also pointed out that quality must be improved even as quantity is extended.¹⁰⁶
- The Labour Party said it would legislate to make three-year tenancies the norm, with a ceiling on excessive rent rises, and allow local authorities that **negotiate rent reductions** on behalf of tenants who are claiming housing benefit to retain some of the savings, on the condition that the money is invested in building homes.¹⁰⁷ Rent reductions and stabilisations were achieved by local authorities in Islington and Camden through negotiation with private landlords and housing associations as an outcome of the Islington Fairness Commission and the Camden Equality Taskforce.
- The Labour Party said it would improve **housing standards** by creating a national register of private landlords. Landlord registration is already being used in Blackpool and Camden as a result of their Fairness Commissions to improve conditions in the private rental sector, using a mix of compulsory and voluntary mechanisms.
- The Labour Party said it would give local authorities powers to reduce the number of **empty homes**, including higher council tax on long-term empty properties.¹⁰⁸
- The Liberal Democrats would enable local authorities to levy up to 200% Council Tax on **second homes**.¹⁰⁹ Both the Islington and Plymouth Fairness Commissions identified empty homes purchased as second homes or as speculative investments as an issue of inequality and one which raises the cost of housing. Islington and Plymouth Councils have since used a mix of advice, support and enforcement action including 'empty dwelling management orders' to reinforce the message that 'leaving a property empty is simply not an option'.¹¹⁰ These further powers pledged by the parties could help them do this more effectively.

Free school meals: an example of inspirational local action

Free schools meals are primarily a policy for reducing the effects of child poverty on child health and educational attainment. They can also help parents cope with the cost of living by reducing their weekly food bill at a time when wages have not been rising relative to inflation.

Free lunches for all primary school children were initially introduced in Newham and Durham as a pilot by the government in 2008. The results of the pilot came out in 2012,¹¹¹ by which time the new government had ended the funding for free school meals. The pilot found that:

- Universal entitlement to free school meals significantly increased attainment, whereas extending entitlement only to pupils from low-income families in work had no significant effect on educational attainment.
- More children from less affluent backgrounds took up the offer of school meals when they were free to all, with 9 in 10 pupils in Newham and Durham having at least one school meal per week compared with 6 in 10 pupils in other areas.
- Diets improved significantly and school staff noticed a 'levelling effect' on the quality of lunches eaten by pupils from different backgrounds¹¹²

Islington Council introduced free school meals for all primary school children in the borough in 2009, followed by Southwark Council in 2010. Newham Council continued to fund free school meals after central government funding for the programme was cut.

Subsequently, a government-commissioned review of school food carried out by the founders of the Leon restaurant chain, Henry Dimbleby and John Vincent. *The School Food Plan* (2013) highlighted the poor nutritional quality of many packed lunches, and low uptake of school meals (just 43%), and called for the introduction of universal free school meals in primary schools. The leader of Islington Council, along with London Assembly member Fiona Twycross and the president of the GMB Union Mary Turner, set up a Labour Party campaign for all primary school children in the UK to receive free school meals.

From 2014, the government decided to introduce universal free school meals but only for children in the earliest years of school, between the ages of 4 and 7.

Continued campaigning involving charities such as Child Poverty Action Group and the Children's Society led to the Liberal Democrat Party committing to extend free school meals to all children in primary education, 'as resources allow and following a full evaluation of free meals for infants'.¹¹³ The Labour Party's 'Free School Meals for All' campaign continues to recommend that local authorities extend the policy to all primary schools in their area, and that parliament rolls out the policy nationally with pilots in secondary schools as well.

This example highlights how local policy can be turned into national debate and used to focus attention on inequality and poverty. While success is not assured, free school meals have established cross-party support.

Issues with greatest potential

Some of the issues championed by local commissions have great potential to become part of the national policy agenda. In particular:

- The Living Wage is widely accepted as an idea and could save the government money if implemented more widely through national incentives.
- Rising household debt is widely considered problematic, especially when debts become unpayable. Local authorities can continue to put pressure on government to regulate the credit market and invest in Credit Unions. With the government considering devolving more planning powers to a regional level, there is potential for actions to restrict payday loan companies locally, too.
- All major political parties made pledges on childcare in the 2015 election. Local authorities are well positioned to advise the government on issues of quality, funding, and the potential for cooperative provision.

6. Conclusion

Local commissions on inequality and poverty have succeeded in generating fresh initiatives and a renewed commitment to action among local authorities and their partners.

We recommend that local authorities and other local and regional bodies run participative processes focusing on inequality and poverty, and apply the most effective approaches and innovations from existing commissions to their local areas.

Recommendations

Throughout we made recommendations for future commissions.

On the process of holding a commission:

- 1. Planning:** Make sure the commission has clear terms of reference, senior leadership, appropriate resource and a well-considered strategy for communication.
- 2. Relationships:** Aim to broker relationships between local partners including the local authority, the voluntary and community sector, campaign groups working on topics of social justice, the health sector, housing associations, and trade unions – developing common cause on issues of inequality and poverty.
- 3. Participation:** Use a range of participatory methods and apply the principles of co-production to hear from as broad a cross-section of residents as possible, treating people as equals and making use of peer networks.
- 4. Recommendations:** The most productive recommendations are specific, measurable, and achievable. It is useful to identify a couple of recommendations that can be implemented in the immediate term and generate momentum.
- 5. Monitoring:** Track and evaluate your progress, using quantitative data on levels of poverty and inequality and programme outputs as well as qualitative case studies.

On developing fresh approaches to reducing inequality and poverty:

- 6. Supporting campaigns:** Consider local and national campaigns that local authorities and their partners can support.
- 7. Ending unjust practices:** Explore the local authority's regulatory and procurement powers and whether these can be used to restrict and end unjust practices which perpetuate inequalities.
- 8. Supporting collective activities:** Prompt the local authority to develop projects that provide collective solutions to challenges that are otherwise seen as individual problems.
- 9. Improving local services:** Recognise the power of services to reduce inequalities and tackle poverty and support the local authority to take the bold step of investing in local services such as childcare, advice services, and free school meals.
- 10. Stimulating fairer money flows:** Describe ways that local partners could stimulate fairer flows of money – from affluent areas to poorer ones – and circulate around the area rather than flow out of it.
- 11. Setting up new enterprises:** Consider recommending that local public sector partners and social enterprises invest in projects for which there is demand and a clear social value but which conventional businesses will not lead because the returns are low and/or long-term.
- 12. Diversifying ownership:** Recommend cooperative and community ownership as a way of shifting how wealth is produced locally and where that wealth accrues;
- 13. Strengthening democracy:** Build new political alliances on topics such as affordable housing, air quality, and the treatment of people attending Jobcentres, to stimulate broader political engagement.

On galvanising national action:

- 14. Using local achievements:** Draw parallels between local changes and the potential for changes to be implemented by national government. Provide evidence of local success to campaigns that can put pressure on national government.
- 15. Speaking with a regional voice:** Join up at a regional level, making use of the opportunities afforded by the devolution agenda and the creation of Combined Authorities. Seek support from membership bodies like the Local Government Association and London Councils in alliance building and potentially setting up regional commissions.

Appendices

Appendix 1. List of Fairness Commissions in the UK

1. Islington Fairness Commission - *Reported Jun-11*
2. Scottish Poverty Truth Commission - *Reported May-12*
3. Liverpool Fairness Commission - *Reported Jun-12*
4. Newcastle Fairness Commission - *Reported Jul-12*
5. York Fairness Commission - *Reported Sep-12*
6. Wakefield Poverty and Prosperity Commission - *Reported Oct-12*
7. Blackpool Fairness Commission - *Reported Oct-12*
8. Greater Manchester Poverty Commission - *Reported Jan-13*
9. Leicester Child Poverty Commission - *Reported Jan-13*
10. Birmingham Social Inclusion Process - *Reported Mar-13*
11. Camden Equality Taskforce - *Reported May-13*
12. Tower Hamlets Fairness Commission - *Reported Sep-13*
13. Sheffield Fairness Commission – *Reported Sep-13*
14. Newport Fairness Commission – *Reported Nov-13*
15. Plymouth Fairness Commission – *Reported Mar-14*
16. Bristol Fairness Commission – *Reported Jun-14*
17. Lancashire Fairness Commission – *Reported Mar-15*
18. Southampton Fairness Commission – *Established Apr-13, not yet reported*
19. Thurrock Fairness Commission – *Established Mar-14, not yet reported*
20. Croydon Opportunity and Fairness Commission – *Established Jan-15, not yet reported*
21. Redbridge Fairness Commission – *Established Feb-15, not yet reported*
22. Dundee Fairness Commission – *Established Mar-15, not yet reported*
23. London Fairness Commission – *Established Jun-15, not yet reported*

Appendix 2. The distinction between outputs and outcomes

Outputs are a quantitative summary of an activity. For example, the activity is 'we provide training' and the output is 'we trained 50 people to NVQ level 3'. An output tells you an activity has taken place.

Outcomes are the change that occurs as a result of an activity. For example, for our example the outcome might be 'improved wellbeing of training participants'.

Appendix 3. Table of commission recommendations

Islington Fairness Commission		Jun-11
Jobs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Increase employment of disabled local people and locally under-represented groups. · Establish 'kite-mark scheme' for employers adopting fair practices. 	
Wages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · All local employers pay London Living Wage and publish their pay differentials. 	
Debt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Use planning enforcement to prevent payday loan companies from operating on the High Street. · Multiple Debts Team providing brokerage and advice. 	
Advice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Employment Services Board instigates collaboration between sectors to co-ordinate employment support. 	
Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Identify and use all unused communal space; use council planning and new build programme. · To establish down-sizing and tenancy audits; tenant support scheme grant to support vulnerable tenants; prioritise council housing allocations to families that are down-sizing and private renters. 	
Food	-	
Energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Set up Combined Heat and Power Network to provide greener, cheaper energy to local houses and leisure centres 	
Childcare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Launch of 'Baby's first library card' scheme. · Establish a Childcare Coalition across sectors to increase affordable childcare provision. 	

Scottish Poverty Truth Commission		May-12
Jobs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · End improper use of zero hours contracts and governments to legislate against their abuse. 	
Wages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Join the campaign for a Living Wage. 	
Debt	-	
Advice	-	
Housing	-	
Food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Campaign against food poverty and support local food banks. 	
Energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Develop alternative energy sources and a not-for-profit energy company. 	
Childcare	-	

Liverpool Fairness Commission		Jun-12
Jobs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fund low-income family members to attend training and education programmes. • Use Global Entrepreneurship Congress to provide practical support to young people on business. 	
Wages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce a Living Wage in Liverpool. • The city and its partners encourage all public sector and major private sector employers to publish annual pay ratios. 	
Debt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen Credit Unions. 	
Advice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen support to Citizen's Advice Bureaux. 	
Housing	-	
Food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free school meals for children whose families are in receipt of welfare. 	
Energy	-	
Childcare	-	

Newcastle Fairness Commission		Jul-12
Jobs	-	
Wages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include financial inclusion and living wage criterion in Council tenders. 	
Debt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase financial inclusion through credit unions; offer financial health checks with Unison and TUC. 	
Advice	-	
Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • £861,000 extra Discretionary Housing Funding. Offer integrated support for residents at risk of eviction. 	
Food	-	
Energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help residents switch energy provider through Internet best-deal searches. 	
Childcare	-	

York Fairness Commission		Sep-12
Jobs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job sharing and job carving for older people and disabled people. • 'Get ready for work' summer schools involving local businesses 	
Wages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make York a Living wage city. 	
Debt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By-law to restrict payday loan companies. 	
Advice	-	
Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared ownership models for helping people access housing. • Seek a better deal from national government on housing subsidies. 	
Food	-	
Energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better environmental standards to address fuel poverty. 	
Childcare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work towards affordable, flexible childcare provision. 	

Blackpool Fairness Commission		Oct-12
Jobs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More work experience and training opportunities for young people. • Include University in raising employment aspirations. 	
Wages	-	
Debt	-	
Advice	-	
Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set up a landlord accreditation scheme. 	
Food	-	
Energy	-	
Childcare	-	

Wakefield Poverty and Prosperity Commission		Oct-12
Jobs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social investment bond to enable community enterprises to provide combined health and employment solutions. • Identify industrial sectors to be prioritised in economic development. 	
Wages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use procurement to promote a Wakefield Living Wage. 	
Debt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use social and environmental enforcement powers to tackle high cost credit companies and doorstep lenders. 	
Advice	-	
Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maximise employment opportunities from local housing development. 	
Food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote local produce and healthier eating. Use community land for increasing physical activity and growing allotments. 	
Energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Futures Academy to assist with specific challenges such as moving to a low-carbon economy. 	
Childcare	-	

Greater Manchester Poverty Commission		Jan-13
Jobs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social City Deal to control welfare budgets and apprenticeships in the North. 	
Wages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopt a living wage in Greater Manchester – but recognise challenges for SMEs. 	
Debt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central legislation to restrict high-interest loan providers and to push banks to offer more affordable credit. • Promote expansion of Credit Unions. 	
Advice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher education providers to provide pro-bono legal advice. 	
Housing	-	
Food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand bulk buy to reduce need for food banks. • Deliver fresh fruit and vegetables to 'fresh food deserts'. 	
Energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free insulation available from energy providers. 	
Childcare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase childcare through City Deal. 	

Leicester Child Poverty Commission		Jan-13
Jobs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public sector procurement strategies should be developed to prioritise local job creation. 	
Wages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leicester council to adopt living wage. 	
Debt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Household budget planning and financial support available at least once a year in every part of city. Targeted money advice courses to families. Instigate efforts to limit payday loan providers. 	
Advice	-	
Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work with public and private housing to improve insulation and ventilation as well as pet problems. 	
Food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support development of school breakfast clubs; Work with voluntary partners to co-ordinate food banks city-wide. Pilot free fruit in schools, leisure centres and libraries. Support local grow and eat schemes. 	
Energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore development of free service advising on energy providers. 	
Childcare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children's centres increase targeting of 2-, 3- and 4-year-olds vulnerable to poor outcomes. 	

Birmingham Social Inclusion Process		Mar-13
Jobs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local inclusive growth strategy developed with schools and business experts. Back to work incentives for adults including apprenticeships and temporary council tax exclusions 	
Wages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Council to adopt Living Wage. 	
Debt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Financial inclusion partnership to offer support including food banks, jam jar accounts and credit unions. 	
Advice	-	
Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A Neighbourhood Trust for social finance and funding to priority neighbourhoods. 	
Food	-	
Energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tackle fuel poverty by extending Birmingham Energy Savers across the city. 	
Childcare	-	

Camden Equality Taskforce		May-13
Jobs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration between education and business to promote the skills needed for enterprise. • Council contractors offer flexible employment options and training for progression opportunities. • Programmes to support maternal employment, especially of Somali and Bangladeshi women; • Council employees provided with 'Timewise' opportunities for flexible working. 	
Wages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building on the Council's policy to pay the London Living Wage, increase the pay of the council's lowest paid staff in the form of a minimum earnings guarantee. • Signed up to UNISON's Ethical Care Charter. 	
Debt	-	
Advice	-	
Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase supply of housing through shared ownership and housing at lower rents. • Tackle overcrowding and criminal landlords. • Central government to support a London living rent. • Use Community Investment Programme to increase housing supply. • Central government to increase the level of grants available for affordable housing schemes and to relax borrowing rules for councils to invest in social housing. 	
Food	-	
Energy	-	
Childcare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase funding of childcare and quality of provision. 	

Sheffield Fairness Commission		Sep-13
Jobs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government to allow Sheffield to retain savings made when people access work, to reinvest in training and up-skilling. • Programme to tackle youth unemployment including work trials and links to City Deal apprenticeships. • £1.3 million employability programme to help most vulnerable access work. • Peer mentoring for 11–12-year-olds to fulfil education aspirations. 	
Wages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commitment to adopt the Living Wage from new suppliers. • Improve council pay ratios and apply living wage to council staff. • Introduce a 'fair employer' code of practice, including living wage reporting, pay ratio and diversity. 	
Debt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide ethical and affordable credit to consumers and small businesses. 	
Advice	-	
Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compulsory property accreditation scheme for all private landlords. • Housing delivery including land allocated to business, de-risking of sites, and more affordable homes. • Provide at-risk tenants with tailored support. 	
Food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support communities to grow their own food. 	
Energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extend 'Big Sheffield Switch' energy saving initiative to a second round. 	
Childcare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide access to affordable, childcare from private community sectors. 	

Tower Hamlets Fairness Commission		Sep-13
Jobs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local business to guarantee work experience for 25% of local students. • Create a 'modern labour exchange' separate from benefit sanctioning. 	
Wages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Living Wage accrediting. 	
Debt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limit gambling and payday loan companies through the Use Classification Order system. • Promote credit unions. 	
Advice	-	
Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government to allow Local Authorities to borrow in order to build social housing. • Improve standard of private rented accommodation. • Set social rents to relate to income of tenants. • London living rents scheme. 	
Food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use Classification Order to limit fast food. 	
Energy	-	
Childcare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set targets for childcare expansion and explore provision through coops. 	

Plymouth Fairness Commission		Mar-14
Jobs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitor use of zero hours contracts. Prohibit advertisement of zero hours contracts by local recruitment agencies and job centres. • DWP to address delays in benefit payments and inappropriate use of sanctions. 	
Wages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council contractors to pay 100% of staff living wage in two years. • Annual reporting on pay ratios and taxable earnings in the city newspaper. 	
Debt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer mentoring for young people in money management. • Credit unions to provide a broader range of services. • Annual anti-debt pre-Christmas planning: with money advice services, banks, trade unions, credit unions and council departments. 	
Advice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Widen free specialist legal advice and professional indemnity insurance. 	
Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a national register of landlords and pilot accreditation scheme for private sector landlords. 	
Food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extend free school meals to all primary school children. • Pilot meal a day to disadvantaged pupils outside of term time. • Tackle 'Plymouth's food deserts'. 	
Energy	-	
Childcare	-	

Bristol Fairness Commission		Jun-14
Jobs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce number of young people classified as NEET to lowest in UK through mentoring, training and apprenticeships. • Ensure enterprises focus on employing people in poorest areas. • Ensure all premises are Disability Discrimination Act compliant. • Become a 'Timewise' council. 	
Wages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make reducing income inequality a core value in decision-making. • Pay Living Wage to council employees. • Request contractors to publish pay differentials. • Council aim for no more than 10:1 pay differential in three years. 	
Debt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognise value of local credit unions. • Discourage payday lending in Bristol through planning rules. 	
Advice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restore access to English for Speakers of Other Languages and facilitate access for advice centres for adults. • Support and promote local outreach help. 	
Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leverage new money for affordable housing developments. 	
Food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extend free school meals to children over 7 and to Further Education colleges. • Support local food suppliers. • Support food growing initiatives. • Avoid fast food outlets near schools by using planning policies. 	
Energy	-	
Childcare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase hours of free entitlement to early years education for 2-4 year olds; • Ensure childcare is available for parents seeking training. 	

Lancashire Fairness Commission		Mar-15
Jobs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • End zero hours contracts. 	
Wages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote Living Wage to all employers. 	
Debt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase high street presence of credit unions and development finance institutions. 	
Advice	-	
Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National government to grant flexibility in setting local housing allowances. • Introduce national index-linked rent controls. 	
Food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lancashire food bank network developed to share surpluses and best practice. 	
Energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase public sector sign up to energy collaboration initiatives. 	
Childcare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National government welfare reform to include additional free nursery hours. 	

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Tackling poverty and inequality

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