

Islington council: opportunities for women in the Holloway redevelopment

This case study has been produced by the [Buying Social Justice](#) research project as part of its exploration of how public procurement is being adopted by public sector organisations to advance equality in employment. It is one of a series of case studies that feature good practice in the use of public procurement by infrastructure and transport bodies, local authorities, housing associations and universities in England, Scotland and Wales. The purpose is to present examples of good practice in how public procurement can incorporate objectives to promote equality, diversity and inclusion in the workforce. By presenting a selection of examples from public bodies of different sizes and sectors, it is intended that other organisations may consider adopting similar measures in their procurement practices.

All the case studies, together with other publications and outputs from the project, are available on the [Buying Social Justice](#) website.

Background to the organisation

Islington Council in North London established a Fairness Commission which reported in 2011, that identified ‘two Islington’s’, in which some of the wealthiest people in the country live in the borough, alongside high levels of income inequality, with incomes for the richest 10% of households likely to be over 10 times that of the poorest 10%. It also has the fourth highest rate of child poverty. The Commission was co-chaired by Professor Richard Wilkinson, one of the authors of the influential book on inequality, *The Spirit Level*. The report of the Commission made many recommendations, including on payment of the Living Wage, job opportunities for local residents, housing and health.

The council spends £650 million a year with almost 6,000 providers. Although much of this spend is predetermined, and the council passes the money on to other organisations, about half is directly commissioned by Islington. The council is keen to use this spending to support community wealth building, which it sees as a community-led model for economic development, based on “a commitment to creating an inclusive and socially just local economy, with local people at its heart – no matter what their background.”

The community wealth building programme, which began in May 2020, is linked to its progressive procurement strategy, which aims to ensure that the council’s spending “has the maximum positive impact for Islington people, especially the most disadvantaged. We want to make sure as much as possible is spent within Islington, and that the council’s purchasing decisions support Islington people through creating employment, skills training and other opportunities.”ⁱ Additionally, it wants to support local businesses, particularly small businesses, to successfully bid for council contracts. It has set two measures of performance against these objectives: an increase in the employment of Islington residents, including those with the greatest barriers to work i.e. long-term unemployed, people with disabilities, black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) and women; and an increase in expenditure with Islington-based businesses, including social enterprises and co-operatives.

Using the planning process

The council uses its planning powers to support its commitments to improving opportunities for the local community. On all large developments in the borough, Section 106 agreements (a provision of

the Town and Country Planning Act 1990) are made between the local authority and the developer that require construction job opportunities for local residents, including work placements at the London Living Wage, working with the council's employment service, and training, including apprenticeships, based on one trainee per 20 residential units in the development, together with financial or other contributions to mitigate the impact of the development on the local community.

The borough covers parts of central London and has many large construction projects. For some time, the construction employment team has had an ambitious target that 25% of all jobs on construction sites are filled by women. The team indicated that this reached 12% in 2022, of which 80% were in the building trades, significantly above the national average of 2% of women in the building trades.

Redevelopment of the Holloway prison site

Holloway Prison, the largest women's prison in Europe, was closed in 2016 and the women moved to prisons outside London. In March 2019 Peabody Housing Association bought the site, which is the largest development in the borough for over 30 years. The redevelopment includes 985 flats, of which 42% will be homes at council-equivalent rents. Demolition started in October 2022.

Community Plan for Holloway

Campaign group the [Community Plan for Holloway](#) (CP4H) was established to maximise local benefits from the redevelopment, following consultation with women affected by the closure carried out by the [Centre for Crime and Justice Studies](#). The campaign was particularly keen to ensure that the project recognised Holloway's 164-year history and legacy as a provider of joined-up support for women within the criminal justice system and when leaving it. It campaigned for the site to include a 'women's building' offering support services for local women, as well as opportunities for women's employment in the construction workforce.

CP4H describes itself as a loose coalition that informs local people and increases opportunities for local opinion to shape how the Holloway development benefits the community. It has been built through a series of well-attended public meetings and has successfully raised funds to employ three part-time community organisers. It has a board of voluntary trustees, representing Islington political parties and local groups.

It has two main strands to its campaign: one demanding affordable, quality social housing and community amenities on the site and a second lobbying for a legacy of service provision for the women of the borough, through the women's building and opportunities for women's employment in the construction workforce. The campaign operates through a series of working groups on themes such as social housing, employment and training, the women's building, co-housing and monitoring the progress of the development. The groups draw on the expertise of local residents, including some with knowledge of construction sector employment and training.

Targets for women's employment

The CP4H employment and training working group drew up a document that set out demands for training and employment commitments to be included in the Section 106 agreement with Peabody that met the council's climate emergency targets, its planning commitments for local employment contained in the council's Section 106 Supplementary Planning Documentⁱⁱ and reflected the historical legacy of the site with respect to women. The document highlighted the council's equality and diversity aims to make Islington a fairer place, arguing that the redevelopment provided an opportunity to increase the representation of women, BAME and disabled people in the construction workforce and challenge its overwhelmingly white male-dominated character. They lobbied councillors to include a requirement in the Section 106 agreement that at least 30% of those employed on site should be women and at least 50% of trainees.

Local councillors saw this as a positive way of meeting council objectives and opened the doors for CP4H to work with officers with expertise in drawing up Section 106 requirements. CP4H held regular meetings with council officers in the construction employment service, who were also keen to ensure benefits for local employment and to address the under-representation of women in construction jobs. CP4H also had discussions with a local further education college with a large-scale construction facility, the College of North East London (CONEL), and a member of CONEL teaching staff joined the meetings. In line with Islington's planning policy, the Section 106 agreement committed Peabody to make 'reasonable endeavours' to ensure that 51 or more construction apprentices were employed at the development. The agreement stated that the apprentices must be Islington residents, recruited through the Council's jobs service and paid the real Living Wage. The collaboration with CP4H also resulted in the agreement containing a clause that supported the council's objective to improve opportunities for women in construction, committing Peabody to a clause that: 'genuine efforts must be made to ensure that not less than 30% of the apprenticeships are provided to women'. CP4H believes that it is unusual for the community to be so involved in how Section 106 requirements are agreed.

An interviewee from the principal contractor London Square believed that Islington's ambition for a minimum of 30% women apprentices on the Holloway project was unique: "We've never worked with any local authority who's had that ambition. I think this is really unique to Islington. I think they want this."

The commitment and experience of council officers to improving opportunities and conditions for women in construction is vital to ensuring that this ambition is achieved. An interviewee from the council's construction employment service said:

"There is no reason why I couldn't get all 51 apprenticeships to go to women other than I don't have enough women. For every one job you need at least five or six candidates. So we're talking about 350 in total [...] over five years. So that's the great thing, we can see them coming months away, but they are time limited, so if we don't have the women ready to go in place and keen to work there, we will have to fill them. [...] But in the meantime, we're meeting loads and loads and loads of women, which is great, and word of mouth is the most powerful form of advertising still."

Tradeswomen Building Bridges delegation

Islington officers and councillors also supported a visit by a delegation of tradeswomen from North America in June 2022 as members of [Tradeswomen Building Bridges](#) who came to London to show how they had succeeded in increasing the numbers of women in the building trades through persistent campaigning and monitoring.

The delegation was hosted by the University of Westminster and organisers had been closely involved with CP4H before the visit, so that the Holloway Prison development was a strong focus of interest. The 50-strong delegation met many of the campaigners during their stay and had a tour of the Holloway prison site, as well as networking with UK tradeswomen, visiting colleges and construction sites, events at the University of Westminster and receptions at Islington Town Hall and at the Houses of Parliament hosted by the Chartered Institute of Building and local MP Emily Thornberry. CP4H organised two "Holloway days" for the delegates, with talks, film screenings and a community picnic in a local park with speakers including the council's Girls and Women's Champion, Saiqa Pandor, and MP Emily Thornberry. One of the CP4H workers commented on the importance of the visit in raising the profile of opportunities for women in the building trades and the links to the Holloway campaign:

"Amazingly significant, you know, providing those role models was just so valuable in terms of translating sometimes what is quite a technical field into something that is, communicates

so effectively how construction jobs can be [...] such positive opportunities for women. And the other aspect is around diversity, which has also been really important for Community Plan for Holloway and for the community, making sure that not only women have access to these opportunities, but that we have women of diverse backgrounds and that these opportunities are offered to women who may have been in prison as well. Those are all really strong themes coming through from community members that they really support the apprenticeships and training, they want London Square to make sure that they're offering them to women who face these difficulties and building further on that link around legacy for the women of Holloway. [...] A good portion of the Tradeswomen Building Bridges [...] are women who have been in the criminal justice system. And they talk about how construction has offered them the opportunity to rebuild lives and to have, you know, really secure jobs, good incomes.”

This comment draws attention to the need to be aware of intersecting inequalities, for example in the ways that women may be disadvantaged due to factors other than gender, such as ethnicity, class or through having been in prison.

Putting commitments into practice

As the Holloway development is currently at the demolition stage, most contracts for building work have not yet been let. The principal contractor, property development firm London Square, has however started to run courses to get women interested in potential jobs. These have included a once-weekly Women in Build course for 12 weeks from March to June 2023, introducing participants to construction trades, including some practical skill sessions, the green skills agenda and health and safety. Everyone who completed the course remains on their contact list to be notified of vacancies. So far, one participant has signed up to a full-time level 2 carpentry course at college as a result.

London Square is working with Islington, who are managing the recruitment of apprentices centrally. The council works with candidates to ensure that they have health and safety and construction site work certification, as well as discussing needs such as flexible working to accommodate caring responsibilities, before referring their applications to London Square. To date, an assistant site supervisor apprenticeship has been filled by a woman, from among applicants referred by Islington. In this case, all the applications put forward were from women. This is viewed as a form of positive action needed to meet the apprenticeship target, but will not exclude men from the many other jobs and apprenticeships on site.

Islington’s employment service also has an important role in supporting women once recruited:

“It's not like any woman can't do any of these jobs. It simply is not true anymore. [...] I think really the industry needs to be dragged into the 21st century and we need to be able to get women and for them to enjoy their job. And all that sort of banter and, you know, making an excuse of it, it just isn't ok anymore, is it? Treat people with respect and that's it, end of. So anyway, that's a bit of a mission for us. [...] We want to put women in teams and build welfare around them and we're going to come on site and read the riot act to the supply chain and say, this is what this is, zero tolerance.”

London Square’s sustainability manager engages with potential contractors over the commitment to women’s employment, informing interested contractors at the tender stage of the ambition to employ women on site.

“So at the tender stage, at the presentations when they're tendering for those packages, the contractor will be obliged to tell us, these are the roles that I can create. These are the number of jobs and then this is how we're going to support more women on site.”

CP4H will continue to work closely with Islington and the developer throughout the procurement and contract management process to support and monitor the achievement of its Section 106 commitments to the employment of women apprentices.

However, despite a detailed consultation process, progress on the women's building has been disappointing for CP4H, with current plans only offering a 'floor' for women's services rather than the hoped-for building. CP4H continues to work on plans for this space and to promote the legacy of Holloway's women as part of the plans for the whole site, and would like to see a women's building built by and for women.

Procurement and social value

Islington's progressive procurement strategy includes a commitment to embed social value in its financial planning and commissioning activities, creating an organisational culture "of being social value pioneers". This involves providing training and resources for managers and close work with the council's Inclusive Economy service and at all levels of council decision making. The social value delivery framework means:

- "including explicit outcomes, particularly more jobs, apprenticeships and work experience opportunities, in all procurement activity, with a weighting of at least 20% of the overall scoring and evaluation
- working with supply partners who pay their staff a living wage and actively develop and support their career progression."ⁱⁱⁱ

Having a weighting for social value of 20% is at the upper end of usual practice for local authorities (according to our survey). The strategy notes that "all tenders will include social value in specifications, terms and/or evaluation criteria and weighted as at least 20% as part of tender scoring. Only in exceptional circumstances will a minimum of 5% (per National Strategy) be accepted and commissioners will be required to provide a robust justification."^{iv}

In order to ensure that social value promises provide genuine benefits for the community, officers have created a social value operations group based on the five themes of: youth, employment, economics, green and communities. This brings together people working on each of these themes to consider what they need when projects and services are being commissioned. The interviewee from the construction employment service explained that bidders often offer school visits, but having the group allows the responsible officer to say "we're saturated with school visits. We don't need that. What we need is learning disabilities in this Community Centre, so we can be specific to the ward and the theme that we need". He added that the group is "proving to be incredibly useful and effective on both sides" as it also provides contractors with contact names within the council who will be responsible for ensuring delivery of social value commitments. By consulting with this group to understand community needs at early stages of the commissioning process, this can result in better quality bids and save time on bids being rejected by the procurement panel for inadequately addressing social value.

Social value commitments assessed in bids are additional to mandatory requirements that bidders must meet in order to win a contract with the council. It defines a series of "mandatory ethical requirements" for the council and contractors. It states that:

"These are non-negotiable and currently include:

- paying the London Living Wage, and ensuring the supply chain does likewise
- no blacklisting of trade union members
- safeguards against modern slavery

- care providers sign up to UNISON’s Ethical Care Charter
- not specifying, purchasing or using products that damage the environment in cases where a reasonable alternative is available.”^v

The procurement strategy lists among its achievements: helping over 4,000 people into work, including apprenticeships, and being the first council to sign up to the trade union UNISON’s Ethical Care Charter, which sets minimum standards to protect the dignity and quality of life for people who need homecare.

It also lists among the achievements of the procurement strategy as bringing council services back in house in education, housing repairs and waste management. Thus in-sourcing where appropriate, instead of procuring services externally, is considered part of the progressive procurement strategy.

Good practice highlights

This case study has highlighted how Islington has used its procurement policy to achieve its ambitious equality and fairness objectives for the residents of the borough. The case study focuses in particular on the example of the Holloway prison site redevelopment, showing how well-organised community pressure was able to build relationships with councillors and officers to put into effect the council’s commitments to equality and diversity, local employment and social value, using the tools of Section 106 agreements and the progressive procurement strategy.

Although the Holloway redevelopment is not yet complete, CP4H continues to work with the council to monitor progress on targets for women apprentices.

Key highlights of good practice illustrated by this case are:

- Firm equality and diversity policy commitments to improving opportunities for the local community, linked to a progressive procurement strategy and community wealth building agenda.
- Effective lobbying by an informed local community campaign, emphasising council commitments to equality and diversity and local employment, and the legacy of Holloway women’s prison.
- Councillor and council officer active engagement with informed local community campaigners at early stages of the Section 106 agreement and ongoing monitoring of agreed targets, including with developers.
- Council officer expertise and resources for construction employment and the local area, and commitment to equality and diversity goals, was instrumental in agreeing the target of 30% women apprentices and in its implementation.
- A high-profile visit from North American tradeswomen, supported by the council, raised awareness of women’s successful employment in the building trades.
- An awareness of intersectional inequalities in Islington and in construction employment, together with the raised profile of the needs of those who have been in the criminal justice system, may widen employment and training opportunities on the Holloway redevelopment.
- An initiative of council officers in establishing a cross-departmental social value group to build meaningful and needed social value into the commissioning process.
- Commitment to a weighting for social value of 20% for most tender assessments.
- Use of positive recruitment strategies by the council to ensure that the CVs of suitably qualified women candidates are put forward.

ⁱ <https://democracy.islington.gov.uk/documents/s23016/Progressive%20Procurement%20Strategy%202020-27%20-%20strategy%20document.pdf>, p.3

ⁱⁱ https://www.islington.gov.uk/~/_media/sharepoint-lists/public-records/planningandbuildingcontrol/publicity/publicconsultation/20162017/20161215planningobligationss106spddecember2016.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://democracy.islington.gov.uk/documents/s23016/Progressive%20Procurement%20Strategy%202020-27%20-%20strategy%20document.pdf>, p.4

^{iv} *ibid*, p.36

^v *ibid*, p.39