Improving Employment Conditions in Islington: Tackling Work-Based Harms and Promoting Unionisation

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Executive Summary



CAPE

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For a more equal future

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To access the full report, visit UCL Discovery: https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10200679/.

Introduction

This report explores experiences of work and the potential for union renewal in the London Borough of Islington (LBI). It emerged out of a series of roundtables on 'good work' in 2021, convened by Islington Council and the Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement (CAPE) project. Those roundtables identified declining union membership as a key factor contributing to the increase in seven specific 'work-based' harms: low pay, lack of statutory entitlements, poor health and safety, contractual insecurity, discrimination, absence of worker voice, and welfare conditionality.

Declining union membership is important because of the associations between unionisation and good terms and conditions (the union 'wage premium', safer workplaces, equality and diversity, and a better work-life balance), as we explore in **section 1.3**. It is therefore particularly concerning that rates of unionisation are lowest in the lowest paid, most precarious occupations, and amongst minoritised ethnicities and those from a migrant background.

Understanding the challenges facing unions, along with best practice for unions engaging so-called 'difficult-to-organise' groups of workers, is crucial. We also consider the idea of 'community unionism' (in **section 1.4**), where unions and communities collaborate to promote good work, as a potential strategy to revitalise the trade union movement and open-it up to addressing broader community concerns.

This report is underpinned by exploratory research designed to investigate these issues by mapping the distribution of work-based harms in Islington, understanding the barriers to unionisation, and exploring local authority policy levers to address the situation.



Part 2: What does Islington's Labour Market Look Like?

In **Part 2** of the report, we examine Islington's labour market, with particular reference to the seven work-based harms, which we examine through available statistical data and existing research. **Section 2.1** discusses the limitations of national statistics at the local authority level. **Section 2.2** outlines the Islington context, noting the significant cross-border commuting and contrasting the high concentration of professional roles with pockets of deprivation and growth in low-paying sectors.

In **sections 2.3 to 2.9** we then explore the seven work-based harms in detail. We note the following:

Harm	Indicators	Coverage	Data	Reliability[1]
1. National Minimum Wage Violations, Unpaid Wages and Low Pay	Approx. 3,500 residents & 4,200 workers paid at the National Minimum Wage	Islington	LPC estimates (ASHE) (2023)	Good
	Approx. 1,000 residents & 1,000 workers each are likely to be paid under the NMW	Islington	Extrapolated from national data (ASHE) (2023)	Low confidence
	Low pay (regional measure) is relatively high for men (16%) & women (21%) & very high in particular industries (women = 45%, men = 36%, in hospitality)	Greater London	Aggregated LFS data (2018 & 2021)	Fair
2. Lack of Statutory Entitlements	Approx. 3,800 residents have no paid holiday entitlement (last 12 months)	Islington	Extrapolated from national (LFS) figures (2022)	Low confidence
	Approx. 6,200 residents likely to have been ill but unable to access sick pay (last 12 months)	Islington	Extrapolated from DWP survey (2021)	Low confidence

1 The reliability of the statistics featured here are open to interpretation. However, we have made judgements on basis of how recently surveys were conducted, their sample size (especially at lower levels of geography), whether trend data is available and taking into account the increasing problems with national surveys such as the Labour Force Survey (see for example, ONS (2023) 'Labour Force Survey: planned improvements and its reintroduction', https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/methodologies/labourforcesurveyplannedimprovementsanditsreintroduction). Where we have extrapolated from national survey data these estimates have the lowest levels of confidence and provide further methodological detail in Appendix 6.1.

Harm	Indicators	Coverage	Data	Reliability[1]
3. Health and Safety	Islington = fewer reportable injuries (147 per 100k people) than London (156) or England (212), but more than Inner London (129)	Islington, London, England	RIDDOR (2022/23)	Good
	Reportable injuries are higher in hospitality (260 per 100k people) & health/social care (259) than all industries average (215)	GB	RIDDOR (2022/23)	Good
	Self-reported stress, depression & anxiety due to work is higher in Greater London (2,690 per 100k) than England (2,570)	London, England	LFS aggregate (2020-2023)	Good
4. Employment Insecurity and Dependent Self-Employment	Small number of Islington residents on ZHCs (2%), but very high in some sectors (health/social care = 18%, hospitality = 27%)	Islington, UK	LFS (2021) and LFS (2023)	Low confidence for Islington, good for the UK
	Very high levels of female part-time working in hospitality (52%), retail (44%), health/ social care (36%) & business support (36%)	London	BRES & LFS (2023)	Fair
	2,100 residents likely to be subject to 'bogus' self-employment	Islington	Extrapolated from national CA data (2015)	Low confidence
5. Discrimination and Harassment	Median gender pay gaps for Islington residents (6.4%) & workers (10.1%) are lower than for Greater London (12.2%) & UK (15.2%) residents	Islington, London, UK	5-year averages of ASHE (2019-2023)	Good
	Workplace sexual harassment is higher in London (35%) than the British average (29%) & higher in hospitality (40%) than other sectors	Regions, GB	ComRes survey (2017)	Fair
	Black British (55%) & Pakistanis/Bangladeshis (47%) have lower employment rates in Islington compared to other ethnicities (White = 81%) & London & UK averages	Islington, London, UK	LFS 5-year averages (2018-2022)	Good

Harm	Indicators	Coverage	Data	Reliability[1]
6. Absence of Worker Voice	Union density is low in the borough (18%)	Islington	WISERD estimates (2000-2021 average)	Fair
	Collective agreement coverage in Islington (29%) is lower than the average for Inner London (32%), Greater London (34%) & the UK (41%)	Islington, London, UK	WISERD estimates & LFS	Fair
	Islington is estimated to have had the 11th worst rate of decline amongst 406 local authorities	Islington, Local Authorities	WISERD estimates (2000/10 -2011/21)	Fair
7. Impacts of Welfare Conditionality	Islington has a slightly higher unemployment rate (5%) than the British average (3.7%)	Islington, GB	LFS (2023)	Fair
	18,516 residents claiming out-of-work Universal Credit (UC), 8,705 claiming in-work UC, & 7,622 claiming Employment & Support Allowance	Islington	Claimant Count (2024)	Good

Part 3: How does the Council Partner with Unions to Promote Good Work?

In **Part 3** we explore the role of unions in the borough, including the way the Council works with unions, union perspectives on work-based harms, challenges around unionisation and the role of Islington Trades Union Council. This is based on findings from interviews with 24 union officials and lay representatives, including 21 from nine TUC-affiliated unions (TSSA, Unite, UCU, CWU, RMT, Unison, NEU, GMB, Usdaw), two from 'independent' unions (IWGB and ACORN), and one from Organise Now!.

In section 3.2 we explore union perspectives on working with Islington Council. Islington Council has a strong track record of passing motions supporting workers' rights. The Council partnered with the TUC during the pandemic to promote a safe return to work and is now promoting the community union ACORN to residents facing issues with private landlords. Unions appreciate such progress, but seek further action on in-sourcing, the promotion of initiatives like Unite's Fair Hospitality Charter, as well as increased local enforcement activity. A number of unions believed the Council has a key role to play in terms of educating residents on employment rights and trade unions.

Section 3.3 details union perspectives on the seven work-based harms introduced above. While there is a degree of overlap with **Part 2**, key findings include:

1. **London Living Wage:** Often subsumes other wage benefits and workers struggle to meet high local living costs.
2. **Health and Safety:** Concerns include workplace violence for retail workers and unsafe conditions for couriers.
3. **Insecure Contracts:** Issues extend beyond zero-hour contracts (ZHCs) to include 'umbrella contracts' and erratic changes in work hours.
4. **Discrimination:** Disproportionate impact on minoritised ethnicities facing the worst work conditions, women facing sexual and street harassment.

In **section 3.4** we briefly note examples of union success stories in and around Islington on issues of pay, union recognition and tackling insecure contracts. However, barriers to unionisation remain steep, and we explore these in some detail in **section 3.5**. They include the following:

i. Large workplaces can be difficult to organise because of the ease of replacing workers, while in small workplaces workers can be subject to high levels of surveillance

ii. High turnover is one of the greatest challenges to organising, and is partially a consequence of the high living costs in Inner London

iii. Unions lack access to workplaces and there are high levels of fear amongst vulnerable workers (migrants, those on insecure contracts)

iv. Lack of knowledge of unions is also a barrier, fewer and fewer people have family or social connections to unionised workers

v. Unionisation is never easy or straightforward, and therefore requires high levels of engagement, which can be resource intensive

vi. Language barriers can be an issue, in the absence of multilingual organisers and translated materials (cultural knowledge/sensitivity can also be an issue)

vii. Given the decline in union strength, the resources necessary for organising campaigns can be lacking

In **section 3.6** we explore a number of initiatives in and around Islington that have been engaging with so-called 'difficult-to-organise' workers. **Unite's Migrant Workers Branch** grew out of links with a Turkish and Kurdish community centre and grew through street-based outreach activities and offering training sessions in the community. The **United Migrant Workers Education Project offers English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)** and other training to cleaners and domestic workers in central London, also serving as a place to secure advice and representation. The Unite campaign at the famous queer venue the **Dalston Superstore** is an important case study for organising in the night-time economy and securing wins on safe transport options home for late night workers.

The **IWGB** meanwhile have built up a track record of organising precarious and migrant workers. They have built the union through engagement events, community training, translating materials and providing a bilingual legal team. Following the murder of Takieddine Boudhane in Islington in 2020 they embarked on a partnership with Islington Council, leading to important successes (**advice provision, community building and dedicated courier parking at Highbury Corner**).

Finally in **section 3.7** we consider **Islington Trades Union Council** as a key mechanism for cross-union collaboration, though challenges remain around income, volunteer numbers, and expanding affiliations. Trades council delegates expressed interest in doing more outreach work in the community, potentially linking with unionfinder and Organise Now! to signpost unorganised workers into unions. Delegates are also particularly interested in campaigning around hospitality, a key sector in Islington (both culturally and economically).

Part 4: What are Islington Council's Policy Levers to Promote Good Work?

Part 4 of the report explores how Islington Council can use engagement opportunities and policy tools to promote good work. We begin by addressing the challenges posed by local government austerity and, in **Section 4.2**, examine how local 'Good Work Charters' have emerged to fill gaps in national employment regulation. We explore the limitations of these charters in terms of a failure to identify what 'bad work' looks like, and their limited uptake by employers. Ultimately, we argue that they can be useful in defining and promoting good work, but they must be backed up by credible monitoring, enforcement, and a wider movement campaigning for change.

In **section 4.3** we take a deeper look at Islington Council's Progressive Procurement Strategy and how it links to existing charters against modern slavey and violence in the workplace. We then focus in on the Council's homecare procurement strategy and the progress made against Unison's Ethical Care Charter.

Section 4.4 looks at employment rights advice provision in Islington. We highlight key council services such as **advice hubs**, **income maximisation team**, **family information service**, **housing advice** and **iWork**, alongside third sector organisations such as **Islington Law Centre**, **Islington Bamer Advice Alliance** and **City Community Legal Advice Centre**, which are either overstretched or have withdrawn from employment advice altogether.

We also discuss **Citizens Advice Islington** (CAI) and their **Employment Law Advice Service** (ELAS), offered in conjunction with the RCJ Advice - Citizens Advice and Law Centre. We highlight the important role of ELAS as the most significant employment advice service in the borough but note that diminishing resources have led to cuts to service provision in recent years and as of November 2024 the project's funding has not been renewed. This informs a discussion of the **Newham Employment Rights Hub** as a potential model for Islington to expand employment rights support.

In **section 4.5,** we examine at the wider landscape of community engagement around employment rights, suggesting that both **Adult and Community Learning** (ACL) and **Personal, Social, Health and Economic** (PSHE) education could both be important mechanisms for increasing public understandings of employment rights. We also consider the benefit of potential collaborations with third sector organisations like **Cripplegate Foundation** and local wellbeing networks.

Section 4.6 covers childcare provision in Islington, and highlights poor working conditions, recruitment challenges, and the impact on single parents who struggle to access flexible working. Further research on flexible working in Islington is needed, and the Council should engage unions and stakeholders to promote good work in this sector.

Finally, in **section 4.7** we explore how the Mayor's night-time economy strategy provides an opportunity to promote good work principles. This strategy can link to Islington's community wealth building, cultural, and violence reduction initiatives, while using licensing and anti-harassment efforts to foster good working conditions and unionisation campaigns.

In the recommendations which follow we attempt to show how these above findings can be implemented by the various stakeholders in Islington (Islington Council, the trade unions, third sector and researchers).

Recommendations

Actor(s)	Recommendation	Rationale	Timeline, Resourcing & Implementation
Islington Council	**1. Promote TUC 'join a union' & Organise Now! via council channels**	Council already promotes ACORN to private renters	- 6 months - Staff time to liaise with TUC & Organise Now! & update webpages
	2. Develop a community unionism campaign to promote employment rights	Need to better promote unions in the borough	- 12-24 months - Establish a working group with TUC, ITUC, unions & 3rd sector to develop materials - Officer support
	3. Improve education around employment rights	Lack of public understanding of employment rights & unions	- 12-months - Staff time to develop materials (ACL, PSHE)
	4. Advocating for the cross-cutting nature of the promotion of good work	Entails local policy on poverty, inequality, regeneration, planning, families and more	- Ongoing - Integrating the work of Council departments (from family information team to procurement)
	5. Continue to build on the Progressive Procurement Strategy, making reference to a definition of 'good work'	There is a need to define high quality work via the GLA Good Work Standard or similar	- 12-24 months - Council to agree definition to be inserted into procurement process
	6. Advocate for investment in employment rights advice provision	Services are overstretched & demand is unmet	- 12-24 months - approx. £200k
	7. Promote good work in the Night-Time Economy through Pathfinder Projects	Significance of local NTE & high levels of work-based harms	- 12 months - Staff time for policy development & liaise with relevant unions
	8. Develop a project to target vulnerable workers in association with IWGB	Blackstock Rd Project benefitted vulnerable workers	- 12 months - Approx £40k
	9. Work with unions to promote good work in the childcare sector	Need to improve recruitment & retention	- 12-24 months - Coordinate with unions (Unison, NEU, UVW)
	10. Scale up promotion of good work through CLF & GLA	Need to work across boroughs (high levels of commuting)	- 12-24 months

Actor(s)	Recommendation	Rationale	Timeline, Resourcing & Implementation
Unions	**11. Draw on best practice for engaging with so-called 'difficult to-organise' workers**	Need to improve rates of unionisation	- Ongoing - Investment in organisers & campaigning
	12. Regional unions to encourage branches to affiliate to ITUC	Strengthens networks & resources	- 0-24 months - National TUC work with union Regional Offices
	13. National TUC to develop capacity in local Trades Union Councils & refresh 'join a union' initiative	A need to think strategically on improving capacity in Trades Councils	- 12-24 months - National TUC to consult with unions & Trades Councils
	14. Islington TUC to work with the national TUC & Organise Now! to promote unions to unorganised workers	Unionfinder & Organise Now! tools can improve the efficiency of outreach work	- 0-24 months - ITUC to liaise with national TUC & Organise Now! - design of relevant materials & volunteer coordination
	15. Increase the profile of ITUC through a borough-wide campaign	Unionisation & increases ITUC capacity	- 0-24 months - Work with relevant sectoral unions
	16. Unions to improve internal training on welfare reform	Union members are increasingly subject to conditionality	- 0-24 months - Liaise with national Unite Community (Brett Sparks)
Community & Volunteer Sector	**17. Promoting collaborative design in advice provision**	Need to improve coordination between different advice service providers	- 0-24 months - Voluntary Action Islington to liaise with members
	18. Develop training materials for CVS sector	Improve/standardise information on employment rights	- 0-12 months - CVS organisations to liaise with Council and unions
	19. Marx Memorial Library continue to promote education on employment rights	Maximise potential of this nationally significant resource	- 0-24 months - Islington Council to facilitate greater links between schools, community & MML
Research	**20. Local surveys on the distribution of work-based harms**	Variable quality of existing datasets affects the reliability of local estimates	- 0-24 months - Explore the potential use of the MOPAC survey to explore work-based harms
	21. Local survey on the availability of flexible working in the borough	Lack of local data on the issue	- 12-24 months
	22. Replicate this research on a wider spatial scale	Due to high levels of cross-border commuting	- 0-24 months - Research collaborations via CLF
	23. Further explore the potential for a community unionism campaign	Understand issues of capacity & priorities for partners	- 0-24 months - Engaging with unions, 3rd sector, anchor institutions & businesses

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