

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

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Key Stats



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

Briefing for Islington Council on Work-Based Harms and Potential Policy Levers

Context and Background: Islington Council has faced significant financial constraints due to austerity, reducing its spending power by 45% since 2010 and cutting over £300 million from the budget. Despite these challenges, the council has endeavoured to mitigate the impact on essential services, including employment rights advice and support for precarious workers. This briefing synthesises key findings from research conducted on the prevalence of work-based harms in Islington, drawing attention to gaps in support, and highlighting possible policy levers and partnership working to promote good work.

Key Quantitative Data

- **National Minimum Wage Violations and Low Pay:** An estimated **3,500 residents and 4,200 workers in Islington** are paid at the National Minimum Wage, with national data suggesting around a quarter of these to be illegally paid below the minimum wage level. Women face higher rates of low pay in Greater London, particularly in sectors like hospitality (45%).
- **Employment Insecurity:** The prevalence of Zero-Hour Contracts (ZHCs) is relatively low for residents (<3%) but from national data we know it is a significant feature of sectors such as **health and social care (18%) and hospitality (27%)**. Female part-time employment rates are also high in Greater London, **52% in hospitality** and **44% in retail**.
- **Discrimination:** Employment rates in Islington are lower for Black British (55%) and Pakistani/Bangladeshi residents (47%) compared to White residents (81%).
- **Workplace Harassment:** Sexual harassment rates are higher in London (35%) than the British average (29%) and are particularly high in hospitality (40%).
- **28% of Universal Credit (UC) claimants in Islington are in work** and subject to demanding conditionality in terms of work search and vulnerable to benefit sanctions. UC is a major cause of in work poverty – 9 out of 10 low-income families on UC are going without the essentials.

Key Qualitative Insights

- **Pay Discrepancies:** Union representatives, particularly from Unite, reported widespread issues with unfair pay practices, such as **non-payment for uniforms** and **unpaid trial shifts** in the hospitality sector. Tipping policies have deteriorated, exacerbating financial pressures on workers.
 - “If you are a good waitress, tips make up a huge percentage of your income”. – Unite representative
- **Health and Safety Concerns:** Retail workers face increased exposure to violence, and conditions for couriers are particularly dangerous. Usdaw reported high levels of fear amongst workers in smaller retail outlets.
 - “Robberies can be pretty terrifying – every few weeks we have a member who is too scared to go to work”. – Usdaw representative
- **Discrimination:** Migrant workers often experience harassment and bullying, with systemic discrimination against minority groups, particularly in lower-paid, insecure jobs.
 - “Their employment position is extremely precarious. These are the precariat. They can be dismissed within minutes”. – Unite representative
- **Barriers to Organising:** Issues such as high turnover, lack of awareness about union benefits, and intimidation from employers hinder unionisation efforts, especially in fragmented workplaces with vulnerable, often migrant, workers.
 - “In the subcontracted transport companies they have an ever-revolving workforce and it’s really difficult to organise them”. – RMT representative

Case Studies of Successful Action

- **NEU and GMB Campaign in Education:** The NEU and GMB’s campaign at Tech City College successfully recruited teachers and took industrial action for recognition and improved terms and conditions. Key to their success was providing teachers with direct contacts for guidance on organising efforts, even in the absence of an established branch.
- **ACORN’s Housing Advocacy:** ACORN’s door-to-door outreach, including referrals from Help on Your Doorstep, has supported residents with housing issues, such as securing tenancy extensions, and tackled unfair evictions.
- **GMB Organising Outsourced Workers:** GMB have successfully organised outsourced parking wardens with NSL, building a sustainable structure of stewards and meetings, winning both union recognition and significant pay increases.
- **IWGB’s Blackstock Road Project:** Following the murder of Takieddine Boudhane in Islington in 2020 the IWGB developed a partnership with Islington Council, leading to important successes (advice provision, community building and dedicated courier parking at Highbury Corner).
- **Unite recognition agreement at Dalston Superstore:** Provides safe transport home and a sustainable structure of workplace reps, who can continue to build the union in the long term. A model that can be developed in Islington.

Challenges in Employment Rights Advice Provision

Islington's main employment advice service, ELAS (Employment Legal Advice Service), struggles with diminished resources compared to the earlier Make It Work initiative, reducing the capacity to address widespread issues. In 2023-24, ELAS served numerous clients, with **34% needing help with Employment Tribunals** and **31% facing issues around unpaid wages**, reflecting ongoing demand despite limited-service provision.

Examples of Levers

1. **Promote employment rights education in ACL and PSHE:** Partner with educators to ensure employment rights awareness is embedded into ACL and PSHE. Surveying teachers and developing specific lesson plans around employment rights could ensure this education is implemented effectively. Collaborate with unions like **Unite**, which has a dedicated **Unite in Schools** program, helping students understand real-world work challenges, such as the risks of **ZHCs** or **gig economy roles**.
2. **Invest in Employment Rights Advice:** Expanding employment rights advice, Newham's Employment Rights Hub offers a potential model. The Hub has in the last year supported **160 residents** in recovering over £1 million in unpaid wages and other successful outcomes.
3. **Promote Progressive Procurement as a form of ESG:** The Council could further develop its PPS (Progressive Procurement Strategy), incorporating the **London Mayor's Good Work Standard** and Net Zero targets. This could incentivise employers to offer better terms by prioritising social and environmental value and worker well-being in procurement and licensing.
4. **Flexible Working and Childcare Initiatives:** Undertake survey research to better understand flexible working availability in the borough, especially for single parents. Engage with unions and employers to promote best practices in sectors such as childcare, where recruitment and retention are issues due to **low pay and poor conditions**.
5. **Night-Time Economy Initiatives:** Collaborate with unions to tackle work-based harms in the night-time economy, leveraging licensing and anti-harassment policies. Unite's **Fair Hospitality Charter** could serve as a framework for improving working conditions in hospitality, an expanding sector in the borough.

Potential ways forward for Islington Council

1. **Support Community Unionism:** Build coalitions with local unions, community groups, and residents to advocate for better working conditions and increase union density across Islington.
2. **Promote Unionisation:** Support a borough-wide unionisation campaign, engaging with difficult-to-organise sectors such as **hospitality, retail, and care work**.
3. **Scale Up Employment Rights Advice:** Advocate for investment in funding and expanding advice services like ELAS to meet rising demand from vulnerable workers.
4. **Develop a Good Work Strategy:** Incorporate best practices such as the **Fair Hospitality Charter** into local policies, ensuring social value and worker well-being are prioritised in council procurement and licensing.
5. **Conduct Surveys:** Explore gaps in flexible working arrangements, childcare, and good work standards through local research to inform targeted interventions.

This briefing highlights the significant challenges facing workers in Islington and the scope for council intervention to promote better work conditions, higher pay, and increased union participation. Investing in these areas would provide long-term benefits for residents and workers alike, improving social mobility, reducing poverty, and fostering inclusive economic growth in the borough.

This briefing note is based on the scoping project [Work-based Harms and Union Renewal in the London Borough of Islington](#), in collaboration with Islington council, the Universities of Sheffield Hallam, Staffordshire and UCL and funded by Islington and CAPE.

