



COUNCILLORS' GUIDE TO DECENT WORK IN COMMISSIONING AND PROCUREMENT

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An enduring, severe job quality crisis is currently being concealed by high employment figures in the UK. Real wages are being squeezed. Low pay and poor job quality are having a profound effect on in-work poverty, personal wellbeing and income inequality.

In response, many councils are innovating to improve job quality in their area. Councils are major employers, they commission services from local businesses and charities, and they have considerable 'soft power' to influence local organisations. IPPR North researched the barriers and opportunities facing councils who are implementing this agenda, drawing on examples from local authorities in the North. The report recommended that councils and councillors explore and implement decent work, giving practical advice on how to do so.

This short guide is aimed at councillors who want to push forward the decent work agenda in their council, highlighting the initial steps they can take.

Councillors play a crucial role in commissioning and procurement. You work with officers to set out strategies which provide the framework for officers to work within, feed directly into the commissioning process to ensure political priorities and strategic policy is appropriately reflected by officers, and scrutinise decision-making to ensure the process and its outcomes are meeting strategic policy goals. If you want to implement a decent work agenda in your council's procurement and commissioning, we recommend the following.

- 1. Adopt a living wage policy.** Work with other councillors and, if possible, council leadership to adopt a living wage policy whereby all directly employed staff will be paid at least the real living wage in perpetuity, and outline the strategic aspiration for this to be replicated in procured services, with a view to becoming a living wage accredited employer. One way to do so could be working with the appropriate Overview & Scrutiny Chair to establish a living wage working, or task and finish, group, to develop the policy collectively.
- 2. Sign UNISON's Ethical Care Charter.** The homecare sector has large problems with poor terms and conditions for workers, which can reduce the standard of care received. UNISON's ethical care charter outlines a minimum standard for homecare services, including specific decent work commitments like paying a real living wage and abolishing zero hours contracts in place of permanent contracts.
- 3. Reference decent work principles in all strategies.** Make sure decent work considerations are accounted for by asking for them to be included in all strategies, such as the overarching council strategy, the local development plan, and health strategies.
- 4. Work with trade unions to deliver decent work policies.** Listen to their representatives, of both directly employed staff and procured services, to understand their aspirations, listen to their ideas, and consider ways to work together to advance this agenda.
- 5. Develop an Employment Charter or ask to be consulted on one that's already being developed.** As highlighted in this report, employment charters can be a tool used to encourage the private sector to adopt decent work principles and can also be levered into procurement to bolster decent work standards in suppliers. Feed into its development, making sure it is co-designed with businesses, trade unions, and employees to maximise take-up and emphasising how it should be used in commissioning and procurement.

6. **Use overview and scrutiny to monitor standards.** Ask questions about decent work principles across all procured services across the whole breadth of council services. Highlight that it is a political priority that all procurement activity aligns to strategic goals around decent work and ask for evidence that it is being implemented during procurement processes and by contractors delivering your services.
7. **Encourage local anchor organisations such as universities, health authorities and businesses to adopt decent work principles.** If you or colleagues sit on boards of organisations, consider asking questions about decent work policies for employees and procured services, and champion examples of best practice.
8. **Work with local enterprise partnerships and chambers of commerce, and other business-facing organisations, including any in-house business support.** Work with business-facing organisations to obtain buy-in from the private sector and to encourage the private sector to adopt decent work principles, as these organisations can articulate the benefits to businesses as well as to their employees of adopting them. Consider how council interaction with businesses, such as through any business support function, can be used to further advance the decent work agenda.
9. **Work across regions, subregions and neighbouring councils to discuss innovation in the decent work agenda.** Consider establishing cross-boundary working groups, discussion forums and other ways of regularly communicating about implementing decent work principles and innovations in implementing them. Ask your procurement teams how they work with other councils' teams to understand innovations.
10. **Promote decent work principles widely and visibly to the public and stakeholders.** Elected members have considerable influence through their local media, their social media and their links to their local community. Not only does promoting the agenda ensure they are held accountable to it, but it can also influence local businesses, other elected members in your and other councils to implement decent work principles.

The full IPPR North report, *Decent Work: Harnessing the power of local government*, outlines the ways councils can, and are, overcoming financial challenges and working through the legal issues, as well as exploring the soft power and influence they have (particularly in areas with metro mayors or combined authorities) and innovations around embedding decent work principles across wider local government activity. It makes further recommendations for how organisations in the North can work together and calls on central government to increase funding to local government. It can be found at www.ippr.org/research/publications/decent-work or you can contact Marcus Johns (m.johns@ippr.org) with any queries.

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