

Buying social justice

How socially responsible public procurement can advance equality in employment

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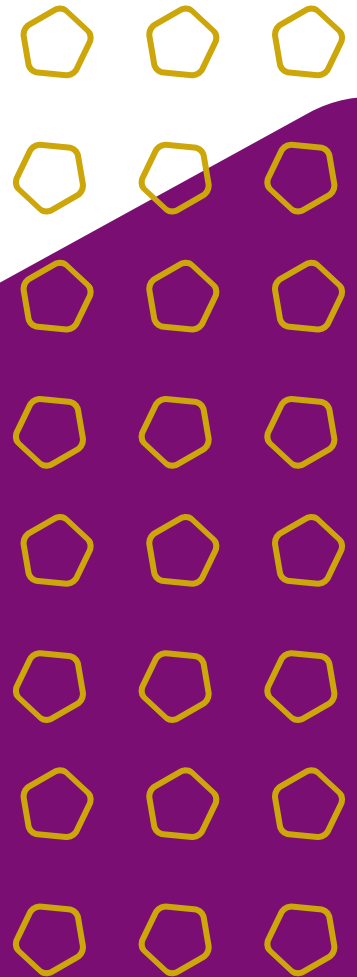
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Research Insights #6

The public sector has a powerful lever to advance equality in employment: socially responsible procurement. Our research – examining public procurement in local authorities, housing associations and universities in England, Scotland and Wales – identified examples of socially responsible practice. But it also showed much more could be done to advance equality in employment through procurement.

Centre for Research in Equality and Diversity

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Each year, the public sector spends around **£296bn** procuring goods, works and services from the private and the third sector, everything from road maintenance and recycling to design, construction and community social care. The public sector can use this significant spending power to improve the lives of local people and communities by incorporating social justice objectives in the procurement process – we call this ‘buying social justice’.

Research overview

Our research examined the procurement practices of UK local authorities, housing associations and universities, as well as a major infrastructure project and a transport authority. We investigated how equality, diversity and inclusion (**EDI**) aims are addressed within public procurement including:

- an **international literature review**
- **33 interviews** and **3 workshops** with procurement and equality practitioners
- survey of **109 procurement officers**
- **9 case studies** of good practice

We found good examples of how EDI objectives are addressed in procurement practice, but that it was not widespread across the public sector.

With evidence-based guidance, support and training, public sector procurement specialists and equality practitioners can be empowered to incorporate EDI objectives into public procurement to deliver social change.

We have developed a free interactive EDI toolkit to help practitioners working in public procurement to achieve this (page 3).

Recommendations for public sector procurement specialists

1

Develop socially responsible procurement policies and guidance that incorporate EDI aims, alongside aims to reduce socio-economic inequality.

4

Public sector EDI specialists and procurement practitioners should work together to develop fairer procurement practices.

2

Use procurement strategy to address patterns of disadvantage in your local community or in a particular employment sector, drawing on data.

5

Highlight the links between public environmental sustainability aims and equality objectives as you develop your procurement strategies and policies.

3

Develop specific EDI training for procurement practitioners and those bidding for public contracts as part of their professional development.

6

Collaborate with trade unions and civil society groups on embedding equality in procurement.

Socially responsible procurement: why it matters

Women, racialised minorities and disabled people, among others, continue to face disadvantage and discrimination in the labour market and are underrepresented in some sectors. Public bodies can use their buying power to help support and incentivise more diversity in employment. They have a legal duty to consider how to achieve social value and community benefits from the services they commission and wider obligations to people with protected characteristics under equality laws.

Our research examined whether and how UK public sector organisations are using procurement to advance equality in employment, evaluating how effective this work is.

Uneven adoption of equality objectives in procurement

We found examples of organisations that have used their procurement strategies to pursue equality objectives, leading to the employment of more under-represented or disadvantaged groups in communities. However, this is not widespread and there is considerable scope to increase this practice.

Our research showed that procurement practitioners in the public sector:

- work under resource and time pressures
- lack expertise in embedding EDI principles
- feel pressure to prioritise costs rather than EDI
- believed that training in social value, including EDI, supports good practice.

Current focus is on reducing socio-economic inequalities

Procurement strategies in Scotland, Wales and some English councils promote fair work, but often focus on socio-economic inequality over other equality issues, such as gender or ethnicity. A more nuanced approach is needed, recognising that some people face multiple disadvantages, with employment targets that reflect this.

Importance of collaboration

Collaboration among varied groups of stakeholders is key to effective socially responsible procurement. This includes networks linking procurement practitioners, joint working between local authorities, civil society groups, including trade unions, suppliers and contractors, and local communities.

The golden thread throughout procurement

Social justice can only be achieved if incorporating issues of equality, diversity, fair work, community benefits and social value is a 'golden thread' woven throughout the five stages of procurement.



Use our free equality and diversity toolkit

Procurement practitioners wanted guidance on integrating equality. Drawing on our research, we have produced a free interactive toolkit with real examples from across the public sector highlighting principles of good practice and guidance on how to incorporate EDI objectives into your procurement.

The toolkit contains valuable information for procurement officers, for EDI practitioners wanting to understand procurement, for trade unionists promoting equality at work, and businesses and third sector organisations seeking to work with the public sector.



[The toolkit] helps demystify the procurement process and puts meat on the bones of the 'how' – what are the entry points for those seeking to support equalities in workplaces across the life cycle of the procurement process.”

Abigail Hunt, policy officer – public services, Trades Union Congress



Access the toolkit:

www.buyingsocialjustice.org.uk/toolkit

How Islington council is using procurement to support a more diverse construction industry

Islington council uses progressive procurement and planning policies to help achieve its equality and fairness objectives. The construction employment team, for example, has an ambitious target that 25% of all jobs on construction sites in the borough are filled by women. The team reported that this reached 12% in 2022, of which 80% were in the building trades, significantly above the national average of 2%. Other best practice includes effective lobbying by a community campaign, and council officers proactively involved in a cross-departmental group to bring social value into the commissioning process.

Read this and other case studies of good practice: buyingsocialjustice.org.uk/case-studies

Underpinning research

Wright, T., Conley, H., Mamode, J. and Sarter, E.K. (2023). Buying Social Justice Through Procurement. Report of project findings



Professor Tessa Wright

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Professor Wright has been conducting research on equality and discrimination at work for many years. Her interest in equality and diversity started while working for the labour movement as a researcher and editor at the Labour Research Department. She has researched and published widely on equality at work, with a focus on male-dominated sectors (construction, transport and firefighting). She is interested in the barriers to and levers for achieving equality and diversity, including trade union interventions and public procurement.



Dr Joyce Mamode

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Dr Mamode had a number of years' experience as a senior public sector manager and a trade union researcher before completing her doctoral research examining the contribution of trade union equality reps. Joyce's current research interests are centred around worker voice and influence, both within organisations and within trade unions particularly in relation to equality and diversity issues.



Professor Hazel Conley

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Professor Conley has written extensively on discrimination and inequality in the workplace, particularly in relation to the development and effectiveness of legal interventions. She has undertaken critical research on the concepts of multiple discrimination and intersectionality, focusing recently on the impact of the economic crisis, austerity, 'Brexit' and the Covid-19 pandemic.



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Dr Sarter is a political scientist with expertise in public and social policy, regulation, particularly of labour, governance of public services, equality and comparative research. Katharina's recent research focuses on social public procurement, the use of public procurement as a tool for regulating labour and promoting equality, digitalisation and governance of public services.

Acknowledgments

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For this brief: Editor Nick Sarson | Design [Research Retold](#)