



## Japan Local Government Centre, London

### Monthly Report for August 2010 (England) – Islington Fairness Commission

#### **Background**

*The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better* was published by sociologists Professor Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett in 2009 and has become a bestseller (by academic standards) in the UK, selling 36,000 copies as of August 2010 and running to a second edition. The text and its key message, that more equal societies ultimately perform better and have a better quality of life, has particularly become talismanic for the UK left since the advent of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government in May 2010. The book has attracted widespread praise among the liberal press and from leaders of both the Labour and Green parties. It has however been attacked vociferously by journalists and think tanks of the political right however, who question its evidence base and conclusions, accusing the book of being socialist propaganda or an appeal for big government.

Based on thirty years of research, it claims that for each of 11 different health and social problems: physical health, mental health, drug abuse, education, imprisonment, obesity, social mobility, trust and community life, violence, teenage births, and child well-being, outcomes are substantially worse in more unequal rich countries. Statistics are given for 23 of the top 50 rich countries and also for 50 states of the United States of America. The book's evidence base and conclusions are actively promoted by the Equality Trust organisation set up by Wilkinson and Pickett to further their work.

While the book found Japan to be one of the most equal societies in the world based on the outcomes examined (alongside Scandinavian countries), critics cited Japan's gender inequality and high suicide rate as possibly detracting from this ranking.

#### **'It's Grim Up North London'**

In the May 2010 London Borough elections, Islington returned a Labour council after almost a decade of Liberal Democrat leadership. Islington has long been associated with 'New Labour' on account of Tony Blair's residency in the borough before the 1997 general election and the infamous 1994 'deal' brokered between him and Gordon Brown over the Labour leadership in its Granita restaurant. London Mayor Boris Johnson lives in the borough and it is known in London for its affluent character and nightlife. However, the borough also has a number of deprived council estates alongside this.

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In July 2010 the new council leadership announced the formation of the Islington Fairness Commission, headed by Professor Wilkinson, to examine the factors which contribute to poverty and inequality of life chances in the borough and to recommend policies for the council to adopt to reduce these. It will meet seven times, to hear evidence, consider the problem and come up with practical solutions. An interim report will be drafted in December, with a final report in April next year. These will be used to help inform next year's budget and the council's ongoing programme. Commissioners include senior figures from Islington Council, Islington Police, NHS, Homes for Islington, Islington Trades Council, Islington Chamber of Commerce, City and Islington College, the Cripplegate Foundation, and the London School of Economics.

Islington Council Leader Catherine West said: *"The new council leadership is passionate about making a fairer - and better - Islington for all. This is about making sure that people in Islington, especially the most deprived, have a better future for themselves and their families. It's also about protecting our most vulnerable people at a time when budget cuts of all kinds are looming large nationally."*

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