

# PLYMOUTH White Papers

Issue 1: Ambition

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#PlymouthWhitePapers

An initiative by Luke Pollard MP

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Thoughtful pieces designed to confront and challenge

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Views from people in Plymouth to make you think differently

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Ideas to inspire and create political change through discussion



## WOMEN IN STEM

### ***DR LORNA DALLAS, CHAIR OF WOMEN IN STEM PLYMOUTH***

Across the UK, women are underrepresented in science, technology, engineering and maths (known collectively as STEM), making up only about 23% of the core STEM workforce. This problem is the result of complex social and political issues, and Plymouth is no exception to the gender inequality.

‘So what?’ I hear you cry. Well, the fact is that this situation is undeniably bad for business - for the fairly obvious reason that (unintentionally) excluding half the population means that you miss out on a lot of great ideas. In fact, 2015 research from McKinsey shows that businesses that buck this trend by being more gender diverse are 15% more likely to be more profitable than their competitors. So, we must take action if we want more profitable, strong and diverse businesses to grow in our ocean city.

The good news is that Plymouth’s women in STEM do not have wild, unrealistic ambitions for their city. Over and over again, the women I interviewed for this piece asked for the same, simple thing: equality. Of opportunity. Of respect. They want to be judged for what they do, not what gender they are; in a city where the employees and leaders of STEM companies are equally likely to be male or female.

The bad news is that this simple request is not so easy to grant. The problem of how to make Plymouth better for women in STEM is not an easy one to solve - it requires some bold steps and brave people to lead the way. Which is why I was so pleased to be asked to write this essay as part of the Plymouth White Papers.

**“Plymouth can sometimes feel like a city that suffers from imposter syndrome - we think we are not good enough for the big leagues, when in reality, that couldn’t be further from the truth.”**

One of the biggest challenges that faces women in STEM (and actually women in other sectors as well) is ‘imposter syndrome’ - the belief that despite their accomplishments, they are actually no good, and are in danger of being exposed as a ‘fraud’ at any time. For women in STEM, this

problem can result in a lack of confidence, putting themselves down, or not grabbing opportunities when they arise. In this respect, Plymouth can sometimes feel like a city that suffers from imposter syndrome - we think we are not good enough for the big leagues, when in reality, that couldn't be further from the truth.

I also asked the women I interviewed: "What does Plymouth have on offer for women in STEM?". In response to this question, I mostly got a sea of blank faces. To be clear, these are intelligent, proactive, successful women, who are engaged with the community, but they still didn't know what Plymouth was doing for them. Communicating what we do well is not our greatest strength.

It might surprise you to learn that our ocean city is already leading the way in terms of STEM initiatives across the UK. The city's innovative STEM forum, which produced a landmark strategy this year, aims to inspire local people of all ages to develop STEM skills and pursue STEM-related careers. Plymouth is also home to the annual STEMFEST festival, run by the National Marine Aquarium, Women in STEM Plymouth, an active and growing networking group for those interested in increasing gender equality in STEM (which I lead), and a hugely successful manufacturing sector supported by the Plymouth Manufacturers' Group (currently celebrating their 40<sup>th</sup> year).

**“We must make bold commitments to gender equality where other cities have just paid lip service to it.”**

All this shouldn't be surprising. After all, Plymouth has a strong industrial heritage and lots of large visible STEM institutions - from the magnificent civil engineering of the Tamar Bridge to the sprawling Cattewater harbour with its oil and gas. Our marine biological institutions lead the world in their fields, and the National Marine Aquarium inspires thousands of people to conserve our oceans each year. The Theatre Royal is world-class, and its production workshop, TR2, is a hive of creativity where the Arts meet STEM as sets

and costumes are designed. All these things and more make women (and men) in STEM proud to live and work here. But we mustn't rest on our laurels; there is still much work to be done. We must make bold commitments to gender equality where other cities have just paid lip service to it.

The organisation that I lead, Women in STEM Plymouth (WISP), aims to increase gender equality in three main ways: *inspiring* more women and girls to embark on a STEM career, *supporting* those women when they do so by providing a network of like-minded individuals; and *promoting* the fantastic work of women in STEM within our local area.

Let's take those three key words - inspire, support, promote - and make a manifesto around them. A pledge for women in STEM (and in general) to produce a better Plymouth that is invested in them, now and in the future.

**To inspire girls into STEM careers, a better Plymouth doesn't reinforce outdated gender stereotypes.**

Recent research suggests stereotypes are so powerful that by age 6, girls see women as less talented than men. Instead of accepting this disheartening state of affairs, let's engage with our retailers to create a haven for children - where their imagination is not constrained by their gender. Where little girls can wear t-shirts with space rockets and little boys can wear pink proudly. And every possible combination in between is accepted happily. Why shouldn't Drake Circus and Cornwall Street be the first shopping areas in the country to work with campaigns like Let Toys Be Toys and completely remove "boys" and "girls" sections from their stores? Let's allow our children to *really* choose, instead of accidentally pushing them down the same old gendered paths.

**To inspire women and girls, a better Plymouth celebrates its fantastic female role models.**

Role models are vitally important for inspiring women of all ages into STEM careers. Who hasn't been motivated by a teacher, mentor, parent or other figure of authority? Plymouth has hundreds of fantastic women, leading the way in STEM roles. Whether they're world-leading scientists, hands-on engineers, fantastic communicators, teachers, or software pioneers, they all have the ability to inspire others - even if they don't know it yet. Let's reach out to our community and celebrate the Mayflower 400<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in 2020 by showcasing profiles of 400 women across the city. We know they're out there, time to let them inspire!

**To support women in STEM, a better Plymouth is a place that shows them they are equal and valued citizens by sending a powerful message - 'Sexism isn't welcome here'.**

In the wake of recent scandals that have rocked Hollywood and elsewhere, do you really think no Plymouth woman said #metoo? No. In fact, I know from my personal social media feeds that many did. Our city suffers from the same problems - where sexual harassment and everyday sexism blight the lives of women. Let's stand together as a city and create campaigns to educate, empower and encourage people to say "No, that's not acceptable". Why can't we have a simple, accredited standard, that bars, clubs, restaurants and public spaces can be awarded, which says women are safe and valued here?

**To support women in STEM, a better Plymouth is connected to the rest of our country and the world.**

A key issue for women in STEM is isolation. Being the only woman in your department, building or even company can be lonely - no matter how well you get on with your male colleagues. This problem can be compounded by Plymouth's distance from the rest of the UK. If you move here for work and it takes more than 5 hours to visit your family or friends, of course you are more likely to leave. Fast, reliable transport networks allow women in STEM to both succeed at work and connect with their families and friends 'up the line'.

**To promote our fantastic women in STEM, a better Plymouth doesn't allow men to dominate public events just because it is easy to do so.**

What's stopping Plymouth from being the first city in the UK to insist that none of the conferences we host in 2018 have only male speakers? It's certainly not the number of brilliant women available. Sure, it can be difficult to find women who are happy to speak - particularly as the pool of people to choose from (in STEM at least) is smaller, and you don't want to burden the same few women with the extra work all the time.

But why not try harder? Why not engage with groups like WISP or Plymouth Women in Business Networking for ideas? Why not advertise in new ways to attract different people? Thinking outside the box not only promotes more women in STEM, it also broadens the scope of an event and brings in new people and new opinions, which is a win for all involved. And when people ask *why* they must include women on the speaker list, let's engage them with facts and empower people to explain why this benefits everyone.

**To promote women in STEM, a better Plymouth shouts about its achievements.**

When we have done all these things to make Plymouth a better place for women in STEM (and everyone else), let's celebrate our success. Shout it from the rooftops! Let's get the better of our imposter syndrome. Plymouth *is* a great place to work in STEM. If we don't talk about it, how will anyone ever know?

Plymouth has the potential to achieve this dream, if we all work together. Let's continue to build on the success we've had with the STEM forum and other initiatives, and show the rest of the UK and the world how to build a city where *everyone* is equal.

***Lorna Dallas is a scientist and engineer. In her spare time, she chairs local voluntary group, Women in STEM Plymouth, and is passionate about creating a more gender equal world.***  
***[www.winstemplymouth.org](http://www.winstemplymouth.org)***

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# PLYMOUTH White Papers

The Plymouth White Paper are an initiative by Luke Pollard MP. They are designed to provoke, inspire and challenge. The hope is that each set of white papers will contribute to the energy, direction and passion around Plymouth, our economy and campaigning.

These white paper submissions have been written by people across Plymouth. They have been free to voice their own opinions and these are their own words. The white papers are designed to be political and challenge established thinking but they're not designed to be party political.

Want to get involved with a future white paper? Get in touch:

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