

My Fair London – Past, Present and Future

Paper by Sean Baine, Vice Chair, November 2021

Introduction

1. The Spirit Level was published in 2009 and The Equality Trust launched in the same year. Following the launch many individuals contacted the Trust to ask what they could do to promote the messages in The Spirit Level. This led to the establishment of local groups including My Fair London – then known as The London Equality Group. The first meetings of the London Equality Group were held in 2010 and ever since then there have been regular monthly meetings – mostly business meetings but also a number of public meetings with guest speakers.
2. In this paper I outline who has been attending the meetings and then give a summary of activities over the past 11 years before discussing some issues concerning the present state of the group and options for the future.

Group meetings and attendance

3. The figures given in the following paragraphs are based on all the minutes of meetings that either I had or that John Philo was able to give me. There may be one or two that are missing. The figures are based only on business meetings and not on the more public meetings with speakers which brought in much higher numbers – usually around 40-60 – and even more during the pandemic when we were using zoom.
4. Over the 11 years the minutes show that at least 216 people attended at least one meeting (up to August 2021). However many of these only attended one or two meetings as the following figures show.

Meeting attendance

1 meeting – 130
2 meetings – 25
3 meetings – 16
4 meetings – 7
5 meetings – 1
6-10 meetings – 15
11-20 meetings – 12
20-30 meetings – 6
31 – 40 meetings -1
40 – 60 meetings – 0
60+ meetings - 3

From these figures it can be seen that well over half of those attending only came to one meeting while over 80% came to less than five meetings. This meant that the great bulk of the work of My Fair London over this period fell to between 35 and 40 people with only 3 people being consistent throughout most of the life of the group.

5. Average attendance at business meetings per year was as follows:

2010 – 14
2011 – 14
2012 – 15.6
2013 – 11.9
2014 – 8.4
2015 – 10
2016 – 11.4
2017 – 10.1
2018 – 9
2019 – 6.8
2020 – 6.7
2021 – 10

It can be seen that there was slight drop off from the first three years with a definite decline in 2019 and 2020 – although 2020 was the first year of the pandemic and records are sparse. There has been a bit of a recovery in the current year.

6. No systematic records have been kept of age, gender and ethnicity of those attending business meetings. However the majority of those attending have been white and male. Of those attending 10 or more meetings all were white while 17 were male and 8 were female. Accepting that this is somewhat subjective 10 were older, 9 middle aged and 6 younger. All three of those attending 60 or more meetings were white and male with two being older and one middle aged.

7. Clearly diversity in all its forms is an issue for the group. However it also has to be accepted that for the young and middle aged there will be many distractions from being an active part of a group such as My Fair London – careers and family being the most obvious but also the many other opportunities for being involved in politics or pressure groups or not for profits. The group that such pressures were most obvious in were those attending between 6 and 30 meetings whose attendance usually ended because of one or more of such events e.g. taking on a new job or relocating outside London or starting a family.

8. Of concern also is the very large number of people who only came to one, two or three meetings – particularly the 130 who only came to one meeting. Here there would appear to be two main contributing factors. Firstly it is not clear to people coming for the first time what the “offer” is – what is the group looking to people to contribute? From early on the Group had defined a number of roles it wanted people to take on which included chair, secretary, treasurer, membership secretary, parliamentary liaison, website and social media, events organiser, liaison with other groups including trades unions and churches and writing blogs, leaflets and pamphlets. However, and this takes us on to the second point, people had to be self starting in these roles as with a group of volunteers such as My Fair London there were no support or supervisory options available. Those leading the group did not have the time to offer such support as they were usually leading on particular activities of their own. This situation might have changed after The Equality Trust got funding for a London worker which included support for My Fair London but, because that worker was not responsible to My Fair London, this did not work in practice. The worker did add capacity to My Fair London e.g. in organising successful public zoom meetings but they were not available for support of new members or new projects.
9. Currently there are 1,650 addresses on the core e-mail list. Over the last year on average around a quarter of messages are opened and there are about 2% click throughs. Over the last two years there have been 25 update or information messages to the e-mail list.
10. One conclusion from this evidence is that there needs to be a full discussion with The Equality Trust who are about to recruit a new London worker about the role of that worker in relation to My Fair London.

Group activities

11. Before outlining the activities of My Fair London over the past 11 years it is worth making a couple of preliminary points.
12. Firstly The Spirit Level and The Equality Trust both appeared in 2009. This was the tail end of the Labour government coping with the financial crisis of 2008. The general election in 2010 returned a coalition government with austerity as its main theme blaming the recession on overspending by the Labour government rather than on the failings of the financial system and irresponsible bankers and investors – a narrative not sufficiently challenged by the Labour opposition. This was followed by a Conservative government in 2015 and then a further coalition in 2017 involving the Ulster Unionists followed by another election in 2019 which brought a clear Conservative

majority. The latter years of these governments were also dominated by the Brexit debate. These general election results meant that there was never a sympathetic political climate for recognising inequality as a major issue or offering opportunities for action to be taken to reduce inequality. Many Conservative politicians may have said they were concerned about it but it was always unlikely that any significant action would be taken to ameliorate it.

13. In addition at a London level Boris Johnson was the Mayor between 2008 and 2016 which, again, meant that there was little sympathy for tackling issues of inequality. And while there was more sympathy for these issues from the current Mayor, and the appointment of a Deputy Mayor for Communities and Social Justice, specific discussion of inequality issues has been lacking. And, more recently, issues concerning the pandemic have been all important.
14. It is also worth noting that the main actions that would reduce inequality are national and concern pay differentials at work, more oversight of the private sector and progressive taxation of income and wealth with a consequent increase in state spending on areas such as education, housing and health. This was recognised in the early days of the London Equality Group when efforts were put into issues such as scrutinising the plans of the coalition government formed in 2010 and developing a Kitemark for businesses. This did lead to a difficult conversation with The Equality Trust about the role of local groups leading to an agreement about the role of local groups. In fact the London Equality Group soon recognised that it did not have the resources to work at a national level and decided to concentrate on London wide issues and on the London public and London representatives, including London MPs.

Spreading the message and influencing the public

15. One of the earliest projects was the development of a large black cube with inequality messages on its side for use in public spaces and on demonstrations. This was followed by the building of The Giant, an inflatable representing the salary of the Chief Executive of a large company, with small figures representing the lower salaries of retail staff, health workers and others. The Giant made a number of appearances and always drew attention to itself and inequality issues. After its development there were some plans for more systematic appearances e.g. in the City, but these never came to anything partly through lack of organisational capacity and partly through lack of volunteers willing to support it. The giant last appeared with Positive Money in 2019 outside the Bank of England.
16. Members of My Fair London attended, amongst other marches and demonstrations, a March for the Alternative in 2011, a TUC Rally in 2012, a rally against benefits cuts in 2013, a March for Homes in 2015 and anti-

austerity marches, usually accompanied by the cube or the Giant but at times through having a stall.

17. The group was very aware of the importance of social media. The website was redesigned and developed in 2011/2012 and periodically after that. Most recently it has been completely revised as part of influencing the Mayoral campaign in 2021 and now brings together different pieces of evidence under each of the main headings in the My Fair London agenda for change. There was a Facebook page and a Twitter account which reached a height of 53,000 “tweet impressions” in March 2021 as part of the Mayoral campaign although by July this had dropped to 431 showing how things can build when there is some activity and decline when nothing is happening. Currently there are 383 followers on twitter. All of these had someone keeping them up to date but the amount of time that volunteers could give to them was limited and therefore they were not as effective as they might have been.
18. The group has also acted as an umbrella or support to various efforts to run local borough-based inequality campaign groups. A Bromley group was active for many years, running a Saturday morning stall on the high street. A member tried to stimulate a West London group for a couple of years, running several public meetings in Ealing with partner organisations, and some members tried to launch a Paddington group for a while in 2015/16. These local groups have always depended on the energy and commitment of one or two committed individuals. Most recently during the pandemic Islington members have launched a local direct-action poverty alleviation programme.

Public Meetings

19. In later years My Fair London, in conjunction with The Equality Trust, sponsored a number of public meetings with keynote speakers. These included talks by Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson on their two books, Danny Dorling, John Hills on housing, Michael Marmot on his reports and health inequalities, Will Hutton, Tess Lanning and Kayte Lawton from IPPR, Zoe Williams from the Guardian, Jo Littler on her book *Against Meritocracy*, Dario Kenner on inequality and environmental issues, Emma Coad Dent, MP for Kensington, Bob Hughes on his book *Bleeding Edge*, Ann Pettifor on the Green New Deal, Rowland Atkinson on his book *Alpha City*; Dianne Reay on education, Michael Edwards and Lucy Roberts from Just Space and speakers from Positive Money and Share Action. These events were well supported with, usually, between 40 and 60 people although later ones on zoom attracted many more. In 2018 My Fair London began hosting these public meetings in partnership with Toynbee Hall.

20. My Fair London also sent speakers to a number of groups, particularly local Labour Parties but also to academic meetings and other community groups. To help with this a London based presentation on inequality issues and the messages of The Spirit Level has been prepared and a presentation training session was run.

Publications

21. The first major publication was Why Inequality Matters, a summary of The Spirit Level in accessible pamphlet form. This was mainly written by a My Fair London member and then produced with CLASS who distributed it to trades unions. It was also sold and given out at many meetings and events.

22. Each of the Mayoral elections brought printed manifestos. In addition there were two publications on specific topics – Inequality and the Economy and Housing and Inequality in London. There have also been a number of blogs – around 30 blog posts between 2016 and 2019 including the odd book or external event reviews as well as write ups of My Fair London public meetings and responses to Mayoral consultations. Currently the website brings together under the 2021 agenda for London headings, evidence, blogs, publications and talks on seven different topics.

London Fairness Commission

23. My Fair London promoted the idea of a London Fairness Commission and working with Toynbee Hall convinced Trust for London, City Bridge Trust, Tudor Trust and London Funders to provide substantial funding of nearly £150,000. After a feasibility study it was established in 2015 and reported in early 2016 in the lead up to the Mayoral elections. It was chaired by Lord Victor Adebawale and had 15 members including a representative from My Fair London.

24. After an extensive consultation process The Commission produced recommendations on the costs of living in London, the need for a higher living wage, protecting homes for Londoners, a fairer deal for renters, more homes for Londoners, making property tax fairer, keeping London honest, a fair chance for every young Londoner, making wealth work for Londoners and keeping fairness under the microscope.

25. The report was launched at an event with Sadiq Khan who pledged to put action on economic inequality at the heart of his programme in action. However not one of the recommendations of the Commission have been implemented.

Elections

26. Since the setting up of My Fair London there have been elections in 2010 (national), 2012 (London Mayor), 2015 (national), 2016 (London Mayor); 2017 (national), 2019 (national) and 2021 (London Mayor delayed for a year because of the pandemic).
27. Nationally in 2010 an equality pledge was sent to all London MP candidates as part of a national campaign. Around 50% of the main party candidates signed it which included over half of the MPs actually elected. In 2015 letters were again sent to all London candidates – there were 50 responses (out of a total nationally of 83 responses) and seven of those responding from London were elected. Activity was much less around the 2017 election (although a letter was sent to candidates) and the 2019 election – indeed there is no mention of the 2019 election in the My Fair London minutes!
28. Part of the follow up to the earlier elections was a newsletter for all MPs (which lasted for two editions) and a meeting at the House of Commons of sympathetic MPs. My Fair London was also involved in 2011 in getting MPs to sign an Early Day Motion on promoting equality – around 100 MPs nationally signed the EDM of which a quarter came from London. However in later years work with MPs lessened significantly with more emphasis being given to London Mayoral elections. This is an area of work that may be important to look to again in the future.
29. Work on each of the Mayoral elections has been significant with manifestos produced in 2012 and 2016 (5 steps for a fairer city) and a manifesto for a fairer city - We Mind The Gap – for the cancelled election in 2020. These have been sent to Mayoral candidates. In 2012 a hustings was held for the representatives of each of the main parties. In 2016 My Fair London was involved in a joint hustings. Leading up to the 2021 election there was a meeting in 2019 followed by two zoom sessions in 2020, each with around 30 people, deciding on the My Fair London manifesto which was to be presented to candidates. This was published with a redesign of the web site as our Agenda for a Fairer London 2021. Also in 2021 MFL hosted two Mayoral candidates zoom sessions with the Liberal Democrat and Green candidates. The Labour candidate acknowledged receipt of the invitation but was not able to agree to a date for a session. No response was received from the Conservative candidate. However while candidates were clearly aware of My Fair London input it is unclear what effect this had on the successful candidates.

30. During the 2021 election campaign (and afterwards) My Fair London directly contacted over 80 of the candidates for the London Assembly. Nearly all the Green's and a handful of Labour candidates endorsed our 'Agenda for a Fairer City', but these contacts have not been followed up systematically.

The Mayor and the Greater London Authority

31. There have been some interactions with the Mayor on policy matters. Detailed comments were made on the Mayor's Good Work Standards, the London Plan, the economic development strategy, the housing strategy and the health inequalities strategy and MFL volunteers attended several consultation meetings with city hall officials. My Fair London was also a named participant at two sessions of the Examination in Public for the replacement London Plan.

32. A meeting was held with the first Deputy Mayor for Communities and Social Justice in which My Fair London outlined concern for action on inequality, discussed the Mayor's plans for an economic equity unit at the GLA, asked the Mayor to make a significant speech supporting action on inequality, asked for an update on implementing the London Fairness Commission recommendations and how these might be followed up and seeking a joint My Fair London/GLA meeting later in the year. Nothing came of these discussions. An invitation was then given to his successor in a letter in January 2019 inviting her to address one of My Fair London's public meetings. Nothing came of this.

33. In essence, due to a lack of resources in the group there has been no systematic interaction with the range of issues over which the Mayor has effective control – and no sense that the Mayor has pressed government on behalf of Londoners on issues of income and wealth inequality.

The London Boroughs

34. Interaction with London Boroughs has been through The Fairness 15. The Fairness 15 was produced by The Equality Trust and consists of 15 policies that local authorities could adopt to reduce inequality in their areas.

35. In 2019 My Fair London decided to approach all boroughs in London to see how many of these policies individual boroughs had adopted and to encourage all authorities to adopt more of them. Initially the approaches to authorities were undertaken by My Fair London members who lived in a particular borough. However early 2020 saw the beginning of the Covid pandemic and it was clear that local authorities had, as their first priority, responding to the pandemic. Therefore My Fair London put on hold plans to contact all London boroughs for responses, using Freedom of Information legislation if necessary.

36. Before putting these plans on hold responses had been received from 12 boroughs – Brent, Camden, Enfield, Hackney, Haringey, Harrow, Hounslow, Islington, Lambeth, Sutton, Waltham Forest and Wandsworth – and from the City of London. In addition meetings had been held with Ealing and Hammersmith and Fulham with responses promised from both of them.
37. My Fair London has summarised the responses that have been received and highlighted areas of good practice. However it is difficult to evaluate the usefulness of these responses. They mainly came from inner London boroughs and because of the delays caused by the pandemic much of the information may now be out of date. The least that can be said is that the issue of income inequality has been raised in 12 boroughs and the City of London by our requests for information – and before the pandemic was also being considered in Ealing and Hammersmith and Fulham – giving a coverage of nearly half of the total number of boroughs.
38. For the recent local elections The Equality Trust put forward five questions that could be asked of candidates:
- Will they commit to adopting the Socio-Economic Duty to evaluate the likely impact of policies on socio-economic inequality, if not already adopted?
 - Will they commit to paying all directly and indirectly contracted council staff the Real Living Wage (as set by the Living Wage Foundation)?
 - Will they ensure that policies and practices to tackle the climate crisis are hitting those that pollute the most and not increasing inequality?
 - Will they commit to putting concrete processes in place to encourage, listen and respond to those with lived experience of the issues and in particular, the voices of young people?
 - Will they commit to tackling health inequalities in their area?
39. Before embarking on any further work in this area, and committing to approaching all London boroughs, it would be useful to meet with The Equality Trust after the London worker is appointed, to see if we still consider it useful to approach boroughs on so many topics or whether some version of TET's Fairness Five might be more manageable.
40. Also at a borough level it should be noted that there have been two attempts to form local borough based groups. The first and longest running of these was in Bromley where two My Fair London members regularly ran a stall in the local market to inform local people. They also approached the local authority to ask it to engage with inequality issues but with no useful outcome. The group no longer operates. The second initiative by a My Fair London member was in West London based on Ealing and Hounslow where a number

of meetings were held, latterly in conjunction with Compass. However again the group could not be sustained.

Other initiatives and other groups

41. Over the period of 11 years since My Fair London started there have been possible projects and initiatives with other groups such as Share Action and Psychologists for Social Change. Early initiatives included a photographic project based on the A41 and the development of educational materials (this last project was then taken up by The Equality Trust). My Fair London has been a member of the London Child Poverty Alliance. Particular projects have also been suggested around the media in London and around developing an app that could map inequality in London.
42. A particular issue has been around engaging with academic institutions and think tanks. Where this happens at a national level this is the responsibility of The Equality Trust e.g. the work of the High Pay Centre, the New Economics Foundation, Resolution Foundation and the Institute for Financial Studies which is undertaking a major review of inequality funded by the Nuffield Foundation. In London the body of this sort that My Fair London relates to is the Centre for London. The Centre is currently undertaking a Review – London Futures – which is a study of London over the next 30 years. It has produced an initial report – London at a Crossroads – and My Fair London has produced an initial response to that report. Continuous engagement with this study will be needed throughout its life.
43. It has been an ongoing concern of My Fair London that it should make better connections with a number of groups in London pursuing similar aims and a number of individuals within the group have agreed to take on the task of tracking other groups and noting opportunities to make contact with them, invite them to attend My Fair London meetings, attend their meetings, offer to speak at their meetings and then develop joint projects. Volunteers have at times researched detailed lists of target groups but as with the initiatives outlined in the previous paragraphs this has not come to fruition because of a lack of resources in an all volunteer group – a theme that will be explored further in the next section which looks to the future.

Looking to the Future

44. My Fair London has always been clear about the range of actions and issues it would like to be involved in. These can be summarised as:
 - Informing the public about inequality issues in London and encouraging activism around these issues
 - Keeping London MPs informed on inequality issues so that they can influence national government

- Influencing the Mayor and the Assembly to recognise inequality as a, if not the, key issue affecting Londoners and asking the Mayor to highlight these issues both by taking action himself where he has authority to do so and by making the case to government for national action
- Influencing the Boroughs to act to reduce inequality in their areas
- Working with, and influencing, other stakeholders and bodies in London (private sector, trades unions, think tanks, voluntary organisations) to recognise inequality as a key issue affecting Londoners and to take action by themselves or through influencing government

45. A programme based on this range of ideas and actions might contain the following:

- My Fair London presence in public places and at public events highlighting issues of inequality e.g. using The Giant
- A heightened social media presence utilising the website, Facebook, Twitter and other newer means of communication
- A series of public meetings using key experts as speakers to help develop understanding of inequality issues
- Produce pamphlets on key inequality issues
- Produce manifestos for candidates at national and London wide elections and host hustings for candidates
- Develop and maintain a dialogue with the Mayor and Assembly and review each policy area the Mayor is responsible for to see how it could be developed in order to assist with reducing inequality
- Develop and maintain a relationship with as many London Boroughs as possible either around the Fairness 15 or the newer 5 principles being developed by The Equality Trust
- Encourage the development of Borough groups
- Engage with other groups in London to promote the equality agenda – in particular engage with the Centre for London Review, London Futures
- Look to develop the group itself by encouraging more diversity in terms of age, gender and ethnicity

46. This is an ambitious programme even for an organisation with 2 or 3 staff. For an organisation consisting only of volunteer individuals (at any one time there are maybe between 5 and 7 individuals involved actively) it is impossible even though, over the past 11 years, some actions have been taken under each of the headings. Therefore if the group is to continue decisions will have to be taken on priorities, combining what is possible with the skills and interests of those who are active.
47. In order to develop more aspects of the programme outlined above will require paid staff. The Equality Trust has received funding from Trust for London for a paid worker part of whose role is to support My Fair London. However the exact lines of communication for this worker have never been clear e.g. although requesting it My Fair London has never been involved in the recruitment of the worker. And The Equality Trust has often split the role between different workers in order to retain workers in difficult financial times. It would seem best if the worker was designated as entirely supportive of My Fair London and proper lines of communication set up with The Equality Trust.

Conclusions

48. My Fair London has been in existence for 11 years in a period when national governments have not been sympathetic to arguments for reducing inequality. In the same period local government has suffered the effects of austerity. Over the period arguments about climate change have become more central while Brexit dominated political thinking for many years. In the last two years the pandemic has occupied politicians nearly exclusively. However the pandemic is retreating, and Brexit is done although we still feel the effects of it. Despite this difficult environment My Fair London has demonstrated a myriad of ways in which inequality issues can be brought into central focus.
49. Crucial decisions about the future shape of the economy will be taken in the next few months and an election may be only two years away. And we have another three years of Sadiq Khan as Mayor. So now feels the right time to review what My Fair London might achieve either with its volunteer resources as it has done over the last 11 years or with a dedicated worker.
50. This paper attempts to start that debate.

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