

## Briefing on the current scale of the socio-economic duty in England

### Introduction

Socio-economic inequalities and disadvantages persist in the UK, but the successive governments have chosen not to enact the socio-economic duty (the duty is contained in Section 1 of the Equality Act 2010). If enacted, the duty would legally require public authorities to consider the way their decisions increase or decrease inequalities that result from socio-economic disadvantage.

In the absence of action at a UK government level, equivalent legislation has been introduced in Scotland (known as the “Fairer Scotland Duty”<sup>1</sup>) and in Wales<sup>2</sup>. Some local and combined authorities in England have chosen to voluntarily adopt the duty.

At GMPA we believe that the socio-economic duty will provide a powerful foundation for the fairer society we all want to see. As there is an absence of action at a national government level, we are working with local and combined authorities to increase awareness and voluntary adoption of the duty as a means of creating better outcomes for those with lived experiences of poverty.

In 2021 GMPA published a [guide for local authorities on socio-economic duty implementation](#) and it is positive to see that some Greater Manchester councils (and a number of councils in other parts of the country) have adopted the duty or are in the process of doing so.

This briefing sets out the scale of voluntary adoption of the socio-economic duty by local authorities in England based on research conducted by Greater Manchester Poverty Action (GMPA). The findings suggest there is considerable potential for widespread voluntary adoption of the duty across England.

GMPA has found that:

- One in seven councils have voluntarily adopted the socio-economic duty.
- A large number of councils are ‘acting in the spirit of the duty’, with over half considering socio-economic status in equality impact assessments and in strategic decision making and policy development.
- Both Labour and Conservative controlled councils have adopted the duty.
- The percentage of local authorities who have adopted the socio-economic duty varies greatly across England. The regions with the highest proportion of local authorities adopting the duty are London, the North East and the North West.
- Local authorities with high levels of child poverty are more likely to have voluntarily adopted the duty.

<sup>1</sup> Fairer Scotland Duty: interim guidance for public bodies (2018) <https://www.gov.scot/publications/fairer-scotland-duty-interim-guidance-public-bodies/pages/2/>

<sup>2</sup> The Socio-Economic Duty: guidance (2021) <https://gov.wales/socio-economic-duty-guidance#description-block>

## Methodology

The findings in this briefing are from our analysis of the responses we received to **Freedom of Information requests (FOI) submitted to every local authority in England**. We received 274 responses out of 333. This represents 82.3% of all local authorities in England. We broke down the analysis according to region, political control, and child poverty rate (after housing costs).

### In our FOI request we asked the following questions:

1. Please indicate whether your local authority has formally adopted the socio-economic duty (Section 1 of the Equality Act 2010). For this purpose, 'adoption' of the socio-economic duty, means that the authority must have either passed a motion at full council that adopts the duty, approved adoption via delegated decision or have agreed it via the council's executive or cabinet.
2. Does your local authority consider socio-economic status within all its Equality Impact Assessments and equality frameworks?
3. Has your local authority made a commitment to considering socio-economic status more broadly in strategic decision-making and policy development?
4. If your local authority has not formally adopted the socio-economic duty (as described in question 1), are there future plans to adopt it?

### Summary of main findings

- The number of local authorities who have formally adopted the socio-economic duty is 39 (14.2%) with 235 (85.8%) having not officially adopted the duty.
- The total number of local authorities who consider socio-economic status within all equality impact assessments and equality frameworks is 151 (55.1%), with 121 (44.2%) not considering and there were 2 (0.7%) no responses.
- 161 (58.8%) of the local authorities who responded said they consider socio-economic status more broadly in strategic decision-making and policy development, 110 (40.1%) did not and there were 3 (1.1%) no responses.
- Out of the 235 local authorities who have not yet formally adopted the socio-economic duty, 44 (18.7%) intend to adopt the duty in the future. However, 163 (69.4%) did not plan to and 28 (11.9%) did not respond.

### Regional analysis - summary and key findings

We found that there is regional unevenness in the adoption of the socio-economic duty:

- Figure 1 below shows that the three regions with the highest number of local authorities adopting the duty are: London (29%), North East (25%) and North West (21.2%).

- Overall, the adoption of the socio-economic duty was low across England but the regions who with the lowest adoption of the duty are:
  - Yorkshire (100%)
  - South West (93.1%)
  - East Midlands (92.3%).
- Despite low levels of voluntary adoption of the duty, the findings highlight that 6 out of 9 regions in England have a high percentage of councils considering socio-economic status within all equality impact assessments and equality frameworks.
- A key finding to emerge was that regions with the lowest levels of adopting the socio-economic duty had the highest percentage of local authorities who said they were making a commitment to considering socio-economic status more broadly in strategic decision making and policy development. The analysis has shown that 21 (72.4%) local authorities in the South West, 13 (65%) in Yorkshire, and 38 (61.3%) in the South East were committed.
- The findings show that out of the local authorities who have not adopted the duty, the regions with the lowest percentage of plans to adopt are:
  - Yorkshire - out of the 20 councils who have not adopted the duty 95% did not plan to adopt the duty in the future.
  - North East - out of the 6 councils who have not adopted the duty 83.5% did not plan to adopt the duty in the future.
  - South East - out of the 53 councils who have not adopted the duty 77.4% of the councils did not plan to adopt the duty in the future.

**Figure 1-adoption of the socio-economic duty by region 2021**

Region	% of local authorities who have adopted the socio-economic duty		% of local authorities who considers socio-economic status within all equality impact assessments and equality frameworks			% of local authorities who said they are making a commitment to considering socio-economic status more broadly in strategic decision-making and policy development			% of local authorities who have not adopted the duty but plan to do so in the future		
	Yes	No	Yes	No	No response	Yes	No	No response	Yes	No	No response
<b>North West (33 councils responded)</b>	21.2% (7)	78.8% (26)	42.4% (14)	57.6% (19)		48.5% (16)	51.5% (17)		19% (5)	65.4% (17)	15.4% (4)
<b>North East (9 councils responded)</b>	25% (3)	50% (6)	41.7% (5)	33.3% (4)		100% (9)			16.7% (1)	83.3% (5)	
<b>East (37 councils responded)</b>	10.8% (4)	89.2% (33)	43.2% (16)	56.8% (21)		45.9% (17)	54.1% (20)		21.2% (7)	60.6% (20)	18.2% (6)
<b>East Midlands (26 councils responded)</b>	7.7% (2)	92.3% (24)	53.8% (11)	42.3% (14)	3.8% (1)	30.8% (8)	61.5% (16)	7.7% (2)	25% (6)	70.8% (17)	4.2% (1)
<b>South East (62 councils responded)</b>	14.5% (9)	85.5% (53)	58.1% (36)	41.9% (26)		61.3% (38)	38.7% (24)		9.4% (5)	77.4% (41)	13.2% (7)
<b>South West (29 councils responded)</b>	6.9% (2)	93.1% (27)	72.4% (21)	27.6% (8)		72.4% (21)	27.6% (8)		25.9% (7)	59.3% (16)	14.8% (4)
<b>West Midlands (27 councils responded)</b>	11.1% (3)	88.9% (24)	51.9% (14)	44.4% (12)	3.7% (1)	55.6% (15)	40.7% (11)	3.7% (1)	16.7% (4)	66.7% (16)	16.7% (4)
<b>Yorkshire (20 councils responded)</b>		100% (20)	65% (13)	35% (7)		65% (13)	35% (7)		5% (1)	95% (19)	
<b>London (31 councils responded)</b>	29% (9)	71% (22)	64.5% (20)	35.5% (11)		74.2% (23)	25.8% (8)		36.4% (8)	54.5% (12)	9.1% (2)

**Figure 2-adoption of the socio-economic duty by political control 2021**

Political party	% of local authorities who have adopted the socio-economic duty		% of local authorities who considers socio-economic status within all equality impact assessments and equality frameworks			% of local authorities who said they are making a commitment to considering socio-economic status more broadly in strategic decision-making and policy development			% of local authorities who have not adopted the duty but plan to do so in the future		
	Yes	No	Yes	No	No response	Yes	No	No response	Yes	No	No response
<b>Labour Majority</b> (Out of 63 councils)	20.6% (13)	79.4% (50)	50.8% (32)	49.2% (31)		49.2% (31)	50.8% (32)		28% (14)	66% (33)	6% (3)
<b>Conservative Majority</b> (Out of 106 councils)	10.4% (11)	89.6% (95)	50.9% (54)	47.2% (50)	1.9% (2)	45.3% (48)	52.8% (56)	1.9% (2)	12.6% (12)	78.9% (75)	8.4% (8)

### Political control summary and key findings

Out of the 274 councils who responded to the FOI request, there were 63 Labour majority run and 106 Conservative majority run councils. <sup>i</sup>

- The findings from figure 2 reveal that a higher percentage of Labour majority councils who responded had adopted the socio-economic duty 20.6% (13) compared to 10.4% (11) of Conservative majority councils.
- The findings show that Labour and Conservative majority councils had a similar level of considering socio-economic status within all equality impact assessments and equality frameworks. 50.8% (32) of all Labour councils and 50.9% (54) of all Conservative majority councils considered it.
- The findings illustrate that out of the 50 Labour councils that have not adopted the duty, 28% (14) plan to adopt the duty in the future. Whereas, out of the 100 conservative councils who have not adopted the duty, 12.6% (12) local authorities planned to in the future.

**Figure 3-adoption of the socio-economic duty by local authorities split into quartiles based on their child poverty after housing costs rate (AHC)**

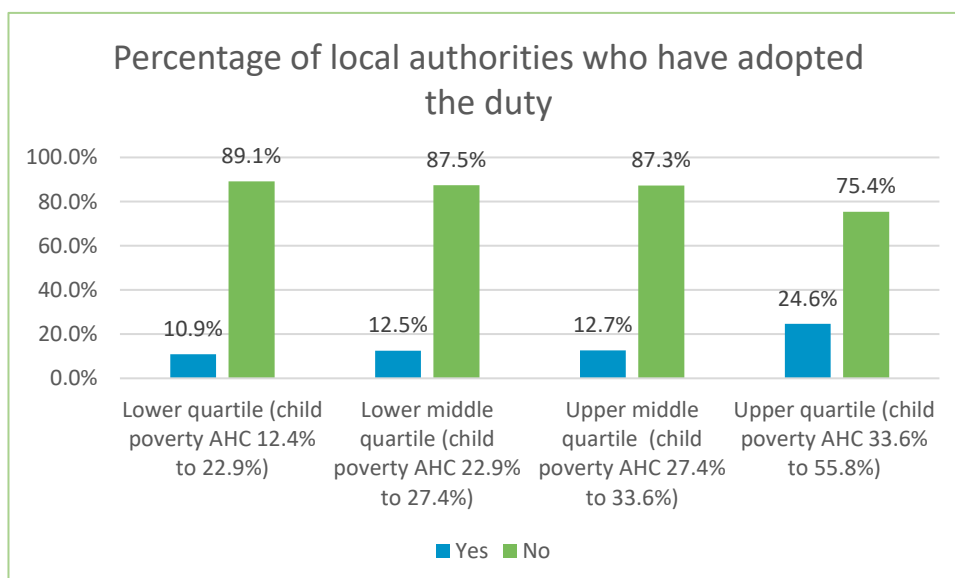
Local authorities split into four quartiles according to their child poverty AHC rate	% of local authorities who have adopted the socio-economic duty		% of local authorities who considers socio-economic status within all equality impact assessments and equality frameworks			% of local authorities who said they are making a commitment to considering socio-economic status more broadly in strategic decision-making and policy development			% of local authorities who have not adopted the duty but plan to do so in the future		
	Yes	No	Yes	No	No response	Yes	No	No response	Yes	No	No response
<b>Lower quartile (12.4% to 22.9%) (64)</b>	10.9% (7)	89.1% (57)	48.4% (31)	50% (32)	1.6% (1)	48.4% (31)	50% (32)	1.6% (1)	19.3% (11)	66.7% (38)	14.0% (8)
<b>Lower middle quartile (22.9% to 27.4%) (64)</b>	12.5% (8)	87.5% (56)	53.1% (34)	46.9% (30)		54.7% (35)	43.8% (28)	1.6% (1)	17.9% (10)	71.4% (40)	10.7% (6)
<b>Upper middle quartile (27.4% to 33.6%) (63)</b>	12.7% (8)	87.3% (55)	77.8% (39)	38.1% (24)		58.7% (37)	41.3% (26)		18.2% (10)	67.3% (37)	14.5% (8)
<b>Upper quartile (33.6% to 55.8%) (65)</b>	24.6% (16)	75.4% (49)	60% (39)	40% (26)		75.4% (49)	24.6% (16)		24.5% (12)	69.4% (34)	6.1% (3)

\*18 county councils have been taken out of analysis as child poverty AHC is not applicable.

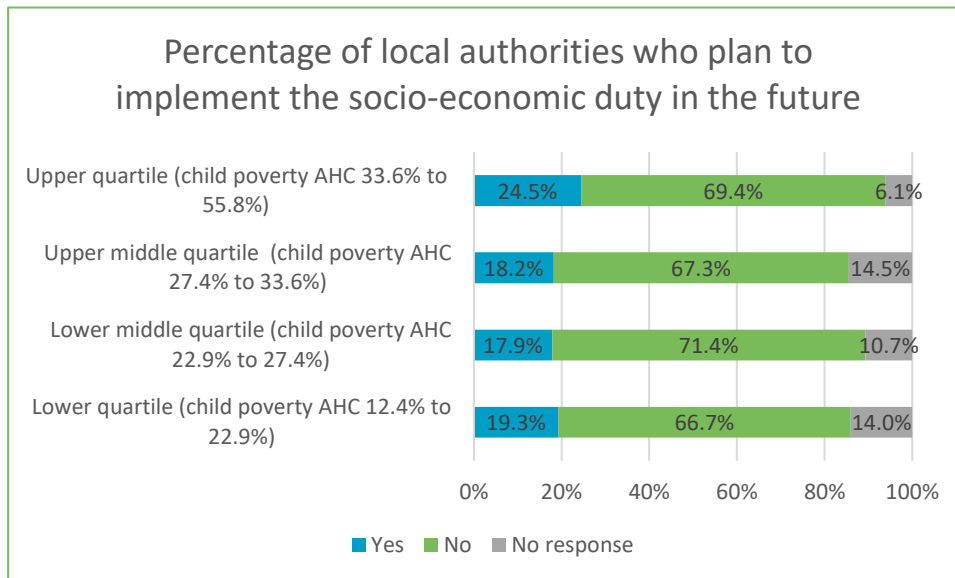
### Child poverty AHC summary and key findings:

- Figure 3 shows the percentages of local authorities who have adopted the socio-economic duty split into four quartiles according to child poverty after housing cost rate: lower quartile (child poverty AHC between 12.4% to 22.9%), lower-middle quartile (child poverty rate AHC between 22.9% to 27.4%), upper-middle quartile (child poverty rate AHC between 27.4% to 33.6%) and upper quartile (child poverty AHC rate between 33.6% to 55.8%).<sup>ii</sup>
- Figure 3.1 reveals that the local authorities with the highest child poverty AHC rate (between 33.6% to 55.8%) have the highest percentage of local authorities who have voluntarily adopted the duty 24.6%.
- The data highlights that the local authorities in the upper two quartiles had the highest percentage of local authorities who consider socio-economic status within all equality impact assessments and equality frameworks (77.8% in the upper middle quartile and 60% in the upper quartile).
- Another important finding was that local authorities in the upper quartile had the highest percentage, 75.4% of local authorities who are committed to considering socio-economic status more broadly in strategic decision making and policy development. Whereas local authorities in the lower quartile had the lowest level 48.4%.
- Nevertheless, Figure 3.2 highlights that the majority of local authorities who have not voluntarily adopted the duty did not have plans to do so in the future. 69.4% of local authorities in the upper quartile did not have plans to adopt the duty in the future, similarly, 66.7% of the local authorities in the lower quartile did not plan to adopt the duty in the future.

**Figure 3.1-percentage of local authorities who have voluntarily adopted the socio-economic duty**



**Figure 3.2-percentage of local authorities who plan to adopt the socio-economic duty in the future**



### Conclusion

This briefing summarises the level of adoption of the socio-economic duty in England. The results show that, in the absence of the government enacting the duty, one in seven local authorities have chosen to adopt it and a significant number of councils are ‘acting in the spirit’ of it. The level of adoption varies across England. The findings presented in this briefing and the recent increase in interest in the duty among councils in the aftermath of the pandemic, suggests there is potential for widespread adoption.

GMIPA believes that the socio-economic duty is an important policy lever to make a tangible contribution to the reduction of social disadvantage as it can hold local authorities accountable and ensure that individuals with lived experiences of poverty are being considered in formal decision-making. Therefore, we are encouraging local authorities in England to voluntarily adopt the duty to help combat social inequality and commit to long term strategic change.

We have seen first-hand the difference adopting the duty can make to strengthening strategic responses to poverty in Greater Manchester.

Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council told us that, *“Local authorities need to look at the holistic needs of individuals and families, where multi-inequalities exist, and are often exacerbated by living in poverty. The socio-economic duty helps to ensure a focus on the economic situation of residents, as well as considering social, health and other inequalities, that often co-exist for individuals.”*

Salford City Council said, *“Given the heightened inequality brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is more crucial than ever to implement an approach that recognises this, particularly for groups who are already disproportionately impacted in terms of the economic fall out of the pandemic. Furthermore, robust monitoring and evaluation where the duty has been implemented allows local authorities to build a sophisticated awareness of the issues facing their communities alongside potential solutions such as economic safeguarding, targeted welfare rights and debt and financial assistance for vulnerable residents.”*



With a focus on Greater Manchester, the Independent Inequalities Commission recently called for the Greater Manchester Combined Authority to adopt the duty – stating in their recent report that “we applaud the decision of a number of boroughs to implement or consider implementing a duty to promote socio economic equality (Section 1 of the Equalities Act), as advocated by the Equality Trust and Greater Manchester Poverty Action, and encourage GMCA to do likewise.”<sup>3</sup>

If adopted locally the socio-economic duty can provide a foundation for a fairer society. Voluntary adoption of the duty can bring a number of benefits including:

- Improving outcomes for local people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.
- Supporting cross organisational and cross-departmental working.
- Raising awareness of socio-economic inequalities within organisations and among partners.
- Ensuring widespread organisational commitment to, and consideration of, socio-economic inequalities.
- Supporting the participation of low-income residents in decisions that affect them, especially in the context of (proposed) cuts to services.
- Achieving greater consistency in practice – and an increased likelihood of maintaining such consistent practice across political administrations and between changes of individual leadership and turnover of staff.
- Improving systematic approaches to equality impact assessments and assessment of policy and practice more broadly.
- Strengthening systematic data gathering and analysis, especially in the conduct of equality impact assessments, thereby strengthening accountability.
- Supporting the effective and efficient allocation of resources.

### **Act on inequality**

- Support the campaign for the enactment of the socio-economic duty of the Equality Act 2010.
- Further information for local councils and combined authorities on how to effectively adopt and implement the socio-economic duty is available on GMPA’s website:  
<https://www.gmpovertyaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Socio-Economic-Duty-Guide-v6.pdf>

<sup>i</sup> Please note that this analysis was carried out in advance of the 2022 elections.

<sup>ii</sup> Quartiles are calculated by dividing all local authorities (256) into four groups according to their child poverty after housing costs (AHC) rate. The lowest child poverty AHC rate was 12.4% and the highest was 55.8%.

<sup>3</sup> The Greater Manchester Independent Inequalities Commission (2021) *The Next Level: Good Lives for All in Greater Manchester* <https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/media/4605/the-next-level-good-lives-for-all-in-greater-manchester.pdf>