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London Calling: Devolution and the London Living Wage Campaign

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of devolution in shaping employment relations through a case study of the Living Wage in London. Drawing on a mixed methods approach it explores the rationale and methods by which the Greater London Authority has promoted fair pay despite possessing limited direct legislative power. The article identifies five key mechanisms; its role as an employer, soft regulation, procurement, institution-building, and ideological leadership, and evaluates their effectiveness in promoting Living Wage adoption in the capital. Our findings suggest that that collaborative, multi-actor strategies can reshape employment practices, highlighting the potential of ‘devolved without power’ governance to reconfigure labour standards.

1 | Introduction

In 2024, approximately one in five people in the United Kingdom were living in poverty despite being in paid employment. In-work poverty disproportionately affects individuals from marginalised groups, including women, single parents, disabled people, and those from ethnic minority backgrounds (McDowell et al. 2005; Wills and Linneker 2014; Richards and Sang 2019). In recent years, it has been argued that deliberate interventions to promote inclusive growth are necessary to ensure that the benefits of economic development are more equitably shared with lower income working families (Whitworth 2017; Joseph Rowntree Foundation JRF 2025). This paper will consider one such ‘deliberate’ intervention to address in-work poverty in the form of the Real Living Wage campaign.

Previous research suggests that devolution has the potential to support alternative approaches to employment and employment relations, particularly given the relative stasis in national-level policy development in recent years (Heery et al. 2020; Newman and Kenny 2023). Although devolved institutions often pursue more progressive employment relations strategies, their limited legislative powers means that they rely on soft regulation such as employment charters and standards for promoting fair work and inclusive growth. Whilst such charters are not enforceable, they can serve important norm-setting functions by encouraging

employers to exceed statutory minima in their employment practices—a necessary ambition, given the persistence of in-work poverty in the UK economy (ibid). Within the United Kingdom, there are at least six city regions (London, Greater Manchester, North East, Liverpool, West Yorkshire, West of England), which have developed and are promoting their own local labour standards or employment charter linked to an agenda of promoting inclusive growth. A prominent feature of these standards is the requirement to pay the Living Wage.

This paper uses the Living Wage in London as a case study to examine the capacity of devolved governance arrangements and the importance of multi-stakeholder approaches to fostering alternative employment relations. It explores how the Living Wage has functioned as a mechanism through which devolution can influence employment practices and contribute to the broader agenda of inclusive growth. The paper thus extends the analysis of Heery et al. (2020) that examined the Living Wage in Scotland and Wales by looking at an example of English regional devolution, where the constitutional arrangements and statutory powers of the devolved government are weaker.

In the following analysis we seek to address three questions. Firstly, we will examine what motivated successive devolved London authorities to address the issue of low pay and support initiatives such as the ‘Making London a Living Wage City’

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(MLLWC) campaign. Second, we will consider the methods used to promote fair work and consider the range of stakeholders and approaches involved in driving change. Finally, we identify the outcomes of this activity by analysing original quantitative data to measure the spread and impact of the Living Wage in London, identifying what the pattern of accreditation tells us about the key components of success in impacting employment relations outcomes in the absence of formal legislative powers. Indeed, our analysis suggests that success in London has come not from these statutory levers, but from the relations built across multiple stakeholders, of which political bodies are only one of many important actors.

2 | Methods

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to examine the promotion and diffusion of the Real Living Wage in London. The Real Living Wage is a voluntary hourly wage benchmark grounded in independent research into the expenditure needs of low-paid households (Cominetti and Murphy 2024). Distinct rates are calculated annually for London and the rest of the United Kingdom, reflecting regional variations in the cost of living. At the end of 2025, the London rate stood at £14.80 per hour, while the rate for the rest of the United Kingdom was £13.45. This is a voluntary rate that employers can choose to pay and is distinct from the statutory National Living Wage, which stood at £12.21 for the same period. Employers that adopt the Living Wage standard are required to pay the appropriate rate to all directly employed staff aged 18 and over, excluding apprentices, and to ensure the same rates are extended to indirectly employed workers—typically those contracted to work regularly on the employer’s premises. Since the scheme’s launch in 2011, over 20,000 employers have gained accreditation, collectively covering more than 4.5 million workers across the United Kingdom. In the analysis that follows we will refer to the ‘Living Wage’ or ‘London Living Wage’ to mean the voluntary wage standard, as distinct from the statutory National Living Wage.

To address the first two research questions, concerning how the MLLWC project has promoted the Living Wage and who have been key actors in that movement, we rely primarily on qualitative methods. This has involved a programme of semi-structured interviews conducted with key stakeholders including Living Wage campaigners, trade union officials, employers, and representatives of regional and local government in London. In total, 37 interviews were undertaken between September 2022 and September 2025. The interviews have been supplemented by documentary analysis, drawing on a variety of materials produced by a range of governmental and campaigning stakeholders that include policy documents, strategic reports, and official web content relating to inclusive growth and Living Wage initiatives.

To address the third research question concerned with the outcomes of devolved government interventions we draw on quantitative data. In collaboration with the Living Wage Foundation (LWF), we have constructed a bespoke database of all accredited Living Wage Employers from the inception of the scheme in 2011 through to September 2025. This dataset includes information on employer location, sector, industry

classification, and organisational size (as measured by headcount). It also records the reported number of workers receiving a wage increase at the point of accreditation. These data, combined with economic statistics from the Office for National Statistics provide the basis for our analysis of employer uptake, workforce coverage, and the direct benefit of the Living Wage in London and the United Kingdom more generally. We are thus able to provide an assessment of the impact and effectiveness of the Living Wage promotion strategy that has been pursued in London by the different levels of local government.

3 | Inclusive Growth as the Foundations for the MLLWC Campaign

The Living Wage campaign started over 20 years ago in East London and the capital continues to offer an important context for examining attempts to address in-work poverty. According to Trust for London (2025a) in 2025 around a quarter of Londoners live in poverty, after housing costs are taken into account, with most of these in working families. The prevalence of in-work poverty is geographically variable across the capital, but in every London borough, at least half of people in poverty are in working households, and in some boroughs, this share exceeds 80 per cent (Greater London Authority 2025; Trust for London 2025b). Thus, London provides an apposite case study to examine how devolved employment relations policies can impact labour market outcomes in the context of significant economic inequality. (Wills and Linneker 2012; Greater London Authority 2025; Joseph Rowntree Foundation JRF 2025).

Wage poverty and insecure, low-paid employment are also strongly linked to poor psychological wellbeing and adverse health outcomes such as higher levels of depression and anxiety, but also cardiovascular and respiratory conditions (Rowlingson 2011; Flint et al. 2013; Public Health England 2014). These effects span generations, with children brought up in households experiencing in work poverty, also appearing to be more likely to suffer health conditions such as asthma. The implications of this can be felt at workplace and societal level with reduced productivity, ongoing absence and impact on health services. In 2024, lost productivity due to mental health concerns cost the UK economy approaching £58 billion (Webber 2024). This figure had doubled from the previous year. Evidence highlights that addressing wage poverty through decent pay is essential to reducing health inequalities, especially in London, where the high cost of living intensifies the pressures of low pay (Marmot et al. 2010; Flint et al. 2013).

Recognising these entrenched inequalities and their far-reaching social and economic impact has prompted growing interest in place-based and devolved approaches to economic governance. Purposeful interventions to foster inclusive growth have attracted increased attention with the aim of redistributive outcomes but also rebuilding the strength, cohesion and connectedness of communities that have been historically marginalised or economically excluded (Imbroscio 2011; Joseph Rowntree Foundation JRF 2025). The concept of inclusive growth is broadly understood as a model of economic expansion that creates opportunities across all social groups by looking to distribute the gains from prosperity in a more equitable fashion (Deighton-Smith et al. 2016; Lupton et al. 2019). Within this context of more

equitable economic outcomes, the previous Conservative government's 'levelling up' agenda also emphasised the centrality of subnational or devolved administration not merely as a facilitator of market activity, but as an active partner, standard-setter and regulator (Lee et al. 2014; Guinan and O'Neill 2019; Newman and Kenny 2023).

This paper will focus on the Greater London Authority (GLA) as a case study of the impact that such a devolved approach can have on outcomes. The Greater London Authority Act 1999 created the devolved authority GLA as a 'strategic authority' for London, led by an elected Mayor and scrutinised by an elected London Assembly. In addition to giving the GLA specific powers in areas such as transport, planning, regeneration, the environment, and adult education, the Act also granted the GLA a 'general power' to promote economic, social, and environmental improvement in the capital, although this is subject to statutory limits (Travers 2002). The devolved authority was not given powers to make decisions in the areas of employment or wages. Rather than relying exclusively on legal authority, authorities such as the GLA have mobilised political leadership and symbolic power to shape employment practices and embed broader goals of fair work and inclusive growth and have also focused on working with other stakeholders to achieve goals.

3.1 | The Origins of the UK Living Wage Movement and the Relationship With the GLA

Using the Living Wage as a lens to explore the ability of devolved authorities to create inclusive growth, it is worth recognising that the GLA's relationship with the Living Wage movement is a longstanding one. The UK Living Wage movement itself started in East London in 2001, led by The East London Citizens Organisation (TELCO), later London Citizens, and was focused on London's immigrant and low-income communities (Heery et al. 2017). In 2001, TELCO commissioned a report called 'Mapping Low Pay in London'. The report itself was intended as a first step to tackle in-work poverty in London and showed the wage needed to live on at that time (£6.30) was nearly twice the recently introduced National Minimum Wage of £3.70. Having highlighted the levels of in-work poverty in London, TELCO then undertook a 'listening campaign' across the capital, speaking to over 10,000 citizens about what issues they faced with significant numbers continuing to highlight the inadequacy of wages to provide a decent standard of living (Brickley 2008).

Although this was effective in mobilising community groups, the community organising model recognised the importance of also engaging with power holders to make change. The initial campaign led to an 'Accountability Assembly' in 2004, ahead of the inaugural London Mayoral elections, where 2000 citizens from community groups throughout London asked all Mayoral candidates to make commitments on a range of issues including supporting a Living Wage for workers throughout London. After his election, Mayor Ken Livingstone worked with the GLA and the London Development Agency to deliver on the commitments he had made. He set up the London Living Wage Unit, which in 2005 calculated and promoted a Living Wage for London.

Citizens UK have continued to use these Accountability Assemblies to ask every subsequent London Mayoral candidate for a commitment to the Living Wage. Boris Johnson and Sadiq Khan have both made similar commitments to those given by Ken Livingstone. Johnson led the effort to spread the Living Wage by making it central to contracts linked to the 2012 Olympic Park development, as well as a campaign to get Premier League Football Clubs in London to accredit. The current mayor, Sadiq Khan has backed the 'MLLWC' project, a London wide initiative with specific aims: to secure £635 million in additional wages for Londoners, to lift 75,000 workers out of in-work poverty, and to consolidate a diverse coalition of employers, civic institutions, and community leaders, who can use the momentum to continue to drive inclusive growth in London after the project ends. Although the project is funded by Trust for London, the organisational investment of the GLA signalled a renewed focus on the co-ordination of activity in the London Living Wage movement. In addition, Sadiq Khan has launched London's own Good Work Standard with the Living Wage as a core principle.

More recently, with a commitment by the Mayor of London to continue to promote the Living Wage, there has been a shift in the nature of the commitment. Rather than sitting separately to the rest of the UK wide movement, the London Living Wage and the UK Living Wage are now calculated together by the Resolution Foundation on behalf of the Living Wage Commission. The Mayor's Office remains involved in the setting of the Living Wage rate by holding a seat on the Commission. This active involvement of the Mayor's Office in the campaign sends a clear symbolic message as to the importance of the Living Wage within London's devolved government.

3.2 | The Role of the GLA in Building the Real Living Wage in London

Heery et al. (2020) outline several ways devolved authorities, such as the GLA, can influence employment relations; acting as employers, funders, soft regulators, ideological entrepreneurs, and institution builders. The GLA has been an accredited Living Wage employer since the scheme's inception, ensuring not only its own staff but also those in organisations over which it exercises control such as Transport for London, police and fire services, and the Olympic Park receive at least the Living Wage. The terms of Living Wage accreditation mean that coverage of the wage standard also extends to third-party contracted staff.

In addition to its role as an employer, the GLA promotes the Living Wage through its procurement practices. Contractual clauses now require new suppliers to meet the GLA's Good Work Standard within a set timeframe. Within the first year of implementation, 45 suppliers signed up to the standard, which includes paying the Living Wage (Greater London Authority n.d.). The Good Work Standard is an example of a voluntary framework of the type that are increasingly used by devolved administrations to tackle issues such as in-work poverty and promote inclusive growth, compensating for the absence of formal wage-setting powers. By May 2025, 170 organisations employing over 300,000 people had accredited under the standard. Notwithstanding the fact that some signatories to the standard will likely have already been compliant before signing

up, the Good Work Standard is likely to have had a positive impact on pay practices and broader employment issues such as diversity.

Beyond its role as employer and regulator, the GLA acts as an ideological entrepreneur, leveraging its convening power to unite stakeholders and champion the Living Wage. It promotes the agenda through a range of forums. These include networks that the GLA has convened itself such as the London Recovery Programme, which is designed to restore confidence in the city as it builds back from the COVID pandemic, and the London Business Hub that is part of a national network of Growth Hubs designed to help firms grow. The GLA also promotes the Living Wage through membership of non-governmental networks like the London Anchor Institutions Network, and BusinessLDN, which are peer networks of large employers offering advocacy, research and relation building services to members. This is in addition to the direct involvement in the Living Wage campaign, and by participating in events like Living Wage Week (the annual focus of campaigning activity, where the Living Wage movement celebrates progress over the preceding 12 months). These platforms enable the GLA to draw influential actors into dialogue and collaboration. Finally, the GLA strengthens the campaign through partnerships with key organisations including NHS bodies and trade unions, and via forums like the London Partnership Board. These efforts help embed the Living Wage within institutional frameworks and extend its reach across the city. However, these strategies remain forms of influence rather than statutory authority, as control over pay and employment law continues to reside with the UK Government in Westminster.

4 | MLLWC—Accelerating the Living Wage in London

London's Living Wage campaign was given an early boost in 2007 when Trust for London, a charitable foundation that aims to tackle poverty and inequality, invested almost £1 million (Citizens UK 2021). That early intervention was viewed as a success generating more than £100 million in wage uplifts for low-income workers, as well as providing the seed funding that enabled the creation of the LWF in 2011. In September 2021 Trust for London deepened its commitment by funding a 4-year project to support the 'MLLWC' project, which is the culmination of a movement that has steadily grown over two decades. It draws on the Living Wage Places scheme, which encourages local groups to collaborate, building a coalition to champion the Living Wage in their community. In the following analysis we outline the approach taken during that project to grow Living Wage accreditation in London and support inclusive growth in a devolved setting.

Over the period of 4 years, the project has adopted two distinct but parallel strands, a sector-based approach, and place-based or borough level work. Each strand typically also involves cross-London discussion and coordination. Action plans were developed to translate the project's overarching goals into sector or location specific priorities. The sector-based strategy allows multiple stakeholders to develop a joint focus on a key area. The initial sector focus from 2021 was on

health and social care, and hospitality. In health and social care, where nearly 17 per cent of jobs fall below the London Living Wage and staff turnover is 28.5 per cent per annum in social care, the aim was that all 35 London NHS Trusts should be accredited by 2025, alongside a rise in accreditation amongst both primary care and social care providers, and private and third-sector health employers. In hospitality, where over half of jobs remain below the Living Wage, the strategy emphasised building the business case, raising awareness through worker voices and research, and leveraging networks to win commitments from both SMEs and iconic employers such as The Ivy, Whitbread, and major hotel groups.

The strategy in sector-based work, known as the action strand, focuses on developing high-level sector champions, in the case of Health and Social Care this was NHS trust executives who, in turn, proactively encouraged and supported counterparts in other Trusts to become accredited employers. In the health and social care sector, the use of NHS internal networks as well as bespoke resources such as the Living Wage 'toolkit' were cited as central in driving Living Wage adoption. Sector toolkits are designed to provide a comprehensive guide to the accreditation process, drawing on research evidence, best practice and testimonials from already accredited employers (Living Wage Foundation 2021). A secondary aim of the sector toolkits is to develop clear and concise narratives as to how and why decent pay is not just an HR issue, but, in the case of health and social care, how the Living Wage is also a health issue and as such the promotion of fair pay and decent work is fundamental to the mission of healthcare providers. This targeted sector focused approach supports arguments made in the work of Choyke et al. (2023) and Conteh (2024) as to the importance focused approaches and the key role of strong and clear senior leadership in the success of promoting measures that speak to inclusive growth.

More recently, there has been a shift to a focus on the creative and cultural industry. Within the creative part of the sector, that primarily consists of private sector organisations, the activity has again been largely driven by industry experts, whilst within the cultural sector, which covers larger name theatres such as the Globe or National Theatre, activity has regularly involved a range of stakeholders, from local communities taking public actions through to the mayor writing letters.

Whilst the MLLWC project is a pan-London initiative, the diffusion of Living Wage activity across the capital is decidedly uneven and fragmented. This has been largely shaped by Citizens UK's historic development and strategic approach which has resulted in distinct areas of concentrated activity or 'hot-spots.' Efforts to promote the Living Wage below the pan-London level highlight how cross-city initiatives are mediated through differentiated local governance structures. The GLA provides an enabling framework but lacks the legislative levers available to other devolved governments, meaning that boroughs, anchor institutions, and community organisations have played decisive roles in shaping the trajectory of the Living Wage movement. Citizens UK's organising presence and strategy has produced spatially concentrated activity rather than uniform diffusion.

This place-based variation reflects the interaction of three key factors. First, borough-level political leadership is crucial. Some local authorities have acted as ideological promoters and

institutional builders, embedding the Living Wage in procurement, and deploying soft regulatory tools such as business rate incentives. Boroughs like Southwark and Ealing exemplify this approach through their Living Wage Place accreditations and proactive strategies (Heery et al. 2020; Choyke et al. 2023). Others, such as Barnet and Hillingdon, have adopted a more limited stance, committing only to paying direct employees the Living Wage without broader promotion.

Second, anchor institutions mediate and amplify the diffusion of the Living Wage. Universities, NHS trusts, and major local employers can act as strategic partners and ideological champions, extending Living Wage adoption beyond their own workforces and across borough boundaries (Lupton et al. 2019). In Southwark, King's College London and the South London and Maudsley NHS Trust have played precisely this role, reinforcing local authority leadership and deepening the reach of the movement.

Third, community mobilisation remains a distinctive driver. Tower Hamlets, the birthplace of the Living Wage, demonstrates how sustained grassroots organising can substitute for, or complement, weaker formal governance structures (Guinan and O'Neill 2019; Heery et al. 2020). By contrast, areas with less intensive community activity, such as parts of North London, exhibit correspondingly lower accreditation and coverage.

These dynamics illustrate how the coordinated cross-London approach initiative can generate differentiated local outcomes, shaped by the interplay between political commitment, institutional capacity, and community power. Rather than a uniform model of policy transfer, the Living Wage in London exemplifies variegated urban governance, in which soft regulation and civic capacity combine in uneven ways to produce distinctive local regimes of fair work promotion (Foundational Economy Collective 2018; Johnson et al. 2023). This underscores the importance of examining how citywide strategies are translated through local political economies, rather than assuming homogenous implementation.

There has consequently been a variety of campaigning activity; from job fairs in Ealing promoting work that pays the Living Wage to local community leaders undertaking major listening campaigns in the South of London across Lambeth, Southwark, Croydon and Lewisham. Other examples include public actions on leading employers like the British Film Institute (BFI) asking them publicly to accredit. Public celebration of employers who have chosen to accredit or act as champions, such as King's College London, is a notable feature of the campaign. Accountability Assemblies at borough level, where local politicians running for election are asked to commit to supporting the Living Wage and then followed up when in office, have also been a major focus during the period of funding to further embed local commitment to the Living Wage across London during the local elections. In total, over the period from January 2021 to December 2024, Citizens had run over 200 local actions in London with the aim of encouraging accreditation.

In 2023 the 'Iconic Employers' campaign was launched where boroughs across London were encouraged to identify well known employers in their area to become the focus of accreditation activity. The campaign was initiated to encourage these large, visible organisations to lead by example, but also allowed each borough to define how they wanted to engage with the

MLLWC project in a meaningful way. These iconic employers range from The Oval cricket ground to Tate Modern, and large London airports. The activity to drive accreditation was then focused on peer-to-peer encouragement by other employers, political leverage through letters from the Mayor's Office coinciding with public community-led actions in the summer to encourage accreditation and then public celebration during Living Wage week in November when those who have accredited are celebrated.

Taken together, the sectoral and place-based strategies reveal a multi-lever approach that blends targeted interventions with broader community mobilisation, enabling the Living Wage agenda to engage both industry logics and local political dynamics. However, while these approaches have generated momentum, their sustained impact increasingly links to the capacity to embed Living Wage commitments within organisational structures that possess long-term influence over local labour markets. In this regard, anchor institutions emerge as pivotal actors, providing both the institutional weight and normative leadership required to consolidate and scale these gains.

4.1 | Anchor Institutions as a Key Stakeholder

A key feature of inclusive growth strategies, including the Living Wage, has been the mobilisation of anchor institutions which are locally rooted organisations with significant economic and social influence (Green et al. 2021). Traditionally, anchor institutions have included local authorities, NHS bodies, and universities. However, more recently, private and third sector organisations have begun to assume anchor roles within their localities (CLES 2024). Within the MLLWC project anchor institutions have played an important role.

The GLA, as London's key anchor institution, has played a significant part in the development and promotion of the Living Wage movement in London. As already noted, the GLA's involvement in the Living Wage campaign long predates the MLLWC initiative, however, the project has amplified its role and influence. Unlike other employers, investors or civil society organisations, the GLA embodies both symbolic and structural authority as the capital's devolved political institution. Its presence as co-chair of the MLLWC Steering Group situates the Living Wage campaign within the formal governance architecture of London, offering political legitimacy and visibility that other actors cannot as readily provide. The GLA is uniquely positioned within the MLLWC project to act as both an exemplar employer and a policy influencer, able to set standards across its direct workforce, its supply chains, and its wider city governance agenda.

The GLA rarely gets involved in public actions but, instead, uses its convening power to bring organisations together in information events; for example the GLA has convened discussion amongst Local Borough Authorities on opportunities and next steps. The GLA and the Mayor's Office also have access to, and sometimes influence over, employers based in London through the networks they convene and sit on. The GLA has publicly committed to promoting and driving the Living Wage through these other networks such as the post-Covid London Recovery Programme. These convening and influencing powers have

played an important role during the MLLWC project in encouraging more public and private organisations to accredit and lobby their partners as well. The GLA has also driven accreditation through recommitting to procurement processes that spread both intent and practice with those throughout the GLA Group supply chain via the GLA Group Responsible Procurement Policy and Implementation Plan.

The GLA's leadership is, therefore, distinct in being simultaneously symbolic, structural, and convening. As a high-profile public body, it has elevated the Living Wage to a citywide policy priority, something that no single employer or community organisation could achieve alone. In this sense, the GLA functions as a keystone actor: amplifying the campaign, providing political legitimacy, and embedding the Living Wage in governance frameworks.

Beyond the GLA in London, the local borough councils play a key role as local anchor institutions and have at their command a similar range of tools and strategies to the GLA to help promote progressive employment practices in their borough. They can also send strong messaging on employment relations as major employers, procurers, funders, regulators, conveners and ideological promoters (Heery et al. 2020; Green et al. 2021). Southwark Borough Council is a clear example of a borough that has used the registered Living Wage Place scheme to develop and fund its own action group at borough level to drive accreditation. During the 4-year period from September 2021 to August 2025 there were 274 new Living Wage accreditations in Southwark, more than doubling the total for the preceding 4 years.

Beyond the GLA and local councils, leaders of other anchor Institutions exercise influence primarily through market mechanisms and organisational practice. Like the GLA and local councils, their leadership is also expressed through accreditation, procurement commitments, but also by leveraging sectoral influence to normalise the Living Wage in competitive contexts. Anchor institutions' authority comes from reputation, economic power and from setting precedents that ripple through industries. One clear example of this was in the creative sector, where key champions in the advertising industry used their sector links and 'positive coercion' to encourage peers to accredit. The number of accreditations in the media services sector more than trebled during the 2021–25 period with 166 new employers signing up. A second example would be the use of peer-to-peer relations that has driven accreditation amongst NHS Trusts across London. Existing research suggests that efforts to generate inclusive growth through anchoring are most effective when driven by voluntary commitments to responsible business practices, rather than imposed through formal regulation (Choyke et al. 2023). This is evident within the MLLWC project.

The actions of the GLA, borough councils, and other institutional leaders demonstrate how anchor institutions can use their economic weight, convening capacity, and normative authority to embed the Living Wage within organisational practices and local governance structures. Their leadership operates across multiple approaches (symbolic, structural, and relational) providing the scaffolding through which Living Wage norms can diffuse through markets and places. Yet, while anchors offer critical leverage points, their influence alone is

insufficient to generate the depth and resilience of change required. The effectiveness of these strategies ultimately depends on their interaction with a wider ecosystem of stakeholders, including community organising groups and local communities themselves, whose mobilisation provides the relational energy and democratic legitimacy that institutional leadership alone cannot replicate.

4.2 | Broader Stakeholder Involvement

The MLLWC project illustrates that pursuing inclusive growth depends on more than institutional leadership alone. Effective strategies combine enabling conditions such as community participation, shared leadership, and mechanisms that link civic energy to structural levers of change (Choyke et al. 2023; Conteh 2024). In London, the accreditation of Living Wage employers has relied on a complex ecosystem of actors whose roles extend well beyond anchor institutions. Central to this ecosystem are Citizens UK and the LWF, which operate through complementary but distinct strategies. Citizens UK draws on the industrial areas foundation model developed by Saul Alinsky, prioritising grassroots listening and community-led action to identify targets and mobilise around locally salient issues (Alinsky 2010). Workers and community members are positioned as protagonists in the campaign, using public actions. One example would be the St. Valentine's Day action on the Sunborn Hotel in London, where local community leaders made and delivered Valentines cards encouraging employers to 'love the Living Wage' with the messaging 'roses are red, violets are blue, give a Living Wage to those working for you' inside.

The LWF adopts a different strategy and approach. It works as the business-facing arm of the campaign, supporting and guiding employers in a language that makes sense to organisations, emphasising the business case for accreditation. The Foundation provides guidance to help businesses implement the Living Wage, including tools for calculating wage rates and advice on communicating changes to staff. They also offer resources for extending fair pay practices to subcontracted workers. Although, in many ways they operate as separate organisations, Citizens UK is the parent organisation of the LWF and Citizens Trustees are responsible for setting the agenda for the LWF's work. The diverging approaches between the two parts of the organisation are sometimes referred to as 'carrot and stick' approaches to persuading an employer to become accredited. The MLLWC project has been helpful in creating more regular touchpoints between the two teams and has developed a growing sense of purposeful and intentional collaboration between the two parts of CUK.

Broader civil society stakeholders, including faith leaders, trade unions, and worker leaders, play yet another role in the Living Wage campaign. They supply moral authority and grassroots legitimacy, anchoring the movement in communities and lived experience, focusing on the values of fairness and dignity. The leadership of these community groups is less about market or political levers and more about movement energy: storytelling, mobilisation, and holding institutions accountable. As an example, in November 2022, community groups including local schools held an action outside a Barchester Healthcare run care home in Haringey, delivering postcards from school pupils and

demanding that carers be paid a real living wage rather than the rates then being offered.¹

The interaction between Citizens UK, the LWF, and wider civil society actors underscores how community mobilisation and moral authority are not peripheral but foundational to the Living Wage campaign in London. These actors generate the political pressure, legitimacy, and narrative framing that anchor institutions and employers alone cannot supply, ensuring that the campaign remains grounded in lived experience and collective action. Their contributions do not operate in isolation but are structured through coordinated mechanisms that bring multiple stakeholders into dialogue and decision-making. It is within this collaborative governance architecture that the diverse strategies of institutional leadership, business engagement, and community organising are aligned and translated into sustained impact.

4.3 | Governance of the MLLWC Project

The governance of the MLLWC project reflects the same pluralism that characterises its strategies for accreditation. Rather than concentrating authority within a single institution, the project is governed through a deliberately broad-based, multi-stakeholder steering group. This structure embodies a model of distributed leadership that mirrors the complex social, economic, and political landscape in which the campaign operates. By bringing together actors who hold different forms of power, political, economic, moral, and experiential, the governance model is designed to align diverse interests, foster mutual accountability, and sustain momentum across multiple domains of action.

The steering group brings together a wide spectrum of actors, including large and small employers, investors, trade unions, faith leaders, local government representatives, and worker leaders with direct experience of low pay. The co-chairing between the Mayor (political power), the Bishop of London (communities and people of London) and KPMG (private employers) indicates a pluralistic orientation with leadership that is distributed across the economy and rooted in communities. The remit of the steering group demonstrates that leadership within the Living Wage movement is simultaneously strategic and operational. Members are tasked with setting direction for the campaign and leading developments in their own area, which are central to the sector-based work. A key example of the role that steering group members play as Living Wage champions is David Bradley, Chief Executive of South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust, who has also been involved in the South London listening campaign. In addition to sitting on the steering group he has driven Living Wage accreditation in the NHS in London. Leadership by the steering group is therefore not simply symbolic. It is a practice of coordination and accountability, designed to prevent fragmentation in a complex social movement. In the case of the GLA, the focus is on driving behaviour in London-wide strategic services and encouraging behaviour in local borough councils.

The steering group thus functions both as a governance forum and a mechanism of distributed leadership, orchestrating the contributions of actors that differ markedly in their capacities,

incentives, and constituencies. Its pluralistic structure enables strategic coherence without centralisation, creating space for multiple forms of authority to be exercised in concert. This model of governance thus not only reflects the hybrid character of the Living Wage movement but also provides the institutional architecture through which sectoral, place-based, and community-led strategies are integrated into a city-wide campaign.

5 | The Spread of the Living Wage in London

The preceding section described the various ways that the Living Wage has been promoted in London, and the extent to which these have been directly and indirectly influenced by the system of devolved regional government in the capital. In this section we will assess the effectiveness of these interventions. This will be done in two principal ways. Firstly, we will examine the breadth and depth of Living Wage accreditation and impact across the capital. Secondly, London's experience will be placed in context, both in terms of a longitudinal analysis of how Living Wage activity has changed over time but also comparing London with nationwide trends and with other politically devolved authorities in England.

The uneven diffusion of the Living Wage across London that was described above is summarised in Table 1. The table uses three variables to assess the breadth and depth of the Living Wage across the different areas of London. First, the level of Living Wage accreditation amongst employers, second the percentage of workers covered by the standard, and finally the percentage of employees reported to have received a pay increase at the point of accreditation. For each of these measures we have also calculated ratios—rates of accreditation, coverage and impact that relate the diffusion of the Living Wage to the scale of each local economy.

As Table 1 illustrates, variation across London in employer accreditation, workforce coverage, and the proportion of employees receiving pay uplifts, standardised against local economic scale, points to a fragmented pattern of local implementation within a single metropolitan policy initiative. Central London accounts for over half of accredited employers, and 46 per cent of all Living Wage recipients, possibly reflecting the concentration of large employers and low paid service sector jobs. East London is the other area where Living Wage activity is concentrated, whilst North and West London have much lower levels of accreditation and coverage. The borough-level figures confirm the pattern that Living Wage activity is predominantly found in more central areas with lower accreditation and impact in the outer regions of the capital.

In Table 2 the same variables are examined but within a broader geographic context. Some care needs to be taken with the measure of Living Wage coverage which is calculated by dividing employer-based figures by geographical area. The implicit assumption that workers live in the same area in which their employer is registered may lead to an inflated coverage figure for London with large national organisations based in the capital having employees spread throughout the United Kingdom. This problem does not apply to the impact figures as these are based on the number of workers receiving a wage increase to the London Living Wage rate. Notwithstanding this limitation, we

TABLE 1 | Distribution of the Living Wage in London.

	Living Wage accreditation			Living Wage coverage			Living Wage impact		
	LWEs ^a % N (000s) 5.2	Businesses ^b % N (000s) 530	Rate of accreditation ^c % %	Employees ^d % N (000s) 1897	Jobs ^e % N (000s) 6499	Rate of coverage ^f % %	LW recipients ^g % N (000s) 93.5	Jobs below LW ^h % N (000s) 653	Rate of impact ⁱ % %
<i>North London</i>	3.5	10.0	3.4	1.4	5.6	8.1	4.9	9.6	7.3
Barnet	1.1	4.7	2.2	0.3	2.4	3.5	1.2	3.8	4.4
Enfield	1.0	2.8	3.4	0.6	1.9	10.5	1.2	3.5	4.8
Haringey	1.4	2.4	5.7	0.5	1.3	13.3	2.6	2.3	16.1
<i>East London</i>	24.8	24.1	10.1	19.6	21.1	30.0	25.7	26.3	14.0
Barking and Dagenham	0.5	1.5	3.6	0.2	1.0	5.8	0.7	1.8	5.6
Bexley	0.4	1.6	2.4	0.1	1.3	3.0	0.1	2.9	0.7
Greenwich	3.3	1.9	17.7	1.2	1.6	23.4	4.7	2.8	24.5
Hackney	7.5	4.9	15.1	1.8	3.1	18.9	2.3	2.6	12.5
Havering	0.5	1.9	2.4	0.7	1.6	15.3	3.0	2.9	14.8
Lewisham	2.7	1.8	14.4	1.2	1.2	31.2	2.3	1.7	19.5
Newham	2.2	2.5	8.7	1.0	2.4	13.6	4.5	3.8	17.0
Redbridge	0.6	2.8	2.2	0.3	1.4	6.6	2.3	2.6	12.6
Tower Hamlets	5.4	3.1	17.2	12.4	5.9	68.0	4.8	3.4	20.3
Waltham Forest	1.7	2.3	7.2	0.8	1.6	15.3	1.0	1.8	8.0
<i>South London</i>	7.0	13.5	5.1	4.4	10.2	14.0	11.2	13.9	11.5
Bromley	0.9	2.7	3.2	0.1	1.8	1.8	0.3	2.4	1.5
Croydon	1.9	2.7	6.9	1.1	2.2	16.6	2.9	3.2	12.8
Kingston upon Thames	0.6	1.6	3.7	1.0	1.3	23.9	1.9	2.1	12.4
Merton	1.2	2.1	5.7	0.5	1.4	11.0	4.2	1.2	49.3
Sutton	0.6	1.5	3.8	0.5	1.2	13.5	1.2	2.1	8.2
Wandsworth	1.8	2.8	6.2	1.2	2.2	17.8	0.7	2.8	3.9
<i>West London</i>	8.5	18.9	4.4	6.5	15.9	13.3	11.7	22.5	7.4
Brent	1.7	2.9	5.7	1.1	2.1	16.1	2.3	3.5	9.2
Ealing	1.7	3.3	5.1	0.7	2.3	10.5	0.8	3.8	3.1
Hammersmith & Fulham	1.8	2.3	7.7	0.7	2.5	8.4	2.0	2.4	11.5
Harrow	0.7	2.9	2.2	0.8	1.3	21.2	0.6	2.4	3.8
Hillingdon	0.6	2.7	2.2	1.5	3.4	14.0	3.5	4.7	10.7

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

	Living Wage accreditation			Living Wage coverage			Living Wage impact		
	LWEs ^a % N (000s)	Businesses ^b % N (000s)	Rate of accreditation ^c % %	Employees ^d % N (000s)	Jobs ^e % N (000s)	Rate of coverage ^f %	LW recipients ^g % N (000s)	Jobs below LW ^h % N (000s)	Rate of impact ⁱ %
Hounslow	1.1	2.5	4.5	1.2	2.9	13.6	1.1	3.7	4.3
Richmond upon Thames	0.9	2.3	3.7	0.6	1.4	12.7	1.3	1.8	10.3
<i>Central London</i>	56.3	33.5	16.5	68.1	47.2	46.6	46.5	27.7	24.0
Camden	9.7	6.8	13.9	11.0	7.2	49.6	10.8	4.7	32.6
City of London	8.5	4.2	19.6	24.4	11.6	68.0	5.4	3.5	21.9
Islington	8.8	4.3	20.2	4.1	4.5	29.1	2.9	2.6	18.4
Kensington and Chelsea	1.7	2.5	6.8	1.4	2.2	19.5	1.9	2.3	10.7
Lambeth	6.4	2.5	25.2	3.9	2.7	46.8	6.6	2.6	36.2
Southwark	9.3	3.0	30.8	10.6	5.1	67.7	7.6	3.1	35.6
City of Westminster	12.0	10.2	11.5	12.8	14.0	29.7	11.3	8.9	18.2
London total	100.0	100.0	9.8	100.0	100.0	32.3	100.0	100.0	14.3

^aAll Living Wage Employers accredited between 2011 and December 2024, including employers that have let their accreditation lapse.

^bEnterprises by local authority, 2024; figures from Interdepartmental Business Register reported by NOMIS (<https://www.nomisweb.co.uk>).

^cAccredited employers per thousand private businesses with at least one employee.

^dThe headcount of Living Wage Employers at the point of accreditation; the figure does not include indirect employees working for contractors who are eligible for the Living Wage.

^eTotal employee jobs in 2024 reported by NOMIS (<https://www.nomisweb.co.uk>).

^fDirect employees of accredited Living Wage Employers per hundred jobs.

^gDirect and indirect employees reported to have received a pay increase as a result of Living Wage accreditation at the point of accreditation.

^hEmployee jobs paid below the Living Wage in 2024; figures from the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (<https://www.ons.gov.uk>).

ⁱEmployees benefiting from the Living Wage per hundred jobs paid below the Living Wage.

TABLE 2 | Distribution of the Living Wage across the United Kingdom.

	Living Wage accreditation				Living Wage coverage				Living Wage impact			
	LWEs ^a % N (000s)	Businesses ^b % N (000s)	Rate of accreditation ^c % N (000s)	Employees ^d % N (000s)	Jobs ^e % N (000s)	Rate of coverage ^f % N (000s)	LW recipients ^g % N (000s)	Jobs below LW ^h % N (000s)	Rate of impact ⁱ % N (000s)			
United Kingdom	100.0	100.0	7.4	100.0	100.0	12.7	100.0	100.0	12.7	100.0	100.0	9.9
England	71.9	86.9	6.1	77.4	85.7	11.4	75.9	84.3	11.4	75.9	84.3	9.0
Northern Ireland	0.7	2.9	0.1	0.9	2.6	4.6	0.9	4.9	4.6	0.9	4.9	1.8
Scotland	23.6	6.3	27.4	18.1	7.7	29.8	17.6	6.3	29.8	17.6	6.3	27.7
Wales	3.8	3.9	7.3	3.5	4.0	11.2	5.6	4.4	11.2	5.6	4.4	12.8
Devolved Mayoral Authorities												
Greater London	25.9	19.5	9.7	39.4	17.5	28.5	33.5	14.4	28.5	33.5	14.4	23.2
Cambridge & Peterborough	1.3	1.3	3.9	0.7	1.3	7.1	0.7	1.2	7.1	0.7	1.2	5.5
East Midlands	0.6	2.7	1.7	0.7	2.6	3.5	0.6	3.8	3.5	0.6	3.8	1.6
Greater Lincolnshire	0.1	1.4	0.8	0.0	1.2	0.4	0.1	1.9	0.4	0.1	1.9	0.5
Greater Manchester	4.9	3.9	9.4	3.8	3.9	12.3	6.5	4.2	12.3	6.5	4.2	15.2
Hull & East Yorkshire	0.3	0.7	2.7	0.2	0.7	3.0	0.2	1.1	3.0	0.2	1.1	2.1
Liverpool City Region	1.6	1.6	8.5	1.2	1.8	8.4	1.2	2.0	8.4	1.2	2.0	6.2
North East	1.9	2.0	7.1	2.4	2.3	13.4	2.6	3.1	13.4	2.6	3.1	8.5
South Yorkshire	1.1	1.5	5.6	0.7	1.6	5.6	1.6	2.2	5.6	1.6	2.2	7.0
Tees Valley	0.3	0.6	3.8	0.1	0.7	2.6	0.2	4.8	2.6	0.2	4.8	0.4
West Midlands	2.0	3.4	4.3	3.5	3.6	12.4	3.0	4.1	12.4	3.0	4.1	7.3
West of England	2.3	1.4	12.8	1.2	1.6	10.2	1.7	1.1	10.2	1.7	1.1	15.9
West Yorkshire	2.4	2.9	6.1	1.2	3.0	5.1	1.4	4.0	5.1	1.4	4.0	3.4
York & North Yorkshire	1.1	1.5	5.5	0.6	1.1	7.4	1.6	1.3	7.4	1.6	1.3	12.6

^aAll Living Wage Employers accredited between 2011 and December 2024, including employers that have let their accreditation lapse.

^bPrivate businesses with at least one employee, 2024; figures from Business Population Estimates 2024 produced by the Office for National Statistics (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/>).

^cAccredited employers per thousand private businesses with at least one employee.

^dThe headcount of Living Wage Employers at the point of accreditation; the figure does not include indirect employees working for contractors who are eligible for the Living Wage.

^eTotal employee jobs in 2025 reported by NOMIS (<https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/>).

^fDirect employees of accredited Living Wage Employers per hundred jobs.

^gDirect and indirect employees reported to have received a pay increase as a result of Living Wage accreditation at the point of accreditation.

^hEmployee jobs paid below the Living Wage in 2024; figures from the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/>).

ⁱEmployees benefiting from the Living Wage per hundred jobs paid below the Living Wage.

are confident that the figures reported in Table 2 provide robust estimates of the spread and impact of the Living Wage across the different areas of the United Kingdom.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from the figures in Table 2. The first is that across the United Kingdom, Living Wage accreditation remains modest relative to the total business base, with only 7.4 accredited employers per thousand businesses. Coverage is stronger than accreditation, however, with one in eight jobs in the United Kingdom located in Living Wage accredited employers. The second notable point is that there is substantial variation across the nations of the United Kingdom. Scotland stands out with the highest accreditation rate (27 per thousand) and coverage, with nearly a third of all jobs found in accredited organisations. These figures, which far exceed England and Wales, reflect the strong policy alignment and advocacy by successive Scottish governments (Heery et al. 2020).

At sub-nation level, however, London is a major locus of Living Wage activity accounting for over a quarter of all accredited employers and two-fifths of all employees covered across the United Kingdom. These figures are double the respective proportion of businesses and jobs in the capital confirming London's position as a key hotspot of the Living Wage campaign. This is further evidenced by its accreditation rate (9.7 per thousand) being the second highest outside Scotland, despite accounting for the largest proportion of businesses of any region

or nation within the United Kingdom. It is also noteworthy that Greater Manchester scores highly, given the strong local support afforded to the Living Wage by Andy Burnham the elected mayor (Johnson et al. 2023). Finally, the rate of Living Wage impact, which measures the proportion of people in jobs paid below the Living Wage that have received a wage rise following Living Wage accreditation is substantially higher in London than anywhere else in England and approaching the figure for Scotland. That nearly a quarter of low wage jobs have been uplifted to the Living Wage in London is evidence of the tangible impact that the campaign has had.

Table 3 takes a longitudinal view and examines the growth of the Living Wage during the period of the MLLWC campaign and compares this to figures for the preceding 4 years from 2017 to 21. This allows an assessment of whether the campaign has succeeded in its aim of increasing the engagement and adoption of the Living Wage by employers. Again, the figures for London are placed in a broader national context as well as being compared to the other devolved mayoral authorities in England.

Table 3 illustrates that the Living Wage accreditation and impact grew strongly in the period 2021–25. Across the United Kingdom over 11,000 employers became accredited over the period which represents an increase of 73 per cent compared to the 4 years between 2017 and 2021. The number of additional employees receiving a wage increase following accreditation in 2021–25 was almost double that for the earlier period. London

TABLE 3 | Living Wage accreditation and impact 2017–25.

	Living Wage accreditation ^a			Living Wage impact ^b		
	2017–21 ^c N	2021–25 ^d N	Increase %	2017–21 ^c N	2021–25 ^d N	Increase %
United Kingdom	6493	11,244	73	119,827	235,611	97
England	4492	8279	84	88,673	187,271	111
Northern Ireland	28	155	454	853	3217	277
Scotland	1689	2391	42	22,748	30,796	35
Wales	284	419	48	7552	14,327	90
Devolved Mayoral Authorities						
Greater London	1704	2621	54	41,828	71,102	70
Cambridge & Peterborough	70	150	114	1158	1231	6
East Midlands	38	67	76	365	1709	368
Greater Lincolnshire	9	16	78	205	213	4
Greater Manchester	303	634	109	8862	18,802	112
Hull & East Yorkshire	14	33	136	193	536	178
Liverpool City Region	118	197	67	2704	2755	2
North East	119	257	116	3213	8652	169
South Yorkshire	65	161	148	1080	7989	640
Tees Valley	24	39	63	190	623	228
West Midlands	120	219	83	3117	5127	64
West of England	131	314	140	3880	3402	–12
West Yorkshire	116	297	156	1565	3569	128
York & North Yorkshire	71	128	80	590	6197	950

^aNumber of new Living Wage employer accreditations.

^bDirect and indirect employees reported to have received a pay increase as a result of Living Wage accreditation at the point of accreditation.

^cSeptember 2017 to August 2021.

^dSeptember 2021 to August 2025.

also saw significant growth in accreditations and employees benefiting during the MLLWC project when compared to the previous 4 years. However, in both cases, the rate of growth is lower than for the United Kingdom as a whole. London's position when compared with the other devolved mayoral authorities in England is mixed. In absolute terms it is comfortably the largest contributor to Living Wage growth accounting for nearly a quarter of all accreditations and 30 per cent of all impact during the period 2021–25. In terms of growth rate, it lags behind, however, with the lowest accreditation growth of the 14 devolved mayoral authorities and the fifth lowest growth in impact. An obvious potential explanation for this pattern is the difference in starting point for the different regions; the higher growth of the Living Wage outside London over the period 2021–25 is coming from significantly lower levels of accreditation. The Living Wage campaign in London is more mature with many of the 'soft targets' already accredited, thus making further growth more challenging.

The sectoral focus of the MLLWC project was concentrated on the health and social care, and creative and cultural sectors. Table 4 shows how Living Wage accreditation and impact grew in both sectors during the project period, compared to the previous for years from 2017 to 21. Perhaps the most significant finding is that the growth rate in these priority sectors is considerably higher than in non-priority sectors. This is true for both Living Wage accreditations and impact as measured by employee uplifts. In the health sector, growth in both Living Wage accreditations and impact nearly doubled during the MLLWC period. This expansion has been driven by hospitals, which account for the majority of employees covered by the Living Wage, alongside more modest growth in primary healthcare and other healthcare providers. Social care has also seen a marked increase, with accreditations rising by 70 per cent and uplifts nearly nine times higher. Over 6000 workers in social care have seen direct pay uplifts, underlining the sector's central role in extending the reach of the Living Wage to some of the most vulnerable parts of the workforce.

Although Health and Social Care were amalgamated in the sectoral action strand of the project, it is important to recognise the heterogeneity of the constituent sectors, which have had

differing successes and challenges during the campaign. NHS Trusts have demonstrated strong progress, benefiting from established networks and clear leadership that support Living Wage adoption. In contrast, social care has faced greater obstacles, constrained by limited financial resources and fragmented internal networks. Primary care has also been slower to respond, though the emergence of a sector champion is beginning to create momentum. Meanwhile, Integrated Care Systems (ICSs) present a new structural lever to embed the Living Wage across health and social care, offering the potential to drive more consistent progress in the future.

The Creative and cultural sector was also prioritised in the MLLWC campaign and Table 4 shows the growth in Living Wage accreditation and impact. Between September 2021 and August 2025, the number of accredited employers in these industries increased by 77 per cent and uplifts by nearly double that amount. Media services, which includes activities such as advertising and communications, saw the strongest growth, which can partly be explained by the presence of proactive industry champions that effectively utilised peer-to-peer networks to spread accreditation within their industry. Strategic wins at high-profile cultural institutions such as The Globe have also generated momentum, helping to raise visibility and credibility for the Living Wage.

Table 5 shows how the Living Wage has grown in the two priority sectors in London, compared to both the wider United Kingdom and amongst other combined authorities. Looking first at the creative and cultural industries, the figures show the centrality of London with 44 per cent of nationwide Living Wage accreditations in these industries located in the capital during the period from 2017 to 21. Indeed, this sector accounted for 11 per cent of all London accreditations, nearly double the rate for the United Kingdom as a whole. In the following period from September 2021 to August 2025 there were over 300 new accreditations in the creative and cultural industries in London, accounting for nearly a third of all UK accreditations in that sector. Despite this strong growth, overall, the 2021–25 period saw faster accreditation growth outside the capital, with all bar five devolved mayoral authorities outperforming London. A similar picture emerges in the health and social care sector.

TABLE 4 | Living Wage accreditation and impact in priority industries 2017–25.

	Living Wage accreditation ^a					Living Wage impact ^b				
	2017–21 ^c		2021–25 ^d		Increase	2017–21 ^c		2021–25 ^d		Increase
	N	%	N	%		N	%	N	%	
Health and Social Care	65	3.8	114	4.4	75	3885	9.3	12,405	17.6	219
Healthcare	25	1.5	46	1.8	84	3191	7.6	6198	8.8	94
Social care	40	2.4	68	2.6	70	694	1.7	6207	8.8	794
Creative and Cultural	169	9.9	299	11.6	77	1550	3.7	3718	5.3	140
Media services	80	4.7	166	6.4	108	282	0.7	1840	2.6	552
Arts & cultural services	89	5.2	133	5.2	49	1268	3.0	1878	2.7	48
Other industries	1468	86.3	2165	84.0	47	36,280	87.0	54,185	77.1	49
Total	1702	100.0	2578	100.0	51	41,715	100.0	70,308	100.0	69

^aNumber of new Living Wage employer accreditations.

^bDirect and indirect employees reported to have received a pay increase as a result of Living Wage accreditation at the point of accreditation.

^cSeptember 2017 to August 2021.

^dSeptember 2021 to August 2025.

TABLE 5 | Living Wage accreditation in priority industries by nation and Mayoral Combined Authority 2017–25.

	Living Wage accreditation ^a				
	2017–21 ^b		2021–25 ^c		Increase %
	N	%	N	%	
<i>Creative and Cultural Industries</i>					
UK	433	6.7	1026	9.1	137
England	323	7.2	732	8.8	127
Northern Ireland	1	3.6	17	11.0	1600
Scotland	86	5.1	240	10.0	179
Wales	23	8.1	37	8.8	61
Greater London	189	11.1	323	12.3	71
Camb & Peterborough	1	1.4	7	4.7	600
East Midlands	2	5.3	8	11.9	300
Greater Lincolnshire	0	0.0	0	0.0	
Greater Manchester	17	5.6	58	9.1	241
Hull & East Yorks	0	0.0	8	24.2	
Liverpool City Region	6	5.1	10	5.1	67
North East	6	5.0	29	11.3	383
South Yorks	6	9.2	9	5.6	50
Tees Valley	1	4.2	2	5.1	100
West Midlands	6	5.0	11	5.0	83
West of England	10	7.6	34	10.8	240
West Yorks	9	7.8	42	14.1	367
York & North Yorks	4	5.6	6	4.7	50
<i>Health and Social Care</i>					
UK	889	13.7	1600	14.2	80
England	593	13.2	1172	14.2	98
Northern Ireland	2	7.1	26	16.8	1200
Scotland	257	15.2	335	14.0	30
Wales	37	13.0	67	16.0	81
Greater London	191	11.2	306	11.7	60
Camb & Peterborough	7	10.0	37	24.7	429
East Midlands	7	18.4	12	17.9	71
Greater Lincolnshire	3	33.3	0	0.0	0
Greater Manchester	62	20.5	147	23.2	137
Hull & East Yorks	3	21.4	2	6.1	67
Liverpool City Region	25	21.2	32	16.2	28
North East	18	15.1	51	19.8	183
South Yorks	8	12.3	29	18.0	263
Tees Valley	3	12.5	5	12.8	67
West Midlands	19	15.8	29	13.2	53
West of England	21	16.0	36	11.5	71
West Yorks	13	11.2	48	16.2	269
York & North Yorks	6	8.5	17	13.3	183

^aNumber of new Living Wage employer accreditation.

^bSeptember 2017 to August 2021.

^cSeptember 2021 to August 2025.

With over 300 new employers signed up during the 2021–25 period, London accounted for nearly a fifth of all new UK Living Wage accreditations in this priority sector. However, as Table 5 shows, despite this representing a growth rate of 60 per cent compared to the previous 4 years, Living Wage adoption spread more rapidly across other part of the country with all but three devolved mayoral authorities experiencing slower growth. For both sectors, an important caveat to restate is that in all cases outside London, this growth was starting from a much lower level than in the capital.

Taking the data in the round, several conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, in absolute terms London remains a major locus of Living Wage activity within the United Kingdom, accounting for nearly a quarter of all accreditations during the period from September 2021 to August 2025. Secondly, the data clearly show that when it comes to the growth in accreditation, there has been a greater acceleration of Living Wage adoption outside the capital, within areas that have not been traditional concentrations of Living Wage activity. This finding suggests there may be diminishing marginal returns within the Living Wage campaign, as it becomes more challenging to continue signing employers up to the wage standard as the ‘softer’ targets become exhausted. It is in this context, that the continued growth of the Living Wage in London should be viewed.

6 | Conclusion

This article examines the relationship between political devolution and employment relations through the lens of the Living Wage campaign in London. Our analysis demonstrates that while the rationale for promoting the Living Wage—addressing low pay, in-work poverty, and fostering inclusive growth—echoes strategies pursued in other devolved administrations, the mechanisms and actors involved in London differ markedly. Unlike Scotland and Wales, where broader devolved powers have enabled legislative and institutional embedding of fair work standards, London’s GLA operates with limited formal power. Consequently, efforts to advance the RLW in the capital have relied on a fragmented yet dynamic approach that mobilises multiple levels of local government, anchor institutions, and civil society actors through soft regulation, ideological leadership, and community organising.

Analysis of the spread and impact of the Living Wage in London reveals that while accreditation remains uneven across boroughs, the capital is a major locus of Living Wage activity, accounting for nearly a quarter of all UK accreditations and two-fifths of covered employees. Growth accelerated during the MLLWC campaign, particularly in priority sectors such as health, social care, and creative industries, where targeted strategies and focussed leadership drove substantial increases in accreditation and wage uplifts. Our analysis also reveals an uneven pattern of Living Wage activity across London, reflecting differing configurations of the coalition of stakeholders that has contributed to the campaign in the capital.

The GLA has played a longstanding and visible role in advancing the Living Wage campaign, offering ideological leadership and symbolic authority that has elevated the issue within London’s governance framework. Yet its influence is part of a wider network of actors rather than as a singular driver

of change. The campaign’s effectiveness reflects a distributed model in which the GLA’s policy levers such as procurement policies and the Good Work Standard intersect with the relational power of community organising and the sectoral reach of other anchor institutions, including borough councils, NHS Trusts, universities, and major employers. This collaborative dynamic underscores that progress towards tackling low pay has depended on interaction among stakeholders rather than the authority of any one institution.

London’s position as a locus of Living Wage accreditation and impact is, therefore, rooted in a multi-lever, multi-actor strategy. Structural influence from anchor institutions has combined with grassroots mobilisation to create both normative authority and democratic legitimacy. Governance has been characterised by decentralised, networked leadership, enabling coordination across political, economic, and civic domains without formal legislative power. This approach exemplifies a pragmatic form of devolution in action; adaptive, place-based, and reliant on the integration of structural, relational, and symbolic levers to embed fair work norms across the capital.

Although patterns of accreditation remain uneven, the highest impact occurs where these strategies converge, boroughs such as Southwark and Tower Hamlets exemplify how local political will, institutional capacity, and community mobilisation interact to maximise impact. By demonstrating how the Living Wage has grown in London as a result of collaborative governance that integrates structural, relational, and symbolic power, we offer a distinctive perspective on how devolved governance can reshape employment practices even in the absence of formal legislative authority.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Endnotes

¹Barchester Healthcare is a health provider that operates nursing homes and hospital beds across the UK.

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