

# Women and Equalities Committee

## Oral evidence: The work of the Social Mobility Commission, HC 743

Wednesday 23 November 2022

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Caroline Nokes (Chair); Carolyn Harris; Kim Johnson; Rachel Maclean; Ms Anum Qaisar; Bell Ribeiro-Addy.

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### Witnesses

[I](#): Katharine Birbalsingh CBE, Chair, Social Mobility Commission; Alun Francis OBE, Deputy Chair, Social Mobility Commission; and John Craven, Director, Social Mobility Commission.

## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Katharine Birbalsingh CBE, Alun Francis OBE and John Craven.

**Q1 Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to this afternoon's meeting of the Women and Equalities Select Committee and our session on the work of the Social Mobility Commission. This is the annual scrutiny of the Commission and I think the first time we have had the opportunity to see you since the pre-appointment hearing. I thank our witnesses, Katharine Birbalsingh, Alun Francis and John Craven for being with us this afternoon. Alun Francis is with us via Zoom. Can I just check that you can hear me okay?

**Alun Francis:** I can hear you very well. I hope you can hear me, too.

**Q2 Chair:** Brilliant. Thank you very much. Can I check how each of you would like to be referred to? Are you happy that we use your first names? I have got nods. Thank you very much.

As I said, it has been a year since your appointment. Thank you very much for coming in to this afternoon's session to talk to us about how that first year has gone and what you have focused on. Could you give us a brief indication, Katharine, of how you think that first year has gone and where your focus and priorities have been?

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** Yes, sure. There have been some challenges but lots of successes. Our first act as Commissioners was to lay out a framework for a stronger and clearer definition of social mobility, because I think there can be some confusion. We can get into conversation a little bit later about what we mean by that.

We very much want to be neutral about the evidence, and we understand very much that this is about us being a Commission that is evidence-led. We are in the middle of getting under the social mobility headlines, which can sometimes be misleading. Again, we can get into that in more detail afterwards. Therefore, who are we looking at? We are looking at people with low educational attainment after living in left behind places, where the economy has not grown. I would also say that we are looking at people who have succeeded in such places and, also, people who are left behind but in successful places.

We want to ask the factors: what factors most influence opportunity and mobility? We can get into that discussion in a bit more detail afterwards, but I think those factors can be more complex. Alun and I would say it is more complex than it first seems when you look at social mobility headlines. Also, what policies do successive Governments need in order to help people improve their skills? At the moment, for instance, we are asking the Government to improve data that is available to the Commission, because there are lots of data gaps and it makes it difficult for us to be able to do our jobs, to look at the evidence, if that evidence just isn't there.



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I want to give you three headlines, to give you a sense of the sort of thing that we are interested in and the way in which we want to lead things. First, we are very interested in developing and nurturing people's talents, and so what does that mean? You see their talents in the early years. You see them in school life and then later on, and so we need to look at early years, what happens in the family, early years in school, parenting and then also schooling. That is from primary school right through to secondary.

The second headline there is deploying people's talents. You want to nurture them, and then how do we get them out there? First there is just the recruitment cycle, from universities, from employers, looking at that and again getting under the headlines and figuring out how that can be improved. Then also from the student perspective, what is helpful to enable them to deploy their talents in a way that is best for them and best for our society?

Lastly, we will eventually get to the link between economic growth, innovation and social mobility. That is something that we see further along the line. That is where we are at the moment, but we can go into that in more detail as we proceed.

Q3 **Chair:** You reference challenges. Has time been a challenge?

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** You were very right. Previous Commissioners have said that this is a full-time job, and I tend to agree. I am certain Alun would also agree. Alun, do you want to say anything to add to what I just said?

**Alun Francis:** I am fine. I can add as we go along.

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** Okay. Yes, you were right and so were previous Commissioners. It is something for the Committee to think about. If successive Chairs say that it really is a full-time job, and if social mobility is to be taken seriously by all the political parties, it is something that needs reviewing. Both Alun and I have very demanding jobs—I am headmistress of a school, and he is the principal of an FE college—and it is hard to be able to do what is necessary.

Forgive me, but I would like to take the opportunity to talk a little bit about the staffing issues that we have had in the Commission, just briefly because obviously we have bigger things to talk about. There have been a lot of short contracts and a lot of time has been spent on trying to get them permanent. There are so many pressures on the stuff that you all never see, which is happening in the background. In fact, John, just give a little bit more detail, because I think the Committee needs to understand the kind of pressures that our Commission is under

**John Craven:** Thank you, Katharine. I joined in June and the challenge I have is that 70% of the team are on short-term contracts that expire for most of them in the next few months. Due to restrictions on recruitment



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that are in place across large parts of the Civil Service, including the Cabinet Office that we sit under, we cannot extend any of those contracts at the moment and we cannot make any of those positions permanent. That makes it very hard to make even medium-term plans to achieve the very ambitious goals that the Commissioners have. We hope that we get clarity on that very soon, but it represents a big challenge to us in trying to make the progress that we want to make.

Q4 **Chair:** How long have you been seeking clarity on that?

**John Craven:** Over three months.

Q5 **Chair:** Do you feel that it is indicative of the Government not taking social mobility seriously enough? Is it not high enough up the agenda?

**John Craven:** I do not think this particular issue is due to that. I think it is more of a widespread issue across government due to the changes in Ministers that we have seen over the last few months—the turbulence that we have seen.

Q6 **Chair:** Do you feel you have a Minister now that is driving this agenda forward?

**John Craven:** Yes.

Q7 **Chair:** Thank you. Alun, is there anything you want to add to that?

**Alun Francis:** Thank you, yes. I want to add an important point, which I think is that obviously the Commission has to work within a set of budgetary constraints to be efficient and effective, but what is very important is that this is a very complex subject, which has a number of technical aspects to it and requires a level of expertise in the team. That does require us to be able to recruit and retain people who work with the Commission over a period of time to ensure that the Commission has that level of expertise.

Some of the judgments of the Commission do not require specific social mobility knowledge but the core of the work around research, analysis and policy recommendations really does. That is the bit that I think we need to get right because that is the engine room in terms of advising the Government, giving good quality reports, generating good data and helping us to formulate good recommendations around policy. That is what is quite frustrating when we cannot get that bit right.

Q8 **Chair:** Thank you. Katharine, John has referred very subtly to the revolving cast of Ministers. Over the course of the last year, you have seen a number of Ministers in role. How much engagement have you had with them personally and on what sort of issues have they come to you asking for advice and recommendations?

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** The thing is that it has all been a bit stop and start. You meet with somebody and then they are gone. When you first meet, you explain what we are doing and it is all introductory, and then



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you might not get a follow-up meeting, because meetings take a long time, Ministers are very busy and so on.

I was told that I have met more Ministers than any Chair of the Social Mobility Commission, so obviously things have been taken seriously enough since my appointment for them to want to meet. It is just that I think there has been some disruption in government, so we have not been able to see that longevity. I am hoping now that things are more settled, and we will be able to build on previous relationships.

**Q9 Chair:** You have a statutory duty to provide advice on social mobility to Ministers. Have any of them specifically come to you asking for advice?

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** Yes, Kemi Badenoch asked us to look into advice for students in terms of the labour market value of qualifications. The difficulty can be that, if you are less aware of what a qualification might be worth, you might end up doing a course that is not the best course for you, whether that is at an FE college or at university. Therefore, that is something we are actually doing right now thanks to her request. It is one of our projects that we are looking into. We are analysing that to be able to give some feedback to her and eventually advise the Government on what kind of policy would help students from more disadvantaged backgrounds to be more aware of the labour market value of their qualifications.

**Q10 Chair:** Was that a published request to you for advice?

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** I don't know if it was published. She certainly asked us for it, but I don't know.

**Q11 Chair:** Do you feel you have sufficient leeway, scope and capacity to go and proactively offer advice? If you see something that you think is not going to further social mobility, you have sufficient access to go and bang the door down if you need to?

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** Yes. I have not felt that we could not say what we want to say. Maybe I am not forthright enough. Would you imagine that the Government would do something and that we should then be demanding a meeting with Ministers right away? I suppose that we are more reserved. We might write an article, or we might put something up on the website to say, "This is our position on what the Government think", but perhaps we should—

**Q12 Chair:** I am just trying to understand how the relationship works.

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** Remember, we are at the beginning, and there have been lots of introductory meetings. I am not sure if we are there just yet. I think next year I would be able to give you a better answer to that.

**Q13 Chair:** Thank you. That is very helpful. When it comes to next year, and you come in front of us again, what do you expect to have achieved? What do you want to be able to share with us that will show progress and



achievements in the key areas?

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** Let me tell you about parenting, because that is one of the areas that we are looking at.

At the moment, we have been doing an internal review of evidence. I will not surprise any of you when I talk about how essential the early years are and what families do with their early years children, and that reading, talking and playing are the three big things that early years children need to do. It is an interesting question: how can the Government help families to do this? Because it is mainly in the home where these things are going to take place.

We are in the middle of looking at governmental and non-governmental programmes, like Sure Start, for instance, and the Family Hubs Network. There are various ones that we are looking at and analysing to see how well they did at changing things for disadvantaged families, because the first start that children have is in the home. Somehow policy needs to help families in order to ensure that they are all able to give children a great start in life. That is one thing that we are doing, and I would love to be able to come back next year and say, "This is what we found".

We have started a series of podcasts. We have managed to do one podcast. I interviewed Lee Elliot Major, who is a sociologist. He has written a book about parenting, which is excellent and gives great advice to parents. Of course, the problem that any of us in this field always buck against is that he writes this brilliant book, but will the families whom we want to reach read this book? I do not know. Some of them may, but it is unlikely. It was a great book. So, what do you do? One of the things that we have tried to do is develop this podcast in the hope that it would reach more people. We need to analyse the evidence more and we need to then come back to you and say, "This is what we found, this has worked and this hasn't worked in the past", and then make new recommendations to Government.

Q14 **Chair:** How easy have you found it to get data, information and evidence from Government? Have you had enough access to it?

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** That has been a problem, and there are massive data gaps. A big report that we are going to come out with now is precisely on that—the problem with data. Alun, do you want to say anything?

**Chair:** Alun was nodding at that, so let's hear from Alun.

**Alun Francis:** If I take one step back, one of the concerns that we have had has been to try to take a view on this sense of frustration in the past around how the Commission can have more impact. Rightly or wrongly, we have taken the view that actually the first thing is that we need to be very much clearer about definitions and how we measure social mobility. Secondly, we need to try to focus in on the things that make the bigger difference. We are a relatively small organisation and we have to work



within the constraints that we have, and apply our efforts on the things where we think the biggest difference can be made; hence our choice of themes. However, the data and the definitions are very important.

The first thing in the State of the Nation report in 2022 was to start to use that annual report to be more like a compendium of information about social mobility, presenting the data on actual social mobility outcomes, not just on what we call “drivers”, and other things that are proxies, if you like, to social mobility—to present the evidence and update that annually.

Doing that unravels the fact that there are quite a number of data gaps. I will not bore you with all of the details, as some of them are quite technical. For example, comparisons between the kinds of data we have to use in the UK compared to other countries, where some of the data sets are more comprehensive. We have used our academic advisory board to help us really focus in on the data areas that we think could best be improved quickly. We are due to report either just before or just after Christmas with what we hope is a fairly weighty piece of work. If we are going to take social mobility seriously, measure it accurately and make sure that we all understand what we are talking about when we talk about social mobility, we do need to close some of those data gaps off as quickly as we can. That is a piece of work that we have prioritised and hopefully will help us to move in the right direction fairly shortly.

**Q15 Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** I wanted to ask some more questions about your comments on parenting, and family and culture. How do you feel that these values are key to upward social mobility, and what evidence is there to support this?

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** As I said, we have done an internal review of other reviews that have been done. There have been all kinds of campaigns talking about those three things—playing, reading and talking. That sort of stuff is not revolutionary. The issue is more about how we get everyone doing this all the time, and so that they are aware. That is something that we need to give thought to and do more analysis on to find out and come up with a strategy, because it is hard.

There are lots of organisations talking about early years and what needs to be done—over the decades this has happened—but there has never been the success that I would like to see on that, because it is hard, so we have to give some thought to that. We are in the middle of that, and it is hard for me to say for sure what the strategy would be, because we have not come up with that yet.

**Q16 Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** So you do not currently have a view on what policy interventions you would be looking at to encourage effective parenting?

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** In some of the work that we have been looking at—there is a man called James Heckman in America who has had some interesting projects. He found that if they send somebody into the home



to give advice about what to do, and then they follow up with text messages afterwards, to say, "It's bath time. Now's the time to read a book, this is the time to do this", and so on, that prompts certain behaviours to make them more habitual.

It is an odd thing to talk to a toddler. It is odd because toddlers do not respond. The conversations that you have with toddlers go something like this: "Hello, how are you? Oh, I bet you're doing really well today. I'm having a great day. Where have you been today, because I was just in the park? Oh, I bet you've been with Mum, haven't you?" Now, you are responding for the toddler each time, and that is a weird conversation; but those of us who do that, we do not think it is weird. We just automatically do that when we see a toddler. If you are not surrounded by people who do that, then it will not be part of your habits and culture around you. It does not mean that you do not love your children; it does not mean that you do not want the best for them. You just do not realise that later, when they are five or six years old and they are in school, and at school they say to you that your child is behind in terms of their literacy—you do not understand why. It is because you did not talk to them enough, you did not play with them enough. You can leave the child to play on their own, or you can play with them. The evidence will show that by playing with them they are more likely to hang on to and retain shapes—they will remember this stuff better than if they are doing it on their own. How are you meant to know that unless someone is telling you?

We would like to start up a campaign. We are in the middle of discussing now what we do, how one finances it and so on. That is a conversation to be had. Ideally, we would love to get the private sector involved. At the same time, we are also looking at Sure Start and various other initiatives that have gone on in the past, to see whether or not they have had the outcomes that they would have liked. Another organisation did an analysis of Sure Start. They interviewed 7,000 families that took part in Sure Start, and the thing is that it was self-identification—the parents themselves felt that they used less negative parenting in terms of the discipline. However, overall, there certainly was not as much impact from Sure Start as even people who have worked within Sure Start would have liked. The question is: what alternatives are there? What can Government do? I am not sure, but next year I will be able to tell you more on what our strategy would be. Alun, do you want to add to that?

**Alun Francis:** I do have a couple of observations. I think the Committee are keen on our direction of travel. In one sense, we are bit more open minded about what we explore, but I will talk for a second about the issues and obstacles. In one sense, it is easy to say what parents and families do to support good early years development. It is harder to say what the obstacles are that prevent some people from doing those things.



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The answers to those questions are complicated and to some degree sensitive. There are issues about different family compositions, the age of parents, and the level of parental education. There appears to be a geographical spread to some of those issues. There is a very definite difference between what has happened to families where parents are graduates compared to non-graduates, for example. There is quite a lot to sort through underneath this. What we want to do is come up with recommendations that are about supporting people to do well, and that means looking in the rounder path around that.

What we also want to do is recommend things, recognising that any anything that is implemented needs to have time to work. These are not quick fixes; it takes 18 years to pick the child up. One of the things that we will want to comment on is that what is not helpful is policy churn—when policies change too much or are not well evaluated, so that we do not know effectively what works. Certainly, in terms of promoting good social mobility, some of our recommendations will definitely be about focusing on things that work, trying to focus on the most important things and evaluating them well, so there is learning as we go along about what practices are effective.

**Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** I know that you not all quite clear on exactly what it is that you are doing, but perhaps there might be an idea of some resources that you might be providing to parents that could work across—

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** Possibly.

**Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** What type of resources would those be, do you think?

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** When I say about reading, playing and talking, it is about doing it with the child. That is the big difference. It is not that children in disadvantaged homes do not play; it is that the parent might not play with them. It is not that there is no talking at all, but the parent might not talk with them. In terms of the research that is out there regarding the “talking with”, it will say that children from disadvantaged homes will hear a lot of instructions: “Come here”, “Sit down over there”, “Eat your dinner”, “Come outside”. The “conversation with” of the examples that I just gave: “And so what about this?” “Look at this, I have got a little stuffed animal, what do you think his name is?”—all this kind of thing which all of us in this room likely do without thinking, where we invent stories in order to talk about the little stuffed animal: “I found him over there. What do you think he was doing? Oh, my goodness”, and all that—it is odd behaviour, and we need to make that odd behaviour more normal.

That is not necessarily about giving out a resource. Of course, one could say, “Well, they need reading, so we need to give them a book,” but the thing is, one book is not—what we need is to change behaviours. It is about encouraging parents to get a few books, to go to the library, to go



to the local Oxfam, to invest in books, and then not just to have them, but to sit and read with their children, to know what to do—to read out loud and draw your finger under the words as you read the words out loud, and to read them with real enthusiasm, “Out came the wolf to play, and then he did this—ooh”. You need to do all of that to keep the attention of the child. It is about changing behaviours. If someone does not read like that, they do not mean not to; they just do not realise how much more the child will be engaged if they do that.

It needs a campaign that can get access to lots of people. The problem with that is that that costs lots of money. Financially with where we are as a country, it might not be a priority. I cannot say whether or not it is; but I imagine this would not be the priority for Government. That is why we try to think outside the box and think, “Well can we involve the private sector? What can we do?” Those early years, they are just so important. I know this from being a headmistress, and from being in teaching all my life. By the time we get them at 11, there is only so much a school can do to help redress those issues that were from before they ever came to school. Those issues then carry on to where Alun then has them at age 16 or 17, where they are constantly behind and constantly trying to catch up. Many of those issues could be avoided if we could get that happening.

I was talking about Heckman’s work in America. It is not just in America—he has done this work in Jamaica and China. There is another woman called Orla Doyle, who has done some work in Ireland, where sending somebody into the home to alter some of those behaviours has had a huge impact. We are looking at that work to analyse it, and then we can come up with strategies and recommendations once we finish that.

**Q17 Kim Johnson:** I wanted to pick up, Katharine, on what you were saying about Sure Start. In my opinion, Sure Start worked really well when it was first established because it was very much about a whole community around that child from early years—a midwife, the health visitor, the school, Jobcentre Plus. It provided a great deal of opportunity for parents and the child to develop and grow. There was lots of anecdotal information from schools that children that went through Sure Start programmes developed better, were better settled and prepared when they got to school.

I want to know, in terms of you as the Chair of the Social Mobility Commission, whether you have a role in putting some pressure on the Government to look at some of these initiatives that worked really well—to say, “There was a longitudinal study on the importance of the early years, and this worked in the early years”? What role does the Social Mobility Commission have in looking at those initiatives going forward?

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** We are looking at it, and it is interesting what you say. We are in the middle of that analysis of Sure Start. There were good things that came out of Sure Start, from what I understand. As I say, we are only at the beginning of it. Some health outcomes were



better—there was less negative parenting. In terms of actual educational attainment, there did not seem to be so much impact. Now we are in the early days, so we might find out more and then find out that actually, it was very successful. It is really interesting to hear your opinion on that. That is not to say that a programme like Sure Start should not be available. Help for families should definitely be there. The question is: precisely what? As I was talking about the evidence and assessing the evidence, it is very important to us so that we make recommendations that are accurate and most likely to be of the most help to those disadvantaged families. Of course, all of this research takes time, and it also takes staff. As John was saying, we are in difficulty.

**Q18 Kim Johnson:** Can I just intervene to say that there is already lots of research out there? Would you agree with me that actions speak louder than words? Is it time to start moving on and making things better for our young people?

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** I certainly would want us to make the right recommendations and so we do need to look at that research. I am not suggesting that we are doing the research. It is just that we need to analyse the research that is there, and to be sure of what our recommendations might be. We will certainly make some recommendations, do not worry, but we just want to be sure of what we are saying, because we have a responsibility to make sure that what we say is accurate. Alun, do you want to add to any of this?

**Alun Francis:** I have a very short observation. I think particularly the multi-agency aspects of Sure Start—as you just described them really well—are very important, and clearly the research that Katharine has mentioned earlier around interventions with families. I think what Katharine is trying to say, in terms of looking at the evaluation of Sure Start and other initiatives, is that we have opportunity areas and other things such as family hubs, and so on, and we need to complete a review of that evidence in order to be able to make recommendations that draw on the best of that work. Clearly, the gist of it, in terms of how you make interventions in those families, is that Sure Start does have some really good elements to it. What we need to do is be able to complete our review of all of those pieces of work and come up with some conclusions that follow from that.

**Q19 Carolyn Harris:** Can I just very quickly say that back in 1998, I was a youth worker and we used to call it social exclusion? We were working very hard with local organisations to encourage them to work with families when a child was in a family, or to work with local social services when the child was not in a family. There are some brilliant projects that started there that are still going, and they still do brilliant work. Why has it taken 22 years and we are still only talking about it? Why have we not done more using the models that we already have?

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** That is a good question. I would be interested to know what specific projects you are talking about.



**Carolyn Harris:** I am thinking particularly of the Faith in Families project, who work in three communities in my constituency. It is a church-based organisation, although the religious side of it is not pushed on anyone. Everything that you have said that we need to be doing, they are already actually delivering. The problem they have is they do not get the resources from Government to allow them to actually do the work. They are dependent on businesses and donations in order to function.

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** That is really interesting, and we will take a look at that. I imagine that there are, as you say, small organisations in various places doing excellent work, which we need to learn from. I share your frustration when you say, "Why are we still talking about it 22 years later?" When I was saying to the team, "Read, talk and play, 20 minutes a day, get them doing this. How do we get them to read, talk and play for 20 minutes a day?"—as you say, everybody knows this. I am not saying anything to you that you all do not know. I do not know why, 22 years later, we are still talking about it. All we can do now is to do our analysis and do our very best, so that 22 years from now we are not still talking about it.

Q20 **Ms Anum Qaisar:** I have in front of me seven new Commissioners that were appointed by the former Prime Minister in September of last year, I understand. I have been looking through the list of names that I have in front of me, and I can see that only one of your new Commissioners is a woman. I will come to you first, Katharine. Are you concerned that it seems to be a very male dominated board? Does that risk social mobility issues being overlooked for women?

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** It is an interesting question; I share your concern and we have had discussions about it. If you would like to ask why there is only one woman, I suppose that whenever you are on a board or in a panel and you are appointing, you are always trying to find a balance. You are thinking that it would be good to have diversity, but it is not just diversity of gender. You also want diversity of race, you want diversity of age, and I think that we have done quite well—50% are ethnic minority. There are a variety of ages on there as well, and experience.

We also were thinking about their experience that they were bringing to the board—and we wanted a variety. We had health, business and finance and we wanted it to complement Alun and me—because Alun and I have education as our background. You are interviewing all of these people and trying to appoint the best people because you want to appoint the best who are in front of you, but then you are also trying to tick all of these boxes. That is the way that it is worked out, but I do understand and share your concerns on that issue.

One of the Commissioners has actually gone. In the end, he could not work in Britain, so there are only six of them. We have had discussions around whether we should open up to appoint again, because that might be an opportunity to bring another woman on board, but we have only



had discussions. We have not moved forward with that. There are other issues all around staffing, and it takes a huge amount of time to run the recruitment cycle. It is a massive time commitment. We are weighing that up. We are thinking, "Should we do that?" We have all these staffing issues. That is more of the priority at the moment. At the same time, I share your concern.

We do have our advisory board, where there are more women on that than there are men, who are also part of the people that we speak to. We must not forget about them—but I do understand. With your question, "Would women's issues be sidelined?" I am not sure that men would always sideline women's issues. I do not think it necessarily follows that if you are a man, women's issues are sidelined, but it is something to keep an eye on.

- Q21 **Ms Anum Qaisar:** Following up from that, my concern would then be that when women have lived experiences—for example, just this morning I had a debate on childcare, or child poverty rather. I was discussing the fact that when it comes to childcare, for example, that disproportionately impacts women. It is women who we know stereotypically are left in the house to look after childcare—women who would quite like to work. My concern is that with women like that, if you only have one woman as a Commissioner, do you think those views are being heard? With all due respect, six men might have been the best for the job, but they might not have those lived experiences.

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** Yes, they might not have those lived experiences, but I am not sure that you need to have had that lived experience to be able to appreciate the issues. There is a small board, and as I say, there were all sorts of competing issues when appointing, and I am not sure that the gender diversity point should have pushed us to not appoint the best people on the day. I am just not sure that that would have been the right call, but I do understand your concern and I follow what you say. Really, I get it, on all aspects of diversity, but when you have such a small board, it is very difficult to tick all of those boxes and appoint the best people, and make sure that you have a team that complement each other, and complement what both Alun and I have to offer in terms of skills and experience.

- Q22 **Ms Anum Qaisar:** I was having a look at the bios of your Commissioners as well. You always have people with a lot of different experiences and you have drawn talent from various different sectors. One thing that stood out to me is that I saw that one of your Commissioners is a former Conservative MP and I think a Government Minister. You have a Commissioner who was a Conservative candidate in the 2019 general election and another person who was also a Conservative candidate in both the 2015 and 2017 general elections. What reassurances can you give the Committee to alleviate any concerns around the Commission's political independence, and how do you, John and Alun reduce those concerns?



**Katharine Birbalsingh:** I have to say, on the day when we were appointing, I did not even realise that that was the case with what you just said. I discovered that afterwards. I was listening to them and I was—

**Ms Anum Qaisar:** Can I jump in? When you were going through the process—for example, I have a constituency office and I get CVs in, and I will read them, but very often they will have different information. When they applied for this role, did the Conservative MP and the other candidates not have that information in their CVs? Did you read the CVs or did you not?

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** I presume they did, but I was not necessarily looking at those details. What was most important to me was what they said about social mobility, their enthusiasm around that and their understanding of the issues. Of course, I am not the only one appointing; there was the Children's Commissioner and the director of the Equality Hub, who have done many interviews before. For me personally, I was much more interested in what they had to say about social mobility. I was not looking at those kinds of details on their CV. I will have looked at their education and some of their experience.

When you read it out, you think, "I suppose that there are quite a few of them". It certainly was not the case that I looked at these and thought, "Yes, we want him because he's a Conservative". I would not think like that because I am not a Conservative. I would say that I am a small "c" conservative, but I am not a big "c" conservative. I am not a member of the Conservative Party. There were three of us making that decision.

Q23 **Ms Anum Qaisar:** I see that. There was yourself, Marcus Bell, director of the Equality Hub and an independent panel member, and the Children's Commissioner for England. I am just a wee bit confused because at the start of your answer, you said that you were not aware of the fact that they came from separate backgrounds. I am just trying to work out whether you missed that on their CVs or whether they did not have that on their CVs.

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** They must have had that on their CV, I presume. To be honest, I do not know; I cannot tell you. You have a big pack of stuff, you look through, they come in and you think, "Right, yes, you have so and so". There are two and a half days of interviews, and it is all very fast. You are not necessarily looking at every detail because you are using most of the time to talk to them, and trying to sound them out on their understanding of social mobility.

Q24 **Ms Anum Qaisar:** I have done interviews before as well, but would you not be looking at every bit of detail? I am very confused, and I am looking for clarification. Would you not be looking for every bit of detail if you are hiring seven Commissioners, who have a very big job?



**Katharine Birbalsingh:** True, but what is most important to me when I am interviewing—and I realise we may disagree about this—is that I do not like to look at too many details on a CV whenever I appoint anyone to anything. That is just me. I do not like looking at those details because I feel that it can bias you against the applicant. I believe very much in that kind of bias when people are being appointed. You want to put them at ease, and you want them to be able to talk about their interests and their experiences as best they can.

Now, one of them did speak about—when you read it out, I think, “Gosh, that does sound like quite a lot”, but it is not something that is important to me. It is not important to me because what should be important is their enthusiasm around social mobility.

Q25 **Ms Anum Qaisar:** You understand why I have asked that question. Then the second part of that question was: how do you reduce the concerns that people may have? That is not just directly to you, Katharine; that is to John and Alun as well. How do you reduce these concerns, if someone is looking at it and saying, “Actually, you have three Tories”?

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** Yes, and I do understand your worries. All I can say to the Committee is that Alun and I are very committed to trying to improve social mobility in this country. The position, as I said at the beginning, is extremely demanding and very hard to do given our full-time jobs. Neither of us is affiliated with any political party.

I do not find that the views are all one-sided with the Commissioners. We get into lots of heated discussions about things, so I do not feel that that is the case at all. I myself am on that panel and I was only one of three, and we were not appointing them, remember; we were just putting forward appointable candidates to the Minister. That is all we were doing. There were more appointable candidates put forward to the Minister, and then these ones were chosen. Of the people who we saw, we chose the best ones to put forward.

For me—I can only talk about me because I do tend to just skim a CV—I like to allow a candidate the opportunity to present themselves outside of their CV so that I am not biased against that person because they went to a particular university, for example. CVs can bias you. You will know about research on CVs.

**Ms Anum Qaisar:** There is research, you are right.

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** People can be biased. It is not just with the appointing here; with any appointing that I do anywhere, that is how I am.

While it is hard to remember exactly, I do remember one of them talking about their Conservative background, but that would not stop me from putting them down as an appointable candidate if they were excellent in



the things that they said. The people who we put down were very good and out of the list we sent a bunch were chosen by the Minister.

**Q26 Ms Anum Qaisar:** I have spent a lot of time asking questions, but my follow-up to that is: I was not on the Committee for your pre-appointment hearing, but as I understand it, you told the Committee that it was important to be open to a range of ideas. Are you listening to ideas from a range of political perspectives, or do you think the Commission is clouded by having a former Conservative MP, a candidate from the 2019 election, and someone who stood in 2015 and 2017?

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** Well, I just did a podcast with Lee Elliot Major and he would most definitely not consider himself to be a Conservative. Interestingly, he and I were very much in agreement on all the parenting issues that we discussed.

**Ms Anum Qaisar:** Having a podcast is slightly different, though, to having a Commissioner.

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** You have mentioned three. There are six Commissioners. Interestingly, those three who I believe you are speaking about do not agree with each other; they really do not. They are very different. We are all very different, and we have heated discussions about things.

In fact, sometimes one of the disappointments of mine is that perhaps we have not gone out enough with some of our thoughts on things more recently, and that is because we cannot agree on what we might say. Recently Alun and I put out a statement about the Autumn Statement. It was just from Alun and me because we thought, "Gosh, let's just do it from us two because if we talk with the Commissioners right now, we might not agree on all of this and then we will never go out with something. Let's just do this and get it out quickly".

For all of you, this is information about commissions. When you have a bunch of Commissioners it is quite hard to then come up with recommendations and it is quite hard to come out with a statement. If everybody has to be able to put their name to it—and I obviously do not think anyone should ever put the name to something they do not believe in—it can be quite difficult. It is one of the reasons why the job then turns into a full-time job, because you are discussing these things with all these people who think differently. While I understand that from your perspective on the outside, you might look and think, "Yes, but look, they are Conservative", I promise you that on the inside they are always in disagreement about things.

**Q27 Ms Anum Qaisar:** That is not my question, though. I completely appreciate that people flowing into one political party can have a range of different views. We have seen that since 2010. Consecutive Conservative Prime Ministers have taken on different agendas. What I am asking specifically is: are you listening to ideas from a range of perspectives?



You have answered from that kind of Conservative centre to right side. I am asking from the other side.

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** We have our advisory board as well and they present a variety of views. We listen to them and everything goes through them, and so they are definitely representing different views. Then there are the various conversations that we are having with different people all the time, who have a variety of political views. Alun, do you want to add anything to what I am saying?

**Alun Francis:** Thank you. I would just like to say, in terms of my personal role, I have no affiliations with any political party. I work in a predominantly Labour local authority, in a predominantly Labour combined authority, with what have been, for the last decade, Conservative national Governments. My view on all of that is that with all politicians of all parties, we collaborate and try to get the best outcomes we can.

I work in further education and I work in Oldham, and many of you who work in or represent communities like Oldham will recognise what I am going to say. Part of the challenge has been that, sadly, for politicians across a wide range of Governments for a while, further education and places like Oldham have not been given the priority in national policy. My sole motivation for being in this role is to try to help address that imbalance and to present the different points of view of the people who are sometimes referred to as 'the left behind', the communities who are left behind and the places that need to have more opportunities in them.

Further education is the place where most young people and adults who need a second chance, who have not had the best first experience, go. My commitment here is to very much bring those perspectives and that means I talk to my students every day about their experiences. I talk to my partners and stakeholders in Oldham about the challenges we have. We are very embedded in all of the challenges of the town, economically and socially. I do not spend all day sat in my office. I know Oldham is not the centre of the world; there are other places like Oldham too.

What I would want to bring to this role is very much listening to a wider range of voices, and also not being ideological about solutions but being practical, based on the evidence about which solutions will have the most impact on helping those people and places who have the least opportunity. I feel personally responsible; I should be bringing that in. My role as Deputy Chair is a role that I applied for, as I have with every other job I have ever done, through a public process. I worked very hard to prepare for the interview properly and made sure I did my homework, and I hope I bring that into the way that the Commission operates.

Q28 **Chair:** You said a range of ages. It looks like the Commissioners are quite heavily dominated by men in their forties and fifties. Do you think there is enough perspective from older people? Indeed, it looks like there is only one Commissioner who is under 30.



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**Katharine Birbalsingh:** I always think of two of them as being quite young.

**Chair:** I think of many people as being very young now.

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** I always think of them as being quite young and giving a younger perspective, and I suppose I am imagining that people in their fifties are relatively old. That is what I mean by there being a range of ages, as opposed to older than that. Certainly, when we are talking, I feel like, as I say, two of them are quite young and do represent a younger kind of view. Then there are the rest of us who are older.

Q29 **Chair:** Can I just quickly follow up on your comment that one of the Commissioners did not have the right to work in the UK? How rigorous was the process if that got through it?

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** Well, the panel are not meant to figure that out. It is true that it was a bit odd that that happened.

**Chair:** A Government Minister signed off the appointment of a Commissioner who did not have the right to work in the UK.

**John Craven:** If I can clarify, he did have the right to work in the UK but only until January 2023. The view was taken that—

**Chair:** When was he appointed?

**John Craven:** September 1 was the appointment date.

**Chair:** This year?

**John Craven:** Yes.

Q30 **Carolyn Harris:** Katharine, some commentators interpreted your inaugural speech as suggesting that working class children should aim lower. I am someone who has been victim to that personally. When I was 15, I was asked by the careers officer in school what I would like to be and I said, "A medical doctor". She said, "Oh, that is very nice, but there are plenty of jobs in manufacturing, dear", and that set the path for my entire life. I have had imposter syndrome all my life and it was not until I was 45 that I actually had a salaried, pensionable job, because I never felt that I could ever reach the level that I needed to be. Can you explain why this was a misinterpretation and what you meant by the "broader" approach to social mobility?

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** We were very annoyed with that misinterpretation because that certainly was not what we meant at all. Just on a personal level, I have spent my whole life trying to get children to fulfil their potential. Just in my school, every year we have children going to Oxford and Cambridge, but we also have some children who do a variety of jobs. They have become hairdressers, plumbers—a whole variety.



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Often when we talk about social mobility—and this is what I mean by getting under the headlines—we forget the vast majority of young people who are managing to be socially mobile but not in a kind of Hollywood way. When I say, “Hollywood way”, what I mean is that everybody loves a story about a boy born in the slums who then has this amazing life, becomes some big banker or a CEO, has three yachts and goes fishing off his yacht or whatever. You always have this. There is the scene at the end of the film where he clearly has a lot of money and that is considered to be a huge success. Yes, undeniably, it is great when you see those long jumps in terms of social mobility, but there are also shorter jumps and we should recognise those shorter jumps as successful.

You do not have to become a banker in order to be successful. Alun and I are not bankers, but we consider ourselves to be successful. Why? Why are we successful? That is what is important. What is it that makes a success, or a successful life? It is when you find purpose. It is when you are able to use your talents to be able to make a difference in the world so that you can come to the end of your life and look back and say, “I contributed. I did something that was meaningful and I made a difference to the world.”

If I were a banker, I would be really miserable. I would not be a very good banker. It would be the same thing if I was a plumber. I am a great teacher. I am so happy that I am doing that job. What Alun and I—I think I speak for Alun, and he will speak after me—want to see when we talk about social mobility is people being given the opportunity to nurture their talents in such a way that that would not happen to you. That is really sad. It is awful that that happened to you.

Sometimes it is because of something that someone has said that a young person is not able to fulfil their ambitions or to nurture their talents, but sometimes it can be material resources that are not there. Sometimes it can be the culture in which they are growing up, that that is not there. Sometimes it can be poor schooling. There are a whole variety of things that can stop a young person, not necessarily from becoming a top banker, but from being able to have purpose in their life, from being able to nurture their talents, deploy their talents, look back on their life and feel like they did something where they contributed. That is a great shame. Alun and I are interested in social mobility for those reasons, because both of us have seen in our lifetime young people who, in that sense, have been failed either by the system or by their country, who have not been able to find that purpose.

While I am thrilled about our children who get to Oxford and Cambridge, I am equally thrilled about those other children who are able to do different things. I was just having a conversation with one of our girls and she was telling me how she wants to be a social worker. I did not say to her, “You shouldn’t be a social worker, that is just not good enough. You need to do something better than that because social workers do not earn enough money”. That would be so wrong. If she becomes a social



worker and contributes to society then I consider her a huge success, just as much as one of our other girls who last year went off to Oxford. That is what we were trying to say.

I think the reaction was really interesting because it sort of proves the point. People hear us say that shorter leaps in mobility should also be celebrated—not should only be celebrated but should also be celebrated—and people hear, “You want working class people to stay in their lanes”. That is what one of the newspapers reported. It was absolutely outrageous, and it is outrageous because it means that we only have respect—we tend to have respect for the jobs that our friends do around the dinner table, and that is wrong. While our friends around the dinner table might do X, Y, and Z jobs, there are a whole variety of careers out there that make our world work that people get satisfaction from and that they enjoy. The important thing is that all children should have access to all of those jobs, and that is not always the case. Alun, do you want to say something?

**Q31 Carolyn Harris:** I wanted to ask, Alun, if you had any ideas of what kind of policies we should introduce to celebrate what Katharine is talking about.

**Alun Francis:** If I may, I will add to Katharine’s answer and then I will come to that question.

I am really pleased that you have asked the question, because it was quite frustrating, and a lesson learned for us, as well, in terms of how we might anticipate this in the future. There are two aspects to this which are really important.

The first is a bit technical. It is, “What do we actually mean by social mobility?” There are different ways of defining social mobility and measuring it. Occupation and income, for example, are often used. They do not end up with the same things. You can get some occupations that are seen as lower status but actually have higher income, and vice versa. There are some interesting issues in that.

The other distinction is between what the economists and sociologists call “absolute mobility” compared to “relative mobility”. Absolute mobility is where you end up compared to your parents, and relative mobility is where you end up compared to other groups in society. Very often, social mobility debates focus only on the relative bit, “How well do the children from disadvantaged backgrounds do compared to children from advantaged backgrounds?” That is a really important question, but it does not look at those who do not have that long leap in improvement to their mobility, which is quite a lot of people.

If you come to talk to learners in an FE college, you will find large numbers of people who do not necessarily have their English or maths GCSE, who may not have done well academically at school, but who are studying for careers where they want to make a purposeful contribution.



We do not have any great measures to say whether they are doing better than their parents or not, though many of them are doing better than their parents as they acquire skills that allow them to get really good employment. One of my frustrations with the whole social mobility debate is that if it is only about relative mobility, it is silent about those people, their options and their opportunities. That is what we mean by saying that we want to broaden out the debate about the different types of social mobility so that this is about opportunities for everybody.

Actually, absolute mobility may currently be—I am asking a question here, not making a statement—a bigger issue at the moment. Real incomes have not risen for a period of time and there is a genuine concern that the younger generation, across different social backgrounds, are not going to do as well as the older generation currently. There is a really interesting set of challenges there, which everybody has to take quite seriously.

That is what we mean by that first bit. If we have a very narrow view of opportunity, we end up not focusing on some of the people who we are most worried about—people who have the least opportunity. Again, thank you for asking that.

On the second question, I am going to refer you to something that I think is an absolutely brilliant project, which already exists but needs to have much more national attention. It is called WorldSkills UK. My college is absolutely thrilled to be a centre for excellence of it, but there are many other colleges that are. In Wales, which I know is your homeland—it is also mine—the Welsh Government have been supporting WorldSkills for some time and they have a really fantastic track record of entries into the programme. It is growing across the rest of the country.

What WorldSkills does is competitions in technical subjects from graphic design to hair and beauty, nail design, carpentry to joinery, electrical—everything else you could think of as technical. They hold competitions at all levels. They are incredibly inclusive, from learners right at the beginning of their trade all the way through to the top level of expertise. They enter competitions, first of all locally, then regionally, then nationally, and if they are successful in those national competitions, they go to the WorldSkills Finals representing the country. It is like the Olympics of skills. I think it should have a much higher profile. It is thoroughly inspiring when you see it. The learners absolutely love it, the staff love being involved in it, and it should be given huge importance in our national policy. It is an absolutely brilliant project. I cannot think of anything I would recommend to you more than that.

**Q32 Carolyn Harris:** I am aware of it, and I would totally agree with everything you have said.

Katharine, I will come back to you and ask: why were there no Government policy recommendations in this year's State of the Nation report?



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**Katharine Birbalsingh:** It is just too early. I refer to what Kim was asking earlier. I hope I can call you Kim. We do need to have recommendations and that will come eventually, but at the moment we are analysing things. We want to get it right. It is hard stuff.

We started off with the idea I mentioned at the beginning about laying out a framework for properly defining and understanding social mobility, because it can be really complex. People mean different things when they are talking about social mobility. We have not necessarily talked about inequality in detail with the Committee. Inequality certainly plays a part in preventing people from being socially mobile but it does not tell the whole story. There is more to it than that, and we are looking at those other bits.

We are interested partly in recommendations for policy, but also in figuring out what works. We spoke about parenting, for instance. What works can be about getting Government to spend some money on X project in order to, for instance, help families know what they need to do in the home, but it might be more than that. It might be figuring out that this way of using the money to get them to change their behaviours would be better than another way. We do not want to just springboard quickly into giving suggestions that might not be the best suggestions, because Alun and I only have one pop at this. We obviously want to do right by the role, and it takes time. It takes time partly because of staffing issues, and because it is it is hard. All of this stuff is also just hard. It is hard to get it right. I would say that is why.

Also, we were meant to be reporting back on the State of the Nation, as it were, which we were doing. We were we were wanting to change the narrative and bring it to where we have it now. Alun, do you want to add to that?

**Alun Francis:** Thank you. I think it is it is helpful to say we arrived in November and State of the Nation was produced by early summer. It is quite a short space of time.

If you compare it to previous State of the Nation reports, there are some significant differences, particularly around what we call in the report "social mobility outcomes". Previous reports talk a lot about the drivers and other factors that may contribute to social mobility, but do not talk about the actual social mobility data. How good is social mobility in our country and where are the issues? Now, State of the Nation 2022 does have a very important section in on that. For next year the team are working on much more granular detail to sit behind that, particularly around geography, but also to break it down more across a wider range of groups so that you can get a sense of social mobility not just between disadvantaged and advantaged, but also to be more nuanced. In that "advantaged" group we have everybody from people who are just about managing to billionaires, and we need to be a bit more nuanced, if we



can, about that. One of the aspirations is to try to build that into the report.

We would also say we do think there is a narrative emerging from that, which we would like to be commenting on for next year. That suggests that while there is more to do across everything, relative mobility is not the disaster story that sometimes people say. It can be improved but it is certainly not declining.

On absolute mobility, there may be more room to improve. When we look at where the real focus of attention should be, we do not want to present a caricature to this Committee, but certainly some of the areas where opportunity is the least evident do marry up with the issue about post-industrial towns, seaside towns, the areas that are called “left behind”, where there are issues about people coming out of school with low levels of English and maths and so forth. We are likely to be able to comment much more clearly in due course about what the issues are that underpin that and where we think policy should focus.

In part, the lack of a lot of policy recommendations is to do with where we are in our cycle on this, but also because our first focus was to get some of that data out. I do think the team did a really good job of making a lot of progress on this very complicated stuff that they are dealing with. I thought they did a super job of getting the report into the condition it was in by the time we were able to report, and we are going to be building on that next year.

**Q33 Carolyn Harris:** Has the pandemic played a role in stifling social mobility?

**Alun Francis:** It is difficult to say that it has not. The problem with all these things is that big issues like pandemics, inflation and the economy all have their different impacts. What we are trying to do here is ask: where do we have a strategic impact over a period of time? Do we get drawn into responding to every single issue as we go along? The danger of the second part is that we do not build up any long-term focus. We know there is a lot of evidence about the impact of Covid and there is going to be more evidence around the impacts of the changes in the economy.

With the team, we have suggested that we have a role around the State of the Nation being a compendium of information about social mobility to which we will add as we go along, but that we also produce some regular quarterly bulletins that bring together the range of research done by other organisations such as the Institute of Fiscal Studies, Resolution Foundation, and Sutton Trust. There are lots of others who are also very active in this field. Our proposal is that, instead of trying to compete with all of that, we use the commentary to try to bring some of that together but we try to keep our focus on the things that we think should be strategically important.



Our aspiration is that at the end of our period the Government accept that there should be a social mobility strategy. We have given them the bare bones of what we think that should look like, not just for this Government but for future Governments, because social mobility is not about short-term fixes; it is about long-term investments, doing the right things relentlessly well over a period of time and not keeping on changing focus as you go along.

**Carolyn Harris:** Thank you.

Q34 **Rachel Maclean:** This is such a fascinating discussion that I wish I had two hours just for myself, but I will not wear out the Committee's patience.

I want to start by picking up something that you said, Katharine, that people mean different things when they talk about social mobility. My other reflection is that you talk very passionately about how you personally and many others are very happy. You are a great teacher, you found your purpose in life and you love doing that, but had it been the case, for example, that your parents had been bankers earning a very high income, potentially you are now an example of downward social mobility. I do not know; I am just making this situation up. You said yourself that you are very happy doing what you are doing. It is possible that there is a downward social mobility journey in people's lives and yet they have a greater level of happiness, they have many other indicators that make their life purposeful and meaningful. First of all, I wonder whether you have, as a commission, agreed what your definition of social mobility is.

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** Well, it is the point about talents, really, that everyone should be given the opportunity to be able to have their talents nurtured, to nurture their own talents, and then also, in the end, be able to deploy their talents. That comes from having an early years' experience that is a positive one, in which someone read and talked and played with you enough, and then being able to go to a good school. We have not spoken about education but that is one area that we are looking at. What makes for a good school? Our initial findings are that strong leadership at the top matters, as well as the quality of teaching and good parental involvement. Those things make it so that the school is good. Now, there will be other things, but we will go with those three for the moment.

If you do not have access to that kind of schooling, a good school, you are going to find it a lot more difficult to be socially mobile because educational attainment is so important, and not just attainment. That sounds like I am talking about a particular GCSE grade, and that is also useful, but it is about developing the skills. Alun talked about the 40% of young people who do not have a GCSE in English, or in maths. They will go to Alun's college and then he and his colleagues have to spend a lot of time trying to catch those young people up, and that holds them back. That is what social mobility is for us: being able to make the most of your



talents, not necessarily moving from rags to riches. That is the key difference.

**Q35 Rachel Maclean:** I completely agree with all of that, and you have done a great job of explaining it, but what I am trying to get at is that you are aiming to measure social mobility on an index. I want to ask you a bit about that. To have an index, you need to have some data points and a strategy for collecting the data. Then you need to be able to track that over time. Where would we find the data points that you are going to try to measure in order to sum all those things that you said, which we all agree with? How do you turn that into a data collection and measurement strategy?

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** That is a very good question. When you have data gaps, that is very difficult. One big data gap for what you were just saying is being able to track parents and children. As you have just said, if the parents are this and the child is something else, how do you then track that? In the US you can do that through the tax reports, and you can connect the parent to the child. You cannot do that here. That is one way. If that could change, that would be a huge advantage in being able to track that data.

**Chair:** Tax information does not tell you how people are doing; it just tells you their level of earnings.

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** Yes. That is for income mobility. We would be able to track their income. Alun, do you want to say something?

**Alun Francis:** Can I go back to the start of your question, which was the definition of social mobility? The issue is that there are lots of definitions of social mobility in the academic literature. There are economists, sociologists, absolute, relative, intragenerational, intergenerational—a whole range of definitions. For different purposes you can focus on different things, but I think the purpose of the Commission is to focus on mobility that allows people to find their best life and for our society to feel that people have fair opportunities.

Katharine has given a very good description of where we try to focus in terms of talent, but the broad issue about the data is that they are all useful, but they all have some limits. Occupational measures are very helpful in some respects, but they assume a bit of a hierarchy of occupations and we might not think that hierarchy is quite right. Income is quite tricky. In America the income tax records link to occupations and they can get some very accurate measures. Here, that is not the case. Income can also be quite unpredictable because it rises up and down. Somebody running a small business may have a big income one year, a poor income for two or three years, and so on. It is less reliable in some respects to build those kind of data sets. What we are trying to do in State of the Nation is take the best, most reliable data we have—it is not all perfect—and make that part of the data set, along with the data on



educational outcomes, early years, university progression and all those other things.

The second issue, though, is the question of the right use of data. Data are very helpful to point us in the right direction to understand broad trends, but they are never sufficient on their own. We always have to underpin that by better analysis and also an understanding of the human side of this.

If we go back to your point about downward mobility, that is a gap in our analysis currently. There is not enough in State of the Nation on downward mobility. It is going to become more important that we understand that and also understand what the different implications of that are for different people. For some people, downward mobility is a terrible, terrible trauma. I do not think we understand enough about those downwardly mobile families, families who might perhaps be bowling along but then the family gets divorced and children suddenly go from being relatively okay to having quite a lot of deprivation. Some families move in and out of that quite quickly, and so on. That is just one example, but there are many examples where we need to understand that. Then another example might be where your parents are senior chief executives of different companies—it is a double-income family—and you choose to be a primary school teacher. That is also downward social mobility, but it is very different to the first. This is the problem with the data and capturing the nuance of all of this.

What we want is clearly for people to feel able to make the right choice about what makes them happy and also where they can make their best contributions to society, without getting hung up on all of the precise details of that. There are no iron rules in this but we want to try to create a better understanding of what that means, and particularly a better understanding of where interventions need to be made to improve things.

If I might make one last comment on downward mobility, there is a view that middle class parents in particular are very anxious about downward mobility and therefore tend to strongly push their children to occupations where they feel safe, and particularly will go to great lengths to get them to the right school and so forth. Part of the problem may well be that some of the jobs in the economy are better protected and more secure than others. If we had a wider range of higher-skilled, higher-paying jobs with more security then perhaps people would not make all the decisions they make, because they would be more relaxed about the future of their children if they made different choices. That is something that we do want to look at when we look at the economy in the third part of our work.

- Q36 **Rachel Maclean:** Thank you. I recognise everything that you are saying, of course I do. I am someone in my late fifties, I have brought up four children, I have one grandchild, and have obviously had a lot of life experience in having those kinds of conversations.



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What I would press you on a bit more is that you have talked about an awful lot of different factors and things that can help, and you have pointed to different scenarios, but I do not have a clear idea of how you are going to do this. You are talking about a social mobility index here in your work. Is that where you are going to crystallise all of these? I appreciate it is really hard. They are very hard things to come up with a number for. Maybe you have two children and both of them decide to be FE college principals. You would have static social mobility, but I am sure that you and your children may be very happy with that. How are we going to overcome these dichotomies and dilemmas and think about individual personal happiness and purpose, which are quite hard to put in an index, are they not?

**Alun Francis:** They are, absolutely. You are making a really good point. The data help us to some extent, but they do not provide all the answers. Social mobility has to be about giving people agency and choice because people will then choose things based on their values, their success and so on.

Part of the issue for policy is to be clearer about where that agency and choice are missing and who does not have agency because of their circumstances. We can talk for a long time about who those people might be, but the aim of the index is to try to, first of all, give a very clear statement of what the evidence actually tells us. From that, we can start to draw the commentary about where we think the focal points of policy should be.

Q37 **Rachel Maclean:** Your index is going to collect five years' worth of data and then you are going to reach a view. Is that the rough plan?

**Alun Francis:** Yes. The index is in our State of the Nation report. The first one was last summer, and that is the first iteration. What we have proposed with that report is that each year it would become more sophisticated. Next year's report, for example, will have a lot of data on geographical inequalities, which we were not able to include this year because we did not have the data. That is a very important part of the social mobility story. There will be other parts that will be able to provide more granular data as we progress. The idea is that it becomes a compendium of information that policymakers and decision-makers can turn to and say, "What is the overall story?" We are likely to produce a strategy document that will sit alongside our work plan to explain the narrative that we are drawing from that story currently. I am not saying we will always write about everything, but that is what we are trying to get to.

Q38 **Rachel Maclean:** That is really helpful. You have talked yourself about some of the issues surrounding families, parenting and the importance of early years. You talked about it, Katharine, as well. You also said that some of these things are a bit sensitive, possibly. I wonder how much you are thinking about family structures. You talked about divorce as well. Are you thinking about marriage? Are you thinking about the role of



marriage or stable partnerships in the upbringing of a young person and the role that that has? I think you talk about protected characteristics. You talk about income and a lot of other things. I am interested in how you are thinking about and capturing family structures and stability as well. I am not taking a view about one parent, two parent, female, male, whatever; I am talking more about a stability angle in this.

**Alun Francis:** Absolutely. It is very early stages of our work, but we are looking at what evidence is out there, and the evidence out there does tell us that family structure is very important.

I hope this does not sound too much like a caricature. It is not meant to; I am just trying to illustrate the point. The evidence is that, for example, graduates tend to form nuclear families. I am not making any judgment on the sexuality of the parents, it could be any mix of identities, but they tend to complete their education, find employment, form a relationship and save for a home. At that point, children and possibly marriage may come into the equation, at which point the child has been born into an environment where there are likely to be two incomes, quite a high degree of parental educational achievement, a higher degree of stability and so forth. This is work that has not been done by us. We have drawn on the work of others, as I said. We would be open about that. There was some very good work by the Institute for Fiscal Studies on this recently.

Contrast that with the other end of the scale, families where the age of the parents is much younger. Very often the couple do not stay together and the parent becomes a non-partnered parent. They often have not completed their education to much higher level than maybe level 2, GCSE, and maybe not even that. If you compare the prospects of the children in those two different families, they are quite different. Now, that is not to say that we are commenting on the moral position of any of that. What we are saying is, "Look, let us try to understand what is happening".

We keep mentioning geography. The Institute for Fiscal Studies work on this has looked at some of the geographical spread and it is quite shocking because if you look at the 'left behind' areas, the post-industrial towns, you find that the predominance of children born into non-partnered families is much, much higher. In some parts of the North, it is 40% of children. Now, we have to look at those issues if we are serious about trying to say what we can do, and that is without us making any judgments about what the right interventions might be but thinking about how we support families, how the taxation system does that, how the childcare system does that, how we support families to do the right thing in terms of early years development. The whole host of issues has to be on the table because these problems have been there for quite a long time and it is important that we get to the bottom of the issues and make recommendations that over a generation perhaps can start to make a significant difference.

Q39 **Kim Johnson:** I have a couple of questions for Alun but John might want



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to come in, given that you have said very little this afternoon, John. What is the Commission's role in levelling up, particularly when we think that as a country we are in recession? We have 4 million children living in poverty. We have heard an awful lot about levelling up but, as I mentioned before, actions speak louder than words. If you could say a little bit about that, Alun, that would be great.

**Alun Francis:** The first point I am going to make is the statement we put out last weekend around the Autumn Statement. The first thing we did was commend the decision to uplift universal credit and the investment in schools. Neither of those in themselves solves social mobility problems because a lot more needs to happen, but what they do is mean that at least in the short term the situation of the most disadvantaged does not get worse.

To improve the outcomes of those families, a lot more is required. It is about some of the things we have talked about. It is how we improve skills, how we improve people fulfilling their potential, how we improve educational achievement, all the things that we have talked about. If you look at linking that to the levelling up agenda—which I implied is quite a strong link between some of the social and family issues as well as the economic ones in my previous answer—I am convinced more and more that when we look at all the issues around parents, families and schools, the levelling up aspect of it is quite an important issue in this country. Why do we have persistent educational underperformance in some parts of the country despite lots of different initiatives?

In my career I have not just worked in FE colleges; I have worked in area-based regeneration and so forth. I can remember education action zones and New Deal for Communities. I can remember even the Single Regeneration Budget many years ago. More recently we have had opportunity areas. I worked on the Building Schools for the Future programme. We have introduced academies. In some of the areas of the country—I won't name them because it is not fair to do that—all those initiatives have happened. The outcomes are not significantly any better and we have to get to the bottom of those issues.

We also have to acknowledge that the majority of debate in social mobility focuses on education, but most of the expert commentators would say that the creation of opportunities is also key. Otherwise, we are arguing—

Q40 **Kim Johnson:** Can I ask a question, Alun? Where do you think that cultural capital plays a role in all that as well?

**Alun Francis:** I am interested in this, so I am glad you have asked that question. I think it plays a role in the fact that there are different cultural capitals. Everybody has cultural capital, but some of the cultural capitals needed to do well in terms of high educational achievement and so on are not evenly spread. Understanding and addressing that is important. I will not pretend to give a glib answer as to what the solutions might be but,



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for example—and I am sure you will recognise this—for many of the families that we work with in my area, attendance at school and college is not a big priority compared to others. That is an important aspect of that story about cultural capital, why you see it as important and what you think the benefits of doing that are and so on. There is a whole range of ways in which that is important in terms of helping to achieve good outcomes for children.

It is also important that those people feel that they have opportunities to strive for. The levelling up aspect of that in terms of professional jobs and the kind of employment in different areas is an absolutely critical part of the story. That is why the third part of our work programme—the first part is parents, families and schools; the second part is about choice in post-16 pathways, apprenticeships, university degrees and so on—is about the economy.

**Q41 Kim Johnson:** Can I ask another question? I think that Katharine talked about education and the importance of schools. We have so many failing schools, and someone touched earlier on the numbers of children that are coming out of education after 12 years in school without GCSE maths and English. Where does aspiration come in for some of those skills and providing opportunities for young people? Carolyn mentioned before that she wanted to be a doctor but, because of where she lived, she was told that she could go and do something else. We have a lot of those issues prevalent in a lot of our disadvantaged communities, so how do you break that cycle?

**Alun Francis:** I will hand back to Katharine about high aspiration in a second, because she also has some quite interesting things to say on this.

Aspiration is important and that is linked to understanding what is required to do well. Attendance is part of that story, really feeling the benefits of working—I will give you an example. English and maths in a lot of further education colleges is hard work because the learners have done it many times before. They come into college and they will say things like, “I can’t do maths”. It is just so not true that they cannot do maths. What they often do not understand is what it is that the other people are doing to get through. They often have not thought that through well enough.

A lot of our work is about getting them to understand that maths is about practice. A lot of it is about practice. Yes, some people are very good at it, but most people are not very good at it; they are just decently good at it. That is about raising their aspiration by saying, “Look, with practice and hard work you will find that you are good at it”. Then you get the feeling of great achievement and that helps you with the next thing that you want to do.

That is just one example of it, but it is also about having role models around you, seeing opportunities around you, seeing the jobs that you



might want to aspire to. These are also all important parts of that. That is why levelling up is part of social mobility because for many people, depending on the area that you live in, those things are either there in great abundance or they are not there in great abundance.

**Q42 Kim Johnson:** Going back to levelling up, Alun, who in government are you currently liaising with or meeting with regarding levelling up and how often do you meet?

**Alun Francis:** One of the first things we have done is we are seeking to have some social mobility targets built into devolution plans. We started by talking to West Midlands and to Greater Manchester as two starting points, two of the large combined authorities, to start to think about what that would look like. We have had a good receptive response from their teams, particularly when we talk about social mobility as being for everybody, not just about “achieve to leave” kind of social mobility. We have also written to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities around how we would like it to work with us around those targets and ambitions. It is early days, but we think that building them into those devolution funding arrangements and agreements would be a good way of starting to see whether we are making progress around more opportunity across the whole country.

**Q43 Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Listening to you, Alun and Katharine, talking about aspiration and perhaps people wanting to go into certain jobs and feeling a sense of purpose and value in those particular jobs, it strikes me that perhaps we may be measuring everything incorrectly. We see being aspirational as aiming for a certain type of job that is considered as high skilled as opposed to low skilled, when in my view certain jobs that are considered low skilled, for example, just end up being low paid, like being a nurse. I think that is a really high-skilled job, one that I could not do, but it is paid much less than my own.

As part of your recommendations and looking into levelling up and at social mobility as a whole, will you be aiming to get the Government to reclassify certain things in an aim to raise the bar, if that makes sense, by looking at things like increasing the wages of certain jobs to give them the value that they deserve in society?

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** That is an interesting question. I don’t know. The thing is that there are all kinds of jobs that one could say, “This person needs to be paid more and that person needs to be paid more”. It is not that I would be against people being paid more, but who do you choose to say, “These are the ones who should be paid more”?

Not only that, but it is what Alun was saying earlier. We very much believe in long-term social mobility. When Carolyn was saying, “How come we are still talking about this 22 years later?”, I suspect that one of the reasons why we end up doing that is because if people—obviously, the Commission did not exist then—in any position are talking about social mobility, if those people are distracted by short-term demands and



more short-term issues or campaigning for something to happen now, as opposed to thinking about the long term, 30 or 40 years in advance, it can distract you from the items that are required to enable social mobility.

While my personal beliefs are that I think nurses should be paid more, should the Social Mobility Commission be making the case for that and not the case that ambulance drivers should be paid more, for instance? I do not know if that is our role. It is about understanding what our role is as Commissioners with the Commission, seeing the long-term goal of trying to influence both policy and behaviours within our communities to make it more likely that disadvantaged children will have the opportunities that, perhaps now in some places and in some schools and so on, they are currently denied.

- Q44 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Then are you working within the same framework that will eventually come back around and have the same effect? If you are saying that disadvantaged children may have parents who have these jobs that should have been paid more, if they aim to do the same jobs that should have more value in society, they are not upwardly socially mobile by your definition, which is wrong.

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** Remember that when we talk about social mobility, we are talking about nurturing talents and deploying talents and people finding purpose in their lives. I see why you say this, but in what you are saying there is the assumption that the more you are paid the more valued your job is. Sometimes that is the case, but sometimes you will find plumbers who earn a lot more than teachers and so on. Middle-class families, for instance, would not necessarily be encouraging—

- Q45 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** It is just that on your current scale a plumber would not be considered better than a teacher, even if they did earn more.

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** I think that you are asking really interesting questions about what we value in society. What does our society think is important and think is the job that you should go for? It is interesting that you then said about salaries. I thought that you were just going to say, "Should Government reclassify how we think about jobs and which jobs we value?"

**Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Yes, they should do that, too, and then pay them more.

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** Yes, and then you connected it to money, and sometimes it is connected to money and sometimes it is not. It is an interesting question. There is only so much one can do in a limited space of time, and we are very interested in sticking with the behaviours and values that will most likely enable social mobility for the greatest number over a long period of time.

You ask some really interesting questions, and it is the kind of discussion we could talk about for two and a half hours. Why is it that our society



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values certain jobs over others? Why do we think it is about earning more, because it is not? Happiness and purpose and satisfaction in one's life does not come from earning lots of money.

**Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** That is not on your scale.

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** What do you mean?

**Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** That is not what you are measuring by—happiness and purpose.

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** I spoke about deploying your talents and nurturing your talents and finding purpose in all that, and I would say that happiness is rolled into that. Alun, I know that you will want to say something.

**Alun Francis:** I think that they are really great questions. Just to clarify, the scales that we are using in the State of the Nation are not ones that we have invented. We are trying to draw the evidence together from the body of academic research using the measures that are conventionally used. That does not mean we think that they are all perfect. We made the point earlier that there is imperfection with all the measures, and the one that you have pointed to is exactly right. If you measure by occupation, there is a hierarchy of occupations. You might not accept that hierarchy of occupations, and I don't in many respects. The same applies if you measure by income. We use the measures, but we don't have to be slaves to them.

On your wider point about jobs, I think it would be difficult for us to make lots of recommendations about what the pay for different jobs might be. However, there are a couple of areas of work under our economy section that we have not yet made a decision about, but there are two that you might be interested in, in terms of your question.

First, it is interesting when people compare the German skill system with ours. We have a very deregulated labour market and Germany has a very regulated labour market. That is one of the reasons that their apprenticeships have the status that they have, because they have this rigid number of technical occupations. The downside of their system is it is not that flexible. The upside of their system is that each of those occupations has status, and you have this obviously fairly rigorous apprenticeship programme.

In our system there is regulation—I am just raising the question, and I am not saying we have made a decision about this yet—but it seems plausible to think that some of the higher-end professional occupations have more regulation than the ones at the bottom end. If I give a crude example, in our country anybody can set up to be a hairdresser or a barber, even though giving beauty treatments can be quite dangerous. However, to become an accountant is quite complicated. There are a lot



of exams to pass and the number of people who pass those exams each year are limited.

One of the areas we have looked at—it has the unattractive name of “occupational regulator”—is perhaps there is a case to say some occupations have slightly more privilege attached to them, because the fact that you have to pass all these exams when there is all this regulation means it is harder to get in there and, therefore, there is less competition. The competition would drive some of the wages down and spread the benefits around a bit more. By contrast, some don’t have so much and therefore are quite exposed to competition.

What we do know is that a qualification acquires values. Take, for example, a plumbing qualification. The CORGI registration gives you the value of the qualification because it is real value to your qualification. It is something that is an interesting field to look at.

The other example we give is something like care and caring professions, where there is not the same professional structure as there is in nursing. Nursing has quite a well-defined structure. You might argue over whether it needs to be a degree-led occupation or not. That is another interesting debate. In care it does not have the same structure of qualifications. Those qualifications can be quite important in terms of helping to professionalise and drive up wages because it recognises the range of skills that you have described. There are lots of skills involved in care but, because there is no qualifications framework, that does not help to make those transparent and, therefore, does not help in terms of boosting wages.

These are areas that I think are worth us looking at, at some point in the future, but we have not made a decision at this present time.

**Q46 Kim Johnson:** John, I want to ask you a question, because you have been quite silent this afternoon, about the impact of public sector cuts, particularly the impact it is likely to have on schools because we have already seen schools struggling over the last 12 years. Do you think that is going to have an impact on levelling-up going forward?

**John Craven:** First, if I can explain why I am more silent, it is Katharine, who is Chair, and Alun, who is Deputy Chair, who are here as the public appointees. I am the civil servant who is tasked to run the secretariat. I am here to be called on by Katharine and Alun.

**Kim Johnson:** I call on you because you will have interesting things to say.

**John Craven:** On the question, it is something that Katharine, Alun, I and the team debated a few months ago before the Commissioners were appointed. An IFS report came out that showed that the impact of inflation on schools meant that per pupil funding was not going to return to the 2010 levels that it was likely to in the 2021 Spending Review. We were concerned about that, at that point. We were also concerned about



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the impact on FE colleges and, in particular, 6th form colleges that have had less funding for a much longer period of time.

In the statement that Katharine and Alun put out in response to the Autumn Statement on Saturday, we did note that in FE or colleges, and indeed early years, there seemed to be gaps in the Government's response. However, it does seem that the increase in education spending that was announced in the Autumn Statement will get us closer to the per pupil levels—obviously it depends what happens with inflation—back to 2010 per pupil levels. We welcomed that increase in spending.

Is that enough? I worked in schools back in 2013 to 2016 and I saw the impact of the cuts then personally. You go back 20 years and you look at how much the country spent on education compared to health, and they were far more similar than they are now. We are not saying that health is not a very worthy cause, but health spending has increased quite significantly. Education spending as a proportion of GDP has gone down.

I think the approach of the Commission is that it is not just about spending money and increasing spending. That is important, but it is also important what happens within schools. I know that is the thing that Katharine is very passionate about.

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** I know that Alun will want to speak about the FE situation. Alun, do you want to contribute?

**Alun Francis:** Very briefly. It would be hard to criticise the decision to invest in Universal Credit uplift and schools. Early years and FE are absolutely critical to ensuring that we at least stay where we are until better times arrive. We would argue that FE is very immediately connected to those better times. It is the critical conduit for how we help people find the route to work in higher skilled occupations, particularly when they have not come out of school with great qualifications. I think FE has a very good track record in terms of doing that.

In terms of the future of the economy, the technical skills that we are delivering are very important and we have a significant recruitment problem. The aim is to get the starting salary in schools to £30,000 per teacher. In most FE colleges in the country, their most experienced staff are only on £32,000 or £33,000. That is a serious problem if we want to deliver on the technical education agenda, apprenticeships and so forth. I am not an advocate of the view that more spending on everything is always the answer. It is about what we spend it on, but there is a serious issue there about the recruitment and retention of the people who will be critical to improving the skills of the most disadvantaged.

**Kim Johnson:** Thank you, Alun, and thank you, panel. I look forward to an update next year when we see you again.

Q47 **Chair:** One final question from me. Alun made reference to role models. Can you be what you cannot see?



**Katharine Birbalsingh:** What do you mean?

**Chair:** Is it important for there to be visible female role models, for example? Is it important for there to be visible role models of people from different ethnic backgrounds?

**Katharine Birbalsingh:** Yes, I think so. It is an interesting question because I think there tend to be two camps when people talk about this. There tends to be the camp of, "We need to get quotas for these kinds of things and there needs to be exact diversity"—for whatever it is, when you are appointing teachers in a school, for instance—"and if you do not have this diversity, children cannot be inspired". Then there is the other camp that say, "It does not matter. You can be inspired by anybody and who cares?"

I would say my personal beliefs are somewhere in between, which is that you always want to appoint the best people but, at the same time, you want to bear that in mind. You have to bear in mind the bias point that I spoke about earlier, which I think exists in all of us for everything. If a tiger walked into the room, we would all run to the other side of the room, because we have a sense of what tigers might do. I think it is silly for us to deny that we all have bias about everybody and about all sorts of things. You have to always be checking yourself when it comes to that kind of thing when you are appointing.

It is also the case that you want to appoint the best people. For instance, in running my school, because we have lots and lots of ethnic minority children, I am always on the lookout for a variety of different ethnic minority speakers to come in to speak to the children about their different careers. I suppose you could ideally say. "If you don't see it, can you do it? Can you envisage yourself doing it?"

It does not necessarily mean that they need to have all ethnic minority teachers but, if they never saw anybody from an ethnic minority in a position of authority or power, I do think that they would struggle. It is somewhere in between, and it is more nuanced than the argument often suggests. It is difficult for people in positions like mine because you are trying to balance all these things.

On what Anum was saying, I understand her concerns. I do get that. At the same time, we wanted to recommend the best people. I believe we did that. You are looking at what you see in front of you and what they say. Even that is a fascinating conversation around: when you do job interviews, is it right to have an interview process like that at all? Do people from different sorts of backgrounds necessarily perform best when they are put under that kind of scrutiny at interview?

At the school, for instance, we try very hard to do it—we never do panel interviews, because that makes people uncomfortable and will favour the best school, the person who has more advantages. Organisations should



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always think about these things. It is a big question. We could talk for hours about it but, yes, it is an interesting one.

**Chair:** Thank you. Can I take this opportunity on behalf of the Committee to thank all of our witnesses this afternoon? It has been hugely informative, and we look forward to seeing you next year.