



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Women and Equalities Committee

Oral evidence: Appointment of the Chair of the Social Mobility Commission, HC 1806

Wednesday 25 October 2023

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Members present: Caroline Nokes (Chair); Elliot Colburn; Jackie Doyle-Price; Carolyn Harris; Lia Nici; Kate Osborne; Kirsten Oswald.

Questions 1 - 24

Witness

I: Alun Francis OBE, the Government's preferred candidate for the Chair of the Social Mobility Commission.

Examination of witness

Witness: Alun Francis

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to this afternoon's session of the Women and Equalities Committee and our pre-appointment hearing into the appointment of the chair of the Social Mobility Commission. Thank you very much for joining us, Mr Francis. Are you content for Members to use your first name?

Alun Francis: Yes.

Q2 **Chair:** You have been here before. You know what happens. Committee members will ask you questions in turn, starting with me. You have served your time as deputy chair and have been the acting chair. Do you have any new priorities or ambitions for the role?

Alun Francis: It is fair to say that there might be a change in emphasis; I would not say it will be a change in direction. In particular, the vantage point that I bring in terms of social mobility is reflected in terms of my professional background. I currently work in a further education college in a northern town. I have been in FE for 13 years. I have worked in northern regeneration for nearly 30 years. I think that gives you an interesting perspective, particularly on the geographical aspect of social mobility and sometimes the complexity of social mobility, where place overlaps with all the other equalities characteristics.

I particularly hope to bring a focus on some of the traditional areas but also a focus on where that overlaps with our wider economic challenges. I would emphasise a second theme: we are very aware that we are going into a period of time when there will not be an awful lot of new money to spend on new things. To be effective, we have to ensure that we focus on the medium to long-term things that will bring about genuine change and that we focus on trying to prioritise interventions on things that we know work.

Q3 **Chair:** Your predecessor used to get a hard time from this Committee over whether she had enough time for the role. Do you?

Alun Francis: So far, I have found enough time. I think it is important that we build some capacity in the commissioner team as well. We need to look at employing some extra commissioners and I would need to appoint a deputy, depending on the outcome of this session.

Importantly, we have to get the composition of the social mobility officer team right as well. We have been making progress on that. This question is always, "How long is a piece of string?". You could have someone being the social mobility commissioner full time and they would still not have enough time to do everything, but I think, given the circumstances, that I have enough time to give it a good shot. If you are asking me if I would like to spend all my time on it, yes, I would love to one day, but with the situation we have at the moment I think we can make it work.



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Q4 Chair: Is there a problem with the other commissioners? You alluded to ensuring that they were being supported to do the job, or that they need to have, perhaps, more responsibility.

Alun Francis: No, there is not a problem, apart from the fact that we clearly have to have capacity in there to run things well. Previously, we had a chair and a deputy. We need to have some deputy capacity. I think the wider issue is perhaps that we need a few more bodies, of which we have a small number, and certainly a couple more commissioners. The normal number has tended to be more than we have now. I think that would help spread the workload.

Q5 Chair: I think that Katharine Birbalsingh, since she resigned, has been quite open about thinking that her tendency to voice opinions sometimes brought controversy that was not always helpful to the commission. Do you think that you have learned any lessons from that?

Alun Francis: That is a good question. No, not really. I think that Katharine had a particular approach, and she is a very free spirit. My approach will be slightly different; I think that my approach is reflected in the "State of the Nation" report, which is a comprehensive assessment of the evidence, and then we have to build our recommendations on that evidence. That will mean, at times, saying things that might be controversial, and, at other times, saying things that are less controversial. But what we will try to do is be methodical, well-grounded and practical in terms of what we say. I am not sure whether that fully answers your question, but I hope that it does.

Q6 Chair: And, on access to the Government Equalities Office and to Ministers, how will you manage that relationship?

Alun Francis: So far, we have managed quite well; when we have asked for meetings, we have generally got them. People are very flexible about meeting online, which helps me. I don't always want to be travelling down from Blackpool for every meeting; we have to use our time as effectively as we can.

It is also important that we spread that work across the commissioner team and the officer team, and I think that now having an almost fully staffed officer team will help in terms of interdepartmental working, too. I am reasonably confident that we have done a decent job on that, and that we can continue to do that.

Q7 Chair: When you say that when you have asked for meetings, you have generally got them, how many?

Alun Francis: I think that we have always got them, to be honest.

Q8 Chair: Okay. So, since you have been acting chair, how many times have you met the Minister?

Alun Francis: The Minister for Women and Equalities? I think probably three or four times.

Chair: Thank you. The next set of questions is from Kate Osborne, please.

Q9 Kate Osborne: Former commissioner Sammy Wright has written that the commission requires more staff, more working days, training and a bigger budget to be impactful. Do you share that view? Do you have the resources and the staffing that you need to drive forward the social mobility agenda successfully?

Alun Francis: I think that the answer to that question depends on what you want the commission to do. If you want to turn it into a think-tank that produces very long reports and very detailed recommendations on a whole range of things, then, of course, you could keep pumping more money into it, but I do not know when you would stop, because there is always something else to be looked at.

I think that we will try to focus on, like I said, the things where we think that policy could be effective and interventions could be made that make a difference over the long term, and, in particular, focus relentlessly on improving some things without changes of direction, without constant changes in policy, and so forth. I suspect that not every effective intervention requires more money, but it does require us to be laser-focused on the things that we know make a difference. So, I do not have the same view, no.

Q10 Kate Osborne: Okay. In September 2025, the terms of six of your seven commissioners come to an end. How do you intend to manage that period to ensure the continuity of the commission?

Alun Francis: I think that it is my term that comes to an end then, and the others are in 2026. I think that one question that came up last time with the Committee was about having more staggered finish times for commissioners so that you do not get that kind of cliff edge. I think that we have had one additional commissioner since then, whose term ends in 2027—so you have me in 2025, five or six in 2026, and one in 2027. If we appoint any new commissioners, they would clearly have four-year terms from whenever they started. That is part of addressing the question that came up last time, which is about having some continuity in the commission and not everybody finishing all at once.

Q11 Kate Osborne: Is that going to cause a problem, with so many ending in 2026?

Alun Francis: That depends on the context. It depends on how many people have already been recruited to replace those that leave, on their finish dates, and on who the chair and deputies are. There is a whole set of questions that I think would determine whether that was a problem or not. But I don't think that it is a problem in itself.

Q12 Chair: As a follow-up to that, you have indicated that you want some more commissioners. What are the plans to ensure that an appointment process is swift, so that those commissioners are embedded and established before these six go?

Alun Francis: We work through the Equalities Hub, which manages the process. The process is designed and ready to go. It will be an open process, as per last time. We would invite people to apply, and then it



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would be a question of speedily interviewing and making some appointments based on merit.

Q13 **Chair:** How many?

Alun Francis: I think we are looking for at least between two and four additional commissioners, which will take us up to around 10 or 11.

Q14 **Kirsten Oswald:** Thinking about the effectiveness of the commission and how you have set out the way you want things to run, would you like to see the commission have formal powers, such as a requirement for the Government to respond to your reports?

Alun Francis: That is a difficult question. If I'm honest, I do not have a clear view on that. The approach that we are trying to take is a slightly different one, which is to increase impact by being more focused on the things that we think Government can deliver.

When I look at the range of different reports that we have done in the past and a lot of the stuff that is written in the social mobility policy area, there is so much of it, so many different reports, so many different disparities and inequalities, it is quite difficult to turn that into coherent policies. The danger is that you end up chasing your tail doing too many different things.

When you look at the evidence, a number of key themes stand out that we need to start to get right. Obviously, interventions around early years are very important, in terms of life chances. We need to be more impactful in how we use some of the resources around things like pupil premium in schools, for example, ensure that we have a good sense of what good educational outcomes look like, and understand the different geographical aspects of that, which is quite a big issue currently in the country. I am sure many of you would agree with that. There needs to be a wider range of options at post-16.

Our approach is going to be focused much more on trying to make recommendations that we think are deliverable, and are backed by the evidence, in terms of what works over the longer term.

Q15 **Kirsten Oswald:** You are not convinced that that requirement to respond would make a difference to that?

Alun Francis: I have not formed a view on that.

Q16 **Kirsten Oswald:** You have said that there is not a problem with the commissioners in your view, although you would want to see more of them. Some of your commissioners have close affiliations with political parties. I wonder how you as chair will ensure that the work of the commission is seen as independent and politically impartial.

Alun Francis: I am aware of the issues you are raising. I think the affiliations are on a spectrum—some are fairly tight, and some are a lot looser. A number of commissioners, including me, have no political



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affiliations. The key is about how we conduct the debate on the issues and run our business. That is very much about focusing on the evidence.

There is a range of different points of view among the commissioners. Part of my job is to marshal those to come to some collective conclusions. I would handle it the same as I would handle any other situation where I have a variety of different views. You try to work through those, based on the evidence, to get to the right outcome. I think that is the most effective way to run the commission.

Q17 **Chair:** This might be an unfair way to paraphrase what you said in response to Kirsten's first question: you want the commission to do less but do it better.

Alun Francis: Yes.

Q18 **Chair:** How will you measure that?

Alun Francis: We had an interesting discussion about this yesterday. I do not have a pat answer, but we are aware that we are going into a very interesting year next year for lots of reasons. We would like to see social mobility much more at the centre of debates about the country going forward.

Part of our impact on that is to think how much purchase we can get on the kinds of policies that whoever form the new Government in future take on social mobility. The measure is really about whether the things we recommend, as we go into the new year, start to make a difference on those policies and whether they work.

Q19 **Elliot Colburn:** This is a very broad-brush question to start. What is your current assessment of social mobility in the UK today?

Alun Francis: How long have I got to answer?

Elliot Colburn: Not very long—we are about to vote.

Alun Francis: I will take as long as I can. The "State of the Nation" report that we produced this year is, I think, a very important landmark report for social mobility, because it pulls together the best evidence we can find, advised on by the best academics who have been working with us, as to the true picture of social mobility in the country. It includes a very important first section, on social mobility outcomes. This is what economists and sociologists call the rear-view mirror: you are looking back, over the last 20 or 30 years, to look at the long-term pattern. Of course, in one sense, social mobility is always a long-term pattern, because it's about intergenerational change. The first part, importantly, puts a real context to that. Lots of the debate in social mobility policy is about social mobility getting worse. What the evidence suggests is that actually it's a mixed picture. There is no overall picture of decline. Depending on which indicators you use, some things have stayed about the same, some things have got a little bit better, and some things have got a bit worse. I won't bore you with all the different definitions; they are all in the report.



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However, we also look, in the second and third parts, at what we call the intermediate outcomes and the drivers. The intermediate outcomes are the things you review as milestones. Is social mobility getting better? What are the indicators in terms of going forward? And the drivers are the things that the evidence suggests are the most important things, so we are looking at childhood origins and those kinds of things.

When we have looked at those, what we have done is break down social mobility as much as we can, because the data is not always exactly as we would like to find it. But we have broken it down by protected characteristics: gender, ethnicity and disability. We have also looked at socioeconomic background, and we have looked at geography. Geography clearly isn't a protected characteristic, and there is debate about socioeconomic background, but the rest already are protected. And what emerges is quite a complex and nuanced picture. None of those explains the whole story. They all have some areas where you think, "Hmm, that social mobility needs to improve," and other areas where you say, "Actually, they're doing quite well, given the circumstances." They are all set out in the "State of the Nation" report. I think that is a very helpful starting point, because it starts to say, "Look, one of the overriding things, when you look at all the other measures, is that place is very important; geography is very important."

If you look at the Dick Whittington view of social mobility—you grow up in very poor circumstances and achieve very highly—that is much more likely to happen to you if you live in some of the outer boroughs of London and some of the home counties than it is if you live in other parts of the country. So that is quite an important thing to say. It is also important to say that your chances of going to university, if you are growing up in London, are higher, even if you come from a very poor background, than those for people from some apparently more advantaged backgrounds in other parts of the country. So, there are some really important lessons in this, particularly as we look at levelling up—whether we keep that term or not—and the whole issue about regional disparities and the importance of place-based approaches to social mobility, because it's clear that there are quite a lot of differences across the country. And within that, you will find differences about gender, ethnicity and disability. They are all in that report.

The overriding picture is not one that is dismal but one where clear improvement is necessary. If there is a golden thread to where there clearly needs to be improvement, our hypothesis—and I think we have some evidence of this already—is that there is a bottom 20% who do considerably worse and that is consistently the case. That is clear in early years, it is clear at primary level, it is clear at secondary level, and it is clear in their propensity to be NEET at ages 16 to 24 and therefore experience longer lifetime unemployment. And there is the likelihood then that nobody invests in improving their skills. That has a familial aspect to it in terms of the next generation and so on. And that is a theme that we do want to draw out.



Q20 Elliot Colburn: To stick with the commission's report, you have outlined what you think some of the key findings are and what Government perhaps could learn from those findings. In future reports, will the commission seek to expand the number of protected characteristics that it looks at and include things like gender reassignment, sexual orientation and religion or belief?

Alun Francis: Some of those are very difficult for us to address, because there is no data. That is the difficulty. We might increase the range of things we look at, but we have to go back 20 and 30 years to have data that we can include to look at the patterns over a period of time. So, it's not something that we have ruled out, but there is a data problem. We produced a separate report, at the beginning of this year, on some of the challenges about data and social mobility. Some countries have better data than we have. There are things that we can't do. For example, we can't directly link income to occupation of family in ways other countries can. That is one example, but there are many others. So, this is subject to data requirements. We could look at many different things, but we have to have reliable data to be able to produce good judgments.

Q21 Elliot Colburn: I want to focus on education and employment. You have emphasised the need to improve education and employment opportunities for a wider range of people. Specifically on the announcement that was made about the advanced British standard—the replacement of A-levels and T-levels with a new ABS qualification—were you consulted on that decision? Whether you were or not, what would your assessment be of the impact that that might have on social mobility?

Alun Francis: I was aware of that proposal, but not in my official capacity. The opinion I can pass to you now is a professional opinion in my day job rather than a commissioner opinion, because we don't yet have a position on it. I think it is fair that we do not have a position because we don't understand the detail.

In my professional opinion, it has caused a little bit of confusion, because we are already in the middle of quite a big change in terms of the curriculum around T-levels, and growing T-levels and their becoming a viable choice. But the ambition to start to create a more flexible system where you can move between academic and technical, subject to the detail, is very laudable.

For lots of young people, the structure of their choice at 16 can drive them down a route that can be either unproductive or more productive. If you are among the lucky few that have very high academic cognitive skills and you are going to go into an occupation that requires those academic cognitive skills, and you are an A or A* student, your life choices are fairly straightforward. For most other people, they are not. It is not just about those in the bottom 20%, who I do think are extremely important. In the middle, there is a whole range of people who might really benefit from the alternative options of mixing the curriculum in creative ways.



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What is important is that the curriculum needs to be robust. As for my professional view, on the T-level content, every tutor I have spoken to across the two colleges that I have worked in recently, and others that I have talked to, have said that the content is so much better than in the qualifications they have replaced. That is not to say they are perfect, but that is a really important thing. If people are going to work hard for qualifications, they need to know that what they are learning is practical, useful and helpful to developing their careers and their wider non-cognitive and cognitive skills. For those in the middle, more choice is a good thing.

Q22 Elliot Colburn: That is very helpful. Obviously, education and employment opportunities are a passion of yours, given your career history. The Prime Minister has described education as “the closest thing to a silver bullet” when it comes to social mobility. Building on that issue of education and employment opportunities, what else do you think needs to be done to improve social mobility?

Alun Francis: I know we haven’t got lots of time—I could bore you for days. The most difficult contradiction is this: when we improve people’s skills, if we do not also improve their economic opportunities in their area, they will leave because they have no option. That leaves us with a dilemma, and that has been our policy position for 20 or 30 years. In one sense, it is a good thing that people have the choice to leave. Everybody needs to be able to go and live their life and follow jobs in the right places and so on, but for those that are left behind, it is a problem. If we have a situation constantly where we just improve skills but do not create the economic opportunity locally, that position will continue, and it leads to a lot of wasted talent.

There are lots of layers as to how this might work, but let me describe some of the northern post-industrial cities. They do not necessarily do less well, in terms of educational outcomes for the most academically able, but for those who are left behind, their choices are more limited. If you do not live in a town that has a thriving private sector, the only major employment opportunities are in the public sector, or in public sector procurement where you have local businesses supported by that, or in the everyday economy—shops and retail and so forth. Without addressing that wider issue of the economy, we have an awful lot of people who are underperforming in terms of the use of their skills but who also have no incentive to improve their skills, and that is a national problem.

Q23 Elliot Colburn: Three previous chairs have resigned before the end of their term. Are you confident that you will be able to see through to the end of your term? How will you judge whether your tenure has been successful? Are you confident that where others have not received results, you will be able to do so?

Alun Francis: First, yes, I will complete my term. I work in further education. We are used to things being difficult, and we just don’t give up, so that is kind of in the DNA. It is a privilege to be from the further education sector and to be in this kind of position. In the sector, we do not



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have enough people in other public roles, and we should have more. Universities do—they are everywhere—but FE does not, so I am hoping that others will take a cue from that.

Your second and third parts were, how will I judge success? I think that goes back to the Chair's original question: have we got purchase, are we being listened to, and do we feel that we are starting to shift that debate in the direction of focusing on the things that will work? I cannot say with confidence that we will do that 100%, but we will give it our best shot.

How do I feel that I might be more effective than others in the role? I think that they have all done good jobs, by their own lights, so I would not like to be compared. I think that we are doing something slightly different and the context is very different. We are trying to say, "Look, the issue here is that there isn't going to be a lot of money. We've got to be really clear about what works. It's really important that social mobility is taken seriously, but done with nuance and balance", so that we start to focus on effective interventions. If we can shift to that policy focus, I would feel that we had done a good job.

Q24 **Chair:** I have a final question—sorry, I have been very greedy, I know. You said that you wanted to have a focus on geography as well. Is that just a very hackneyed north-south divide, or will you be more nuanced and, for example, look at things like seaside towns?

Alun Francis: I moved to Blackpool College three months ago. Blackpool is the absolute epitome of all the challenges around seaside towns and, I have to say, it is a place that is doing an amazing job of turning itself around. I am very fortunate to be leading a college that has a great track record, too.

Absolutely, your point is where we want to be. It is about nuance. There is not a straight north-south divide, and it is not even a straight London v. everyone else. London is complex; there are tremendous opportunities in London, but there are some tremendously high risks of unemployment and real poverty in London, too. The whole point of the geographical part of our report is to say, "This is complex."

Perhaps going back to the question about policy, the answer to what I am going to say is quite difficult to work out, but if we can find a way of being stitched into place-based policy, whether that is levelling up, devolution deals or whatever other arrangements are put in place around regional disparities, to me that would feel like a very positive place to be. The challenge in Grimsby is not the same as the challenge in Great Yarmouth or Cornwall, and Leeds and Manchester have different challenges. They all need to have their own approach, informed by the evidence, so that they can address the kind of nuanced picture that we have been describing.

That includes all the other characteristics that we have talked about, but they are not the same. The outcomes for the Bangladeshi community in London are not the same as they are in Oldham, for example, and that is what we need to help people move towards.



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Chair: Thank you. That is much appreciated. I will bring this part of the meeting to a close and move back into private session.