



Social Mobility Policy Committee

Corrected oral evidence: North-east England and regional social mobility initiatives

Thursday 1 May 2025

10.05 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Baroness Manningham-Buller (The Chair); Baroness Blower; Lord Evans of Rainow; Baroness Garden of Frognal; Lord Hampton; Baroness Hussein-Ece; Lord Johnson of Marylebone; Baroness Ramsey of Wall Heath; Lord Ravensdale; Lord Watts; Lord Young of Cookham.

Evidence Session No. 7

Heard in Public

Questions 76 – 88

Witnesses

I: Dr Fiona Hill, Chancellor, Durham University; Sir David Bell, Vice-Chancellor and CEO, University of Sunderland; Professor Andy Long, Vice-Chancellor and CEO, Northumbria University; Professor Louise Kempton, Professor of Urban and Regional Policy, Newcastle University.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

1. This is an corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.



Examination of witnesses

Dr Fiona Hill, Sir David Bell, Professor Andy Long and Professor Louise Kempton.

Q76 The Chair: Good morning. I would like to start by thanking our witnesses for making, in some cases, quite long journeys to be with us today to give oral evidence in our investigation into social mobility.

There will be people dropping in and out for parliamentary questions and for the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill. That is no reflection on the quality of what you are going to tell us; it is quite a busy morning in the House and at least one of our members has a parliamentary question, so if people disappear there is a reason.

We have been trying to feel our way towards a definition of social mobility and we have had different evidence. What issues and concepts would you draw attention to in seeking to define this subject for us? Who would like to start?

Sir David Bell: I am happy to start. At its simplest, social mobility is the ability to move from one sector of society to another in a relatively straightforward manner. I know it is a caricature but it is often taken to mean a young person from a poor area who has gone to a non-selective school, having the talent to go to a selective university and never coming home.

That is one assessment of social mobility in higher education, but it is also a rather limited assessment because we are now seeing many more people who are staying at home and coming to university, not just in the north-east of England. Through doing so they are acquiring really valuable qualifications that give them new opportunities and probably a leg-up in social mobility terms. I do not think we yet have the evidence required to fully understand the social mobility impact of that movement within a place or within a region, but it is something that is worth looking at; we should not just think of the person who leaves home and never comes back. A lot of people stay at home and can still improve their lot in life and go up the ladder of opportunity as a result.

Professor Andy Long: Obviously, I agree with David and the same philosophy would apply at Northumbria University. I guess for me, in relation to higher education, social mobility means that those for whom a degree is the right path have the opportunity to go to university regardless of their financial situation or social background. What is really important is that the university focuses not just on access but on outcomes. Otherwise, you have only done half the job. We want people to be just as likely to succeed after they graduate regardless of their background, as well as just as likely to have access to higher education.

Dr Fiona Hill: I would like to add a few things, with the caveat that I am not speaking on behalf of Durham University here. The role of chancellor is obviously not one with the responsibilities held by Professor Kempton



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and my colleagues on either side. I speak as someone who has experienced social mobility, as have some other panellists; it is not just about university-level education, it is the whole ecosystem of education. In fact, in the hearings that you have today [in Parliament] on well-being and childhood education it is clear that those opportunities to get experience with life and a reasonably good grounding in elementary education depend on where you are located. Family is also critical, to be honest. A lot of research has been done in the United States by social scientists such as Raj Chetty at Harvard and at MIT with a group who recently won the Nobel Prize, looking at the fact that some form of family network and strong ties with family are critical for giving children a grounding and advice for the path forward. It does not have to be a conventional so-called nuclear family but can include surrogates for family such as neighbours, aunts, uncles and extended family. We find that people who do not have family structures of some sort, which could also be close ties within the community, are much more unlikely to be able to move forward.

Housing and where you live is pretty critical as well. I grew up in a very deprived area of the north-east of England; my parents made a huge sacrifice to move from the council estate into starter private housing through access to funding from building societies. What was key was that there were people from all kinds of different backgrounds who were able to give me and my sister advice that we would not have received in another setting. That is another thing that Raj Chetty and his team have shown: in the UK the model where public housing, council housing and private housing is mixed together is the kind of place where you get important outcomes for mobility because people are exposed to groups of people with different life and work experiences.

David mentioned movement; transportation is critical as well. You are not going to get anywhere if you literally cannot get a bus. I grew up without a car. In the north of England, for example, just under 30 percent of the population does not have a car or access to a car. You frankly have a paucity of good transportation routes; we have a lot of bus routes but they do not always go where you want to go. I have come across all kinds of students at Durham and elsewhere—I am sure that Andy, David and Louise have as well—who cannot get directly to their places of education because they do not have reliable transportation. It takes several hours to get there.

That is the same for jobs as well. Social mobility, or any opportunity, is going to flounder if jobs are not available, and it is the training aspect of education that is key. In many surveys—I am sure you have been looking at them as well—a good 70% of students want to have work training, practical training and sometimes more along with their university or school studies so that they will have some practical experience, which is key for their mobility. That is where movement and transportation come in.



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The other critical element is information. In many cases, people simply do not have information on what is out there in terms of schooling opportunities, be that for university, FE college or lifelong access to education. Many people flounder after they leave the university setting; they find that they need re-skilling. Obviously, Northumbria, Newcastle and Sunderland do a lot of this. There is a lot less at the more conventional universities but that access beyond the age of graduation from college and university to re-skill and train is important, and information is critical there as well.

Professor Louise Kempton: Since I am last to go, I am not going to rehearse all the comments that have been made and with which I entirely agree. I would just like to highlight that Fiona has given us a great example in what she has said about the importance of promoting bridging social capital: enabling young people in particular to have access to people outside their immediate networks and social circles. What we find in the north-east of England is that we have very high levels of strong bonding capital, but that means people have strong links to those who are in the same circumstances. It is important to find ways to introduce young people to new experiences and new opportunities.

I would just like to build on what Sir David and Professor Long have said about graduates: we should be mindful of the fact that universities have a lot more influence than just the production of graduates. They are huge anchor institutions, massive employers, procurers, and have a really big impact on the places in which they are situated. That is particularly the case in the north-east of England; we are an institutionally thin region. So, we need to be exploring the role of universities beyond their immediate missions of teaching, producing graduates and research. What I feel we need to be doing in order to promote social mobility is to make people of all ages prepared and ready for opportunities as they arise. That is about equipping them with the capacity, the skills, the resources and the awareness—as to Fiona’s point about information—about the opportunities that are out there. Again, that brings us to the point of what those opportunities are; if they do not exist, then our young people will leave or fail to transcend different divides in society. Fiona has talked in the past about creating the infrastructure of opportunity and that is something we need to be looking at in the north-east of England, beyond just graduate jobs.

Q77 Lord Evans of Rainow: Thank you for those answers to the first question, which are very interesting. What are the particular barriers to social mobility in the north-east of England? I appreciate Dr Hill has touched on that. In what ways do they differ from other regions in the UK: the north-west, Yorkshire, the south-east, and south-west?

Professor Andy Long: Professor Kempton may have more academic knowledge from her research into the causes of the barriers. What I would say is that we know the north-east currently has the lowest rate of participation in higher education in the country. At the recent January application deadline, 32% of 18 year-olds in the north-east applied to go



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to university compared to 41% nationally and 58% in London. This must also be related to the fact that the north-east has the lowest A-level attainment rates in the country.

The other challenge, and it is one that Dr Hill touched upon as well, is geography. We have 2 million people in the North East Combined Authority area, but it is also the second largest combined authority area so those people are generally sparsely distributed, aside from three city regions. If you travel north from the city of Newcastle where there are two universities, you will not find another major higher education provider until you get to Edinburgh. Why does that matter? Again, Dr Hill has touched on the challenges of transport. What we know is that students from the least well-off backgrounds are much more likely to be commuter students. They are much more likely to live at home and need to be able to get to a university and, quite simply, it is very difficult for them to do so if they are from those rural areas.

Dr Fiona Hill: If I could add to that: the north-west, Cumbria, for example, would also fall into this category. We get a lot of students coming from Cumbria as well on the trans-Pennine routes to study in the region.

Professor Andy Long: The A69.

Dr Fiona Hill: Yes, and it is not the easiest route either. Again, in my Durham capacity, I have met many students who have somewhat hellacious commutes from one place to the next, which I am sure is reflected elsewhere.

Just to add—obviously, Professor Kempton has done a lot of extremely good research on this—part of this is rooted in history. You have to think about the varied history of the United Kingdom. Most of the north-east was a palatinate for a long time. It was not until 1832 with the Reform Act that Durham University was founded. Back in those days, many people did not think about university education because it was not seen as particularly necessary. We went from a feudal set-up to nationalised industry, and certainly for other generations—I do not know if you would agree, Sir David, from your experience in Scotland and elsewhere, and of course you were heavily involved in education in the north-east for many years—there was not a lot of encouragement for people to go to university up until the 1980s, beyond the grammar school system. There was an expectation that the jobs you would go into would not necessitate anything beyond the equivalent of secondary education, or you would be funnelled into training schools. It took a long time before the comprehensive system really took over from the vocational and secondary modern schools. The pipelines for preparing people to go from the old grammar schools to university also broke down in the 1960s and 1970s. With the collapse of nationalised industry and mass privatisation, fewer jobs were available in the region as well, which put some restraints and constraints on people's appetite for higher education.



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Frankly, with the introduction of loans as opposed to the grants and maintenance grants that we had from local education authorities which have now been quite restricted, a lot of people feel that, for precisely all the reasons laid out, they cannot afford to go to university. Where will they find a job? They perhaps do not want to move from the region so why should they invest in a university education?

Sir David Bell: There is much to be proud of in the north-east of England. It is a place where I lived for a decade in the 1990s and chose to come back to seven years ago so that I could spend the rest of my life there. It is a region with a rich and distinctive culture and history, and it was a powerhouse in many ways during the Industrial Revolution. But a powerful trifecta of issues has really impeded the development of the north-east: historically higher levels of deprivation and poverty, lower educational attainment, and fewer opportunities to progress to high-skilled, high-quality jobs. The manifestation of that has been illustrated by what both Andy and Fiona have said.

There is also a question about private investment in the north-east of England. We are still pretty heavily dependent on state funding. If we are going to grow a more productive economy which has the right level of high-skilled jobs and therefore high-skilled opportunities, we need private capital as well as public investment in the region. The universities, to take an example, can play an important role in generating research and knowledge that in turn creates those jobs that we want in the future, but that has to be backed by more substantial investment from private capital and companies—international companies as well as national companies—choosing to invest in the region. So investment is a very high priority when it comes to enabling the north-east of England to deal with those historic issues.

Professor Louise Kempton: I will just add a few comments on the legacy of our post-industrial heritage in the north-east of England where we had the nationalised industries. Those were jobs for life which provided you with a pathway. You went in at 14, 15 or 16, and bright kids were picked out to do apprenticeships and go into more skilled or even managerial occupations. That was lost to us when we lost our industries.

I have been in the north-east of England for 27 years now and over that time I have seen a huge shift in terms of investments, mostly public and university-led, in new innovation, infrastructure and the creation of a great number of what we call knowledge economy jobs. However, we risk creating an hourglass-shaped economy with lots of very well-paid jobs at the top end for people with very high skills who are very highly qualified, and lots of precarious jobs at the bottom end in the service sector with zero-hour contracts and no opportunities for advancement. There has been a real hollowing out of that bit in the middle and no opportunity for people to transition between the two. Part of that is due to a total focus



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and obsession with high-tech sectors when it comes to economic development and innovation strategies over past decades.

Our research in the Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies would argue that we really need to have a big focus on what we call the foundational economy: that everyday economy where most of the jobs and most of the businesses are situated. Without boring you with a long and detailed explanation of the foundational economy—which accounts for about 60% of jobs in the north-east of England—it is basically all those things we realised in the pandemic were really important such as retail, logistics and care: things that cannot be traded into other areas. I believe the failure of four or five decades of regional policy has been to ignore the foundational economy in their strategies and plans. But I would like to highlight the fact that we are working closely with our North East Combined Authority and it is very much taking a focus on this in its forthcoming local growth plan, which we applaud.

Q78 Lord Ravensdale: Dr Hill, I was quite struck by what you said in response to the first question about this problem of bubbles: that people essentially are divided into bubbles in society. You talked about your own experience and I absolutely agree about the importance of breaking down those barriers to social mobility. One of the factors you pointed to was mixing types of housing, for example. I wonder if you could point to any other factors or solutions to the problem of bubbles in society.

Dr Fiona Hill: It also comes down to different tiers of schooling as well. I went to a primary school that was a mixing pot for my town—Bishop Auckland in County Durham—so I met people from all kinds of different backgrounds as there was not really a private primary school anywhere in the area. That was important early on. Then, of course, you get that streaming out in secondary school. As time has gone on, with fee-paying and grammar schools still existing—obviously there are comprehensive schools, academies, charter schools and all those kinds of things—the opportunity to meet people from different backgrounds when you get past 11 tends to get reduced. So that is one thing to think about.

There are still all kinds of opportunities, particularly here in London, to meet people from different backgrounds but that is increasingly less so the further away you get from a major urban area. Even in places like Newcastle and Sunderland those opportunities have rescinded.

I had the opportunity to have a chat recently with Lee Hall, the famous playwright who wrote “Billy Elliot”. I asked him how he got started, because he comes from similar very humble origins. He said that when he was a young person there were numerous youth theatres in Newcastle mostly funded by Northern Arts or sometimes by the university. That was how he met people and got on his pathway to become one of Britain’s best-known playwrights and screenwriters.

Other similar community-based organisations that bring together people from different backgrounds are now missing, beyond the opportunity to



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mix with people from different backgrounds by the time you get to college or university.

Lord Evans of Rainow: Can I pick up on what the professor said about the foundation type of jobs over the last 40 years in retail and hospitality? The north-east has some beautiful places to visit, so you do have some very good foundation sectors there, tourism and hospitality among them.

You mentioned tech and you gave the impression that attracting high-tech investment into the north-east is somehow an issue. Is it not the case that you want to attract international investors into places like the north-east that have those high-tech jobs? For example, Nissan was attracted there because skilled people who were made redundant from the nationalised industries could transfer their skills into motor manufacturing, which I understand has been a huge success story. Is it not the case that you want to attract high-tech industries into the north-east for those transferable skills from industries that have gone into decline?

Professor Louise Kempton: We absolutely do, yes, but it is not just a supply-side issue. We need to look at the demand side as well and how to calibrate those. If we do not have people with the necessary skills to fill these roles then they will not come. I heard recently about a battery plant manufacturer up in Blyth that is flying in people from Poland and Germany to work in the factory because the local population does not have the required skills or the particular training and qualifications to deal with hazardous materials. It is very much the role of both the universities and the public sector to make sure that the supply side is ready to meet the demand side. You have to do both at the same time.

Dr Fiona Hill: Can I add something to that? I spent six months in Germany a year and a half ago, looking at this exact issue to see if Germany was doing any better than other countries in managing this. It was exactly the same problem in the former East Germany; it had not re-skilled the population. In places like Dresden in Saxony—which they are calling Silicon Saxony at the moment—it was actually flying people in from all over Europe, including the UK, to work in the managerial and skills section. Of course, that is one of the places where you have had the highest numbers voting for Alternative für Deutschland because most of the people who, in normal circumstances, would expect to work in the chip manufacturing plants were not getting those jobs. They were not getting the skills and they were very angry.

The Chair: Lord Young, I think this is a positive moment for your question.

Q79 **Lord Young of Cookham:** Dr Hill, you spent much of your career in the United States. Is there anything that we can learn about the issue of social mobility from what happens in the United States?



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Dr Fiona Hill: There are some cautionary tales at the moment about the attack on universities that would not be a line of pursuit I would recommend, but there are some very important lessons out of this. Professor Kempton particularly talked about the bridging opportunities from universities. In the United States you have a huge divide, as you have in the UK, between people who go to a university or a two-year college and those who do not. That has actually become the new class divide or the new social divide in the United States; 60% of the population do not have any access to advanced education beyond high school. For the 40% that do, there are problems of retention just as there are here in the UK.

It has been noted over time that a lot of it comes down to the universities having bridging programmes for people who come from environments in which they have not really been exposed to a more academic environment, or who need extra training and assistance. It is a bit like the Scottish Higher system. I went to St Andrews University as an undergraduate because there was an extra year in which you could prepare if you had not come from an academically advanced secondary school. Many universities now have those kinds of programmes and they have tried to expand access in terms of recruitment. Of course, in the United States that is a very tricky project because it is such a huge country, but Harvard for example has teamed up with a host of other universities. I am on the Harvard Board of Overseers; the University goes across the country to rural areas—the equivalent of rural Northumberland or Cumbria and elsewhere—to encourage people who are not thinking about going to university. Harvard engages with rural schools and other schools—which is something that is done here as well through all the various academies—to give people the idea that they could go on to some form of higher education.

The UK, like the United States, has a long tradition of supporting the poorest students. Harvard University, for example, has now made it possible for any student whose family makes less than \$100,000 and less than \$200,000 annually—it is tiered—to have their whole or the bulk of their education and maintenance paid for. But that of course, is only because universities like Harvard have such large endowments. We will see if that is still possible in the future. The US Government is actually restricting some mainstays like the Pell Grants, which are for underprivileged students and enable them to pay for college. Just like here, it is becoming quite clear that if students think they have to go into debt, they will be more reluctant.

The other element is the same in Germany, which is to give people some form of vocational training at the same time. So, the most popular courses in the United States are those where you have a public/private partnership along the lines that Professor Kempton has mentioned.

Lord Young of Cookham: On the bridging programme, how would one shoehorn that into what happens here?



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Dr Fiona Hill: From the US point of view, it gives people support all the way through the first year of university, but also in a summer programme beforehand. I know Durham has started to do that, and I think all the other universities have done this as well.

Sir David Bell: A number of universities, our own included, offer a foundation year, which is a pre-undergraduate year designed to do exactly what Fiona said: prepare students for the academic requirements ahead of undergraduate education. We carry some risk in doing that because, perhaps unsurprisingly, the attrition rates can be higher in that first foundation year than they might be once students get to undergraduate study. But our view has been that it is a risk worth carrying because we know that many of those students who get on to the full undergraduate degree actually go on to do better than many of their peers.

Of course, all our universities are involved in engagement programmes with schools and colleges and increasingly with children of all ages, just to try to provide that understanding of what life at university might be like. It is not the be-all and end-all and it is not for everyone, but if we are going to broaden access and perhaps promote the social mobility we are all interested in, we have to give people a sense that this could be for them too.

Professor Louise Kempton: There are potentially more flexible ways that we can teach students. I believe that the US has a credit-based system so you can build up your credits as quickly or as slowly as you want. So, for example, if you have to balance caring responsibilities or part-time work, you can spread your degree out over a longer period of time. Having the ability to be more flexible in our offering would certainly go a long way to appealing to a wider group.

Dr Fiona Hill: Just to add, that may be about to break down in the US because the Pell Grants that I mentioned were tied to the time period in which you are in university, and the current Government is thinking about reducing the amount of time that people can access Pell Grants. It is really critical for students to have that flexibility to finish. The lesson from this will be that you need to give them flexibility with the funding as well so that it does not expire in a three-year or four-year timeframe, for example.

Q80 **Baroness Ramsey of Wall Heath:** In terms of the efforts that are made to improve social mobility, there are the national government efforts through various programmes over, say, the last 25 years, and then there are—I imagine you will tell us—local initiatives and local authority initiatives to improve social mobility. I wonder what you see is good about them, what is not so good, and how they compare. What are the advantages and disadvantages, and what works?

Professor Louise Kempton: I am an economic geographer and our *raison d'être* is that place matters. There are very few entrenched



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problems that can be solved by central government that do not include working at a local or even hyperlocal level. To overcome the challenges we have already spoken about, we need hyperlocal solutions co-designed by local authorities with voluntary and community sector organisations, businesses, the NHS and universities, and all those place-based anchors. I will just give an example of this; I was on a call a couple of weeks ago with Nissan, and it was telling me about the open days it has to advertise its apprenticeship programme. It was getting quite low numbers of local young people coming along and was trying to figure out why that might be. Transport was obviously identified as an issue: if a family did not have a car, it was not the easiest place to get to using public transport, which might not even be affordable. But what it found by working in very close partnership with a local-based organisation in Pallion in Sunderland was that the biggest challenge was that the young people did not have suits to wear to attend these open days. So, it allowed children to attend in their school uniform, and that had a huge transformational effect on the number of young people it was engaging with. That is a really small thing and it did not cost a single penny, but you need ears and eyes on the ground to help shape that. We really need to bring back more local control over the ways we address these issues.

Just as a final point, we have talked about the pre-university education system, which is critical in terms of the north-east situation. We only need to look to the London Challenge and the huge transformational effect that had on the outcomes for disadvantaged young people in London, so I would really call for a north-east challenge.

Sir David Bell: I would broadly agree, although there are national policy initiatives and changes that can have a transformational impact over generations. The Robbins report from 1963 effectively opened up access to higher education for, I guess, many people including people on this side of the table, and I am sure your side of the table. Just look at the investments nationally in early years, particularly around the Sure Start initiative.

The Nissan story was pretty much made possible by substantial government support to bring Nissan to the UK in the 1980s, and indeed the putative £400 million-plus film studio development in Sunderland is also going to be supported, perhaps to a modest but still important extent, by central government. So there are interventions at the national level that can create the conditions that allow things to happen locally.

Where it does not work is where central government try to use what I would call the long screwdriver, and fiddle around with everything at the local level. I speak perhaps as a sinner who has repented, given my time in central government, but there is always a temptation for Whitehall and Westminster to think they know best, and that is a long-standing, potentially quite disabling feature of our political system.



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We should not underestimate what Governments can do but when it comes to the execution, that is far better done—as Louise suggested—at a local level.

Professor Andy Long: Arguably, the main thing the Government have done in recent years has been to remove student number caps. That has meant that more people overall can go to university, including more people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and we see that in the numbers. There are disadvantages as well that we could talk about, but that is definitely an advantage of that policy.

The recent increase in student maintenance loans for next year in line with inflation is also welcome. It has not increased in line with inflation in recent years, and that means that day-to-day going to university has become increasingly unaffordable, particularly for people from poorer backgrounds.

What is the opposite of the icing on the cake? Whatever it is, the real barrier is the household income threshold at which you can get the maximum maintenance loan. That has been frozen at £25,000 since 2008, so it has reduced in value by 40% in real terms. That now means that next year, a family where one parent is earning just above the national minimum wage is expected to subsidise their children when they are at university, and that is obviously absurd.

Dr Fiona Hill: Just one small point to add: a lot of universities now are fundraising to create small opportunity grants—let us call them that—to address the kind of things that Louise was talking about. Students cannot participate in many of the activities once they get to university because they have to get jobs, precisely because of the reason that Andy referred to. They might not have a suit for an interview. I actually did not and a professor bought me a suit for my first job out of their own money. To have these kinds of small funds available is critical. That can also be done in conjunction with local government.

Interestingly in Germany, the Ministry of the Interior—I would not say this is necessarily something that Government should be doing here—has small pots of money for community funds. So it actually supplements this kind of outreach for local regions, particularly in the east, where civic organisations have been underserved and where there is no private philanthropy to step in.

One other thing that is notable in Germany is that local members of the German Parliament act as representatives of the region, not as representatives of their party. That has been incredibly important in getting regional funding sustained over longer periods of time because they act in close consultation, not as partisan actors but as regional actors, which is quite the opposite to the United States.

Q81 **Baroness Hussein-Ece:** You have touched on my next question on access and barriers. I was going to ask you to describe the work that has



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been done in partnership to reduce barriers to social mobility and improve local policy to facilitate it. I think we have started the discussion on that; certainly you have, Professor Long.

Professor Andy Long: I can give a couple of examples of things that are happening now. For the last 10 years, there has been something called the North East Raising Aspiration Partnership, which is about to be rebranded as Access UNEE, where “UNEE” is “Universities for North East England”, which is a recently launched partnership between the five universities in the north-east. That programme supports over 30,000 young people a year. It provides information, advice and guidance to them about progressing to university, and we think it is a very successful way that we can work together to raise the aspirations of people in the north-east.

More locally in Newcastle, we have what is called an IntoUniversity centre. You may know about IntoUniversity, which is a national organisation with about 44 centres now. It places its centres in areas with low rates of participation in higher education; IntoUniversity raises money to support them, and universities co-fund them. The one in Newcastle East is co-funded by Northumbria and Newcastle Universities and has been open since 2021. It has supported around 2,000 young people so far.

Of those of university age who have been through the centre, 64% go on to higher education. In the schools it works with, the average rate of progression to higher education is 12%, so those centres make a massive difference. We are so pleased with that outcome that we have just opened another centre jointly with Newcastle University and Gateshead.

Sir David Bell: I want to emphasise the point Andy made about collaboration across the north-east of England on matters such as access. I will just give a couple of specific examples. We were given one of the 2019 publicly funded medical schools. We were very clear that we wanted to improve access to medical education, so we have a programme called Medstart, which is targeting students who may have the talent and aptitude but not have thought of medicine as a potential academic route. It allows them access through a summer school and provides pre-interview and other support. Medicine is a really interesting example of a career where your family and your connections often matter. If you do not have family and connections in medicine, it is still relatively difficult to get in, particularly if there are expectations around work experience. It is easier if you have a family member who is working in the health system than if you do not.

All the universities in the north-east could point to specific examples which are designed to give students genuine experience of what life might be like at university, recognising that for some it may not be the first thought in their minds and therefore you need to provide targeted support to enable them to come in and to succeed.



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The Chair: Thank you. Could we move on to—I am sorry, Professor Kempton?

Professor Louise Kempton: You wanted me to speak about Insights North East?

Baroness Hussein-Ece: Yes, I was going to ask you about that.

Professor Louise Kempton: I will try to be brief because I know we need to move on.

The Chair: The committee will tell you that I get worried whether we are ever going to get through all the questions, but actually it does not matter if we do not because what you are telling us is so important.

Professor Louise Kempton: Thank you very much. I guess this is a different angle, and it is about how we use research that is generated in our universities to inform public policy. Between us, we have hundreds of millions of pounds of public money that comes to us to do some, in many cases, world-class research. However, this was not really getting out to our partners in the public sector partly because a huge amount of capacity has been lost in the public sector since 2010.

Large policy teams have been decimated and now spend their time just writing bids for funding to Government and so on. In the words of one of our public authorities, “The transaction costs for them were just too high in trying to engage with the university”. So, Insights North East, with investment from UK Research and Innovation, has been able to build up a new infrastructure across the four institutions but most importantly across our public sector partners as well. It has some dedicated resource that not only brings the research to those public partners—often academic research is not in the right shape and form for public policy making—but a team at Insights North East makes the conversion, synthesis, or whatever is required.

Importantly, it is not just about pushing out from the universities. We are demand-driven, so it is about understanding what the needs or challenges are of our public sector partners and getting them to go back into the universities. Often, we need to talk to colleagues across multiple disciplines because the challenges we are dealing with are so complex. An example, is the social determinants of poor health, which is a chronic issue for us in the north-east of England. We need to talk to social scientists as well as medics and many others. It is not a big team—12 or so people—but we need that dedicated infrastructure to enable those things to happen and to try to maximise the benefits of that huge public investment that is made in the research in our universities for the benefit of the north-east.

Thank you for the opportunity to tell you about that.

Q82 **Baroness Garden of Frognal:** We have touched on the role that employers and businesses can play in creating good-quality, meaningful



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jobs and employment, which improves social mobility. In that context, I wonder if you could say something about apprenticeships, which have been a valuable vehicle in improving social mobility?

Sir David Bell: Perhaps I can start with one example although of course there are many. The University of Sunderland is the higher education sponsor of the South Durham University Technical College, or UTC, and the South Durham UTC has a particular focus on STEM-related subjects. What is good about that is that you have a co-design of the curriculum involving employers and educationalists with really excellent facilities within the college that enable students to have that work-based experience from a relatively early stage, as students come in from age 14 upwards.

We certainly see the evidence of a number of students who are coming from less advantaged backgrounds, with many progressing, interestingly, into apprenticeships in that part of County Durham; there are some very important and significant industries there. But we also see students progressing into STEM-related higher education and that is very important. I would just say, as a sidebar comment, that some research has been done relatively recently which says that the north-east of England and other parts of the country that do not do as well have a lower number of STEM graduates. Essentially, they are there to fuel the economy. So, trying to keep more STEM graduates, educate more in the region and keep them in the region is very important.

I also think there is a role-modelling piece here, particularly if we look at new industries where there is a potential for the north-east to benefit. I was up in Blyth recently and there has been very substantial investment in the northern part of the region around wind and other green technologies. There is that sense when the first person gets a job in that new sector other people start to talk about it, "Oh that's interesting, they have a job working on the port." "And what are they doing in the port?" "They are working on this renewable energy stuff, whatever that is." Before you know it, you get this very powerful impact of people understanding what opportunities are there. I genuinely think that contributes to social mobility, as people see opportunities in emerging industries that they may not have thought of undertaking.

Dr Fiona Hill: Could I add just one quick thing? The information collection that Professor Kempton and others are involved in is pretty critical. As was said already about medical schools, for example, it is about word of mouth and family connections. That was the way people used to find jobs in the north-east previously. Most people did not have CVs, and they were told of jobs basically by the people they connected with. That still holds true, so collecting that information and finding ways of disseminating it through schools is critical for these kinds of opportunities. I have been part of the strategic defence review with Lord Robertson and others, and one of the focuses has also been on STEM skills and education.



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There are all kinds of jobs available now in the defence sector, and veterans of the Armed Forces mostly find out about this through their networks. But many of these jobs are civilian jobs, particularly in the power sector and maintenance. There are going to be all kinds of new digital or maintenance opportunities around bases, for example. The question is how to get that information out there. Groups like Insights North East and the universities play a role, but this is another place where Government and local government could become quite helpful in figuring out ways of disseminating information about opportunities.

Baroness Blower: Can I ask Sir David a specific logistical question? I have no criticism of UTCs; I visited some along with Lord Baker, whose brainchild they were. The transfer point to UTC is the age of 14, so do you have any observations on the impact on the remaining secondary provision around those UTCs? Clearly, funding depends on headcount. I am just interested to know how that works in your area.

Sir David Bell: Because the UTCs generally recruit a relatively small number of students compared to the total school population, the impact is marginal. The detrimental impact, particularly in the early days, was often felt more by the UTCs than it was by the sending schools because there was a misunderstanding of what UTCs were for. They were not just somewhere to put disengaged students; it was actually the opposite. They were for students who had a bias or bent towards particular professional career routes, and you needed quite good entry-level qualifications.

In the north-east generally, they have settled down into quite a decent pattern. That is largely because the numbers involved are low. A general point I would make is that the STEM focus is a really important issue for schools in the north-east. If you look at the uptake of STEM-related A-levels—not just in Sunderland but across the region—it is nowhere near where it needs to be if we are to get that kind of high-skilled STEM-related focus. All of us as universities are really interested in building the STEM pipeline.

Professor Louise Kempton: A number of years ago, we did some research around the advanced manufacturing park that was being set up across Sunderland and South Tyneside to look at that skills pipeline. Some 5,000 jobs were supposed to be created; where were these 5,000 people going to come from? The original assumption was that this would be a university or a college-level issue, and in part it was, but the main blockage in that pipeline was how few schools offered triple science at GCSE. If you have not done triple science at GCSE, you cannot do a science subject at A-level. If you do not do a science subject at A-level, you cannot do engineering. That was really problematic.

The other issue, which is much broader than just this example, is the chronic underfunding of further education and the often mismatch between the kids coming out of further education and the opportunities in the local labour market. That is because where there are areas of



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demand, those are expensive subjects to teach. It is a lot cheaper to teach tourism, management, security or whatever it may be, compared to engineering or more tech-focused subjects.

The other big problem is the imposition of the requirement for colleges to take on the responsibility of getting the kids through their level 4 English and maths if they have not passed it at school, which is then passed on to the teachers. If you have somebody coming in from industry, they do not want the responsibility of getting somebody their English qualification. That is not what they are there for. Also, are you going to give up a job in industry as an engineer to earn £27,000 a year as an FE lecturer with those additional responsibilities? We have to look at this chronic issue that we have in further education, because that is a big blockage in the pipeline and in the broader topic of this committee.

Baroness Ramsey of Wall Heath: I am interested in the percentage of STEM students in your respective institutions who are from the local population or from the north-east. How many stay in the north-east once they graduate or complete their course?

Professor Andy Long: I cannot break it down by STEM, but it is fairly uniform across most of our subjects at Northumbria. About 60% of our students are from the north-east; about two-thirds of our graduates stay in the north-east after they graduate.

Professor Louise Kempton: This was something that we looked at in the research I mentioned earlier. The north-east of England, as Professor Long just pointed out, has a very good reputation for holding on to its own graduates, but it is interesting to look at what our young people study compared to what is studied broadly at our universities. Certainly, when it came to the various engineering programmes that we do at Newcastle University, very few of those young people were from the region and very few of them stayed after they graduated. So again, there is that issue about a mismatch between what our local economy requires and what the young people who are staying on in the region after graduation have studied.

Baroness Ramsey of Wall Heath: Can I just ask Sir David and Fiona that same question because I am interested in the figures for each of their organisations? It is 60% at Northumbria.

Sir David Bell: Around 80% of our home students are effectively commuter students from the city or the region and that percentage pretty much stays in the region. We have quite a bias towards science and health-related subjects, so we think there is quite a contribution being made. Going back to my point at the very beginning about the contribution that makes to social mobility, those STEM-related graduates are staying and contributing to the economy.

Baroness Ramsey of Wall Heath: I am particularly interested in those who come in and go out. What about Durham and Newcastle?



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Dr Fiona Hill: To be clear, it is difficult for me to speak on behalf of Durham, but about 10% [its actually closer to 8%] of Durham students have been from the north-east and County Durham.

Baroness Ramsey of Wall Heath: Do you know how many stay on after graduation?

Dr Fiona Hill: I do not, and that is part of the issue. It is one of the reasons I have been asked to be the chancellor. I am from the region, but I did not go to Durham precisely because of some of the issues we have been airing here. I would have had to commute from home, which is only 8.8 miles away, but I would have had to cycle because the bus routes were not reliable. My parents also thought it would be better for me to go away so that I could live in a university environment. That was a long time ago in the 1980s, of course. That is an issue for Durham, which is why it is so good to be part of a larger organisation.

Traditionally, people from the north-east have gravitated towards Newcastle and Northumbria, Sunderland or Teesside University as well. Previously, Durham had a reputation of being part of the Russell group, more geared towards what Sir David was talking about, with people leaving the region. There are more and more graduates from Durham wanting to stay in the north-east, but they are not necessarily from the region. Durham University is now trying to increase the number of scholarships and I have been quite heavily involved in this. The aim is to expand access to students from the north-east and encourage them to come to Durham—hopefully not at the expense of the other universities in the area—to encourage them to find jobs locally. That gets back to where we started from, that all the other factors become quite critical.

You asked a question before about Government. There has been a quite strong effort by successive Governments to relocate some central government functions to other parts of the United Kingdom. Treasury, of course, now has a major facility in Darlington. Newcastle has always traditionally been part of all this. There is the Passport Office in Durham; I think the building has recently fallen into disrepair, but in theory the Passport Office has moved to Durham. Those give opportunities to people to get different kinds of jobs locally because a lot of people working or wanting to work in the Civil Service would, of course, have to leave.

Lord Johnson of Marylebone: And move on to other things.

Dr Fiona Hill: Increasingly, we are seeing movements to bring more central government opportunities to the regions. That is an area where you could be quite influential in encouraging the devolution of central government functions as well.

Baroness Ramsey of Wall Heath: Professor Kempton, do you have your figures? So, we have 60%, 10%, and 80%.



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Professor Louise Kempton: I think it is about 55% of our students at Newcastle are local.

Baroness Ramsay of Wall Heath: Do you know what percentage stay on in the north-east?

Professor Louise Kempton: I do not have our precise figure, but overall for all north-east graduates, about 80% to 85% of home students stay in the region.

The Chair: Thank you very much. We now move to Lord Johnson. He is going to ask a slightly different question than what we predicted because you answered what he was going to ask so well, but he has another one up his sleeve.

Q83 **Lord Johnson of Marylebone:** Just to build on what Professor Long said about student number controls and their removal having had a very positive effect on widening participation: does that mean that you accept the corollary that reimposing them would be a break on social mobility?

As a follow-up, one of the paradoxes of the strengths of universities as local anchor institutions is that they are so international. We have a White Paper on immigration coming up, which may see the Government yet again crack down on international students. Does this concern you and your ability to continue to bring such wealth to your region through international students and the great faculty you bring to your universities?

Professor Andy Long: To answer your first question, personally, I think it would be a mistake to reimpose number caps because, although the argument in favour of reimposing them is that some institutions are now struggling to recruit students as other institutions lower their entry requirements and Hoover up even more of the students they would have recruited, the impact on social mobility would be my first consideration. There would be a detrimental effect on social mobility, perhaps not at institutions like mine, but that is what would happen across the sector.

In terms of international students, it is a great concern to the sector—to all of us, I am sure—that again, as you say, the Government are looking at removing or changing the graduate route to post-study work. You and I were together in Saudi Arabia when that was last being discussed, and thankfully it did not happen then. There does not seem to be any significant logic that applies to this other than reducing headline figures of net migration. This change will not make a difference to the kinds of migrants that some members of the public might be concerned about. Poll after poll shows that people are not concerned about international students; they are generally transient. The only reason why they are not transient is, after their post-study work period, they have skills that this country wants and therefore they get longer-term visas. Of course, we are in complete control of that process.

Sir David Bell: My answers to your questions are yes and yes.



Professor Louise Kempton: I agree. International students are an easy target when trying to make a statement about reducing immigration, but the consequences of that need to be considered. As an economic geographer, I have always found it extraordinary that higher education never really gets talked about as a sector. It is one of our biggest export industries. It is critical as a sector in our economies, particularly in the north-east. If we took a sectoral, industrial view to that, there is no way we would go ahead with putting any restrictions on our ability to export our great higher education offer.

Dr Fiona Hill: Lord Young asked whether there was something to learn from the US and, Lord Johnson, in a meeting I was at, you mentioned that the UK is an educational superpower. I know that keeps getting played back to you, but if you think of the other educational superpower, the United States, it is shooting itself in the foot right now. There are 1.1 million international students at US universities. Harvard has been in the spotlight but let me be clear: Harvard does not depend on revenues from international students for its bottom line, whereas many universities in the sector do. International students in the United States are responsible for 378,000 jobs—I have the statistics for this—and \$45 billion in annual revenue. Those were the figures for 2023-24. This is going to be disastrous for the economic sector.

In the United States, the data is unfortunately all over the place because there are about 6,000 different kinds of colleges and training schools, and you cannot aggregate it. But you can in the United Kingdom and there is something like £2.2 billion¹ annually of combined revenues or associated revenues from the five universities in the north-east; a lot of that is also generated in part by international students. Think of taking that out of the economy. Some 25% of students at US universities are international. The only university in the UK that has that kind of rough figure is St Andrews, which specialises and leans into American students. I can assure you there are a lot of American students who would be absolutely delighted to come and study in the UK as they find their options constrained in the United States.

Professor Louise Kempton: I do not have the exact statistic to hand, but if you look at patent applications and high-growth spin-outs, international students or people who were international students totally punch above their weight in those areas. So again, any restrictions on international students, particularly at postgraduate level, risk those new high-growth businesses, new innovations and inventions for the UK going forward.

The Chair: That is sobering stuff.

Q84 **Lord Hampton:** I have been fascinated by what has been going on so far. I am disappointed that in terms of at least one of the people in the room nobody has mentioned Skills England. Having said goodbye to the

¹ Correction: £1.97 Billion pounds



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If ATE Bill last night, there is now a lot of pressure and expectation on Skills England.

Starting with Sir David Bell—congratulations on your role there—how do you envisage Skills England working? How will it improve the skills landscape and enhance opportunities for social mobility if you are looking to put away your long screwdriver and looking for the hyperlocal solutions that we have talked about?

Sir David Bell: I might just gently push back on your first comment because underpinning a lot of what we have said is about providing the right skills for people in the north-east of England to be able to exercise greater social mobility. That has underpinned all that we have said. A key point to make right away on the regional dimension of this is that Skills England has to work, as you know, with the combined authorities in a way that has never been mandated previously. That is very important because it will allow the combined authority areas and those that eventually get into that status to set out their own skills objectives and where they see gaps that need to be plugged. They will be able to do that in the context of what the national evidence tells us.

Quite soon, Skills England is due to publish an interesting piece of work that will look at the eight main industrial strategy sectors plus construction and health and social care, to identify the skills gaps in particular areas and crucially, the qualification and skills requirements for the future. I imagine the north-east of England would look very carefully at that national analysis and say, "How does that match up with what we are trying to do?"

The other big theme that has come across in the early consultation work that Skills England has done in shadow form—thank you for your approvals last night—has been to understand where there is a lack of flexibility. A critique made of successive national initiatives on skills is that they are rather inflexible and, dare I say it, they can be rather lumbering. You do this great skills analysis, you think up your policy solutions, and before you know it, the world has moved on. So there is something about flexibility. The Government have already identified certain new flexibilities by reducing the minimum time for apprenticeships and loosening the English and maths requirements. That will be very well informed by what is happening regionally, as regional government understands its own skills needs better. So I do not think this will be another example of my long screwdriver in action; it is all about the collaboration between Skills England nationally, and combined authorities regionally.

The Chair: There is a lot of emphasis on flexibility.

Sir David Bell: Flexibility is really important because a lot of employers have already told the shadow Skills England team that they do not necessarily need a long-winded, complicated qualification when it comes to reskilling groups of staff; they might need something that is just a bit



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sharper and more focused. Of course, this is where potentially the new growth and skills levy might provide that flexibility, although there are some questions around it.

Lord Hampton: Could I just ask the other three, maybe starting with Professor Long: if you had one wish from Skills England granted, what would that be?

Professor Andy Long: Flexibility is probably key, as is to recognise that needs will be different across the country. So, the plans will need to be different, as will the role of local actors, including universities, in helping to define those skills needs. We did some work recently with Newcastle University and local colleges to map out the educational provision in healthcare, for example, which we can share with local NHS providers and others to understand how that matches their needs and, if not, we can plan together to address that. That is a methodology we want to roll out across the whole of the north-east and then apply to other sectors. Clearly, that needs to interface with the work of Skills England.

Dr Fiona Hill: I would say the same thing. Any mechanisms that can be encouraged to facilitate collaboration across the region will be key. Most of these efforts flounder when elements of competition are included because many parts of the north-east do not have the wherewithal to compete on a national basis with other regions. The north-east tends to lose out because it often does not have the mechanisms to take advantage of some of the great legislation that is passed here, and we see this over and over again. The universities working with FE colleges, the kinds of mechanisms, and this idea of flexibility and collaboration are pretty key.

Professor Louise Kempton: Reflecting on a conversation I had with Nissan a few weeks ago as part of our programme on economic inactivity, which is an extremely challenging issue for us in the north-east of England, I asked it about its various programmes, and it said it finds the funding landscape incredibly difficult to navigate, so it just goes ahead and creates its own programmes. This is an enormous organisation with 6,000 or 7,000 employees, with whole teams of people dedicated to doing this kind of work. It cannot figure it out, so how would we expect SMEs to be able to do that job? We need more transparency, more clarity and to make things simpler to access.

Finally, it is right that we talk a lot about apprenticeships, but we should bear in mind that 90% of the new jobs created in the next 10 years will be taken up by people already in the workforce. What are we doing for those people? In the north-east, how are we helping those that have extracted themselves from the workforce for various reasons, particularly since Covid? How do we get those people back into work? If we cannot address that in the north-east, we are never going to solve this social mobility problem given the levels of economic inactivity we face at the moment.



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The Chair: Lord Ravensdale, has your supplementary been answered?

Lord Ravensdale: No, I have a question for Sir David. You mentioned combined authorities being the vehicle for regional engagement through Skills England, but there are many areas which are not covered by combined authorities. Very briefly, could you clarify how you will engage with those areas?

Sir David Bell: To be honest, Lord Ravensdale, I do not know the answer to that. I guess that is going to depend on government policy in relation to the creation of combined authorities. Most, if not all, of those areas already have a mechanism for gathering data around skills, for example, through local enterprise partnerships. There will be evidence at the local level. The advantage of a combined authority model is that we know who to pick up the phone to in order to talk about skills issues. But I know that areas without combined authorities are concerned that they will not have that same seat around the table that I talked about.

The Chair: Thank you. Just to say, we have 15 minutes left. We do not want to cut this short because the evidence you are giving us has been extremely helpful.

Q85 **Baroness Blower:** You have talked about infrastructure developments in the north-east. Can you give us an example of recent infrastructure developments in the region? Can you say what demonstrable impact these have had on improving social mobility? If you think they have not, is there any tweaking that could be done to show that that might happen?

Sir David Bell: I wonder if I can start on this one. The city of Sunderland is quite an interesting case study in flight, if I might say, rather than one that has been concluded. Over the past few years, about £1 billion-worth of private and public sector investment has gone into, and continues to go into, Sunderland to build both private and public sector capacity, new homes and new facilities, including the new eye hospital and the film studios development that I have talked about.

Infrastructure development can bring good-quality jobs into the city, but it can also support the foundational economy. One thing that is growing quite substantially in Sunderland as a result of this infrastructure development is hospitality and tourism, so you are getting a lot more jobs at different levels available.

I have always thought that infrastructure development like this is necessary but not sufficient. It is necessary because people deserve to have good homes, good facilities and the ability to have decent transport links in their areas; it is not sufficient simply because some evidence we have seen previously—Louise touched on this—shows that people who take up the jobs that come in on the back of infrastructure can occasionally leapfrog the people who are in the locality and do not necessarily have the skills. At the university and through the DWP, we



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are working very much with the city authorities to think about the skills needs for the future and to provide the short and long-form training and education that people will need to exploit those opportunities.

Louise might be able to say more about this, but I recall from my first stint in Newcastle 30 years ago that there was a lot of infrastructure development happening around the city centre, particularly at the Quayside. Anyone who has been in Newcastle recently knows just how impressive it is. But that debate was live 30 years ago when people were saying, "Well, that's all very interesting, but what about the people who are living in Benwell or Scotswood, the inner city areas?" The evidence is probably mixed on this but I do not think it is a reason for not investing in infrastructure; we just need to be smart about how we provide the support for human infrastructure development behind it.

Baroness Blower: Can I just come back on that? An interesting thing about the foundation economy, which Professor Kempton mentioned, is we know those jobs such as care would never feature in the high levels of "These people are socially mobile". For me, it is really important that we look at the question of social justice and work of social value. Do you have any observations about that in terms of how infrastructure development plays into those aspects of what goes on in the region?

Professor Louise Kempton: At the moment, I lead a programme on inclusive innovation working with colleagues in Belfast, Pittsburgh and Medellín in Colombia. Hopefully, with the right funding we might expand that out. It is trying to address how these massive investments in new innovation infrastructure—often led by universities and in our city centres—can deliver more beneficial outcomes for local businesses and local citizens. To pick up David's point about it being necessary but not sufficient, trickle-down does not work. It is not a case of "build it and they will come". We have to go out and actively intervene and get involved.

For example, how do local companies find out about second, third or fourth-tier supply-chain opportunities? What are the barriers to them being able to avail of those? Maybe it is because the procurement contracts are bundled up and are too big, maybe it is because the certification and insurances and so on that they need are too expensive, or maybe it is because they do not have quite the right skills.

As an example, amazing life sciences research is going on in the Centre for Life in Newcastle. It often needs to transport cellular materials between the centre and the hospital: that is a perfect opportunity for a local courier firm which is currently delivering Amazon parcels to be trained in how to handle that material, kit out their van and get the right equipment. They can then charge £300 instead of £50 an hour, but we cannot just expect people to discover these things by themselves. We have to go out and actively intervene and work with our local neighbourhood groups, communities and business support organisations



like the Chambers. We are about to launch a study specifically on that topic in a couple of months.

Dr Fiona Hill: I want to mention something very specific and practical on the human dimension. I grew up without a car. My family never had a car. One-third of the population of the north-east does not have a car or access to one, and a very large swathe of the population lives outside the city areas. Newcastle, Sunderland and Gateshead, all the way down to Darlington, are very well connected; The rural areas are not connected at all. For example, from Bishop Auckland, where I grew up on the edge of the town, there are two buses to Durham. It is only 8.8 miles. One bus gets there in a relatively quick period; another takes 90 minutes because it has to go around every single village and it has at-will stops. If you use that bus for work, which most people do, you have to pack in and then you may actually be transferring from Durham bus station to the train station in order to go to Newcastle or Gateshead. I know of people who take two and a half hours every single day just to get to their work from remote villages. They cannot take advantage of any of these things we are talking about. Many of them are carers. My mother lives in a care home and some of her carers walk miles. The area is unreliable for buses. Not a single one of them has a car because they cannot afford it.

That is a huge problem for the north-east of England. All the other places where social mobility works is literally because of mobility, as we said at the very beginning. The UK has many more bus services and bus stops than most other European countries because we rely so heavily on them having basically denigrated or destroyed most of our rail networks. It was much easier to get around the UK in the 1950s and 1960s than it is now. We have to look at how we address the problem for people who live there, for justice and fairness, so they can actually take advantage of a job.

If you live in Bishop Auckland, you are not that far away from Sunderland or Newcastle, but if you do not have a car you are two and a half hours away in terms of the practical purposes of getting a job. We need accessible, reliable transportation for people because you cannot tell when the bus is going to arrive. Even if you use Google Maps and have access to a smartphone, it is not connected to real-time information as it is here in London; it is connected to whatever the fiction is of the bus timetable. I have tested all this because when I go to the north-east I still try to live without a car, and it is really difficult.

Professor Louise Kempton: There is also the cost and the lack of integration. We are always seething with envy when we come down to London and you tap on and tap off and everything is connected.

The Chair: Can I just say to the panel that we are going to run over? If you have trains to catch, please evaporate and we will understand. I am going to move on to Lady Ramsey.

Q86 **Baroness Ramsey of Wall Heath:** You have covered what was going to



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be my question, so I will reduce and link it to transport and local authorities. Are there things that you are doing in your higher education establishments to work with local authorities, transport authorities and companies, or recommendations that you would hope we might make around either of those areas? Professor Kempton, your answer is going to be emphatically yes, but I do not know about the others.

Sir David Bell: I cannot speak for other parts of the region but we are very fortunate in that the relationship between the university and the city council in Sunderland is absolutely superb; we work really closely with it. However, some issues that you touch on, Baroness Ramsey, are at the regional level and sit with the elected mayors and combined authorities. Transport, housing, bigger infrastructure development and adult skills are all at the combined authority level.

In terms of transport—it has become a bit of a theme of this morning—the mayor has been consulting recently on a local transport plan explicitly with the student communities around the north-east of England, and they identify the precise points that Fiona made. Actually, north to south is not bad in the north of England but east to west is an absolute nightmare. The mayor will have certain powers and responsibilities to be able to effectively compel a greater degree of integration on transport.

As you may be aware, I have been chairing a large social housing association in the north-east of England for the last five years. Under the Government's ambition to build more houses, we see a big opportunity for that to be done on a regional, planned level as well as operationally. So, while we can all point to individual institutional relationships, our engagement with the elected mayor and the combined authority may well be the future when we address some of those issues.

Professor Andy Long: North to south is not bad because there is a good railway line on the east coast, but it is still unaffordable to lots of people. If you live in Berwick, you may not be able to afford to get to Newcastle, or to Edinburgh for that matter, if you need to commute to study. It is not simply the case that we need to replicate that system across the north; it needs to be affordable.

Baroness Ramsey of Wall Heath: On that, do you have recommendations that you would want us to think about?

Dr Fiona Hill: I would certainly recommend student passes. I took my school-aged daughter with me when I went to Germany and she could go anywhere in Germany on her student pass. Of course, that adds to the cost of transportation from public spending, but it is critical in terms of social mobility in Germany where it is recognised that transportation and movement are key. If you look at the Ruhr region, the density of transportation is one of the key elements in its transformation from being a potentially left-behind region on the scale of the north-east. Affordable housing is not actually excellent in Germany but making transportation networks accessible for people on low incomes, particularly students and



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others on fixed incomes who are able to travel regionally as well as across the country on special fares, is key.

Professor Louise Kempton: I will add price and integration to that as well. In London, and now in Manchester, the buses are integrated with other forms of transport and there is only so much that you pay in one day, which is great. That is not the case for us. If a young person from Bishop Auckland needs to get into Durham, they get the train and then a metro when they get to Newcastle and have to pay for all those as separate journeys. It is just not worth your while if you are on a minimum-wage job, particularly where it might be a zero-hours contract and they tell you to go home after an hour or that there is no work for you that day. These are the people who are now extracting themselves from the workforce because it does not pay.

Today, it cost me £1.75 to get the bus from my hotel near King's Cross to here. To get from my house in Newcastle to the Newcastle University, which is a journey of nine minutes, costs me £2.50 and that is with a fare cap. Obviously, I can afford £2.50 on a bus, but that is a lot of money for a student or another young person to have to pay in each direction.

Lord Hampton: As my parting comment, the good news is that the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill, which is bringing the London model to the regions, has just left the House of Lords. So watch this space.

Professor Louise Kempton: People said nothing ever gets done!

Lord Evans of Rainow: In terms of north-east as a region and the transport strategies, you mentioned Bishop Auckland. Is there a cultural connectivity with the various towns throughout the north-east? I compare it to the north-west, which we mentioned earlier: Cumbria and Cheshire are poles apart. There is no connectivity in terms of cultural or transport links, but in terms of Lancashire and Greater Manchester there clearly is. You mentioned Greater Manchester's progress in that. Do you have that connectivity culturally throughout the north-east?

Sir David Bell: It is interesting—Louise and I were just talking about this point out in the corridor—that in many ways, and looking at it from the outside, Greater Manchester had the advantage of being a single large city with surrounding boroughs, none of which, bluntly, thought they were on a similar scale to Manchester. As you know, there have been some interesting rivalries in the north-east of England between the cities of Sunderland and Newcastle. It took a long time and at least one but possibly two abortive attempts to get the devolution deal together for the north-east of England, which was perhaps less reported on than it should have been.

Bringing together the authorities of the north-east of England, including County Durham which had looked as if it might be the outlier, has gone quite a long way, Lord Evans. That is not to say there are not going to be tensions between rural Northumberland and County Durham, Sunderland



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and Newcastle, but at least we have a mechanism with each of the council leaders sitting alongside the mayor and her cabinet. I am not underestimating those cultural differences, but we are a long way on from where we were previously.

Lord Evans of Rainow: That is your long-screwdriver point—

The Chair: Lord Watts has been very patient, and he must have a final question.

Q87 **Lord Watts:** I was going to ask a question that you have already dealt with, so I will move on. As you pointed out, we live in a very centralised country. Governments have moved departments, et cetera, but they tend to move them to major cities. The problem is the rural people cannot get there, so it does not have the effect that we want. My question is about research and development, which is very centralised. My own experience is that there is no good research and science base outside the triangle. There is one in Scotland, perhaps, but the Wellcome Trust dictates government policy on health science and will not back any scheme that is not in that triangle. That means that all our regions—your region—are at a major disadvantage. What can you do to change that and get a better share of the research and development that is taking place?

Professor Andy Long: I wonder if that is partly perception.

Lord Watts: No, it is not.

The Chair: Can I intervene as a former chair of Wellcome to say I am not sure that is true? But either way, let the panel answer.

Lord Watts: Can I give you an example? We had the synchrotron that was a Nobel Prize winner in Merseyside. The Wellcome Trust were asked to fund it, and it said, "Yes, we will fund it, but it has to go through Oxford". Now, that is an example.

The Chair: That was a long time ago.

Professor Andy Long: I understand what you mean.

The Chair: It was also the Government's decision. It was not just Wellcome that funded it; it was Government as well.

Professor Andy Long: Of course, we would definitely welcome more investment in those kinds of facilities in the north-east. We know from the last research excellence framework that there is now a greater concentration of researchers in the Newcastle and Durham area than anywhere outside the golden triangle, so there is a lot of research power in our region. If that can secure further national investment then of course we would be happy with that.

Dr Fiona Hill: Getting back to the US question, I noticed in the work we did on the strategic defence review that UKRI has a huge number of investments in the United States in the life sciences and other areas as



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well. The US is not going to be a very hospitable environment for the next several years to invest in, so I would strongly suggest a reassessment of priorities when thinking about regional cluster development in the United Kingdom. There is an enormous opportunity here to build up and help fund the research base. I saw there was a lot of investment in places like the research triangle in the United States that could be brought to different kinds of research triangles or, in this case, the constellation of five universities, or in Scotland and elsewhere.

Professor Andy Long: Clusters.

Dr Fiona Hill: And clusters, exactly—a network, set of clusters. The UK university infrastructure is conducive to creating networks of clusters. There are 141 universities that are already in the public sector. There is huge opportunity for the UK to think about the development of these clusters of excellence.

The Chair: The science centre you mentioned in Newcastle did fantastic mitochondrial research at Newcastle University, funded by Wellcome. Lord Watts and I will have a private conversation after the meeting.

Lord Evans of Rainow: Can I add to that private conversation? I was the Member of Parliament for Daresbury, which has the Science and Technology Facilities Council. You are exactly right; it was a government decision. Tony Blair decided to send it to Oxford. I got inward investment on the back of that, which said, “You have taken that, but can we have this?” It is competitive; you have to fight for inward investment, and that is the point I just want to get across.

Q88 **The Chair:** Can we end by asking members of our panel, who have been extremely patient and I am very grateful, if you would all like to choose one or more themes or recommendations you would like to see in our final report? We are reaching a stage where we have a number of emerging themes and members of the panel will certainly have views on what our recommendations should be. What would you think they should be?

Professor Andy Long: I will repeat what I said earlier: the biggest barrier is student maintenance. Actually, it is not tuition fees; it is the money that students have to live on when they are at university. That is what needs to be addressed. Ideally, we would see grants reintroduced for students from the poorest backgrounds. The one thing I would ask is that the household income threshold of £25,000 to secure the maximum amount of funding is increased back to where it would have been if it had gone up with inflation since 2008.

Dr Fiona Hill: I would want to make sure that the way you frame everything includes this whole idea of infrastructure. I do not mean just transportation but an infrastructure of opportunity, as I mentioned before, because it is all the different elements. There are all kinds of endeavours here in the United Kingdom, but they are not joined together.



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So, it is a framing of the problem of social mobility. It is multifaceted. There is no single silver bullet or, “This would make a huge difference”, in terms of providing people with access to have these significant payments. It is thinking about it all in a larger frame of infrastructure of opportunity, not just universities but FE colleges, secondary as well as primary education. We need to give people the sense that they can make the most of their lives and not lose hope in the prospects of opportunity ahead.

Sir David Bell: I would encourage that we go further in devolving additional funds and responsibilities to the regional level. This carries risk in so far as central government has a mechanism that always wants to ensure the proper and effective use of public money, which is absolutely right but sometimes you have to take a risk and put more money out there. The disparities we have talked about quite a bit this morning are not going to be addressed simply by more of the same. Picking up a theme from this morning, more control at local level enables key institutions and organisations to make decisions that are more sensitive to local needs.

Professor Louise Kempton: I was teaching some second-year geography students yesterday, and the topic was looking at how local development strategies are designed and implemented. On one of the slides, I had the churn of policy levers and institutions since 2010 and the demise of the RDAs. It is no wonder nobody really knows what they are doing because the goalposts change every couple of years. So, I would like to see more consistency. If we are going with local growth plans, let us agree cross-party that this is the approach for the next 10 years so we all have a bit of consistency. They need to take an inclusive approach to innovation, include the foundational economy and be developed in a bottom-up way that is sensitive to the local context rather than some top-down diktats.

Sir David Bell: Baroness Manningham-Buller, we would love one of these—an Oyster card—for the north-east of England.

The Chair: I am sorry that is probably not within the powers of the committee to influence, but thank you all very much indeed. It has been really useful and I apologise that we have kept you 10 minutes over your time.