

Women and Equalities Committee

Oral evidence: Work of the Social Mobility Commission (SMC) (2024-26 session), HC 1373

Wednesday 10 December 2025

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Members present: Sarah Owen (Chair); David Burton-Sampson; Dame Nia Griffith; Christine Jardine; Kim Leadbeater; Kevin McKenna; Rachel Taylor; Nadia Whittome.

Questions 1 - 41

Witnesses

[I](#): Alun Francis OBE, Chair, Social Mobility Commission; Summer Nisar, Director, Social Mobility Commission.

[II](#): Victoria Howard, Senior Social Mobility Inclusion Manager, Browne Jacobson; Paul Gerrard, Campaigns, Public Affairs and Policy Director, Co-op Group; Sarah Atkinson, Chief Executive Officer, Social Mobility Foundation.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Alun Francis and Summer Nisar.

Chair: Good afternoon and welcome to the Women and Equalities Committee. Today, we are holding an evidence session on social mobility, which includes our annual session with the Social Mobility Commission. We welcome Alun Francis OBE, the chair of the commission, and Summer Nisar, the director. I will hand over to Kim to start.

Q1 **Kim Leadbeater:** Good afternoon, Alun and Summer. Thank you for joining us today. We will start with the big picture, if we can, and then narrow down into a little more detail. Could you just give us your thoughts on the current state of social mobility in the UK? What are the key trends that we are seeing? Alun, shall we start with you?

Alun Francis: What a great question to start with. In answering, I want to be really careful not to dive into all the detail, because there is a whole set of technical definitions relating to how we measure it, what we should look at and then what the evidence says about those different trends. There are also different kinds of social mobility. When you ask that question, it unpacks a whole lot of complexity. I will try to keep this very simple.

If we were to pick out the two most common ways of measuring it, sociologists tend to use occupation and economists tend to use income. They both have problems and they both have advantages—that is why the debate remains—but they measure it in different ways.

Two terms that you will find quite commonly used in the literature are “absolute” and “relative”. Absolute social mobility is when you measure from one point in time to another. For example, how much does a carpenter earn in 2025 compared with a carpenter in 1985? That would be a change in absolute mobility. That is one example; there are a number of others, but I am trying to make it simple. Relative mobility is when you say, “What are the relative chances of two people from different social backgrounds, different starting points, becoming, for example, a lawyer?”

The reason it is important to make those distinctions is that when you ask the question about social mobility, the outcomes for those different kinds of social mobility are not the same. The evidence is all in the different state of the nation reports that we produce and so on, so I will not take you through all that. Some evidence is very strong; some evidence in this country, particularly on income, is less good than the American evidence, for example. I can explain why, if you want to know. The overriding evidence on relative social mobility, whether you measure it by income or occupation, suggests that there has been no significant change in relative social mobility over the last generation or so.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

To summarise, occupational social mobility has been pretty stable for decades. What tends to change is the number of professional occupations, compared with what we used to call manual working-class occupations. That is significantly different. There has been a century of change on that. Back in the 1920s, 60% to 70% of people had manual working-class occupations; it is now between 25% and 30%. That is a change in the structure of the economy. It is quite important that we understand that, because it means that quite a lot of people have moved up into professional jobs compared with their parents. But it is not because their relative chances have improved; it is because the economy now has more of those jobs, and they have moved up compared with other people who were in the same circumstances.

That has tended to be relatively stable, although the rate at which we are creating new jobs is slowing slightly. The phrase "There's less room at the top" is used, meaning that there is a bit more competition. There is the sense that parents who have professional jobs perhaps have an advantage over parents who do not, if they want their children to have those outcomes, because the competition is a little more acute than it was.

If we look at income mobility, not occupation, we would also say that it has been relatively steady, and may have improved slightly. That is when we compare movement into higher-paid occupations, because the way in which we measure occupations is not completely reliable in terms of income. For example, a primary school teacher may well be in a professional occupation, but a plumber whose occupation may be manual and seen as working-class may earn more money. There is not always a straight correlation between the two, but those two measures tend to be fairly stable.

Where there are some really important and interesting current trends that we should focus on—this is what we set out in our work—is particularly around absolute income mobility, where there is a stickiness for those at the bottom. That has meant that, particularly for people born in the mid-'70s, it has not improved as rapidly as it did before. That will underpin some of what we see as current inequality, because the incomes of some people at the top have gone up faster than those at the bottom. Absolute mobility in terms of income is important; relatively, it has remained roughly similar, but that issue about stickiness is important.

In education, we have seen some real improvements in people moving into higher education and higher-skilled occupations, and some improvement in relative education mobility, although it depends on how you measure that. Housing mobility has slightly worsened, and wealth—particularly because housing is such an important part of wealth—has probably grown worse. If you were to say, "What do you think should be the focus of social mobility policy, then?", I would say that in some respects the commission and many supporters of improving social



HOUSE OF COMMONS

mobility have previously focused on relative, and that is not the right problem.

There is an issue about absolute mobility, and it underpins four key areas. First, there is the whole intergenerational issue, and whether this generation is going to be better off than their parents, which you will read a lot about. It has many different manifestations, but there is that sense that actually things are slowing down and not getting better.

Secondly, an issue that is connected but not the same is the problem of the left behind. I cannot think of better words to describe it; I wish I could. What we mean by that is there are serious geographical differences, and there are some groups of people who are not benefiting from the upward movement in terms of occupations and income. That is a really strong feature of our current position.

Thirdly, there is a sense of declining public confidence in opportunity, social mobility and the link between effort and achievement compared with entitlement. Those are important questions.

Fourthly, there has been a real lack of effective policy interventions to improve outcomes. That is partly because some have been focused on the wrong thing. I will give you one example that I know is going to come up later: we spend a lot of money on widening participation in university and practically nothing on NEETs. That is just one example; we could cite more if you want to know more.

I hope that that gives you a decent starting point. To summarise, there are a lot of different ways of measuring it. There is not a lot of evidence either that we are worse than other countries or that it has grown worse, but we have social mobility problems, and I have tried to describe what they are.

Q2 Kim Leadbeater: That is brilliant—thank you very much. That is very comprehensive.

Summer, do you want to add anything to that, maybe with particular reference to any specific sectors where socioeconomic mobility is reversing, like creative industries or sport? Are there any specific concerns that you have, as well as the bigger picture? Also, what are the key drivers of social mobility and what are the barriers?

Summer Nisar: As Alun has indicated, there is no single trend for social mobility overall, which is one of the reasons why it is quite a complex landscape to look at. Outcomes vary across the measures that he indicated, but also across things like sex, disability, ethnicity and region. In terms of the sectors, different sectors are very interested in social mobility and how to create opportunities. There is a lot of good work, and I know that the Committee is going to hear from others who represent different facets of those sectors. That is certainly a positive thing.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

There is a big challenge in terms of what actually helps those sectors do what they can in advancing people from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Maths and English are quite a big challenge for many who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Education is certainly one of the key drivers, but there are different facets of education. One of the things that we particularly focus on in the Social Mobility Commission is looking at expanding the pathways, as in further education, technical qualifications, as well as the route of higher education.

Q3 Kim Leadbeater: That is really helpful. As someone who has worked in a further education college, I think that is absolutely right, and I am pleased to see that the Government are placing more of an emphasis on that. As for the key drivers and the barriers, are there any specific things that you want to list?

Alun Francis: In our state of the nation report, we try to set this out in terms of the factors that affect social mobility. There are the measures that I have talked about and all the social mobility outcomes, and then we look at what we call drivers and then intermediate outcomes. It explains in the document how those are all worked out. In terms of drivers, we try to identify the things that correlate with good or bad social mobility outcomes. They are conditions of childhood; educational opportunities and quality of schooling; work opportunities for young people; social capital, which has a very broad interpretation, but you might also call that culture; and then the broader economic environment.

It is important to say that the causality in each of those areas is not clear; they are correlations. There are lots of debates as to exactly how that may or may not work, but if you were to identify the key areas, they are there in those documents. We try to lay out what the evidence shows in that respect.

Chair: We are going to move on to regional differences.

Q4 Christine Jardine: I am a Scottish MP, so regional and national differences resonate with me, and you mentioned that there are some serious geographical issues. Could you give us a feel for how social mobility might vary across the UK and what you think might cause these differences?

Alun Francis: I am so pleased that you have asked that question. I did my homework before I came in, so I know we have you from Scotland. I know we have Llanelli here as well, and I can pronounce it properly; it is my home country.

Dame Nia Griffith: Da iawn, Alun.

Alun Francis: We have somebody from Southend, so the seaside. We have people from post-industrial places, we have people from towns, we have people from the south and people from the north. So I think you already know the answer to this question, because if you talk to each



HOUSE OF COMMONS

other, you will see that there are huge differences. What our work does is provide the evidence base to measure and capture those.

I would say that the geographical differences, in terms of opportunity, are the biggest thing that we have added to the discussion of social mobility in our work over the last two or three years. We have catalogued this with something called a data explorer, which allows you to search the various measures of social mobility by locality. Every year, we have increasingly broken this down in our state of the nation report. Without boring you, there is a really technical set of data issues about how you break it down into the right geographical areas to make it make sense. We have worked through those, and we have that to a point where it tells a story.

The geographical differences across the country probably almost outweigh everything else. If you wanted to go to the place where as a poor family you have the best chance of long upward mobility—going through education, achieving highly, going to a great university and getting into a professional job—you would live in the outer boroughs of London, because you are distinctly more likely to do that. Do not go and live in Barrow, where my college is just merging with Furness College to take over what is a hugely important place in terms of submarine building. In Barrow, very few people want to go to university; they all want engineering apprenticeships, because if they want to stay in Barrow, that is going to be the most lucrative outcome.

Those are two extremes, but across the country you find really quite significant differences in outcome, and then you find areas where there are persistently poor outcomes. If you group the areas with the worst outcomes in terms of education, they are persistently the same. Our new state of the nation report links that with de-industrialisation very strongly. You can see the long legacy of that, which we have not overcome in many areas. You will see that across all those post-industrial areas and seaside towns that were often connected to them.

The evidence is all there to say that those are really important. The second part of your question was about what sits behind that. It is the structure of our economy and the extent to which London has become the absolutely dominant part of the economy in terms of economic growth. We produced a think piece on this called “Spatial agglomeration”, which is the long, complicated way that economists describe this. It is quite natural for economic growth to cluster into areas where you get all the spin-offs that happen with that, but what our think piece says is that the extent to which London dominates the UK economy over other places is extreme in comparison with other parts of Europe, for example. The gap between Paris and Lyon is smaller than the gap between London and Manchester, and Manchester has clearly narrowed that gap more than some other places have.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

In one sense, we need to be very proud that we have London, but we also have to understand what is stopping other areas improving, particularly those with a long legacy of de-industrialisation. We have done some work on that. We produced a report two months ago on innovation and investment, which has some recommendations around that. Our wider view is that actually we need to think of social mobility quite differently, if that is our challenge. The economy becomes much more important than the traditional focus on education and early family years. They remain important, but if we do not address that wider economic issue they will not work.

If you look at the places where we have some of the worst outcomes, they are also the areas where the economy is worst. There is a range of issues attached to that. Poverty is part of it, but it is also about opportunity and having a different social mix: if you attract more people with higher-paid jobs, they spend money on other services, which lifts the wider area.

In our report—we have been going around the country talking to the regions about this—there are also some really important green shoots. Edinburgh and Manchester are the strongest places for growth in professional jobs outside London. That is a really good thing to say. But we also see in other cities the beginnings of more innovation of the kind that you can probably see in Manchester, the kind that is slightly the outlier at the moment. That is true of Leeds, Birmingham and Glasgow. We have been to Wales. We can see lots of things happening, but the challenge is to make them happen quicker and faster. We would argue—we think we are going to argue, anyway—for more measures in devolution deals around innovation and growth, as part of the package of measures there to help drive up better outcomes overall.

I will stop there because I am drifting into the detail, but I hope that answers your question.

Q5 Christine Jardine: It does, but it raises so many others. You talked about the different geographical areas. Not to digress too much, but I worked for a while in the highlands of Scotland, where the biggest problem is depopulation, because generation after generation—it is true of other rural areas—have to move to find any kind of social mobility. Is there any change in that trend? Do you think there is some kind of role in this for national identity? Does it help or does it hinder in general social mobility?

Alun Francis: I thought there were lots of questions; I had not thought of those two in quite that way. Regarding the depopulation, this is one of the reasons that we would argue that there is not a one-size-fits-all solution to all the geographical differences, because different places need to find their own solutions to some problems. Some places might accept that they get smaller and change as the economy changes, and they might focus on quality of life. They might, for example, have a lot of people retiring there. They might want to have great schools and a good



place to live, but the economic growth side might be less important to them. Other places will say, "No, it's essential that we turn the economy around and attract more people to come."

There is no easy answer to all those problems. I worry slightly that we tend to assume that there is going to be a great solution for everybody, in terms of geographical differences. If you look at the scale of the challenge, actually the agglomeration and the leave-to-achieve bits are partly good, because it moves people to where opportunities are. The problem is the extremity of that. I am probably not giving you the best answer, but somewhere in between is a happy medium. Our recommendation would be that we need to create a structure where places find their own solution to that.

National identity and place identity are really important to people, and all our research is suggesting that. One of the things we produced earlier in the year was a comparison of two places with different levels of social mobility. We took Rochdale in the north part of Greater Manchester, and we took Macclesfield in Cheshire. Macclesfield comes out very high on the indices, and Rochdale not so much, but what comes out when you actually ask people about it is that not everybody sees social mobility as just about them. They see it as about their family, their community and their place. These are really important aspects of how some people see their future.

We produced another piece of work that was published yesterday—we have been working on it for months—on perceptions of social mobility. It goes back to the point about measures, which Kim asked about earlier. I told you that sociologists use occupation and economists use income. The general public do not use either. They use health and wellbeing and social connectedness. They are not bothered about high-status jobs; they want a job that they get something from. They have some very interesting attitudes to class. I have just told you that the working class has shrunk and the middle class has grown. Some 76% of our respondents describe themselves as working-class, even though they are in a higher-paid, higher-status occupation than their parents. It tells you a lot about how people see class. It is not the same way administrators see it. It is about place, it is about community and it is about that wider connectedness.

There are a range of other qualitative things in that research that are very important. They all chime with your question, in that these are values, and social mobility needs to align with those values, not impose a one-size-fits-all solution, which it has tended to do.

Q6 **Christine Jardine:** Getting back to the policies of the moment, how effective do you think strategies such as levelling up and the towns fund have been? Are the current Government taking the necessary steps to address regional disparities?

Alun Francis: Let me answer the two parts. You can see small improvements in different places, and some places are slight outliers. If



you go to Greater Manchester, you will see significant changes, but they are not so much the outcome of one Government's policy; they have been going on for 30 years. There are some real lessons to be learned. We noted that the Government have sent some experts around regional growth to go and look at the Greater Manchester story. There are lots of things to be learned. They are not the only ones, though; other places are doing some really interesting things too, and we need to draw out how that works. There is a real challenge, because some changes need significant investment, and we are not in a period in which that is easy to do.

I am also slightly concerned about whether the devolution framework gives a strong enough focus on this. There are some really great positives in devolution—increasingly, I am a fan, though not uncritically. I was in Manchester when the first devolution deal was struck, and it had a very strong focus in that first deal on reversing the dependence of Manchester on central Government funding. There was the notion of building the city back up to stand on its own two feet, to be able to deal with its own problems better and to receive less in grants and less in welfare. That measure has been lost a bit. It would be a good measure to bring back and think about how we can make sure the economy is growing in a way that is benefiting everybody, which is the key challenge. Sorry, I do not know if I have answered your question well enough.

Christine Jardine: I think so, thank you. Summer, is there anything you want to add?

Summer Nisar: No, thank you.

Q7 **Rachel Taylor:** I will address this one to you, Summer, so we can hear a little from you. Why do you think girls tend to have worse social mobility outcomes despite the fact that academically, more often than not, they outperform boys?

Summer Nisar: It is an interesting question that has a multi-layered response. The background of the young woman certainly has a part to play, whether they have an affluent background or come from a disadvantaged background. Things like the culture also have a part to play, in terms of faith or race. One of the things that we have particularly noticed in the data is that young girls, as you say, do very well in education, generally speaking, but it does not necessarily translate into employment opportunities. There are a range of reasons, which are perhaps not so well explored.

One thing that has been unexamined thus far is the causal reasons why young women do not actually do so well. There is not a prolific amount of data on that. Recently, certainly over the last year, the CSJ did a great report on things like the lost boys and the white working class, but the same does not really apply for young women. There is a concern, I suspect, that young women will be crowded out of that particular field, because now the attention is very much looking at the disparity—rightly—



HOUSE OF COMMONS

for young white boys. Alun, I do not know if you want to add something to that. We were having a debate about this earlier, as it happens.

Alun Francis: We were. I do not know if somebody wants to come in first.

Q8 **Rachel Taylor:** I just want to follow up on that, because I do not think it will be covered anywhere else in the questions. Has any work been done on how sport might impact social mobility and participation in sport? We know that that often gives boys leadership abilities, but has anything been done? Do you think it particularly impacts girls, or are there any other areas that we need to be particularly concerned about?

Alun Francis: There are two ways of answering your question. There is the social mobility debate, which is about policy, and there was a strategy; there are a range of activities that people do. In that area, there are an awful lot of very important aspects of social mobility that have never been discussed, and sport is one of them. Crime is another. There are a whole range of issues that are really important social mobility obstacles, which have never really been talked about in the social mobility world, if you like.

Outside that, there will be a lot of research on the positive benefits of sport: team building, purpose, focus, all those things. One thing you can do is commission us and say, "Tell us what the evidence base looks like," and we can go away, do some work and give you an overview of what the evidence tells you. That would be very positive.

If I can come back to the issue of young women, though, there has been a really important change recently in the focus of a lot of debates about opportunity, with people saying, "Actually, outcomes for boys are poor, and outcomes for white working-class boys in particular are poor." I am slightly worried about where we are with white, poor, young women. This is my side hustle at the Social Mobility Commission; my day job is being the chief executive of Blackpool and The Fylde college. My career has always been in northern post-industrial seaside areas and so on, and in further education.

If I look at the challenges there, it is fair to say that there are some people going into further education who are coming out with really highly skilled jobs, and they are going to do very, very well. Their pay is going to be good, and their lives will be good. Hidden in that are a group whose outcomes are much more difficult, and they are typically coming out with very low English and very low maths. There are significant differences if you look at the outcomes for people from different social backgrounds.

If I start off with a bit of data, we looked at the intake to our college last year, and we asked about family background. Some 50% of our students live with only their mum. That is fine—it happens—but it is quite a large number. If we map that across, the numbers who arrive on lower-level courses—entry or level 1 courses, so below GCSE level—are



disproportionately likely to come from larger families with only one parent, and they are living in the poorest parts of town.

Behind that story there are a lot of issues; it is not one simple issue. There are issues about the age at which people have their children and the nature of the romantic partnerships they form. Very frequently, the men are just missing. This is not a moral issue; I am saying it to compare the different outcomes for people from different backgrounds. If you compare the age at which graduates and non-graduates have children, there is a significant difference. There is a significant difference in the order in which they do things. Graduates are much more likely to get their qualifications, then get a job, meet their partner, buy a house, have a child, get married, in that order. The order used to be different; the marriage bit came earlier, now it comes a lot later.

These are averages, so it is not true for everybody, but non-graduates typically have children much younger and are highly likely to be non-partnered at the time the child is born. At that point, life is really tough. There are then a load of obstacles to improving your skills. If you have a child and you are dependent on welfare, you might get some part-time work at a certain point, but how do you get back into college? That is quite difficult. The system is not set up for that to happen very easily.

Adult education does not pay maintenance grants. Whether you can do college or not is dependent on universal credit assessors. There are all kinds of issues there, but that then has a knock-on effect for that family: you might meet somebody else, you might want to try to form a partnership with somebody else, you might have another child, but then you still have that problem to deal with.

There is a whole set of issues, including the impact on young women of not having dads. We talk about young men not having dads, but actually you can tell me—the women in the room—how important your dads were to your self-esteem, your view of yourself, your sense of wellbeing and your expectations in relationships that you form. It is probably quite important. Young women are more likely to be subject to damaging relationships that are not high-quality, to CSE and to all the other risk factors around young women. It is an area that we just do not know enough about, and it is one in danger of being neglected.

Chair: We have two members who want to come in on the back of this. I will call Nia first, and then Nadia.

Q9

Dame Nia Griffith: I will be quick, because we have lots to get through. I want to ask about women from lower social backgrounds who feel that they cannot go away, either because they are expected to look after elderly relatives or younger children, or they know that they will need other members of their family to do it because they will not be in the income bracket that can afford it, or they are not used to a pattern of paying somebody else to do it, so it has to be done by the family. How much do you think that limits where young women see themselves going



HOUSE OF COMMONS

and therefore the opportunities they go for?

Alun Francis: Shall I have a go?

Summer Nisar: Yes.

Alun Francis: Thank you. I do not want to dominate the whole thing, but let me answer it this way. If you are a very clever young woman and you do academically quite well, there are lots of programmes that people will get you on to, to help do exactly what you have described. They will take you to visit universities, meet elite employers, give you mentors and all kinds of things to support you. If you are not doing well at school, nobody is that bothered. Well, I am exaggerating: there are people who are bothered—teachers bother and everybody else bothers—but there are none of those kinds of programme.

When I look at the most disadvantaged groups in the areas that I have worked in, I wonder what the outcomes would be if you could take them away and give them those experiences of seeing different things and different employment and meeting different people. How different would life be? If I talk about apprenticeships, for example, one of the things a university does is take you to a different place where you meet different people and live on your own. With apprenticeships you cannot do that, because there is no way of easily going away to an apprenticeship. If you live in Blackpool and your apprenticeship is in Spen Valley, how are you going to manage that on apprenticeship wages?

There is a whole notion about developing that young person's wider experience and their wider personal qualities. I am just citing those as examples where there is a lack of thought given to what could be done differently, because we all know that giving people new experiences raises ambition and expectation and challenges people. Actually, it is not that available, unless you do well academically and then other things may open up, but not if you are in the group that is not shining.

Q10 **Dame Nia Griffith:** Has there been any analysis of care facilities and the impact on young women as opposed to young men? I am talking about childcare or elderly care.

Alun Francis: No, that is another area that has not been looked at.

Q11 **Nadia Whittome:** This is really interesting. I am just wondering whether there is any data to support the assertion that this is particularly a problem with white working-class girls, as opposed to black and Asian working-class girls. Is it that your experience is in areas that are disproportionately white compared with an area such as Nottingham, or have you compared like with like—not a town and a city, but somewhere like Batley and Spen, where there is quite a large Asian population?

Alun Francis: Prior to working in Blackpool, I worked in Oldham. I hope I am not overgeneralising; you are right to ask the question. Because most of our social mobility debate has focused either on very young



HOUSE OF COMMONS

children and families or on movement into elite jobs, there is not a great evidence base for lots of the questions you are asking in the social mobility debate. There will be evidence in the wider academic community. It is about pulling that in, really.

Let me go back to the heart of your question, because one of the things that stands out from the data is that many ethnic minority groups do better educationally than white poor families do. When we start looking for explanations for that, there are many. One thing that stands out is the cultural outlook on education. The highest-performing groups are Chinese; Chinese free school meals children do even better than non-free school meals children. The research suggests that what is behind that is the huge commitment to education as being important to improving your situation. That may also explain a lot of the outcomes in London: people move to London with very high ambitions. Parents may take a lower-paid job in a different country because the focus of the whole process is about improving the outcomes for their children. Education becomes very, very important.

These things may not be as evident across the country, but we do not understand them well. We do not understand the nuances of that, in terms of different ethnicities and different groups in different places. That is partly why we say that the answer to some questions is to have a much more place-based approach, because if we want to understand all these obstacles, we need to get under the skin of them. We do not understand them well enough.

Q12 Nadia Whittome: It is not particularly white working-class girls, then?

Alun Francis: If I were to draw on my experience of working in other places outside Blackpool, I would say, for example, that there are all kinds of other pressures that different young women have in different communities. Some are educational, family expectations, expectations about marriage, and expectations about jobs that you do and do not do. They are all factors.

Q13 Nadia Whittome: What I am trying to draw out is that those things are separate from class. You can obviously be black or Asian and be working-class and poor. It is not "white, working-class and poor" or "ethnic minorities". People have all those experiences together.

Alun Francis: Yes. I might have been a bit careless, then, in my use of language when I compared. There is a focus on white working-class boys, and I have drifted into "Well, it's white working-class girls." What I am talking about is young women. Young women who are not doing well at school is how I would describe it.

Nadia Whittome: Thanks.

Q14 Chair: That was really useful. I am going to come on to disability. Why is it that disabled people are more likely to be in lower socioeconomic occupations? Is there a need to focus on progression for disabled



workers, as well as being able to get access to work in the first place?

Alun Francis: It is a great question. Our data tells us that the pattern you have described is there. Again, there is very little work to draw out the causes that sit behind that. One of the problems with the data is that we do not have accurate data going back over a long period for issues such as disability and sexual orientation. These are all important factors that might explain a lot. We have some on gender, but the reason that occupation and income are focused on so strongly is that this is where the data is the most reliable over a long period. They tend to be the ones that dominate the literature.

Q15 **Chair:** Given the fact that that is what economists and policymakers use, and you have already said that the general public do not necessarily use it as a metric, is there a huge data gap in how we make our policies and our informed decisions in this place when we look at it from the viewpoint of the economists, rather than the people we are actually making these changes for?

Alun Francis: In my opinion, yes. One of the reasons we commissioned the perceptions work was to open that question. It does not unpack everything we need to know, because we need to do a lot more research, but the notion that actually we need to understand qualitatively what people think, hope for and regard as valuable is really important.

I reiterate my point that there are lots of aspects of social mobility that we just do not understand well enough. Disability is one, the sport question is another, and we have raised the issue of carers. There are lots of areas in which there might be research about them, but they are not connected back to the social mobility debate. The reason is that most of the focus has been about elite employment and addressing that. Actually, when you start climbing into the challenges for everybody else, they are just more complicated.

Chair: I guess there is another group of workers for whom progression is really important, and that is the older workforce. We are expected to work for longer. I do not know how old we are going to be by the time we retire.

Rachel Taylor: Eighty-nine.

Q16 **Chair:** Eighty-nine? Okay. Older workers seem to be left out of the conversation on social mobility altogether, unfortunately. For somebody who is really committed to lifelong learning, does more need to be done to ensure that there is progression and social progression throughout their working life, not just at the education phase?

Alun Francis: What you are describing is what some academics would call life-cycle social mobility: rather than intergenerational, they describe it as intragenerational. Can you improve over your lifetime? That is more important to people than intergenerational. Can you improve your situation?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

If you look at the raw data, we have some quite remarkable movements in social mobility. I am just going to read out a couple of things from our 2023 data, which is quite illuminating. We split this into quintiles. We grouped people into five categories—excuse the names, we cannot find good names—lower working class, higher working class, intermediate, lower professional, and higher professional. You can do seven; it used to be three; we wanted to do five, because it shows better nuance, really.

Of people who grow up in a lower working-class background, 30% will stay in that, but 70% will be upwardly mobile. Some 11% will go into the highest professional jobs. Actually, there is quite a lot of mobility from the bottom. You can see that on a spectrum as you go through, but even at the top, if you take higher professional jobs, only 34% of people will stay in the same category as their parents. The rest will drop because they are already high. When you get to the top, you can go down, but you cannot go up. If you take professional jobs, it is more split. You have 42% of people whose parents are in lower professional jobs who will go down, and 58% will go up.

There is a whole set of issues here about the movement between those groups that are quite important. Your question then becomes even more important. If we just judge people by the background they were born into, they might end up in a different situation, but at some different point in their life, we want them to have the opportunity to improve. We do not want to say, “Well, you’re 30. It’s all over.” That intragenerational bit is another missing part of the story.

Q17 Chair: Is it not fairly patronising, then, for that to be the metric by which we measure success, when it is not necessarily what an individual may measure success by? I speak to and hear from younger people all the time, and they have a much more sensible balance in how they want their life to be. As you said, their health and wellbeing are much more important to them than perhaps they were to my parents’ generation. Is there a lack of data around that? That 48% who have gone down with professional parents may have done so because they have just watched their parents work themselves to the bone and have said, “Do you know what? I am all right, thanks. I actually want to be around my kids, and I want to see them, and I want to watch them grow up.”

Alun Francis: I agree with you. My motivation for applying for the commission was that I work in further education, and I was thinking about why none of the things that we do regarding social mobility are taken into account. I could see loads of people winning prizes for social mobility, and I was wondering why we are measuring only the number of people who go to Russell Group universities from poor backgrounds. I am not even sure that they are always the poorest, and yet we have young people who come to us with the most difficult backgrounds, and they get great jobs. It makes you think that it is a miracle that they have done that. We give all the support, but people do amazing things and yet would not necessarily measure high on that scale.



I agree with you, and that was my motivation for becoming a commissioner. That is why we have tried to shift the focus of the commission in the way we have done. Those wider metrics are important to have in the background, but if they start driving how you think about every individual's outcomes, you are going to produce poor outcomes. If the focus is on every individual having the chance to realise their potential and improve their situation by their own lights, that is a better measure of improvement. Getting to the point where we can measure that well is quite difficult, but if we can do it, it will produce a much better set of outcomes.

Chair: Maybe some happier human beings, too.

Alun Francis: Happier human beings, absolutely.

Chair: I am going to pass on now to David, who is a happy, happy, lovely man.

Q18 **David Burton-Sampson:** It has been really great to hear from you so far. I want to focus a little more on ethnicity and race, which you have alluded to already. It is obvious that there are disparities between different ethnic groups. Maybe you could go into a bit more detail on how social mobility differs between ethnic groups. What is it that really drives those differences? Following on from that, are there particular groups that need some sort of targeted focus, and what should that look like?

Alun Francis: We have included data on ethnicity in our annual reports, and it shows some differences between groups. Many ethnic minority groups do better educationally than white people do, but that does not always translate yet into the best outcomes in higher-level employment. It is improving, but it is a bit like the situation for women: you cannot say that you can see the improvement in education outcomes and then move on from there. But there are also some quite significant differences between different ethnicities.

The overriding thing I would say is that we do not understand that well enough. When we have looked to try to explore some issues, there is a complex set of issues that shape somebody's outcomes: where you live, access to good schools, the community you live in, the family support you get and the material resources you have. Those are just some; there is a whole range. When it comes to breaking that down by area, place, and ethnicity, I cannot give you a really nuanced picture, but what I can tell you is that there are these broad patterns.

What we can say is that the outcomes for some ethnic minority groups are really high; Chinese I have mentioned, but Indians tend to do really well as well. It is not our research, but when we look at the research from educationalists, it appears to be partly about access to good schools—that is important—but it is also about how far that family places education as really important. That also shapes some other outcomes in terms of education and about what families in different communities



regard as good outcomes for employment. For example, some ethnic minority communities are very focused on the professions. They would not be so keen on being a digital tech entrepreneur, for example, which we need more of—we need more entrepreneurs in general. There are those cultural aspects too in terms of how far parental expectations and community ambitions shape outcomes. There is a gender aspect to that, and there is an aspect around which employment outcomes are best.

I will tell you a story of a friend of mine in Oldham who became a tech millionaire because he managed to get in very early on, and he had a very fortunate deal early in his career. He left school with no GCSEs, could not get a job and ended up getting a job with the local authority doing some graphics work, but was not particularly well skilled. He spent all his evenings developing his business. It was all about providing online platforms for things, which he taught himself. His parents were against everything that he did because they wanted him to be a doctor, like his brother, which was not him; he was not academic. His family are Bangladeshi. He would tell you that story himself and say, “Everybody was against me going down this route.” He is now funding start-ups because he wants to give more people the opportunity that he had.

I hope I am answering your question. There are some really important issues in there, and they are not well enough understood. We have highlighted them in our research, in terms of the broader patterns, but we have not been able to explore the nth detail of them all.

Q19 David Burton-Sampson: From what you have said, it sounds as if this is not something that you can define by group, but you can define by groups within areas. What advice or what policies should be put in place to help lift those groups up?

Summer Nisar: What I was going to add to what Alun said, and it may go some way to answering your question now, is that we have spent probably the past three years trying to get the place-based data as granular as possible. There was something that Nadia said earlier about how different places have different numbers—different permutations, if you like—of different communities. It is not that different groups live in only one part of the country or the other, for example. The advantage of our being able to get more granular data is that we can then work with some areas that are showing particularly profound disparities.

Throughout this year, we have been visiting and learning from different parts of the country. We have looked at the combined authorities devolution. We are also very supportive of devolution in principle, because a lot of the areas that have entrenched particular disparities or poorer outcomes need a particular degree of support. As Alun said, it is not one-size-fits-all. The other advantage of going by place is that because local leaders and local infrastructure will know their own communities, know which disparities exist at a much more granular level and know how to reach those people, groups, or ethnicities who need the support, that has a higher chance of success.



In terms of ethnic groups, there is something about the labelling that tends to go on, in terms of expectations. Yes, the data is very clear that even between broad groups of ethnicities—historically they were called “black” but that predominantly deals with Caribbean and African heritage, or “Asian”, which would be the whole gamut—clearly there are very profound communities within there. This particular identification of where some groups do better than others is not true for everybody. That is one of the things that the perception study also highlighted.

Now we are dealing with a different approach to social mobility, where what has historically trended or what has been previously considered the right way to go now needs to be much more bespoke for different parts of the country and for the different communities within them.

Q20 Nadia Whittome: What do you see as being the main structural drivers of young people not being in education, employment or training, and how significant a factor do you think mental health issues are in the rising rates of NEETs? Additionally, what do you think is driving that? That is for whoever would like to go first.

Summer Nisar: Alun is definitely the expert on this, in his day job alone.

Alun Francis: Just as background, many years ago I worked in the Connexions service, which had a target around reducing NEETs. Since I have worked in further education, it has been an ongoing theme. It was very high in 2010-11, we reduced the numbers, and then it has gone back up again. Since 2021 it has gone up really quite abruptly. I would say that it is not the same problem each time. There are a number of factors attached to this that are important.

First, a point I would make about young people who are NEET is that they do not belong to anybody. We measure 16 to 24-year-old NEETs. For the 16 to 18-year-olds, the responsibility sits with the local authority to count them, but not to do anything more than that. Once they become 19, they become the responsibility of the DWP, but nobody has the overview of those outcomes. There are different responsibilities within that.

Secondly, a really important issue in terms of NEETs is the growth of those who are inactive in the labour market. In Blackpool, the latest figures we had were 3,000 NEETs, which in a place such as Blackpool is quite a large number, and 1,000 are inactive. Everywhere is going to be slightly different in the configurations of what this looks like; there is a range of factors. To begin with, there have always been some NEETs. When we set targets, perhaps we should set a target of having no NEETs at all, but there have always been some because it has always been about reducing it, not getting rid of it.

Within that, there will be a range of things that explain why some people end up in that situation. That will often be to do with school grades, poor experience of school and those kinds of issue. More recently, new things have arisen. For example, we have a significant number of young people



HOUSE OF COMMONS

who have been home educated. We are also conscious that the group we have coming into college now who are 16 and 17 are the group who were in year 7 during covid. We have noticed a really big difference in behaviour. There is a whole range of issues sitting behind that.

I am acutely conscious that all the young people who are growing up today are growing up in a world that none of us experienced, because of social media, the rule of their phones, and the things that are on there to look at. Their lives are very different—in some ways positively, but in many ways negatively—as a consequence. There is also a wider set of issues about mental health, which is confusing and difficult. We notice this in education because of the increased number of people who are asking for extra time for exams, for example. Those are some indicators of how that comes into the system.

I cannot remember the exact number, but we did November resits for English and maths GCSEs, and I think—forgive me if I get the numbers slightly wrong—we needed 70 rooms. Bear in mind that an FE college has a lot of people doing resits, but that was because each individual who requires special support has to have an invigilator with them and be able to sit in the room separately. We cannot say whether they need that or they do not. They present with a mental health issue. We are not doctors, we do not know—we just want them to pass the exam.

If you ask me what I think is underneath it, there are mental health issues for young people. Some are about—I do not like the use of the term—things people would describe as the “normal” parts of growing up, but which actually have become more difficult to deal with. Social media has a part to play in that. The isolation of young people has a lot to do with it. The lack of time spent with other people, the lack of the normal social aspects of mixing, meeting, sport and all kinds of other things are all parts of that story.

The phone is like crack cocaine. In my college, we do not allow it in the classroom. I know they are over 16, but you cannot teach people if they have their phones out. It is just not possible. The rule is that if the tutor wants them to use it for the lesson—they do sometimes, because they have that side of learning; we are preparing them for the workplace and so on—that is fine, but they cannot use it the rest of the time, because we want them to learn. Learning is a social experience of being with other people—learning from each other, and so on. Outside that, social media use is big and some aspects of social media are clearly not great for people’s mental health.

To go back to the issue about young women, the way it impacts young women in particular is not great. You are worrying about how you look, measuring yourself against ridiculous standards, the whole influencer thing reinforces that notion of what your self-worth is, and so on. All those are factors. There is a problem around what our definitions are. The definition of autism changed to go on to the spectrum, and now it is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

difficult to say who has an autism that is a disability as opposed to who may have traits. It may be helpful for them to understand that, but it is not necessarily holding them back, or it does not need to hold them back, but the same is true of other aspects of it.

To get to the root of your question, we know that there are some issues attached to this, but we do not know what they are. What we are doing is commissioning a piece of qualitative research. The Social Mobility Commission is going to fund that. We are going to support it in Blackpool and find two other areas to look at as well. We want to find out how young people have ended up NEET and what it is about their mental health: what are they spending all day doing? Is that helping their mental health or not? What do they need to help them get back on track? In the end, we have to get that qualitative data out to understand that problem. It is not the same problem we have had before, and if we do not ask those questions, we will not have good solutions.

Q21 Chair: We will have a vote at 4 pm. I just want to check whether some of the data on the issues that you are talking about is going to be in the state of the nation report. It seems that there is a huge area of data that is missing. Is that part of your future work?

Alun Francis: No, we would need a budget five times the size of our budget to be able to do all those things. What we are trying to do is flag up that actually there are still an awful lot of aspects of social mobility that we do not know enough about. The data in the state of the nation report really deals with the data that is accessible and easy to get, and our other pieces of work tend to point in the direction of where further work is needed.

Q22 Nadia Whittome: That is really useful, thank you. Could you clarify what you meant in relation to autism diagnoses?

Alun Francis: Yes. I could send you some links around this, which might help. The definition of autism went from one that was fairly tightly defined to one that is broader. There used to be a notion that there is autism and then Asperger's syndrome, and they have changed that definition. This is not my opinion, by the way; I try to take it from people who are experts in their field. The leading expert on autism is a guy called Baron-Cohen, who is the cousin of the comedian—I am not sure that he is a comedian, but you know what I mean. His view is that we changed the definition so that there would be more of a sense of a spectrum, and there would not be these two distinct categories, but the problem is that it has made the definition very woolly.

You then have difficulty deciding for whom autism is a real disability, as opposed to part of your character, part of your life, part of your personality. It is not necessarily holding you back. It is something we need to take into account, but it is not necessarily an obstacle to you in the same way it might be for somebody who might be non-verbal or unable to communicate, for whom it really affects their life in a very



HOUSE OF COMMONS

dramatic way. That is probably the case with quite a number of the definitions of mental health. It is about understanding how we unpick some of that so that we can give better help to people.

Q23 Nadia Whittome: Is there any data to support that being the case with—

Alun Francis: Around autism?

Nadia Whittome: Yes, and across the board with other mental health diagnoses.

Alun Francis: I can send you the stuff that I have looked at that makes that case.

Nadia Whittome: Okay.

Q24 Kevin McKenna: Thank you, that was all really fascinating. I just want to think about stuff that is being done more actively, not just understanding, and then the “what should be done” part. How would you evaluate the Government’s approach up to now on social mobility?

Alun Francis: It is fair to say that the Government do not use the term “social mobility” very often. Individuals use it. It has become part of the common language about how we describe opportunity; some people use that and some people use “social mobility” and so on. We have not had a social mobility strategy since 2011. When we had one, it fairly quickly fell into disuse, and we have not at any point updated that. We think that that is an issue, and there is a case for place-based strategy, but I will not go into all the details of that now.

To answer your question, there are aspects of policy that are certainly getting to deal with some of the right questions. It is very early to say what the impact of that is going to be. If I take the issue around NEET, for example, we have been arguing for two years that NEET should be taken much more seriously, so of course we are pleased to hear that there are a number of initiatives that are going to address some questions and issues. There is the NEET intervention directly, the youth guarantee, the work around mental health, which has been a health issue, and so on. They are all helpful. It is too early for us to say how impactful they would be, but what we can say is that we are glad people are talking about NEETs, and we hope they continue to do that. On regional disparities, inequalities and so on, again it is fairly early to say. We have an industrial strategy; we just need to see how that unravels over time. We would say this about most policies: it is very early to say.

If you ask me specifically about social mobility, there is a healthy scepticism about social mobility, which many Members will share. Some people feel that social mobility has become something that we talk about instead of talking about inequality, but just because some people do well, that does not mean that it is the end of the challenge. We are not disagreeing with that; we just think that the problem is not social



HOUSE OF COMMONS

mobility, but which kind of social mobility do you mean? Actually, when we start thinking of it as something that can integrate economic, educational, family and community outcomes in the way that we tried to talk about today, perhaps it should be more central to thinking about how the issues of the country can be addressed, particularly around the central role we give to geographical and regional differences.

Chair: That brings the first panel to a close. Summer and Alun, thank you very much.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Victoria Howard, Paul Gerrard and Sarah Atkinson.

Chair: This is our second panel. As I said, we will have votes in half an hour, so I am very sorry that this is going to be a very quick session. We have Victoria Howard, senior social mobility inclusion manager at Browne Jacobson; Paul Gerrard, campaigns, public affairs and policy director at the Co-op Group; and, on our screens, Sarah Atkinson, chief executive officer at the Social Mobility Foundation. Thank you very much for being here. We will start with Nia.

Q25 **Dame Nia Griffith:** It is lovely to see you. Could you outline very quickly how you think social mobility benefits employers and the wider UK economy?

Victoria Howard: I am happy to start. It is one way to make sure that we are operating responsibly and sustainably as a business and that we are leaving society a little better than we found it. It is a way to tap into the widest possible talent pool. For example, when we look at recruitment, we make sure we take opportunities to people who might not otherwise have access to them. It matters to us because it is important to make sure that our people feel included and valued and that they have a sense of wellbeing at work, and we know that they take that through into the outside and their family lives. We are also well aware of the impact that social mobility and an engaged workforce has on innovation and productivity in the workplace. Those who feel engaged and actively included at work are more likely to be able to innovate in their roles to come up with innovative and novel solutions to problems. We know that our people really value social mobility; it is very important to us to recognise that. It is a source of talent. When we bring people on board, we often hear that our values—social mobility being one of them—are a really positive source of attraction.

We serve a very wide variety of clients across the UK and we know that social mobility is also important to our client base. Having a range of different people from different socioeconomic backgrounds means that we can be alive to issues because of the lived experience of our people, which can be beneficial to clients. For example, when we are working with local authorities, with the NHS, in social care, and social housing, having that broad spectrum of people actually adds to what we can deliver for our clients. As an employer, we are well aware that social mobility is something that organisations and regulators such as the Financial Conduct Authority recognise is really important to resilient business, as well as diversity of thought and breaking groupthink. All those things are benefited by positive social mobility.

Chair: Thank you very much. Paul, we will come on to you a bit later, if that is okay. I am going to ask that Committee members direct one question to one person. Please indicate if you have a burning desire to add something, but if not, we will make sure you all get a fair crack.



Q26 Rachel Taylor: Paul, could you set out your organisation's position on social mobility and give us an idea of the programmes you run to support that?

Paul Gerrard: I work for the Co-op Group. It is the UK's biggest and the world's oldest co-operative business. It traces its roots back to Toad Lane almost exactly 181 years ago, when the Rochdale Pioneers opened their shop.

The whole point of a co-op is that no one gets left behind. I think the first rulebook said that the society exists for the pecuniary, economic and social benefit of its members. The pioneers did not call it that, but in a sense, social mobility is absolutely what the Co-op is about. For us, social mobility is very much about intersectionality, which has come up a few times, but it is also about the kind of social mobility. The work that the professional services sector has done at providing jobs and graduate routes into really high-end jobs has been outstanding—I think Alun referred to that—but social mobility is a bit more than that.

We employ 56,000 people. I will caricature this for effect: if you are a young kid from a tower block in south Manchester, from a family that is in multi-generational worklessness and you become a store manager in the Co-op, you are in a store. If you become an area manager, you are in 20 stores. That is social mobility. It gives your family, wife, and yourself a different perspective. For us, social mobility is not an individual thing; it is a community thing; it is about different kinds of jobs.

The last point I will make about social mobility is that there is a danger with social mobility that it is individual. The Co-op is about a community; it is all about a society. If you are not careful, social mobility hollows out communities, and that brings tensions. If people have to get out to get on, you are going to have a problem.

I will briefly mention three programmes. The first is apprenticeships. At any point in our business, we have 600 apprenticeships from level 2 up to level 7. We have been very worried about the reduction in apprenticeship starts at levels 2, 3 and 4 because those jobs that get people in are really important. Levels 6 and 7 are great, but levels 2, 3 and 4 can often help people get into the workplace, so we prioritise those levels.

The second is the Co-op levy share scheme. The apprenticeship levy is an interesting beast. The policy intent is great, but it does not always work as it should. The Co-op levy share scheme allows people who have unspent levy to donate it to people who need the levy, which is brilliant. We launched it in 2021. Some 140 businesses, from Greencore to Royal Mail, Amazon, us and 130-odd others have donated £40 million in unspent levy. That has created almost 4,000 apprenticeship starts, from arborists to adult care, from business analysts to forklift truck drivers. Critically—I think it came up in the previous session—if you look at those apprenticeships, 26% are non-white British, 67% are women, 29% are carers and 65% of all those opportunities come from communities that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

score in the top five indicators of deprivation. They are in challenging places; they are where apprenticeships are needed.

The final one is academies. We are the business sponsor of the Co-op Academies Trust, which is the 15th biggest multi-academy trust in the country. They are in tough places—places like I grew up in. In our schools, 45% of the kids are on free school meals—the national average is 25%—and 57% are non-white British. In some schools, we have 80 different languages spoken. The connection between a school and a big business allows you to really drive differentiation.

We can give you other information. I know you do not have time, but I will leave you with this one fact: the NEET rate for 16 to 17-year-olds nationally is 6.2%. In Co-op Academies, the rate for 16 to 17-year-olds who leave our secondary schools is 3.8%. There is a reason for that: it is the great teachers we have, the resource, that connection and the opportunities that big businesses can provide on work experience, apprenticeships, skills, all those things. Businesses can do lots: apprenticeships, levy matching, but also education. Education was a founding principle for the Co-op movement. The Rochdale Pioneers always gave 2.5% of profits to education.

Q27 Rachel Taylor: It is very interesting to hear about some businesses that are not using their apprenticeship levy, particularly Greencore, which has a big site in my constituency, so I will certainly follow that up with them. Sarah, what successes have you seen from the social mobility index, and what key steps should employers take to improve social mobility in recruitment and progression?

Sarah Atkinson: Briefly, the Social Mobility Foundation, as an independent charity, runs the social mobility employer index. It is a benchmarking and feedback tool designed to mobilise employers around social mobility. Individual employers enter and answer a structured survey where we look at their practice across all aspects of the employee life cycle. We look at their outreach and engagement with young people, routes into the employer, and the way they attract and recruit. We also look at progression, experienced hires, and how people progress in the organisation, data, the internal conversation around social mobility, and external advocacy and leadership.

We have been running the index since 2017, and the picture has really changed quite dramatically over that time. In the first year, the only organisations that had a social mobility strategy, that called it that, and that had data to share were professional services and law firms. However, there was very poor take-up from employers on collecting socioeconomic background data. The state of outreach was very scattered: lots of individual work with schools, very little targeting, and very little to report in terms of thinking about social mobility inside workplaces and progression.



The index will be in its 10th year next year, and we have had over 400 employers enter during that time. Through the index, we have been able to recognise the level of good practice and drive it through, and employer participation as a peer group has been quite considerable. For example, on outreach, there are really well-developed, well-structured programmes that target the places and the people most in need of that opportunity. They are structured along the Careers and Enterprise Company employer standards. In terms of internal advocacy, it is increasingly common to have someone at board level who is the champion for social mobility and who leads that conversation internally.

Very significantly, there was poor data collection by employers when we started. We now have a very substantial collection of socioeconomic background data for workforces and 36 employers measuring the class pay gap. The next step will be to encourage them to close the class pay gap. We have seen increased awareness and increased data which drives that evidence base and action, which is great, the sharing of good practice, and a bit of healthy competitive stimulation to get employers to do more and be more focused. We have also seen a broadening of the range of employers that are participating and leading on this. Browne Jacobson and the Co-op are both significant good performers alongside a whole range of employers across private and public sector. I am pleased to say that even a few charities and small businesses take part; it is free for them, which is really important.

Q28 Rachel Taylor: Victoria, thank you for joining us. Equality, diversity and inclusion initiatives have faced growing scrutiny and some toxic rhetoric in recent times. Why does your organisation think that they work, and what evidence do you have for that?

Victoria Howard: We think they work because our people tell us that they work, that they contribute to our people feeling actively included and comfortable at work and that they have access to opportunities and can progress at fair rates. Increasingly, we know that generation Z expects EDI initiatives. Research suggests that around 77% of generation Z would actively not apply for a job with an employer that was not committed to EDI, so it is very important for recruitment purposes. If you are not doing it, that workforce is coming through and you will miss out on a huge chunk of talent.

We know it is the right thing to do and that everybody should have fair access to opportunities across the board. Taking a very intersectional approach is really important. It also matters to clients. As I say, clients increasingly look for responsible supply chains. They want to partner with organisations that share values and commitments, and part of that is creating fair opportunities for everybody. Again, there is research to indicate that diversity is particularly important for productivity: for example, there is research from McKinsey that shows that it plays a key role in effective decision making as well. We really believe that EDI should be embedded in everything that we do and that all our actions



HOUSE OF COMMONS

should have that element of fairness, diversity and inclusion throughout. We aim to be in a state where it is effectively incorporated in every decision and every stage.

Q29 Rachel Taylor: Do you have any particular concerns around the suggested guidance that has come from the EHRC about facilities in workplaces and how that might impact your wish to have a diverse workforce?

Victoria Howard: Are you referring to the definition of gender?

Rachel Taylor: Yes.

Victoria Howard: That is probably something that is within the scope of other people within our business more than my own role. I would have to defer to them and come back to you in writing.

Q30 Dame Nia Griffith: Sarah, could you very succinctly summarise the key barriers for people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to enter and progress in the workforce?

Sarah Atkinson: The most succinct way to think about it is around knowledge, skills and what you might think of as confidence, or what we sometimes talk about as self-efficacy. The knowledge is about what the pathways and opportunities are. If you do not know what jobs exist, what qualifications you need for those jobs, how to build the application or find your way into those roles or organisations, then you cannot progress.

If you cannot present in a satisfactory way for a recruitment process or have the skills that are needed, you will not be able to progress. As I say, if you do not have the confidence or the self-efficacy to put yourself forward and be confident, you will not be able to be successful. This is not about deficits or gaps in the people; these are systems gaps and a systems problem. For example, we know that over 30% of the socioeconomic gap in graduate routes in is on the employer side. Even where people have identical qualifications and broadly similar work experience, we can see a socioeconomic gap of about 30% that we know is coming from the employer side.

Some barriers are hard barriers around cost, access and qualifications. Some people talk about softer barriers, but I think of them as more pernicious barriers or expectations around certain sorts of behaviours or ways that people carry themselves. One example is seeing work experience gained in the sector as relevant, while overlooking the enormous skills and capabilities that can be gained through work experience in retail, hospitality, caring, and unpaid work.

The barriers are very significant and, as you rightly say, they present in getting into organisations and jobs, but they also present in being able to progress and get on in work. Alun previously talked about some challenges for young people not just in getting into work, but in staying in work and progressing. We can see socioeconomic gaps in the evidence



as to how people progress to their full potential, not just getting in. Access to jobs is not the end of the social mobility barriers. They can still really present and be experienced inside workplaces and organisations.

- Q31 **Dame Nia Griffith:** Paul, by the time people reach employment age, do you feel it is more difficult for them to overcome earlier difficulties they may have faced?

Paul Gerrard: In our academies, we see that young people face those challenges, but it is about what support they are given. One lesson we have learned from the work we do in the Co-op Academies Trust is that providing them with that knowledge, access to information and access to people who look like them and are like them is really powerful.

Also, it is about giving them a taste of what that might look like. One thing we ran with Unilever for all year 8s across the Co-op Academies Trust was point-of-sale design of a new Pot Noodle flavour. The winning year 8s have seen their design across 2,500 stores. For every child that was involved in that, as Sarah talked about, there was self-efficacy and confidence. They said, "I didn't know there was a job to design point-of-sales in the supermarket." It is that kind of thing. That transition to work is a real challenge.

We did some work a few years ago with Richard Taylor, who has since passed away; he was the father of Damilola Taylor. What Richard did phenomenally well, and the trust does phenomenally well, is make sure that young people's aspiration is not killed. In today's society, there is a real danger that young people's aspiration is beaten down. Whether it is people like Richard—or my mother for me—or whoever it might be, it is really important to make sure aspiration is kept alive. You want people to try to fulfil their potential.

- Q32 **Dame Nia Griffith:** Victoria, the legal profession has often seemed like an absolute no-no for people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. It seemed very much a closed shop. How have some recent reforms given a bit more success? I was very interested to meet someone only yesterday who is applying for an apprenticeship, which I did not even know existed. Do you think there is a need for further reforms?

Victoria Howard: Quite likely, yes. In particular, solicitor apprenticeships, as you mentioned, are helping with social mobility. I think we have 22 solicitor apprentices in our business at the moment, two of whom have recently qualified. They are just coming through now, having started several years ago. We know that those apprenticeships are really attractive to generation Z who want to earn and learn. They want to avoid university debt, which can seem vastly overwhelming, especially for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

We also find that the solicitor apprenticeships themselves are very structured programmes. They provide a lot of in-line support for the trainees coming through. It is a smaller cohort, so we can deliver quite



targeted support to them, rather than their being part of an anonymous large group as they would be if they were at university, for example. They are a really core part of our recruitment strategy now. About 30% of our annual junior intake is apprentices. It goes up to about 95% when we look at graduate apprentices, so those who have a degree. One way they are particularly beneficial is that the recruitment process is strength-based. Rather than competence, we are looking at the skills that young people are able to bring into the workplace, which may well favour those who do not necessarily have the academic background or academic approach.

We also have some evidence that they are working really well, because there is data that suggests that solicitor apprentices have a higher pass rate in the solicitor qualifying exam—the new way of qualifying as a solicitor—than non-apprentices. In our business, we find similarly that the solicitor apprentices are performing very well; it is a very engaged group. Also, those solicitor apprentices in our business have the opportunity to build networks while they are there that they might not have access to if they were following a more traditional route. There really are a lot of advantages to solicitor apprenticeships, and certainly we are very enthusiastic about pursuing more apprenticeships.

Chair: Kim, this is going to be the last section that we can cover, which is pay gap reporting. We also have two sections on regional offices and future Government action, which we will write to all three of you about after this session.

Kim Leadbeater: Most importantly, Paul, what was the winning Pot Noodle flavour?

Paul Gerrard: I don't know.

Kim Leadbeater: Oh, Paul, come on!

Paul Gerrard: But I will write to you with the answer.

Q33 **Kim Leadbeater:** Please write to me with that information.

Paul, both your companies report on your socioeconomic pay gap. What trends have you found in relation to socioeconomic background and pay?

Paul Gerrard: We have published a socioeconomic background pay gap report for two years now, for '24 and '25. In 2025, the mean pay gap was 5.2%, which is coming down a little. What is important, though, and perhaps it speaks to some things the Committee talked about earlier, is that in 2025 we published a combined gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic background and disability pay gap.

You then find that the intersectionality is really important. Colleagues who are from a lower socioeconomic background are less likely to progress than those from a higher socioeconomic background; that is a fact. If you begin to look at the intersectionality of that, female



colleagues who are from a lower socioeconomic background have the biggest pay gap. Women from ethnic backgrounds have the biggest pay gap. We have found that pay gap reporting provides data you can use to make decisions.

We have 54,000 people in the cohort—7.2 million members—and you need data to be able to scale. The pay gap reporting provides us with the data. It also allows us to be really transparent with ourselves because we publish them with everybody else. You then decide whether to ignore it, which we have not done, but that transparency means you have to do something about it. If you are a female colleague from a lower socioeconomic background, you have the biggest pay gap, so what are we going to do about that? Let us start to look at programmes and activities that can begin to support those colleagues to fulfil their potential. We are huge advocates of pay gap reporting across the piece. Our own view is that it should be all four. There should be consultation on gender, ethnicity, disability and socioeconomic background, because it is by putting all that together that you can begin to really see the issues, challenges and solutions.

Q34 Kim Leadbeater: That is brilliant, thank you. Victoria, is it similar for you? You are in a very different business, of course, but are there similar or different patterns?

Victoria Howard: There are similar patterns. I would emphasise that it is really important that the narrative about what is being done to close the pay gap goes alongside the figures. Also, it is important to be mindful of the fact that sometimes the pay gap might grow because of initiatives such as a recruitment drive at junior levels to try to increase diversity in the long term, so there can be a bit of short-term pain. There definitely needs to be a level of understanding and nuance alongside those numbers as well.

Q35 Kim Leadbeater: Did you get any pushback about doing that piece of work and reporting?

Victoria Howard: Internally, as far as I am aware, not really. As a business, we are quite committed. We have published our disability and ethnicity pay gap as well as the socioeconomic background gap since 2022, so I do not believe there was any significant pushback within the business.

Paul Gerrard: We did not receive any pushback. Indeed, when we first started collecting socioeconomic data in 2022, we had about 40% of people put it in. It is now at 81%. Actually, people have said to us that they do not mind giving us data, which can sometimes be sensitive, if we are going to do something with it. Collecting it for its own sake is just nosy. They have seen things like the socioeconomic pay gap reporting and some of the programmes we run. That is why people are very happy to provide the data on which we base those reports: because we try to do something with it.



Q36 **Kim Leadbeater:** Why did you start doing it in the first place? Have you found it valuable?

Victoria Howard: In the interests of transparency and openness, it was a real driver for us. It builds trust with our workforce to do that, to provide the data, and to make it open and accessible for everybody. We think it contributes to progress. It is one of several tools. On its own, it might not be effective without a whole range of other approaches, such as senior buy-in, strategy, and policies to actually close the pay gap. It is very important to be mindful that when you are collecting the data, you have to have the resource to be able to close the pay gap. Otherwise, people wonder why they are providing their data and whether they will bother next year, because what difference does it make? It is a powerful tool among others.

Paul Gerrard: I agree with all those reasons, but there is also a really crude commercial reason: if we focus on social mobility and get that right, we will be a more successful business. There was some research done by Demos last year that said that there is £90.7 billion in economic growth on the table if business is focused on it. I speak as a former director at HMRC. That is about £70 billion in tax, which I am sure the Chancellor would like, so there is a real commercial reason.

Just to go back to the point about the rollback from some DEI policies, you wonder how committed people were with the speed with which they have moved away from those approaches. People watch that; people will see that; and those organisations that continue to stand up for fairness, equality and equity will see a premium, because people will want to work for them and they will get the best talent.

Q37 **Kim Leadbeater:** Sarah, would you support the Government including socioeconomic pay gap reporting alongside proposals for ethnicity and disability pay gap reporting?

Sarah Atkinson: Yes, we really would. As I said, we have seen the growth in data collection with employers and pay gap reporting, and we have seen some action that that has driven, which Paul and Victoria have both described really well. Socioeconomic background data collection is still not as consistent as it should be. The NHS will be collecting socioeconomic background data; it is in the workforce plans. The NHS is the biggest employer in the world, and that is going to be a fantastic step, but there is still no consistency. We know the impact that socioeconomic background has on opportunities to access and progress. We know—as Paul has described—the intersection with other characteristics. We cannot treat things as sort of, “Let’s deal with one thing at a time, and then get to something later.” Human beings are not like that.

When we have had initial conversations with Ministers about this, the resistance does not seem to be a lack of recognition that this is an issue and a challenge that really impacts people and business; it is a pacing



question. There is a nervousness about putting a burden on businesses that are not ready to do this. That is one thing that could be explored. Clearly, we want the requirement; that will really move things. What could be explored is a bit of a road map towards class and socioeconomic pay gap reporting, some really clear guidance on how to do this, good case studies of employers that are doing this, and clarity of the impact that socioeconomic background has, particularly when it intersects with other things. We would really like to see that kind of conversation properly explored because that is what will actually mobilise change. Things get measured; they get done. We see that in business, so we would love to see progress with that conversation.

Q38 Kim Leadbeater: The final point, which Sarah alluded to, is that from a business perspective there is presumably a cost involved with reporting.

Paul Gerrard: There is a cost involved, but I would argue that the cost is offset by the opportunity that it gives in the performance of people, getting the best talent in, and attracting and keeping people. It is not just a cost; you get a commercial benefit as well.

Kim Leadbeater: Do you agree with that, Victoria?

Victoria Howard: Yes, and that cost is potentially absorbable by the gains, as Paul said. Also, I reiterate that the cost is not just the cost of reporting; it is the cost of doing something about it as well. You would have to factor in that the organisations reporting the pay gaps would have to have resource to be able to do something about it for it to be effective and to gain the trust of the people providing the data.

Q39 Chair: I will use the time that we have left to ask the last question about future Government action. Sarah, you alluded to wanting more clarity and more work done on intersectionality. What could the Government do to improve social mobility, and are they doing enough currently?

Sarah Atkinson: We have seen some great things happen under this Government. I talked about the NHS long-term workforce plan, which has some really strong clarity around the economic and the productivity, but also the social and community benefits, and the importance of a public service addressing socioeconomic background. That is great, but then if you look at the industrial strategy and the workforce plans that sit within those priorities, there is nothing like the same clarity and focus on addressing those socioeconomic and opportunity gaps, and those regional impacts.

Similarly, it was incredibly powerful to hear the Prime Minister talking about parity for higher education and apprenticeships. That is brilliant to hear, and we would support that. But then Skills England is not collecting socioeconomic background data on apprenticeships, and we know that there are socioeconomic gaps at every stage of the apprenticeship journey. We do not want to replicate the same problems we have had in higher education in apprenticeships, but if we are not paying attention to the data, we are going to recreate some problems. There is clearly some



good intent and action—I think Alun Francis described it earlier—but there is no strategy and no success measures for opportunity. There is some inconsistency, which just feels as though there is opportunity that is being missed to drive this forward for the benefit of individuals, sure, but also for the benefit of communities and for the benefit of everyone to be part of opportunity and prosperity.

Q40 Chair: One thing the Committee was really struggling with is that the answers we actually want to hear and know about are just not being collected. The questions are not being asked and the data is not being collected. It is a complete mismatch between what the public actually wants, expects and thinks of social mobility as, and what economists and policymakers think. Would it be possible for you to write to us and outline the areas where you think we need to see more data and more resources?

Sarah Atkinson: Very gladly and very happily. Data is not the answer, but data is an enormous pathway to really analyse the problems and to identify whether action is making a difference, and of course that is also critically important. We do not want to see anybody wasting time or resources; we want to drive on the things that are making a difference so, yes, we would be happy to do that.

Q41 Chair: Thank you very much, Sarah.

Victoria and Paul, I am going to come to you for the final, final question—I feel like Columbo. What roles do the private and public sector working together have in enhancing social mobility? Paul, I know that you talked about the Co-op schools and how you feel that that has given a real edge in being able to bridge that gap. Victoria, you talked about apprenticeships and solicitor apprenticeships. How could you talk to the private sector? There always seems to be this false rivalry between the public and private sector, “We do it better; we care more,” and actually it is a fake world because we co-exist, and if one of us is doing well, we have both got to be doing well. Victoria, what would you say to other private sector employers and the public sector organisations you engage with on how to work on social mobility better?

Victoria Howard: Partnerships are really important between the public and private sector. We are asked to deliver on social value by public sector clients, local authorities in particular, and they will want us to provide, for example, work experience places for young people in their boroughs. There are lots of ways that we can work together, and there can be ways that we can optimise the impact of what we do. Sometimes, social value on public sector contracts can be a bit cut and paste, and there is potential for us to work more effectively together in those situations.

Sharing good practice is really important across all sectors. We run a social mobility incubator, which is a progressive series of webinars with lots of different specialists to guide public and private sector



HOUSE OF COMMONS

organisations through social mobility based on our own learnings. It is important that we do not gatekeep progress and that we can share learnings across private and public sector so that we all learn from each other, because there are certainly plenty of opportunities to do that.

The private sector has a responsibility to provide good opportunities. We increasingly talk about those access opportunities that are not just into elite professions such as solicitors; 40% of our workforce are not solicitors or lawyers. We have lots of opportunities in facilities, front-of-house, marketing and PR. There are lots of opportunities for us to deliver that gain across the board and to work more effectively with public sector organisations.

Increasingly, I would say that there are conversations for the public sector too. If your supply chain involves private sector employers, talk to them about the social value that they can deliver, use the resources, and solve local problems together instead of a one-size-fits-all approach.

Chair: Paul, do you have anything to add on that?

Paul Gerrard: I agree with all that. The Government can set the weather on this a bit, and perhaps need to do so more. I guess the thing I would say to other private sector businesses is that they are missing out. There are talents and skills out there.

If I can draw on one specific point, some of you might have noticed that there have been some cyber-attacks over the recent months, and we were subject to one. Many of the people involved in those cyber-attacks will not traditionally go through graduate programmes. They will not come out of universities. They will be kids who are on games at night being unbelievably talented at hacking, because ultimately that is what it is in a sense. We are working with an organisation called the Hacking Games. It is going into some of our schools and finding phenomenal kids who perhaps are not academically flying. They are clearly bright kids, but they are unbelievable in terms of their gaming. When they run diagnostics, like the Hacking Games does, you suddenly find kids with unbelievable capability that, if you pointed it towards a private sector role, could protect the private sector, and that gives economic growth. That is one example, but there are lots of them. Private sector businesses are missing out on talent because they are not prepared to get something that is perhaps not quite as shiny as a graduate but—you know what?—is going to give them plenty.

Chair: I thank all three of you very much. I really appreciate your expertise and your answers today.