
Written evidence for Women and Equalities Committee on social mobility

23 February 2026

Submitted by Browne Jacobson: Victoria Howard and Tom Lyas

About Browne Jacobson

Browne Jacobson is a national full-service law firm, ranked number one in the Social Mobility Foundation's Employer Index for four of the last five years. Headquartered in Nottingham with offices in Birmingham, Manchester, Exeter, Cardiff, London, and Dublin, we are a 1,350-person business serving public and private sector clients. We were the first law firm to hire a dedicated social mobility team.

Our position on social mobility

1 How can promoting social mobility benefit employers as well as the UK more widely?

- 1.1 Promoting social mobility allows us to tap into the widest possible talent pool and bring opportunities to those who might otherwise lack access.
- 1.2 Social mobility extends beyond recruitment. We focus on inclusion, ensuring all employees have fair progression opportunities and feel valued. Our Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) research with the University of Nottingham (2023-2025) confirms that our values attract and retain talent.
- 1.3 Having diverse socioeconomic backgrounds in our firm means we better represent and understand the communities we serve, including the NHS, social care, social housing, and education sectors.
- 1.4 Regulators such as the [Financial Conduct Authority](#) (FCA) recognise benefits of all types of diversity and inclusion in challenging groupthink, ensuring resilient financial systems, minimising risk, and promoting better decision making.
- 1.5 Research by organisations including [OECD research \(2025\)](#) indicates improved social mobility contributes to social cohesion, higher living standards, and reduced pressure on public services.
- 1.6 [Deloitte Global \(2024\)](#) found that 75% of Gen Zs and millennials consider an organisation's community engagement important when choosing employers, indicating that this is key to recruitment and retention.

2 Could you set out your organisation's position on social mobility?

- 2.1 We aim to embed equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) principles, including social mobility, in all that we do. This position is supported by senior leadership and executive sponsorship. We have been working on our social mobility mission for almost a decade, initially removing academic requirements in recruitment in 2016 and establishing a targeted work experience programme to promote social mobility, FAIRE (Fairer Access Into Real Experience) in 2019.

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- 2.2 Our dedicated social mobility team ensures authentic, impactful activity. We run a Social Mobility Incubator supporting other businesses (including competitors) to develop their strategies. Our UKRI-supported KTP with the University of Nottingham researched the career paths of people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to help us to better understand the experiences of our people. Having identified that accent stereotypes play a key role in exclusion, we developed [accent and socioeconomic background bias training](#) (see further section 18 below).
- 2.3 We believe that employers often approach socioeconomic diversity as a need to address a "lack" of something in their people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. However, we recognise that a diverse workforce better understands and serves the interests of our clients and society. We focus on dismantling existing barriers and implementing inclusive practices in our workplace rather than simply providing additional support.

3 What programmes do you run to support social mobility and how are they effective?

Work experience

- 3.1 In 2018, we began to collect work experience data and found that 96% of places went to contacts. Those places were unpaid and unstructured. In 2019, we launched our flagship FAIRE (Fairer Access Into Real Experience) work experience programme. This operates in person (three times annually, 90 places, 85% from lower socioeconomic backgrounds) and online (reaching approximately 7,000 participants, with 58% from underrepresented ethnic minorities and 62% from lower socioeconomic backgrounds).
- 3.2 In-person work experience now follows a structured programme which includes employability and technical training. It is targeted, non-competitive and paid at National Minimum Wage/National Living Wage to ensure that candidates, particularly those who would ordinarily be in paid work during the programme, can afford to attend. It is available in all areas of our business across our UK offices, not just legal functions.
- 3.3 The cumulative reach of our FAIRE programmes to date is 87,000.
- 3.4 If there are commercial reasons to bring contacts' children into the business, we offset that with placements for young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and reciprocal placements in clients' sectors such as retail, technology, and HR.
- 3.5 In 2025, we launched a free, on-demand employability hub providing virtual work experience, skills development, and knowledge for professional services roles. It provides insights into typical tasks, supports job applications, develops commercial awareness, and includes career stories and guidance for parents and teachers. The hub particularly supports people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and rural areas where access to in-person work experience is limited by infrastructure challenges, caring responsibilities, or time constraints.

Outreach

- 3.6 We have reached over 2,200 schools, colleges and universities through outreach activities including careers events and employability sessions in areas of high youth unemployment.

Recruitment practices

- 3.7 We removed academic requirements from job applications in 2016. Before this, we required ABB at A Level and a 2.1 degree and 100% of our legal trainee recruitment was from Russell Group universities. Now, around 60% of legal trainees are from non-Russell Group universities. 40-45% of those candidates wouldn't have received offers under the previous criteria. Of those hired, 70% of trainees achieved the highest performance rating.
- 3.8 We use RARE contextualised recruitment, which collects socioeconomic data to flag candidates who have outperformed their peers despite facing disadvantages, such as attending low-performing schools. We take a “second look” at flagged applications that might be overlooked based on grades alone, ensuring that we do not miss talented individuals. In 2025, 54% of applicants who secured employment had one or more contextual flag, and 23% had three or more flags (versus 3.5% of all applicants).
- 3.9 For all applicants, we ask the four Social Mobility Commission recommended questions on socioeconomic background. For early careers roles, we also use the RARE contextual recruitment tool to collect additional socioeconomic data. We evaluate socioeconomic diversity at each recruitment stage to identify and address barriers for different socioeconomic groups.

Employee support and development

- 3.10 Our onboarding programme builds networks and internal knowledge, making explicit the unwritten workplace rules that can otherwise make it difficult to feel included in a workplace.
- 3.11 Our Aspire leadership programme develops future leaders among Senior Associates, Legal Directors, and Partners. 92% of employees agree our learning and development approach is inclusive and accessible, up from 86% the previous year.
- 3.12 We have a supportive network for staff from lower socioeconomic backgrounds providing peer support and a direct reporting channel to senior leadership via an Executive-level sponsor. Our DEI [diversity, equity and inclusion] Strategy Steering Committee addresses all aspects of inclusion from an intersectional perspective.
- 3.13 In 2025, we launched our free, on-demand Social Mobility Incubator programme, supporting other businesses (including competitors) to develop their social mobility strategies. We do not gatekeep our expertise. Participants have enhanced social mobility in their organisations, evidenced by their progression in the Social Mobility Foundation’s Employer Index 2025.

4 What are the benefits of apprenticeships in improving social mobility?

- 4.1 We have 22 solicitor apprentices. The pathway attracts Generation Z by enabling them to earn while learning and avoid debt. The structured programme with small cohorts enables targeted support, particularly for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, while building valuable professional networks.
- 4.2 Solicitor apprentices are more likely to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds than those entering through other qualification routes ([SRA, 2026](#)). 81% of our solicitor apprentices met social mobility criteria, and 50% were from lower socioeconomic backgrounds by parental occupation. Apprenticeships now form a core part of our lawyer

recruitment strategy, representing 25-30% of our annual junior intake—rising to 95% when including the Graduate Solicitor Apprenticeship pathway.

- 4.3 We use strength-based recruitment rather than grades or competency-based approaches, levelling the playing field. Recent research suggests apprentices outperform non-apprentices in the [Solicitors Qualifying Examination](#) (SQE). Our apprentices demonstrate strong performance, engagement, resourcefulness and resilience.
- 4.4 For our apprentices, formal training and qualifications are a core part of their career development. Our early careers employees receive financial support to help them to focus on their studies.

5 Why do your organisations think Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives are important?

- 5.1 EDI initiatives bring opportunity to everyone and ensure fairness and progression. A valued and fully included workforce is better for wellbeing and engagement.
- 5.2 As noted above, research by [Deloitte Global \(2024\)](#) found that “three-quarters of Gen Zs and millennials (75%) say that an organisation’s community engagement and societal impact is an important factor when considering a potential employer”, suggesting this will become a recruitment and retention issue.
- 5.3 Our clients expect us to demonstrate commitment to EDI. It's important for relationships with organisations that want to work with responsible businesses and understand supply chains.
- 5.4 EDI initiatives ensure that our firm represents and understands the communities we serve. This means that we build a more inclusive workplace where people feel valued and empowered to be themselves and to speak up. This, in turn, benefits productivity and innovation.
- 5.5 There are economic benefits of diverse teams ([McKinsey](#) research (2023) demonstrates this), and diversity in decision making (recognised by the FCA) leads to greater resilience and decreased risk.

6 What are the key barriers for people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to enter and progress in the workforce?

- 6.1 Parental occupation data shows that in the legal profession, 57% come from professional backgrounds, 13% from intermediate, and 18% from lower socioeconomic backgrounds ([SRA, 2023](#)), compared to the national picture of 37% professional, 24% intermediate, and 39% lower socioeconomic backgrounds. This indicates that people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are under-represented in the profession.
- 6.2 Entry barriers include academic gatekeeping, grades, (as above) and bias towards preferred universities. According to the Social Mobility Foundation, 84% of offers made by the top 100 law firms come from Russell Group universities. Access to work experience (paid or not) also presents a significant barrier.
- 6.3 Narrow perceptions exist of who can be a lawyer and what they look or sound like. We have carried out research in partnership with the University of Nottingham which looked at

experiences of people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. We found that some of the attributes expected of professionals—whether lawyers, leaders, etc.—can conflate professionalism and articulacy with factors like accent, hobbies, and educational institution. The tendency to look for people who “fit” can be exclusionary. Research by the [Bridge Group and Progress Together \(2025\)](#) found it takes almost 2 years longer for people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to progress between middle and senior roles than peers from higher socioeconomic backgrounds.

- 6.4 Financial costs present significant barriers, including the costs of qualification, workwear, high rents in cities, the cost of living generally, and having to pay expenses upfront.
- 6.5 Those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds might not have access to networks which already are a part of our industry. This might mean that they don't have knowledge of the unwritten rules (such as attire, ways to get ahead). We address this by ensuring that these unwritten rules are either made explicit (transparent progression processes; clear guidelines on workplace attire; explicit training on workplace expectations) or by removing those rules altogether. A lack of networks also impacts the sponsorship someone might receive in their career, as anecdotal evidence suggests that sponsorship often comes from those who have a similar background to you or have something in common with you.

7 By the time people reach employment age, to what extent do you think factors impacting social mobility are increasingly difficult to overcome?

- 7.1 Working with universities, we see that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are behind their peers when it comes to access to work experience, information about routes into our industry and connections. We often find that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds come to us much later in their university life (end of second year or third year) compared to their peers, and in many businesses, this will mean that they miss opportunities to gain employment after university (spring weeks, summer vacation schemes).
- 7.2 For this reason, we do not set age or university year upper limits on any of our outreach or recruitment programmes, which greatly benefits students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.
- 7.3 From our engagement with students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, we know that they have a much narrower view of careers. The information they know about the legal sector may be heavily influenced by the information they have access to, like media and the internet, or information from a teacher. As an employer it's our duty to provide that greater breadth of information and democratise information about our industry. Working with schools, colleges and local authorities helps to bridge some of this information gap.

8 How successful do you think recent reforms to the legal profession have been in making it easier for people from a lower socioeconomic background to enter it, and what further reforms would you like to see?

- 8.1 The introduction of solicitor apprenticeships has been transformative. 81% of our solicitor apprentices met social mobility criteria (Free School Meals and first generation to university), and 50% were from lower socioeconomic backgrounds by parental occupation.

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- 8.2 While designed to widen access to the profession, we have concerns about how the SQE may harm social mobility. Firstly, despite aims to reduce the cost of legal education, the cost of the SQE is still high – exam fees alone are almost £5,000, and many candidates incur significant travel and hotel expenses due to the lack of available local exam sittings, and on top of all this is the cost of the SQE preparation course (ranging from £6,000 to £18,850) subject to geographical location. For self-funded candidates, this can restrict access for lower income candidates. Secondly, SQE courses are not currently regulated and there is no accurate way to assess SQE pass rates by individual provider. This causes course quality to vary widely and pass rates may depend on candidates having the means to purchase additional course materials to increase their chances of success. The biggest worry is the SRA data which suggests that prior education and academic background strongly affects SQE performance, in particular the clear data which suggests candidates who [attended fee-paying schools are passing in greater numbers](#).
- 8.3 Further reforms we would like to see include: enactment of the socioeconomic duty in England; making it important to go beyond most prestigious roles like solicitor and ensure social mobility is a consideration in all roles—bringing good quality, rewarding work to all; and more exploration of the role businesses can play to support social mobility.
- 8.4 We also recommend making socioeconomic background a protected characteristic.

9 What trends have you found in relation to socioeconomic background and pay?

- 9.1 We publish our socioeconomic pay gap yearly. Year on year, we have seen a reduction in the pay gap. We attribute this to the fact that we removed academic requirements from graduate roles in 2016, which significantly improved representation from lower socioeconomic backgrounds at the bottom of our organisation and this cohort is now being promoted to more senior levels.

10 What other trends did you find related to ethnicity and disability, and how those characteristics interact?

- 10.1 As may be expected in British data, there is a higher proportion of our staff from ethnic minority backgrounds who are also from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (13% above the firmwide average). Looking at progression rates, this group is particularly represented within our partner population, suggesting that those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who do make it to leadership from UK ethnic minority backgrounds excel.
- 10.2 Our REACH programme, whilst specifically targeting Black aspiring lawyers, attracts 80% of its participants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, demonstrating a clear intersectionality. This mentoring programme provides sustained support and a valuable pipeline of Black talent for our firm. Many of the barriers faced by our REACH mentees relate to their socioeconomic backgrounds, with ethnicity then being seen as a double-disadvantage.
- 10.3 We were proud to achieve Disability Confident Level 3 (Leader) status in recognition of the strides we have made around accessibility and disability inclusion.

10.4 We are starting to see reductions in our ethnicity and disability pay gaps, acknowledging that our progress will be slower here (than for example, in relation to gender) due to the efforts we are making in our early talent recruitment programmes, and the challenges that come with diversity data sharing. We anticipate a greater difference over time.

11 Has there been any pushback from your employees on the collection of data for your pay gap reporting?

11.1 We have not experienced significant pushback from employees on data collection for pay gap reporting. Our approach has been grounded in transparency and trust, and we position data collection as part of our commitment to fairness and progression for all employees. It is key that there is clear communication about the purpose of data collection and commitment to action to address any issues detected in the data.

12 What led you to begin socioeconomic pay gap reporting and how valuable is it for addressing a lack of social mobility?

12.1 We began publishing socioeconomic pay gap data in 2022 on our website. It has contributed to progress as part of our wider strategy. We accompany data with a plan and context—organisations must be aware there might be some short-term pain to make longer-term gains, such as recruiting lower socioeconomic background juniors temporarily widening the pay gap.

12.2 Our strategy to close the pay gap includes reducing the gap between lower and higher socioeconomic backgrounds by a similar amount as last year over the next two years, process auditing, and training.

12.3 On its own, pay gap reporting will not transform a business; it must be accompanied by leadership and strategic commitment to change.

13 Is socioeconomic pay gap reporting costly for a business?

13.1 We're a 1,350-person business, and producing the data is manageable. Even assuming reporting would only be required for organisations with 250+ employees like gender pay gap reporting, it could be resource intensive to produce. However, it's not just about reporting—it's about doing something to close the gap, and that needs more resources. Otherwise, people won't see the point and will disengage.

14 Would you support the Government including socioeconomic pay gap reporting, alongside proposals for ethnicity and disability pay gap reporting?

14.1 Yes, if accompanied by targets and commitment to progress. We have published ethnicity pay gap data since 2019 and disability pay gap data since 2021/22. Mandatory reporting makes the invisible visible, builds trust, identifies systemic issues, provides an evidence base for EDI work, and creates reputational incentives to improve. We have advocated for mandatory race and ethnicity reporting with Business in the Community.

14.2 However, socioeconomic background is not a protected characteristic, creating definition challenges. Many organisations struggle with low disclosure rates, which affects data

quality. Clear communication about the purpose of disclosure and transparent collection methods are essential.

- 14.3 Key caveats include: definitions must be consistent; disclosure cannot be mandatory; clear data handling guidance is needed; organisations should guard against negative behaviours (such as shifting pay into bonuses); mandatory reporting could deter early talent recruitment (which may temporarily widen pay gaps); and intersectionality can obscure root causes.
- 14.4 We have reviewed our data using the Social Mobility Commission's five-part categorisation, which provides greater detail. For example, higher professionals are significantly over-represented compared to lower professionals, while group 5 (unemployed/not in work) is significantly under-represented. However, without national benchmarks, we cannot assess whether our data reflects the wider population or identify where specific interventions are needed.
- 14.5 Care-experienced individuals, carers and refugees face significant employment barriers, particularly in the legal profession. However, we lack data to understand the scale of this problem, and current socioeconomic background data collection may not capture these groups adequately.

15 How important is having offices outside of London in improving social mobility?

- 15.1 Having offices outside London helps drive social mobility by providing high-quality opportunities outside the capital. We are headquartered in Nottingham, with offices in Birmingham, Manchester, Exeter, Cardiff, London, and Dublin. Being regionally based means we are closer to clients and understand their communities and needs better.
- 15.2 Our regional presence enables partnerships such as those with the Welsh Government and Nottingham City Council supporting care leavers. Through these partnerships we deliver work experience and mentoring which benefits local communities.
- 15.3 There is strong regional variance in social mobility—different places face different challenges. We are aware that opportunities including work experience are often London-centric, so we offer most places outside London and online. There can also be hyperlocal issues regarding school engagement with some schools, and local authorities, being particularly proactive and harnessing multiple benefits of outreach, whereas others are much harder to engage.

16 How can the Government incentivise more companies to have offices and invest outside of London?

- 16.1 The Government could incentivise more companies to have offices and invest outside London through procurement requirements, regional development incentives, and recognition schemes, perhaps including tax benefits, that reward employers creating opportunities across the country.

17 To what extent does accent bias hinder social mobility?

- 17.1 Accent refers to the way someone pronounces words, and their rhythm and intonation. Our research with the University of Nottingham shows that there are still strong hierarchies in

workplaces, with higher-status standard accents (including received pronunciation and Standard Southern British English) considered more professional and competent. Accents associated with some ethnic minorities (such as Multi-Cultural London English) and post-industrial cities (such as Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham) tend to be particularly negatively evaluated with speakers stereotyped as being less intelligent, articulate and well-educated. Accent can be a signal - accurate or not - of class, background, ethnicity, nationality, and education.

- 17.2 Our research indicates that some speakers with less prestigious accents report being overlooked for opportunities - such as client work, tenders, or jobs - because of their accent. This can happen at every stage of the employee lifecycle from work experience to promotion. There is also the mental load of having to modify an accent to “fit in” and the resulting inauthenticity.

18 How can accent bias be overcome?

- 18.1 We bring awareness to stereotypes and prejudice through training co-developed with sociolinguists at University of Nottingham. We have rolled out this training to our recruitment, learning and development, EDI, People, and network teams—all those involved in hiring, promotions, support, events, and ambassadors. We are expanding this to clients and turning it into e-learning to broaden reach across our business. 99% of partners have completed DEI training.
- 18.2 We remind interviewers to challenge their preconceptions before interviews and decision-making, to unpick which attributes they're looking for, and to judge content not accent. We raise awareness of when accent and socioeconomic bias can arise at events and in day-to-day activities, promote diversity of voice in leadership, and provide strategies to deal with bias.

19 How well is the Government doing at improving social mobility?

- 19.1 In our experience, local government tends to be closer to local needs and offers more opportunities for people from diverse backgrounds to progress. We have seen effective initiatives such as our partnership with Nottingham City Council to provide mentoring for care leavers.
- 19.2 At central government level, historic issues remain entrenched. While relocating functions outside London is positive, higher levels—including Special Advisers—still seem to favour qualities associated with traditional expectations of politicians and civil servants which are more likely to be linked to higher social class norms and behaviours. Fewer people now seem to enter politics through alternative routes such as trade unions.
- 19.3 Social value requirements under the Procurement Act present opportunities for improvement. As a supplier, we provide social value when appointed to contracts, but impact could be optimised through shared goals. Procurement teams should specify their requirements rather than accepting standard offers, and work with businesses to deliver social value addressing local issues through partnerships and incentivised work experience placements.

20 What roles do the private sector and public sector have in enhancing social mobility?

- 20.1 Both sectors have responsibilities to create opportunities available to all and to share good practice. Government policy should include business and employers as a core part of any policymaking on social mobility, involving all employers including SMEs, and supporting industries to work together. Progress largely sits with legal and professional services, but these organisations have access to a wider ecosystem through their clients and supply chain. Unfortunately, some employers treat social mobility and careers as solely recruitment, refusing to work with competitors, which narrows the information young people receive. Each year, Browne Jacobson holds events with different businesses across our sector, including barristers' chambers, in-house legal and direct competitors, to ensure young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have the greatest breadth of information.
- 20.2 As at [November 2025](#), there are around 946,000 16–24-year-olds not in education, employment or training (NEETs), (around 15.1% of that age group). This cohort was in secondary education during the pandemic when many businesses rolled back outreach support and careers advice was less readily available. Existing social mobility initiatives often rely on proactive and academically gifted young people to put themselves forward. Employers should provide opportunities to people of any age and academic qualification to access skills development and industry information, working together even with direct competitors to support this group.
- 20.3 Local and central government should pull together the ecosystem of schools, colleges, universities, third sector and employers to provide a more consistent and informed journey for all young people. Our FAIRE initiative has no age limit, often including mature students and career changers, which is important as age barriers can “lock out” those who did not participate fully in education. We provide both in-person and virtual offerings to maximise inclusivity.

21 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? (In reference to gender)

- 21.1 We, like many other organisations are currently navigating how to reflect a biological approach to sex in policies and facilities, while avoiding unlawful discrimination against trans employees and maintaining workable, inclusive workplaces. It's a delicate balancing act between different protected characteristics under the Equality Act and raises concerns about whether trans employees will feel welcomed and supported in the workplace.
- 21.2 The guidance creates genuine tensions for employers committed to diversity, equity and inclusion, requiring careful, case-by-case assessment rather than blanket policies, alongside potential investment in alternative facilities where possible to ensure all employees feel respected and accommodated.

We would like to thank the Committee for inviting us to give evidence to support its vital work. We are very happy to speak further about social mobility, should the Committee have further questions.

Contact us



Victoria Howard
Senior Social Mobility Manager

+ [Victoria Howard | Browne Jacobson](#)



Tom Lyas
Head of Resourcing and Social
Mobility

+
[Tom Lyas | Browne Jacobson](#)