



House of Commons
Women and Equalities
Committee

Appointment of the Chair of the Social Mobility Commission: Katharine Birbalsingh CBE

Second Report of Session 2021–22

*Report, together with formal minutes relating
to the report*

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Women and Equalities Committee

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Appointment of the Chair of the Social Mobility Commission

Introduction: the pre-appointment hearing process

1. This Report follows our pre-appointment hearing with Katharine Birbalsingh CBE, the Government's preferred candidate for the post of Chair of the Social Mobility Commission (SMC). The hearing was held on 20 October 2021.
2. Government sponsorship of the SMC passed from the Department for Education to the Cabinet Office's Equality Hub on 1 April 2021.¹ The Foreign Secretary, The Rt Hon Elizabeth Truss MP, in her dual role as Minister for Women and Equalities and ministerial head of the Cabinet Office's Equality Hub, is the SMC's ministerial sponsor and, as such, is responsible for appointing its Chair.² We are therefore responsible for scrutinising her decision through a pre-appointment hearing. This was the first such hearing we have conducted in relation to the role. Previous hearings were held by the Education Committee.³
3. Our guidelines for conducting pre-appointment hearings are set out by the Liaison Committee, a House of Commons Committee comprised of the Chairs of 35 Select Committees. The guidelines include the following purposes and objectives:
 - **scrutiny of the quality of ministerial decision-making**, which is a proper part of ministerial accountability to Parliament;
 - providing **public reassurance**, in addition to the processes of the Office for the Commissioner for Public Appointments, that those appointed to key public offices have been selected on merit;⁴
 - providing public evidence of the **independence of mind of the candidate**; and
 - **enhancing the appointee's legitimacy** in undertaking his or her function, including providing the public with an insight into the candidate's views on the policy issues related to the role.

While Select Committees' observations on the suitability of preferred candidates are not binding on the Government, "it is expected that the appointing minister will consider any relevant observations made by a committee before deciding whether to proceed with an appointment."⁵ Following the pre-appointment hearing, we wrote to the Secretary of State, setting out our observations, which are also in the concluding paragraph at the end of this Report.

1 ["The Social Mobility Commission joins Cabinet Office"](#), GOV.UK press release, 1 April 2021

2 *Ibid.*; Cabinet Office, ["HM Government Public Appointments: Social Mobility Commission Chair"](#), accessed 29 September 2021

3 See, for example, the Education Committee's endorsement of the previous SMC Chair, Dame Martina Milburn: Education Committee, Fourth Report of Session 2017–19, [Appointment of the Chair of the Social Mobility Commission](#), HC 1048

4 See ["The Commissioner for Public Appointments"](#), accessed 30 September 2021

5 Liaison Committee, Third Report of Session 2017–19, [Pre-Appointment Hearings](#), HC 2307, Annex: Revised Guidelines for Select Committees carrying out pre-appointment hearings

Background

The statutory functions of the SMC

4. Originally established as the Child Poverty Commission by the Child Poverty Act 2010 (now known as the Life Chances Act 2010),⁶ then re-titled the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission following the Welfare Reform Act 2012,⁷ the SMC is an independent statutory body, which assumed its current name following the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016.

5. The 2016 Act sets out the SMC's statutory duties, which include:

- Promoting social mobility in England;
- Providing advice, on request, to ministers about improving social mobility in England;
- Publishing an annual report before the end of each financial year, “setting out its views on the progress made towards improving social mobility in the United Kingdom”; and
- Carrying out “any other activity relating to improving social mobility in England or Northern Ireland”, as directed by a minister.⁸

Appointment of a Chair, Deputy Chair and members of the SMC

6. The responsible minister is required to appoint a Chair and any other members (Commissioners) of the Commission for terms of no longer than five years. They may also appoint one of the Commissioners as Deputy Chair. The responsible minister can reappoint the Chair, Deputy Chair and Commissioners, whether or not to the same office, at the end of their terms. The minister also determines SMC members' pay, allowances and expenses.⁹

7. The last two SMC Chairs have resigned before the end of their respective terms: The Rt Hon Alan Milburn, former Labour MP for Darlington (1992–2010) and Secretary of State for Health (1999–2003) resigned, alongside his three fellow Commissioners, in December 2017;¹⁰ his successor, Dame Martina Milburn DCVO CBE, Group Chief Executive of The Prince's Trust, resigned from the SMC in April 2020, less than two years into her five-year term.¹¹

8. In resigning, Alan Milburn expressed dismay that vacant SMC Commissioner roles had remained unfilled for nearly two years and frustration at what he perceived as the then government's lack of commitment to the social mobility agenda.¹²

6 Child Poverty Act 2010, [section 8](#); [Schedule 1](#). The short title of the 2010 Act was amended by the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, [section 7](#).

7 Welfare Reform Act 2012, [sections 145–6](#); [Schedule 13](#)

8 Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, [section 6](#)

9 Child Poverty Act 2010, [Schedule 1 \(as amended\)](#)

10 See, “[The government is unable to commit to the social mobility challenge](#)”, *The Guardian*, 2 December 2017

11 [Letter of resignation dated 29 April 2020 from Dame Martina Milburn DCVO, Chair of the Social Mobility Commission, to the Prime Minister](#)

12 See, “[The government is unable to commit to the social mobility challenge](#)”, *The Guardian*, 2 December 2017

9. Following the resignations, the Education Committee considered the future of the SMC and how it could be reformed and strengthened. It concluded that the SMC’s membership “should not have been allowed to dwindle to the point that it did” and recommended that the minimum membership of the Commission should be at least seven Commissioners, in addition to the Chair.¹³ The Government rejected the Committee’s recommendation of a minimum membership but committed to appointing “a sufficient number of high-quality Commissioners”, once Alan Milburn’s successor had been appointed.¹⁴

10. In October 2018, the then Secretary of State for Education, The Rt Hon Damian Hinds MP, appointed a record high number of 12 SMC Commissioners to serve alongside Dame Martina Milburn. In doing so, the Minister said:

This new team of Commissioners brings together established businessmen and women, policy makers, academics and young people, all with important perspectives to bring. The Social Mobility Commission will benefit from the expertise of this diverse mix of individuals, all of whom will bring their own unique stamp to what social mobility means in their lives.¹⁵

11. The SMC’s Annual review and business plan for 2020, published in February 2021, noted that, “unusually”, all 12 Commissioners had been appointed in 2018 for three-year terms, all ending in November 2021, thereby creating a “risk of a lack of continuity of cover when all the Commissioners’ terms end at once.”¹⁶

12. On 7 September, we wrote to the Minister for Women and Equalities, noting this risk and asking how the Government intended to mitigate it.¹⁷ The Minister replied on 9 October, confirming her intention to appoint Katharine Birbalsingh as Chair and the appointment of Alun Francis OBE, Principal and Chief Executive of Oldham College, a Further Education college, as the SMC’s Deputy Chair. Mr Francis has an academic background, teaching social sciences, history and politics early in his career, before working in local government on regeneration programmes in Manchester, with a focus on skills, education, youth and crime, and then leading the Building Schools for the Future Programme, as Oldham Council’s Director of Transforming Learning.¹⁸ The Minister’s intention is that the new Chair and Deputy Chair will provide continuity of cover at the end of the current Commissioners’ terms. The Minister confirmed she would shortly be launching a recruitment campaign for new Commissioners. Our correspondence with her is included as Appendix A to this Report.

13. Martina Milburn’s letter of resignation as SMC Chair cited the increasing demands of her Prince’s Trust role, particularly in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, and an inability to commit sufficient time to the SMC. She had been appointed to work three days per month for the SMC, which she felt was insufficient given the demands of the role. She

13 Education Committee, Second Report of Session 2017–19, *The future of the Social Mobility Commission*, HC 866

14 *Government response to the Education Select Committee report into the future of the Social Mobility Commission*, Cm 9619, May 2018

15 “Education Secretary appoints new Social Mobility Commissioners”, DfE/SMC press release, 31 October 2018

16 SMC, *Annual review & business plan 2020: A year of innovation and collaboration*, February 2021, p60

17 Letter from the Chair of the Committee to The Rt Hon Liz Truss MP, Minister for Women and Equalities, 7 September 2021

18 Oldham College, ‘Alun Francis’, accessed 14 October 2021

believed the SMC needed an Executive Chairman working “at least three days per week”, or a “different structure”, perhaps similar to the role of Children’s Commissioner, which is a full-time paid position.¹⁹

14. Since 10 July 2020, two SMC Commissioners, Sandra Wallace and Steven Cooper, have acted as interim Co-Chairs, on a job share basis, each for two and a half days per month, initially for a period not exceeding nine months.²⁰ This was subsequently extended to “October 2021 at the latest”.²¹

SMC Chair: job description, terms and recruitment process

15. The competition for a new SMC Chair was launched on 30 April.²² The role is described as leading the SMC in “promoting social mobility both within and outside Government” and overseeing “work to strengthen the evidence base and improve public understanding of how opportunity is created and made accessible to all.” The appointee would also “lead the Commission in realising a more defined role in national life and launching a more clearly defined framework for assessing the impact of public policy on social mobility.” This would include:

- the establishment of headline metrics through which the Commission can consistently measure the UK’s progress and inform public understanding; and
- a refocusing of the Commission’s work around the ‘three E’s’ as priority areas: employment; education; and enterprise.

As such, the SMC and its new Chair would have “a crucial role to play in the realisation of the Government’s levelling-up agenda.”²³

16. The new Chair will be expected to provide effective leadership in relation to:

- advocating the social mobility agenda and shaping the debate about equality;
- demonstrating what ‘good’ looks like, and challenging key institutions;
- raising the profile of the Social Mobility Commission and social mobility by being a public spokesperson for the Commission;
- providing strategic leadership of the Commissioners and Secretariat in setting the overall direction, policy and plans for the Commission;
- working collaboratively with Ministers, Parliament and other strategic partners; and

19 [Letter of resignation dated 29 April 2020 from Dame Martina Milburn DVCO, Chair of the Social Mobility Commission, to the Prime Minister](#); See also, Cabinet Office, [‘HM Government Public Appointments: Children’s Commissioner for England’](#), accessed 4 October 2021

20 [“Social Mobility Commission: interim chairs appointment”](#), SMC press release, 10 July 2020

21 [“Recruitment starts for new Social Mobility Commission Chair”](#), Equality Hub/SMC press release, 30 April 2021

22 [“Recruitment starts for new Social Mobility Commission Chair”](#), Equality Hub/SMC press release, 30 April 2021

23 Cabinet Office, [‘HM Government Public Appointments: Social Mobility Commission Chair’](#), accessed 4 October 2021

- overseeing work to strengthen the evidence base and publish key reports, including the Commission’s Annual Report [...].²⁴

The detailed person specification and eligibility criteria are included in Appendix B of this Report.

The Government’s preferred candidate: Katharine Birbalsingh CBE

17. Katharine Birbalsingh is a secondary school teacher and qualified school leader. In the early part of her career, she worked as a French teacher, first in an independent school in Notting Hill, and then, after gaining her Postgraduate Certificate in Education, in several state secondary schools in south London. She rose to be Deputy Principal of a school in Camberwell, south London.

18. She resigned from her job and left the mainstream state education sector after coming under pressure for giving a speech to the Conservative Party conference in 2010, in which she was critical of the “failed” state education system. In 2014, she co-founded, with Suella Braverman (Conservative MP for Fareham since 2015, and now the Government’s Attorney General), the Michaela Community School in Wembley Park, Brent, north London, where she is Headmistress.

19. At Michaela Community School, Ms Birbalsingh employs traditional teaching methods and strict discipline, known as “tough love behaviour systems”. The school was rated Outstanding by Ofsted in 2017. The school’s pupils, many of whom are from disadvantaged backgrounds, have achieved excellent exam results.

20. In addition to her role as Headmistress at Michaela Community School, Ms Birbalsingh is CEO Designate of her prospective multi-academy trust and a trustee of New Schools Network, a charity supporting free schools.

21. She has authored books about her experiences at Michaela Community School and the benefits of its traditional teaching philosophy. She is a frequent contributor in the media on education, social mobility, race and poverty, from her perspective as a “small c conservative”. She is active on social media and has more than 85,000 Twitter followers.²⁵ Ms Birbalsingh’s CV is included as Appendix D to this Report, and her supporting statement for the post is in Appendix E.

The pre-appointment hearing

22. In oral evidence on 20 October, we questioned Katharine Birbalsingh about her appointment to the role. Topics covered during the session included:

- The terms of her appointment, in particular whether six days per month would be sufficient given the scale of the challenge, and her ability to commit sufficient time to the SMC given her other responsibilities, including as Headmistress of Michaela Community School;

24 Cabinet Office, ‘[HM Government Public Appointments: Social Mobility Commission Chair](#)’, accessed 4 October 2021

25 https://twitter.com/Miss_Snuffy?s=20

- The breadth and depth of her policy knowledge and experience beyond secondary education, and the support she would need from her Deputy Chair and fellow Commissioners;
- Her definition of, and vision for, social mobility and her strategy for achieving progress, including in the very challenging context of the Covid-19 pandemic;
- The effectiveness of the SMC to date and how she intends to make the most of its limited statutory powers and duties;
- Her personal and leadership style, including her ability to work collegiately with colleagues and collaboratively with stakeholders who may have different views on controversial or sensitive issues; and
- The benefits of the SMC's move into the Cabinet Office's Equality Hub; her understanding of the Government's Levelling Up agenda and her role in driving its progress; and the interrelationships between social mobility, Levelling Up and equality for groups of people protected by the Equality Act.

There is a link to a transcript of the evidence session at the end of this Report.

Conclusion

23. Katharine Birbalsingh is a bold and interesting choice for Chair of the Social Mobility Commission. She has several major strengths, including a track record of enhancing the life chances of disadvantaged young people through education, excellent communications skills, and a forceful character with the ability to challenge institutions and received wisdom. Ms Birbalsingh has forthright views on education, which she has robustly defended against opposition from within the sector. While we admire and value robustness, as Chair of the Social Mobility Commission she will need to demonstrate her ability to listen to, and work collegiately with, colleagues and stakeholders with whom she will not always agree. We note her relatively narrow field of experience in secondary education. Her answers to our questions invariably returned to the importance of education, particularly the setting of high expectations and standards of behaviour, and parental responsibility. Her vision for social mobility beyond the sphere of education was much less clear. This is mitigated, in part, by the appointment of Alun Francis as Deputy Chair, but we believe she will need further support from a wide range of fellow Commissioners with diverse backgrounds, knowledge and experience across all relevant areas of social policy and sectors of the economy. We urge the Minister to launch a recruitment campaign for Commissioners without delay, and to ensure new Commissioners are in place as soon as possible. The terms of these Commissioners should be staggered so that they do not all expire at the same time. On consideration, we find that Katharine Birbalsingh is a suitable candidate for the role of Chair of the Social Mobility Commission. We recommend she be appointed for an initial term of three years. We look forward to working with her and wish her success in her vital role.

Appendix A: Correspondence with the Government

Letter dated 7 September from the Chair of the Committee to The Rt Hon Liz Truss MP, Minister for Women and Equalities

Dear Liz,

Appointment of Social Mobility Commission (SMC) Chair and Commissioners

I look forward to your confirmation of the Government's preferred candidate for the post of SMC Chair, interviews for which I understand were held on 14 July. While the delay in announcing the preferred candidate is regrettable, I appreciate the greater importance of appointing the best candidate to this important role. We had hoped to hold our pre-appointment hearing with the preferred candidate on 8 September. Our programme of work precludes us from rescheduling the hearing during September. We are now planning to reschedule for shortly after the conference recess, assuming your decision has been announced.

The delay gives rise to concern about the continuity of the SMC and its Board. We note that the terms of the current co-Chairs expire at the end of this month. We are also aware that all 12 Commissioners were appointed for three-year terms, which expire at the end of next month. This was flagged as a risk in the SMC's Annual Review and Business Plan 2020. We would therefore be grateful if you could confirm the steps the Government is taking to ensure continuity:

- Will the terms of the current SMC co-Chairs be extended until a new Chair is in post? If not, how will you ensure the SMC has effective leadership in the intervening period?
- Have any existing Commissioners been approached about extending their terms? If so, how many have been approached and indicated their intention to serve as Commissioners beyond October?
- How many new Commissioners do you intend to appoint; when will the recruitment process commence; and when do you intend to have new Commissioners in post?

I would be grateful for an urgent response. Many thanks.

The Rt Hon Caroline Nokes MP, Chair, Women and Equalities Committee

Letter dated 9 October from The Rt Hon Liz Truss MP, Minister for Women and Equalities, to the Chair of the Committee

Dear Caroline,

Thank you for your letter of 7 September.

Following the report received from an Independent Advisory Assessment Panel chaired by Dame Rachel De Souza, I am pleased to confirm that I have selected Katharine Birbalsingh CBE as my preferred candidate for Chair of the Social Mobility Commission. Katharine will therefore be attending your Committee's pre-appointment hearing on 20 October.

The recent competition produced a high standard of candidates, and therefore, in order to support the SMC Chair, I intend to make an early appointment of Alun Francis OBE, as Commissioner, whom I intend to appoint as Deputy Chair. I am confident that Katharine and Alun's combined skills and experience will allow the SMC to take forward its important work. Their announcement as preferred Chair candidate and Deputy Chair respectively, will help in ensuring stability and continuity in the Commission before the existing Commissioners' terms end on 31 October. I will also shortly be launching a recruitment campaign for SMC Commissioners.

I look forward to receiving your report following the pre-appointment hearing.

Best wishes,

The Rt Hon Elizabeth Truss MP, Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs and Minister for Women and Equalities

Appendix B: Selection process for a new Chair of the Social Mobility Commission

The recruitment campaign for a new Chair of SMC was launched on 30 April 2021, the Minister for Women and Equalities having previously written to the Women and Equalities Select Committee to notify them about the campaign. The vacancy was advertised until 11 June 2021. The opportunity was promoted via the Commission and other interested stakeholders. We received 25 applications for the role of Chair.

The Advisory Assessment Panel (Panel) was chaired By Dame Rachel De Souza, Senior Independent Panel member. The other Panel members were Marcus Bell, Director of the Equality Hub, and Pamela Dow, Director in the Cabinet Office. No panel member declared a conflict of interest except a routine professional knowledge of some of the candidates.

The Panel carefully assessed the candidates against the essential criteria outlined in the job specification at the Panel sift meeting on 29 June 2021. The Panel members assessed the evidence of relevant up-to-date experience and skills presented in the candidate's CV and supporting statement, and compared these with other candidates. The Panel only selected for interview candidates who were clearly able to demonstrate meeting all essential criteria and whose applications were particularly strong. The Minister for Women and Equalities was content with the short list of candidates.

On 14 July, the Panel interviewed the six shortlisted candidates. The interviews consisted of a short presentation, followed by questions that tested candidates' skills and expertise against the job description, which can be found at: <https://publicappointments.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/appointment/social-mobility-commission-chair/>

Taking account of performance at interview together with all other evidence obtained, the Panel identified 5 candidates appointable for this post. The Panel's assessment was objective, impartial and evidence based, and they assessed the candidates solely on merit.

The Minister for Women and Equalities decided to appoint Katharine Birbalsingh, due to her significant vision and commitment to social mobility. Her decision was published on GOV.UK on 10 October 2021 and the Minister for Women and Equalities wrote to the Committees on 9 October 2021.

The recent competition produced a high standard of candidates, and therefore, in order to support the SMC Chair, the Minister for Women and Equalities intends to make an early appointment of Alun Francis OBE as Commissioner, whom she intends to appoint as Deputy Chair. The Minister will write to the Committee Chair to confirm any further appointments.

The process was conducted in accordance with the Governance Code for Public Appointments.

Cabinet Office Equality Hub, 11 October 2021

Appendix C: Person specification and eligibility criteria

All candidates must demonstrate, in their CV and supporting letter, how they meet the selection criteria for the post through their knowledge, skills and experience.

Candidates should be able to demonstrate the following essential selection criteria:

- a strong understanding of and demonstrable commitment to social mobility with the ability to think strategically about cross-cutting issues in, for example, housing, education, or family support;
- a commitment to exercising impartial and independent judgement, drawing sound conclusions that differentiate and weigh up competing arguments which are capable of justification under close scrutiny;
- the ability to lead a high-profile organisation, including ability to chair the board and provide effective challenge and support to the organisation;
- outstanding relationship-building skills, with the ability to command respect, build networks quickly and work with and through others to achieve objectives;
- an understanding of a political landscape in Great Britain and an ability to develop a strong and credible relationship with Ministers and senior Whitehall officials;
- excellent communication skills, including the ability to operate effectively and comfortably as an ambassador for the organisation;
- a demonstrated understanding of and engagement with the critical economic and cultural divides that have come to the fore in modern Britain—between graduates and non-graduates; between the metropolitan cities and the countryside and towns; and between the nationally or internationally mobile and those more rooted in place and tradition—and the importance this has in developing public policies that serve those seen as being left behind;
- the ability to lead and develop the Commission with a diverse membership that represents often-competing priorities;
- the ability to understand and interpret financial information and to provide effective challenge on the regularity and propriety of the SMC's spend and business activities;
- high standards of integrity, commitment to public service values, and an understanding of the principles and practices of corporate governance.

Applicants will be assessed against these criteria in their application and any subsequent interview.

For this post, a person cannot be appointed as a Board Member if he or she is

employed in the Civil Service of the state, has unspent criminal convictions, is subject to bankruptcy, or disqualification as a company director. There must be no employment restrictions, or limit on your permitted stay in the UK.²⁶

26 From Chair, Social Mobility Commission, Candidate Information Pack, available via Cabinet Office, '[HM Government Public Appointments: Social Mobility Commission Chair](#)', accessed 12 October 2021

Appendix D: Preferred candidate's CV

CAREER

Co-Founder and Headmistress @ Michaela, Wembley, 2014-present

Trustee @ New Schools Network 2017- present. NSN is a charity supporting free schools. I have helped to appoint two directors, and led on strategy and corporate governance.

Telegraph blogger and freelance writer, published in the Spectator, Standpoint, The Sun, Daily Mail, The Guardian, while setting up Michaela, 2011–14

Speech @ The Conservative Party Conference, October 2010

Deputy Principal @ St Michael & All Angels Academy, Camberwell, Sept 2010 -October 2010

Head of Languages/Assistant Principal @ Dunraven School, Streatham, 2003–10

Head of Languages Department @ St Thomas the Apostle School, Peckham, 2002–03

French teacher @ Westminster City School, Victoria, April–August 2002

French teacher @ Archbishop Tenison Boys School, Vauxhall, 2000- April 2002

PGCE @ Institute of Education, Academic year 1999/2000

French teacher @ David Game College, Notting Hill, 1996–99

EDUCATION

NPQH (qualification for headship) 2008

PGCE (teacher training) in Languages @ Institute of Education, London, 1999- 2000

BA in French & Philosophy @ New College, Oxford University - 2.1, 1992–96

A levels in French, Philosophy & English @ The Trinity School, Leamington Spa, 1990–92

Schooling before A levels took place in Toronto, Canada, with the exception of 1983–84, which I spent in Rouen, France and 1977–78 in Ibadan, Nigeria.

MEDIA EXPERIENCE

I have been interviewed for dozens of podcasts, mainly British, but also international, including by Jeremy Paxman, David Rubin and other more community-based podcasts like Blakademik and The Peter and Tosh show.

I have made countless TV, radio and documentary appearances commenting on education, social mobility, race and poverty, including several interviews on Radio 4, Good Morning Britain, Sky and BBC News, BBC Politics, Newsnight.

I have been interviewed numerous times in the international press in France, New Zealand, Australia and the US.

I built up Michaela's reputation from nothing, raising the profile of the school to international status, with us having more than 600 visitors from around the world every year. I am the public spokesperson for the school, and use Twitter as my main mouthpiece with some 80k followers. I am followed by key members of the press.

I am often asked to comment in the media because of my excellent communication skills.

I have written two books and our school Michaela has published another two, of which I am the editor. To Miss with Love sold well over 20k copies. The more niche market of our books on Michaela's methods are extremely popular in the educational community.

All of the above makes me an ideal candidate to handle the high profile demands of the role as chair when trying to help the public understand how opportunity is created and made accessible to all.

Appendix E: Preferred candidate's supporting statement

Why am I applying to be the chair of the social mobility commission?

Because my whole life has been about trying to enable social mobility for our most disadvantaged. When, after my Conservative Party speech in 2010, I was told I would never again work in inner-city state schools, I briefly considered the private sector, but then I thought, how can I? My whole existence is about giving poor children a chance to reach for the top.

So committed am I to social mobility and so convinced was I that education could be much better, that I set up my own school against all the odds. I gathered like-minded people and established Michaela which opened in 2014. In 2017 we were rated Outstanding by Ofsted. In the last set of national GCSE exams in 2019 (before Covid) our top cohort achieved a Progress 8 score that placed us as the 5th best school in the country. Half of our exam papers achieved a grade 7 (A grade) or above. Our intake isn't even comprehensive: most children in our top sets failed to get into the local grammar schools in Barnet at age 11.

In all of my battles, I believe I have demonstrated integrity, always refusing to speak ill of any one school or school leader. Instead I have made bad ideas my enemy and I have taken many punches from my detractors in order to pursue wider goals for the country.

It was a 3.5 year long fight to set up Michaela with detractors across the country protesting with placards, calling me names, threatening violence, sending me hateful and racist emails. But I kept on going. I have dedicated my life to public service and the values of self-sacrifice that come with this.

Many of the ideas and strategies promoted at Michaela have gone against the grain, rejecting long-held shibboleths in the education sector. I do what is right, not what is popular. But the good news is that many teachers and parents have been inspired by my stance, and our success at Michaela. Indeed we have over 600 visitors every year at the school, often taking ideas back to their classrooms and changing things for the better.

I am sometimes asked why I have stayed at Michaela as Headmistress when other opportunities have been sent my way. Heads like me normally move to CEO with speed. It is also the case that good schools tend to expand quickly. I have both delayed the expansion of Michaela and refused to leave my post as Headmistress in order to establish and guarantee Michaela's role in the bigger fight for the country in revolutionising education. We demonstrate what excellence looks like. As many educational leaders have told me, they like to point to Michaela and say, 'If Michaela can do this, then why can't we?' I lead the team at Michaela not only to provide our families with the best possible education, but also to change the national educational landscape by showing what is possible.

My initial thoughts are that as chair, I would want to lead the commission in developing headline metrics and (SMART) action points in public policy in the key areas of employment, education and enterprise. But I would also want to look at other areas that are linked, such as family, culture, nationhood, and youth work. As I have done at both Michaela and New Schools Network, one looks at competing arguments and evidence, and then one develops strategies from informed positions.

The social mobility commission should advance nationwide strategies, including cities and the countryside, north and south. Although I am well aware that social mobility can require people to uproot from their community and this isn't necessarily right for everyone. Not everyone should pursue the route of university and more should be done to support those who wish to pursue the world of work at an earlier age. I know first-hand from my work in education that apprenticeships and work placements are woefully inadequate.

I have some understanding of the political landscape, which I have gained through the battle that was setting up Michaela. A number of politicians and other important individuals have visited Michaela and so I am no stranger to building relationships with them. My work with New Schools Network similarly has allowed me to work collaboratively with many different strategic partners. It is only thanks to the networks I have built over the years that the brand of Michaela has spread so successfully. I would hope to do the same for the commission, as chair.

I find it funny that the job spec lists 'strategic' leadership as desirable, as if there is any other viable kind. That's what leadership is: to bring people with you on a strategy to reach a particular goal. Some of those are daily, while others are more long term. One should always involve the team in such a way so that they 'own' their part of the project. At Michaela, I have a senior team, each with their own responsibilities. Every morning at 7am when we meet, we come together with a common purpose and support each other's vision. We throw an idea out for discussion and in the end when a decision is made, we will all support that strategy, whether or not we wholeheartedly agree.

That, in essence, is what it is to work collaboratively but with specific and undeterred purpose. The buck stops with the leader and I always embrace the responsibility of making the final decision. I am aware that I cannot think of everything. So I surround myself with people who have sharp minds who I trust, who are brave enough to challenge my thinking. That's how we achieve our objectives. I am not clever enough to have come up with all of the alternative ideas at Michaela on my own. I am always in pursuit of what is true. This requires independent and impartial judgement at every level for any decision made. Bias is the enemy of truth. Being open to challenge makes bias less likely when I am setting our overall direction.

Sometimes challenge requires encouragement. I have systems at school to enable this, like an Error Correction Chart, Candour Chart and chocolate chip cookies in my office to entice people in. Relationships are everything and building trust is crucial for any team to be successful. I look forward to providing effective challenge to the commissioners, strengthening our evidence base, and then explaining our findings to ministers.

I seek out challenge from others because in order to disrupt the status quo, different approaches are required. Alternative clever thinking comes from high trust conversations in a team, informed by data or experiences. I am experienced in holding people to account for their ideas and work, as am I held to account as Headmistress, by our trustees. I am familiar with writing reports for our trustees and would bring this strength to the role as chair of the commission.

I challenge the status quo in most things I do, write, say or tweet. I have challenged key institutions such as the teaching unions, Ofsted, the DfE and the general public. Michaela

has shaken the equality debate by encouraging people to ask, ‘What do we want for our children?’ Is it equality we seek by bringing down those who are at the top, or do we instead enable those at the bottom to compete?

As the founding Headmistress (and Accounting Officer) of Michaela and only recently, the CEO Designate of our multi academy trust, I’m fully aware of the importance of and requirements relating to corporate governance. As companies limited by guarantee and exempt charities, academy trusts are required to satisfy a lot of reporting requirements including DfE and EFSA. This aspect of my work and my experience as a charity trustee with New Schools Network has given me a detailed understanding of and exposure to governance in these contexts.

As the daughter of immigrants, I run Michaela on a tight financial shoestring. My frugality means that we have more than a million pounds in reserves. I think strategically about how and where to spend, being clever about how to get the most out of the money. I treat state money as if it were my own. I grew up in a household where the very rare treat of a trip to Pizza Hut meant that I would make sure my coke lasted the entire meal. I knew I would not get a second coke. That mentality is hardwired in me and if I were appointed, the commission would benefit from this mentality, as Michaela has.

So again, why am I applying for this post?

Partly, because I like a challenge. But mainly, it is because we only get one life to make a difference. When on my deathbed, I want to be able to look back and say I did all that I could to enable social mobility for the poorest in our country. Being the chair of the social mobility commission would, in part, give me the chance to say that I lived a life worth living.

Formal minutes

Wednesday 27 October 2021

Members present:

Caroline Nokes, in the Chair

Lee Anderson

Philip Davies

Draft Report (*Appointment of the Chair of the Social Mobility Commission: Katharine Birbalsingh CBE*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 23 read and agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Second Report of the Committee to the House.

Papers were appended to the Report as Appendices A to E.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available (Standing Order No. 134).

[Adjourned until Wednesday 3 November at 2 p.m.]

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Wednesday 20 October 2021

Katharine Birbalsingh CBE, the Government's preferred candidate for Chair,
Social Mobility Commission

[Q1-41](#)

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the publications page of the Committee's website.

Session 2021–22

Number	Title	Reference
1st	Levelling Up and equality: a new framework for change	HC 702

Session 2019–21

Number	Title	Reference
None	Easy Read: Unequal impact? Coronavirus, disability and access to services: full Report	HC 1050
None	Easy read: The Coronavirus law, treating disabled people unfairly? Interim Report on temporary provisions in the Coronavirus Act	HC 386
1st	Unequal impact? Coronavirus, disability and access to services: interim Report on temporary provisions in the Coronavirus Act	HC 386
2nd	Appointment of the Chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission	HC 966
3rd	Unequal impact? Coronavirus and BAME people	HC 384
4th	Unequal impact? Coronavirus, disability and access to services: full Report	HC 1050
5th	Unequal impact? Coronavirus and the gendered economic impact	HC 385
6th	Changing the perfect picture: an inquiry into body image	HC 274