

THE BUILDING BLOCKS

An employer's
guide to improving
social mobility in
the workplace



Social Mobility
Commission



Social Mobility Commission

About the Social Mobility Commission

The Social Mobility Commission monitors progress towards improving social mobility in the UK, and promotes social mobility in England. It is an independent statutory body created by an Act of Parliament.

www.gov.uk/government/organisations/social-mobility-commission

INTRODUCTION

We all want to live in a country where hard work is rewarded. Regardless of where you were born, or what job your parents did, you should have the opportunity to make a success of your life. But we know that while talent is spread evenly across the country, opportunity is not. We also know that the ‘rules of the game’ can be stacked against people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Regardless of ability and potential, too often where you start off in life determines where you end up. Regional disparities continue to affect labour markets and earnings, shaping the supply of opportunities and people’s final social mobility outcomes.

Social mobility is about giving people control over their own destinies, and unleashing their true potential. This isn’t about tokenism or lowering standards – families, schools, colleges and universities have a crucial role to play in ensuring our young people are properly equipped with the essential skills for the workplace, both technical and soft. It’s about ensuring that where merit exists it is recognised. It’s about ensuring that people are able to get on through their own talents and efforts. It’s about enabling all applicants and staff to demonstrate their skills and talent, and ensuring they aren’t held back by invisible barriers.

Socio-economic inclusion is not solely the domain of big corporate businesses with large Human Resource (HR) functions. It is about helping businesses and organisations of all sizes, up and down the country, to access a wealth of untapped talent. Not only does it offer businesses (particularly small and medium-sized enterprises – SMEs) the opportunity to access a wider range of local skills, many businesses are also finding that promoting social mobility is a great way to embed themselves in the local community. SMEs have a strong presence in social mobility ‘coldspots’ and they know their local areas. They can therefore play a critical role in improving social mobility, strengthening local labour markets and rooting out merit wherever it lies.

This is about the opportunity to recruit, promote and retain some of the most talented and driven people in our country. It’s also



about recognising we all have a role to play to ensure the rules of the game are fair. This in turn brings numerous business benefits – from the creativity and innovation diversity of thought can bring, to the greater retention potential for staff who feel they belong.

This guide is for all employers, regardless of size or location. We do recognise not all organisations will have the same capacity to take forward all of these steps. However, even the smallest businesses and those without large HR functions will be able to apply many of the recommendations to take their first steps in ensuring their organisation is an environment where all staff can thrive – regardless of background.

A NOTE ON THIS GUIDE

The building blocks include recommended interventions on data; culture and leadership; recruitment and outreach practices; and tips on ensuring individuals from diverse backgrounds are able to progress through the ranks.

Whilst we have listed all the building blocks, the reality is that employers can get going in any order. For example, although data is important for designing and measuring the impact of your strategy, non-collection or limited data collection is not a barrier to implementing any of the other actions. We know not all organisations have a dedicated HR resource, and that some actions will be easier to implement than others.

Although this guide is focused on improving social mobility, many of these steps will have a positive impact on your wider inclusion goals. A culture that embraces differences and allows staff to be authentic at work can benefit women, those with disabilities and staff from ethnic minorities too. An emphasis on skills and experience over qualifications or undefined criteria ultimately ensures you get the right people in the right jobs. Knowing the make-up of your organisation will also help you to understand the interrelationships between different diversity characteristics – e.g. socio-economic background, gender and ethnicity, which will assist your organisation creating a wider diversity and inclusion strategy.



BUILDING BLOCK

Create a compelling, shared vision of socio-economic diversity and inclusion across your business



Real change can only happen when it has the backing of the whole business, from top to bottom.

Don't worry if you are only just getting started with this agenda. Even the most inclusive employers need to start somewhere – the very fact that you are reading this guide is your first step towards building a more inclusive workplace!

- Ensure a senior leader has visible accountability for the delivery of this agenda.
- Encourage senior leaders to [discuss socio-economic inclusion](#)¹ alongside more established diversity issues.
- Ensure all line/people managers (responsible for the operational delivery of your inclusion initiatives) are aligned to your inclusion goals.
- Ensure all line/people managers have the necessary [people management skills](#)² to manage and develop people underpinned by training and performance management objectives.

+ MORE

Make it more than an HR story

In order to succeed, inclusion has to become an issue that occupies the minds of your senior and middle management, changing mindsets and behaviours across your organisation. Make sure the topic of socio-economic diversity and inclusion is discussed, and that employee voices are heard. [Hear from leading employers](#)³ on why they promote socio-economic inclusion in their businesses.

1 The SMC website has resources that can help you 'talk about class' in the workplace. <https://socialmobilityworks.org/resources/>

2 CIPD, [Line Management guidance](#), accessed 2022

3 <https://socialmobilityworks.org/social-mobility-success-stories/>

- Build a [positive narrative](#)⁴ around the subject within the organisation, so that everyone understands why it is important, and that it is a priority.
- Encourage leaders and senior role models to participate in mentoring opportunities.
- Ensure your anti-discrimination policies clearly incorporate and relate to socio-economic background.
- Create regular internal events and opportunities to engage, from webinars to a social mobility network, to share evidence, show your commitment and plans, and to listen to colleagues.

Leaders in businesses with the strongest outcomes listen to their workforce as much as they talk to them.



4 SMC, Let's talk about class, as above

+ MORE

Creating a vision in a smaller company

Even if your organisation is not a big company and doesn't have a dedicated HR resource, you could take forward some of these actions by getting a member of staff to volunteer to drive this agenda, perhaps in return for reward or recognition. These messages could be delivered at an all staff meeting or event (e.g. training or away days), incorporating these themes into any staff reflections you may have.

BUILDING BLOCK

Widen your talent pool



When it comes to outreach and hiring, you could be missing out on the kind of talent that will give your organisation a competitive advantage.

- Target schools and further education colleges in [social mobility coldspots](#)⁵ or with high levels of free school meals students.
- Consider a variety of entry routes into your organisation (such as Traineeships, apprenticeships, work experience and more) and ensure all internships and other opportunities are openly advertised and paid, which helps a greater diversity of applicants.
- Recruit for skills and potential over qualifications and polish. Asking for a qualification should only be standard if it is essential to the role. Effective competency based interviews combined with practical assessment methods will provide greater inclusivity in the assessment process. Try to differentiate between important soft skills (e.g. communication) and arbitrary factors such as accent or cultural affinity.
- Support applicants through the process to understand any other challenges they may be facing (such as what to wear for an interview).
- Stay in touch with applicants after you have offered a job, using that time to develop applicants' skills before joining.

5 Social Mobility Commission, [State of the Nation](#) 2017, pg 5

6 <https://socialmobilityworks.org/organisation-directory/>

+ MORE

Partnering with experts can be an effective way to address challenges an organisation might have in connecting with diverse talent. Use [our directory](#)⁶ to find delivery partners.



- For those that will be working from home or virtually, ensure that they have access to any tech equipment needed for their role. Provide laptops, data bundles, headsets, second screens if needed.
- For smaller businesses, consider partnering with relevant organisations to deliver effective outreach.

! DO

Remove barriers that are limiting your organisation's access to talent

Many common hiring practices create artificial barriers for people from lower socio-economic backgrounds. For example, qualifications can often exclude disadvantaged applicants who may not have had the best opportunities but who could thrive in your organisation. Asking for a qualification should only be standard if it is essential to the role.

One option is to ask for a qualification or equivalent work experience – i.e. 'Bachelors degree, level 4 technical qualification or 3 years work experience in equivalent field.'

Ask competency or skill based questions at interview and encourage candidates to draw from a broad range of experiences – this highlights skills that are transferrable to the workplace.

Start small and grow. Choose one intervention and do it well, then build from there. [More here](#)⁷.



⁷ <https://socialmobilityworks.org/toolkit/hiring/>

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Create a diverse and inclusive culture



Why is it important? Many aspects of an organisational culture may be invisible, but culture plays a huge role in how welcome and included employees feel. Norms, values, behaviours – they all shape whether employees feel valued and supported, and feel like they belong in your workplace.

Thinking about socioeconomic background as part of team conversations is a critical strand of this. Laying this foundation will help everyone in the organisation to feel they have a stake in the social mobility agenda and are welcome and supported to participate.

INVOLVE YOUR STAFF

A truly inclusive and sustainable culture is co-created by everyone, not just those at the top. Consider the following:

- **Offer training to all staff** on socio-economic diversity and inclusion to increase understanding and develop a shared language and practices. Make sure the training addresses the types of behaviours and practices that can be exclusive or make people feel stigmatised.
- **Regularly invite anonymous feedback** from all staff on what they appreciate about the internal culture and what needs to be improved and how.
- **Create formal opportunities to build networks.** Set up schemes (e.g. mentor matching) that staff can put themselves



forward for, that replicate the kinds of informal personal networks staff from more privileged backgrounds may have access to.

- **Have visible role models from different backgrounds,** who are passionate about social mobility. This will help create greater visibility and understanding of different backgrounds in the organisation.
- **Encourage staff to be open about their background** at work and ‘tell their story’ – and have senior leaders model this behaviour themselves.

TAKE A DEEP DIVE INTO YOUR CULTURE

Having an inclusive organisational culture can be a significant force in shaping and creating a successful workforce and organisation. Investigate how inclusive employees feel your internal culture to be on a range of different issues. Consider what makes up your internal culture and in what ways you can make it an inclusive environment. Create an initial diagnostic by considering areas such as:

- **What social norms prevail in different environments:** Don't assume that everyone is familiar with the cultural norms, dress codes, behaviours etc. in professional environments.
- **What kinds of subjects you bond over:** If you are frequently talking about foreign holidays, high-end cultural references or what school or university you went to, be conscious of not making the assumption that everyone has done these things and making decisions based on knowledge of these topics.
- **Does your organisation encourage diversity of thought:** Strive for an organisation where a challenge culture is encouraged, so that staff know different perspectives and views are encouraged and valued.
- **Do employees feel that their views matter:** Actively encourage staff to provide feedback and have an understanding that all views are taken on board.



CULTURE AND LEADERSHIP SUCCESS STORIES

Find out from others how they have created a positive narrative in their business through our [success stories](#)⁸.

! DO

Support all staff to access opportunities to develop

[Our research](#)⁹ finds people from lower socio-economic backgrounds can find it harder to access training. Key barriers include caring and childcare responsibilities and fewer opportunities to progress and develop. Make sure no one is overlooked. [Leading employers](#)¹⁰ who buck this trend:

- Recognise the positive effects that a commitment to progression brings on staff satisfaction, retention and productivity, as well as brand reputation.
- Embed a culture where training is a key part of what it means to be an employee.
- Ensure management talks and listens to all their workforce, training schemes are communicated and support systems are in place to enable progression.
- Ring-fence a budget to provide development opportunities at all levels and prioritise management accountability for staff progression and continued education.
- Reduce the 'jump' between frontline and management; provide stepping-stones of responsibility, especially for frontline staff (e.g. extra pay for a shift-level safety leader).
- Communicate training in ways their frontline staff can access (e.g. in 1:1 meetings with managers and not by email, which isn't used regularly by those on the shop floor or on the production line).

8 <https://socialmobilityworks.org/social-mobility-success-stories/>

9 Social Mobility Commission, [Learning ladders: The role of adult training in supporting progression from low pay, 2020](#)

10 Social Mobility Commission, [Increasing in-work training and progression for frontline workers, 2020](#)

BUILDING BLOCK

Progression - make sure the best can succeed



Socio-economic diversity and inclusion is not just about who gets in, it's also about who gets on. Our research consistently finds outreach and hiring practices alone won't create workforce wide diversity and more specifically that those from lower socio-economic backgrounds may face '[a progression gap](#)'¹¹. Progression should be based on skills and experience and you should also be on the lookout for invisible barriers.

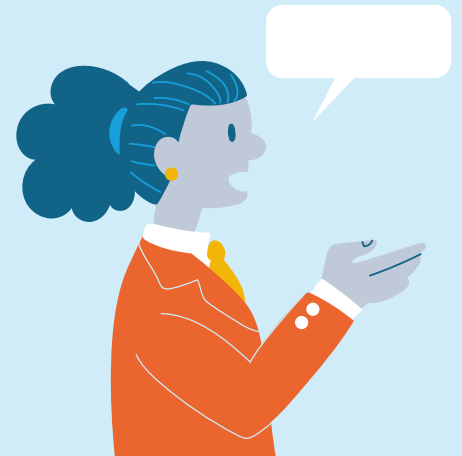
- **Build a culture of progression:** ensure managers at all levels are offering training and holding regular career conversations. Encourage senior leaders to participate in mentoring opportunities.
- **Reduce informal ways to be promoted:** sponsorships, high-profile roles and informal networks can give those from privileged backgrounds an unintended leg up. A managed/formal sponsorship programme can level the playing field for under-represented groups.
- **Have a defined list of skills required for each promotion:** and build flexibility into job specifications. Be explicit about what experiences and attributes are necessary for progression. Where available use data to see where employees from more disadvantaged backgrounds fall off the progression ladder (both in terms of remuneration and responsibility).

¹¹ Social Mobility Commission, [Social Mobility, the Class Pay Gap and Intergenerational Worklessness: New Insights from The Labour Force Survey, 2017](#)



BUILDING BLOCK

Ask the key question and analyse your data



DATA

If you have the capacity to capture it, knowing the socio-economic background of both your current employees and potential recruits is an invaluable step to help shape and refine your approach. It helps you understand the makeup of your workforce.

You can find this out by asking your employees and potential recruits one key question:

This one **key question** is the best measure to assess someone's socio-economic background. It's easy to understand, gets the highest response rates in testing, and is applicable to those from all ages and from all countries.

Respondents are asked:

What was the occupation of your main household earner when you were about aged 14?¹²

**REPORT
SOCIO-ECONOMIC
BACKGROUND
IN THREE GROUPS,
SEE NEXT PAGE:**

¹² Social Mobility Commission, [Simplifying how employers measure socio-economic background – An accompanying report to new guidance](#), 2021

- **Modern professional and traditional professional occupations** such as teacher, nurse, physiotherapist, social worker, musician, police officer (sergeant or above), software designer, accountant, solicitor, medical practitioner, scientist, civil/mechanical engineer.
- **Senior, middle or junior managers or administrators** such as finance manager, chief executive, large business owner, office manager, retail manager, bank manager, restaurant manager, warehouse manager.

HIGH SOCIO-ECONOMIC OR PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND

- **Clerical and intermediate occupations** such as secretary, personal assistant, call centre agent, clerical worker, nursery nurse.
- **Small business owners** who employed fewer than 20 people such as corner shop owners, small plumbing companies, retail shop owner, single restaurant or cafe owner, taxi owner, garage owner.

INTERMEDIATE BACKGROUNDS

- **Technical and craft occupations** such as motor mechanic, plumber, printer, electrician, gardener, train driver.
- **Long-term unemployed** (claimed Jobseeker's Allowance or earlier unemployment benefit for more than a year).
- **Routine, semi-routine manual and service occupations** such as postal worker, machine operative, security guard, caretaker, farm worker, catering assistant, sales assistant, HGV driver, cleaner, porter, packer, labourer, waiter/waitress, bar staff.

LOW SOCIO-ECONOMIC OR WORKING CLASS BACKGROUND

- **Other** such as retired, this question does not apply to me, I don't know.
- **I prefer not to say.**

EXCLUDE OR REPORT SEPARATELY

The value and subsequent use of the data you collect is dependent on getting a good response rate. **How to get a good response rate:**

- Make sure people understand why you are asking the question.
- Use senior leaders to communicate how this will be used to drive greater diversity.
- Provide a variety of opportunities for employees to disclose data year-round.
- Set and share an achievable target response rate internally.
- Encourage and support areas of the business where response rates are low.

To build trust:

- Invite applicants and staff to disclose their socio-economic background anonymously. Ensure you include the option of 'I prefer not to say.'
- Reassure them that the data will:
 - be stored and handled in line with GDPR best practice.
 - be used in aggregate i.e. not associated with individuals.
 - not be used for appointment and promotion decisions.
 - not be accessible beyond the core team in HR.

Asking more questions on socio-economic background can help take your inclusion practices to the next level. Find other useful questions to ask when measuring socio-economic background ([here](#)¹³). When collecting data, applicant and employee data should be stored and used in line with GDPR guidelines, and that data should be aggregated, used anonymously and never used to form basis of individual decisions.

Make sure people cannot be identified from the data by not going below the anonymity threshold of 10. If your workforce has less than 10 employees, you can still collect the data at the application stage from all candidates and look at trends over time to find out whether you are attracting people from a range of backgrounds.

¹³ <https://socialmobilityworks.org/toolkit/measurement/>

ANALYSE YOUR DATA

If your organisation has collected data on the socio-economic background of the employees, it will allow you to understand your workforce and target interventions. By knowing where you are now, you'll be in a much better position to decide where you want to go and build a road map for getting there. It also gives your organisation a way to measure the progress your efforts have made, as ultimately any intervention should be evaluated for its results.



MEASUREMENT AND BENCHMARKING

If you have the capacity, benchmarking is an impartial, data-driven means to understand how your workforce compares to the national workforce. It is based on national workforce data, therefore consideration should be given to your own organisation's circumstances such as sector, location or any other factors specific to your organisation. Nonetheless, benchmarking can highlight any stark differences between your organisation's workforce and the national picture, which you can then investigate to see what is happening and what the reason might be. It is a useful starting point to see if your hiring or progression practices are as fair and meritocratic as they can be. You should consider what success looks like and how to measure the impact of any interventions you are making.

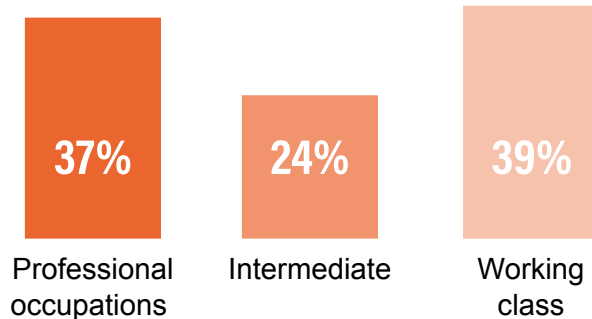
In figure 1 (overleaf) you see the national benchmarks for the UK workforce based on the key question. For sector-specific benchmarks and benchmarks against the other socio-economic background questions, [visit our website](#)¹⁴.



¹⁴ <https://socialmobilityworks.org/>

Figure 1: National Benchmarks

Parental occupation at age 14*



* Percentage of workforce by NS-SEC category of the main wage earner when respondent was 14.

ANALYSING YOUR DATA

You can use this data to understand who is 'getting in' to your business through your recruitment processes for experienced hires, those applying for early-in-career roles and your outreach activity.

Just as importantly, you can also explore who is 'getting on'.

Split job roles within your business by grade or seniority:

- **Understand representation at all levels:**
 - See what percentage of people at each grade or seniority level are in the three socio-economic background groups (working class, intermediate and professional).
- **Interpret the results:**
 - Is there a group that dominates a certain occupation or grade level?
 - Does your data have a 'cliff edge' effect, where those from lower socio-economic backgrounds suddenly fall off,

+ MORE

Find inspiration from other employers [success stories here](#)¹⁵.

Apprenticeships

Don't assume that apprenticeships automatically drive socio-economic diversity.

Ask your apprentices the **key question** and analyse this data as you do the rest of your workforce.

Monitor to understand any disparity in completion rates, drop-outs and post-training progression between people from disadvantage and privileged backgrounds.

Compare applicant data with [external benchmarks](#)¹⁶ to assess how well they reflect the eligible talent pool.

Learn [more here](#)¹⁷.

¹⁵ <https://socialmobilityworks.org/social-mobility-success-stories/>

¹⁶ <https://socialmobilityworks.org/toolkit/measurement/>

¹⁷ <https://socialmobilityworks.org/toolkit/data/>

or a 'pyramid' effect, where they slowly fall off, as you go higher in seniority?

Understanding where those from lower socio-economic backgrounds stop progressing will help you identify the barriers that are limiting progression in your organisation, and help you introduce the right interventions.

Data lets you:

Understand the current situation, inform activities, and most importantly evaluate your interventions and make necessary changes. Learn [more here](#)¹⁸.

WE ARE HERE TO HELP

There are plenty of further resources [on our Website](#)¹⁹. Our Toolkits are there to give you more detailed guidance, and there are case studies of businesses like yours, lists of partner organisations to support you in this work as well as articles and webinars to enrich your understanding, and inspire you on this journey towards greater socio-economic diversity and inclusion.



18 <https://socialmobilityworks.org/toolkit/data/>

19 <https://socialmobilityworks.org/>

20 <https://socialmobilityworks.org/toolkit/data/>

Make a plan

Use the evidence you obtained to set objectives and create a plan of action for improving socio-economic diversity and inclusion within your business.

Learn more [about strategy here](#)²⁰.

! REMEMBER

All buildings start with the laying of those first blocks.

Start with the right mindset and belief in socio-economic inclusion – you will have challenges and hurdles to overcome. Start with a base of commitment and conviction for your actions. Prove a concept, show the value of it, and go from there.

Developed by: Social Mobility Commission

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Partners resources:

CIPD – Managing inclusion in the workplace

<https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/relations/diversity>

CMI – resources on socio-economic background

<https://www.managers.org.uk/knowledge-and-insights/professional-practice/socio-economic-background>

ICAEW – Social mobility and inclusion

<https://www.icaew.com/technical/economy/social-mobility-and-inclusion>

Social Mobility Foundation - Get involved

<https://www.socialmobility.org.uk/get-involved/>

The Law Society – Social Mobility Hub

<https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/campaigns/social-mobility/>

APPENDIX A

Key Terms



Socio-economic background

Socio-economic background refers to the particular set of social and economic circumstances that an individual has come from. It permits objective discussion of the influence of these circumstances on individuals' educational and career trajectories. It can be objectively measured by capturing information on parental occupation and level of education.

Social class

Class can be a loaded term. Class encompasses a range of socio-cultural and geographical factors. Objective measures of assessing family income may not necessarily match up with individuals' perceptions of their social class status, and individuals may feel less comfortable talking about social class. However, class can invoke a range of tacit assumptions and practices, from how to dress and talk, to food choices and hobbies, and using it can expose the negative ways that these assumptions affect attitudes and behaviours. In this toolkit, we use the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification groupings.

Those from 'professional' backgrounds are from managerial and professional backgrounds. Examples include CEOs, senior police officers, doctors, journalists, barristers, solicitors, teachers and nurses. Those from 'working class' backgrounds are from routine and manual occupations. Examples include receptionists, electricians, plumbers, butchers and van drivers.

Social mobility

Social mobility is the link between an individual's income and occupation and the income and occupation of their parents. It is about where people end up in comparison to their parents or relative to their peers. It is widely adopted as a way of describing the importance of creating opportunities for individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds to enable them to become more economically successful.

Diversity

This term captures the importance of recognising and valuing difference among individuals, e.g. along the lines of gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background, sexual orientation, age

or disability. It generally refers to increasing the representation of groups that are under-represented in organisations. It must, however, be understood alongside 'inclusion'. Diversity in and of itself does not result in an inclusive environment.

Inclusion

This is the meaningful achievement of diversity. This involves creating the conditions to ensure individuals from diverse backgrounds are valued and treated equally, feel empowered and are able to progress.

If you have any comments or suggestions for improvements to future versions, please email:

contact@socialmobilitycommission.gov.uk

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