



Social Mobility
Commission



Innovation Generation: next steps for social mobility

2024



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About the Commission

The Social Mobility Commission is an independent advisory non-departmental public body established under the Life Chances Act 2010 as modified by the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016. It has a duty to assess progress in improving social mobility in the UK and to promote social mobility in England. The Commission board comprises:

Chair

Alun Francis OBE, Chief Executive of Blackpool and The Fylde College.

Deputy Chairs

Resham Kotecha, Head of Policy at the Open Data Institute.

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Executive summary

This document sets out the Social Mobility Commission's long-term approach to improving social mobility in the UK. It argues that:

Social mobility policy has typically focused disproportionately and too narrowly on disadvantaged young people's access to university and professional careers.

A wider approach is needed, with an emphasis on economic growth and innovation – which is essential if we seek to increase opportunity for all.

We also need a stronger evidence base, particularly in relation to which policy interventions work, where and why.

The increase in university access in recent years is to be welcomed, but should go alongside a more coherent and better-evidenced approach to vocational education and training, including apprenticeships.

In particular, we should pay much more attention to how we can best support young people who are not in education, employment or training, and those with no qualifications at all, who are much more likely to be economically inactive.

We should move away from a “one size fits all” approach. The evidence suggests that social mobility and opportunity vary significantly between different areas, and place-based strategies are required to understand and address local challenges.

Existing and forthcoming devolution deals offer an opportunity to develop a joined-up approach, particularly linking employment and skills together.

We need to consider the role of geography in educational performance, and to develop a significantly more sophisticated understanding of disadvantage than the current binary division based on eligibility for free school meals.

We also need a more comprehensive understanding of how to effectively support disadvantaged families, particularly during their children's early years.

The SMC has committed to a broad programme of research in these areas, including a project on the role of the economy in improving social mobility and a series of deep dives into areas with high and low social mobility.



Foreword

Alun Francis OBE,
Chair of the Social Mobility Commission

In September 2024, the Social Mobility Commission (SMC) published *State of the Nation 2024* – the twelfth and most recent of the annual reports that the SMC is legally required to publish about the progress of social mobility in the UK.¹ In addition to *State of the Nation*, the SMC has published numerous reports, papers and think pieces on subjects ranging from the value of qualifications in the labour market and the effects of growing up in a deprived area to the data practices required to improve our understanding of social mobility.²

Now, drawing on our recent publications, we set out our interpretation of the evidence. There are barriers to opportunity in our country and they mean that too many people are not fulfilling their potential, socially or economically. Too often, however, policies designed to improve social mobility have been based on unhelpful narratives. They present access to opportunities in binary terms, creating a caricature of ‘disadvantage’ and ‘non-disadvantage’.

Such approaches are sometimes understandable, because the data we need to measure and assess social mobility is not always easily available. But it is important to challenge simplistic thinking. Those who are born into difficult circumstances, or experience other challenges which prevent them from achieving their potential, deserve to know that

many can take advantage of opportunities available, achieve and ‘move up’.

For example, in 2022, among those from a lower working-class background in the UK, around 70% of those aged 25 to 64 years experienced either short or long-range upward mobility, and 32% experienced long-range upward mobility into the professional classes. It is true, of course, that the comparative (or relative) chances of this happening are different, depending on which socio-economic group someone originates in. Those born to parents in higher professional occupations are more likely to obtain similar types of employment. But this does not mean that privilege always generates privilege. In fact, 67% of people from higher professional backgrounds experienced downward mobility into lower professional (32%), intermediate (17%) or working-class (18%) occupations.³

It is important, therefore, not to think about opportunities and social mobility in terms of rigid ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’. When we consider socio-economic background, this is best understood as a spectrum, with some extreme differences at the top and the bottom, but a more graduated set of differences in the middle. There are also significant differences in outcomes within, as well as between, people from apparently similar socio-economic backgrounds.

¹ The SMC has a statutory duty to assess progress in improving social mobility in the UK and to promote social mobility in England. For this reason, when discussing areas (such as education) where systems differ between the four constituent nations of the UK, this report focuses on England.

² Social Mobility Commission, ‘[Our research](#)’. Published on [SOCIALMOBILITY.INDEPENDENT-COMMISSION.UK](#).

³ Social Mobility Commission, ‘[State of the Nation 2023: people and places](#)’, 2023. Published on [GOV.UK](#).



Too often, it is assumed that the relationship between socio-economic origins and destinations is deterministic, but that cannot be true, or we would not observe the upward and downward movement which the data describes. Other factors, such as sex, ethnicity and disability also play a part, but so too do factors such as geography, place, neighbourhood and family. And there is almost certainly a role for two issues which the policy literature is relatively silent about: abilities (of different kinds) and culture.

Part of the problem is that the data only gets us so far. Some of this is due to the limited availability of relevant data in the UK, as we highlighted in our 2022 report, *Data for Social Mobility*. However, it is also because broad statistical patterns do not translate simply into individual narratives. Real human beings are rarely, typical of the average. And when we assume that they are, it becomes very difficult to know if practical interventions are targeted

at the right people. Almost all of our targeted interventions to address disadvantage gaps, from early years programmes and Pupil Premium to contextualised admission and contextualised recruitment, appear to run into problems of this kind. The data tells us that the ‘disadvantaged’, however defined, include some who are going to struggle and some who do relatively well. But it doesn’t tell us how to spot the difference.

Just as there are problems identifying the ‘truly disadvantaged’, there are problems identifying those whose achievements are simply an expression of privilege. Such people almost certainly exist, and the notion that they do is certainly prevalent in the social mobility policy world. But it is difficult to be specific about exactly who they are. The private- versus state-educated binary narrative does not really work, not least because there is substantial privilege within elements of the state sector.

The measure of parental occupation at age 14 years is often regarded as the most reliable indicator of socio-economic background, but this assumes a lot in a world where families have changed and so have occupations. And while other data, such as the Index of Multiple Deprivation, might help in terms of understanding general patterns, the same issue holds in that individual narratives are not considered in these metrics. There are also different outcomes within 'privileged' groups. Given the importance of high skills and sophisticated knowledge in a modern economy, it is important to understand how these are fostered – and this will not be achieved if 'privilege' is the sole answer.



There are undoubtedly ways of accounting for the nuances and complexities of social mobility, without becoming confused and lost in the detail. The key to good policy is to use the data to identify general patterns, but to interpret the findings carefully. This means being aware of the strengths and limitations of the data, and being sensitive to the real social and economic context in which real lives happen.

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It is important not to think about the social mobility 'problem' as a one-size-fits-all challenge. Arguably, social mobility policy – along with the education system in many respects – has been cast in the image of 'the professions' and the pathways into them. While this is understandable, given the dominance of 'higher professional' occupations in terms of elite employment, it ends up defining our social mobility challenge – and with it the rich and diverse talents of our people – in a very narrow way.

We call this the 'lucky few' approach, which aims to change social mobility outcomes by increasing the proportion of elite professionals from humble origins. This usually takes the form of finding academically able but disadvantaged young people, and preparing them for entry to elite universities and elite occupations. Interventions take the form of coaching, mentoring and additional training, combined with changes to entry requirements to 'contextualise' for disadvantage. While such approaches may be helpful to some individuals, they are typically small-scale, and have not had a noticeable impact on social mobility as a whole. [W](#)



If we want social mobility to have meaning beyond the ‘lucky few’, it is important to realign social mobility policy so that it more directly addresses the real obstacles to opportunity which characterise our times. We have identified four ‘big issues’ which need to be addressed. They are the slowdown in the rate of growth in higher-level occupations; the problem of the people and places who are ‘left behind’; regional and geographical disparities; and the reduction in opportunities for young adults today compared to their parents. Each of these undermines confidence that our economic and social system can create opportunities for everyone, and each requires us to think differently about social mobility.

Each of these challenges is linked to the need for a different kind of economy, with a far greater diversity of opportunities, and many more ways of taking advantage of them. We need a stronger, more innovative economy, creating wealth and opportunity through improved productivity. At the centre

of innovation is the generation of a greater volume of good-quality, skilled and well-paid jobs. Expanding opportunities in the professions (and challenging barriers to entry into these professions) is important, but only part of the story. Real change requires enterprise, entrepreneurialism and a wider range of technical skills and knowledge, across a wide range of economic sectors.

This is an important point, because it is the access to the professions the elite universities provide, in large part, which determines their hugely important role in allocating opportunity. But an innovative economy challenges the accepted ways of doing things, because it thrives on the disruption associated with new challengers arriving and displacing the established elites. We produced a think piece on innovation and social mobility which described this process.⁴ We now need to champion policies which will support it in practice.

⁴ Social Mobility Commission, ‘[Innovation and social mobility: two sides of the same coin](#)’, 2024. Published on [SOCIALMOBILITY.INDEPENDENT-COMMISSION.UK](#).

What the SMC is seeking to explore – and something which has been notably absent from policy full stop – is a comprehensive explanation for the interplay between limited economic opportunity, and the pattern of persistently weak educational attainment evident in so many places, particularly post-industrial and seaside towns along with rural areas.

Improved social mobility does not, however, arise only from more competitive and open elites. It also depends on the benefits of this process extending across society and creating opportunities for others. The big issue here is that our economy does not do this, as it is so highly concentrated in London and its surrounds, and the country as a whole is characterised by significant and deeply entrenched regional disparities. Again, we have written about these recently in the form of a think piece.⁵ We have also systematically reported on the importance of geography and place in shaping opportunity across the country. There is a wider literature in economics which discusses how and why specific sectors and places dominate the UK economy,

and what the implications of this are for the country as a whole.⁶ The time has come to champion policies which will change this.

This does not mean abandoning everything which has been achieved to improve social mobility in recent years. We do need to be clearer, with stronger evaluation, about the evidence base for ‘what works’, but this does not mean that nothing has. In the workplace, for example, there has been some tremendous progress in the way that employers think about recruiting and developing talent. Our employer toolkits and advisory group show that there is a greater awareness of the need to look beyond the ‘signalling’ system, where qualifications from elite institutions have traditionally been used as an easy shorthand to identify suitable candidates.⁷ In education, there is a much stronger understanding of the institutional and pedagogical practices which early years, school and college providers should champion to create the best learning environment for disadvantaged pupils. We are arguing that these initiatives (and others) should continue, subject to better quality evaluation, but that they are not, on their own, enough. They work within the parameters of the existing economic model, whereas we need to foster the talent to disrupt it.

Where the evidence base is weakest, and the impact of policy appears to be most limited, is in how outcomes for the most disadvantaged can be improved. What the SMC is seeking to explore – and something which has been notably absent from policy full stop – is a comprehensive explanation for the interplay between limited economic opportunity, and the pattern of persistently weak educational attainment evident in so many places, particularly post-industrial and seaside towns along with rural areas.

5 Social Mobility Commission, ‘[Spatial agglomeration, productivity and inequality](#)’, 2024. Published on SOCIALMOBILITY.INDEPENDENT-COMMISSION.UK.

6 Diane Coyle and Jen-Chung Mei, ‘[Diagnosing the UK productivity slowdown: which sectors matter and why?](#)’ 2023. Published on ONLINELIBRARY.WILEY.COM; Jonathan Haskel and Stian Westlake, ‘[Restarting the future: how to fix the intangible economy](#)’, 2022. Published by PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS.

7 Social Mobility Commission, ‘[Socio-economic diversity and inclusion: employers’ toolkit](#)’, 2021. Published on SOCIALMOBILITY.INDEPENDENT-COMMISSION.UK.

The contrast between areas where educational performance has improved – with London being the shining beacon of success – and those stuck in a consistent cycle of poor outcomes is, in our view, the educational challenge of our time. Our evidence shows that it is much better to be young and disadvantaged in our capital city than to be from an equivalent background anywhere else in the country. To some extent this can undoubtedly be explained (and therefore remedied) by looking at the institutions, educational practices and demographic mix involved, but place-based improvement initiatives such as Education Action Zones (in the late 1990s/early 2000s) and Opportunity Areas (in the late 2010s) have not had the hoped-for impact.⁸

It is unlikely that better long-term solutions can be developed without considering neighbourhood, community and family factors. It is equally likely that these are connected to the wider structure of opportunity, which is fundamentally economic, and which we consider is central to improving social mobility. The evidence suggests that innovative economies provide greater opportunities – including for those who have the least, even where they have relatively low skills.⁹

To summarise, our approach to social mobility acknowledges the importance of education, schools and early years, in shaping opportunity and nurturing the talent of our country. But we are different in the emphasis we give to three things: first, the importance of an innovative, dynamic economy; second, the value of high-quality vocational training and of supporting those not in training or work at all; and third, the role of neighbourhood, community and family in shaping the context in which opportunities are opened or closed.



The evidence suggests that innovative economies provide greater opportunities – including for those who have the least, even where they have relatively low skills.

⁸ A full evaluation of the Opportunity Areas programme has not yet been published.

⁹ Philippe Aghion, Céline Antonin and Simon Bunel, '[The power of creative destruction: economic upheaval and the wealth of nations](#)', 2021. Published by HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS.

In order to distinguish our approach, we have called our report “Innovation Generation”. For us, the foundations for effective social mobility are open and competitive markets combined with strong and clear interventions from the government, based on evidence. A strong and innovative economy can create a greater number of opportunities for a wider variety of people in a wider variety of places.

Stimulating economic growth and creating a successful society are two distinct, but complementary, challenges. The foundation of each is a high standard of general education, and then a strong system of developing applied skills and knowledge, with a variety of routes for moving into the workplace, recognising people’s different interests and talents. This has to go hand in hand with addressing our fundamental economic challenges of productivity, innovation and regional disparities – and, crucially, it must be based on strong evidence and better data collection and policy evaluation. This must be combined with a better understanding of those areas where the private sector economy has been weak, where opportunity has been limited, and the impact this has had on

communities, neighbourhoods and families.

We are not claiming to have all the solutions to improving social mobility. There is a great deal of further work to be done. Our work so far has concentrated on building up the evidence base, challenging some myths about social mobility, arguing the case for a different view, and linking our ‘social mobility problem’ to the real challenges of improving opportunity across the country.

What this amounts to is a redefinition and reorientation of the social mobility challenge, and a new framework for discussion and debate, rather than a set of detailed policy prescriptions. We make some broad recommendations, however, of which the most important is that improvements to social mobility are best understood geographically and that place-based solutions will therefore be the key focus in the future. We will be developing more detailed proposals in this space. For now, we are pleased to present a fresh approach to social mobility policy and encourage policymakers and stakeholders to join us in the debate.



Introduction

Successive UK governments have expressed their commitment to improving social mobility. However, there has been considerable frustration about the limited impact of policies and interventions designed to do so. There are complex reasons for this. One is a lack of consistent evaluation, with the result that too few areas of policy have a strong evidence base. This is related to policy churn (too many changes in the government approach, before anything has a chance to work, and no consistent focus). It may also be that there is insufficient understanding of the real factors which are driving different outcomes, and therefore a lack of focus on the interventions most likely to work. Perhaps even more importantly, we argue that our ‘social mobility problem’ is ill-defined in the first place. It is associated with a narrow conception of long upward mobility for the ‘lucky few’, obscuring wider barriers to opportunity, and the need to think about the different meanings and definitions which social mobility may have.

We are not alone in being sceptical about the conventional approach to social mobility. It is important to be mindful of the concerns that critics have. Alongside the ‘lucky few’ argument are several other criticisms. One is that social mobility is about equalising outcomes between groups while ignoring inequalities within those groups. Another is that the equalisation process is unrealistic and depends on far too much social engineering to achieve it, even partially. Another is that such interventions amount to a ‘zero-sum game’ because the success of a winner must be matched by someone else’s loss (although policy evaluations are remarkably silent about who the losers might be in any given intervention). Very importantly, it must be noted that social mobility is a value-laden concept, and those values may not be shared by everyone – and differences in attitudes to social mobility may contribute to the different outcomes associated with different groups.¹⁰



For some, these criticisms are so serious that they suggest abandoning social mobility in favour of other approaches to equality of opportunity, especially ones which emphasise “opportunities for self-realisation rather than social advancement”.¹¹ We have some sympathies with this latter approach, because it means that any individual, no matter where they are in life, can seek to fulfil their potential and improve their situation – without being measured against external yardsticks which they have not chosen. A serious weakness of conventional social mobility theory is that, whether it is based on a hierarchy of occupations or of income, it asserts these as the objective measure of progress for individuals and groups. But people may not share these values, and may think very differently about how they measure their progress in life. Many people make huge progress but without this resulting in significant movement up or down the occupational hierarchy, or without considerable changes in income compared to the family they grew up in.

The notion that people can and do have social mobility and can move up and down, however this is measured, is an important feature of modern societies, in terms both of economic efficiency and fairness. But it needs to be balanced against other views and values.

¹⁰ Social Market Foundation, ‘[Social mobility and its critics](#)’, 2023. Published on SMF.CO.UK.

¹¹ Social Market Foundation, ‘[Social mobility and its critics](#)’, 2023. Published on SMF.CO.UK.

Social mobility is likely to mean different things, to different people, in different places. And policymakers should be sensitive to this.

We do not, therefore, consider that we should jettison the concept of social mobility altogether. What we advocate is a pluralist approach, which recognises that social mobility does not have one fixed meaning, definition or measure. This means that we recognise the benefits of a broad analysis of the origins and destinations of individuals belonging to different groups, and of course have contributed to and deepened this analysis in our successive State of the Nation reports. However, we also recognise the limitations of this approach and acknowledge that there is no “one size fits all” model, to which all individuals and groups must conform. Social mobility is likely to mean different things, to different people, in different places. And policymakers should be sensitive to this.

Our approach means that we have to distinguish different kinds of social mobility, measured in different ways, so we have provided an easy-to-understand summary of the key definitions on pages 16 to 17 below. To put our argument in simple terms, using this technical vocabulary, our current challenges around improving opportunity in the UK have more to do with changes to absolute social mobility, measured in terms of occupation and income, than relative social mobility. Viewed from this perspective, the remedies for removing obstacles to opportunity mean that we must start with the economy to improve the quantity of good-quality opportunities, and with geography if we want to understand the distribution of these and the complex factors shaping underachievement and underperformance for those who have the least.

This marks a significant departure from previous approaches, which have tended to concentrate on education as the magic potion for improving social mobility. This is true in many respects, but it ignores the context in which education either does or does not work its spell. The economy is critical in terms of growing opportunities, and economy, place, community, neighbourhood and family are all critical in shaping their distribution and accessibility.

What is social mobility?



What do we mean when we talk about social mobility? As with many abstract concepts, the more we try to unpack it, the more complex it appears. This is not always apparent from some of the coverage of this issue, much of which takes the concept for granted and fails to explain or interrogate the particular set of measures on which it bases its arguments.

Therefore, unpacking the different definitions and metrics we use to measure social mobility is a helpful way to ground our approach. This also explains why different organisations take different approaches and suggests where more data may be needed.

Key social mobility metrics

Occupational versus income mobility

A person experiences occupational mobility if their occupation is in a different occupational class from that of their parent(s). At the Social Mobility Commission (SMC), we use 5 occupational categories: 'higher professional and managerial', 'lower professional and managerial', 'intermediate', 'higher working class', and 'lower working class'.¹² Occupational measures have the longest track record in terms of research.

A person experiences income mobility if they have a different income level from their parent(s) at the same age. Income measures are harder to use because we have gaps in the UK data, which relies on a small number of long-term panel studies and is not as comprehensive as some other countries (such as the US, which links tax records between parents and their children, allowing detailed intergenerational comparisons).

Social mobility has been a major topic of research both in sociology and economics, with sociologists tending to concentrate on occupational class mobility and economists on income mobility. It's important to be clear which measure we are using when, and why. Of course, there is some correlation between the two measures, as people in the upper occupational categories are likely to have above-average earnings too, and vice versa. However, the two measures can also diverge; sometimes people in lower occupational classes earn more than those in higher occupational classes. To quote an example from the State of the Nation report 2024, speech and language therapists count as higher professionals because their job requires a first degree for entry and experience-related training, and the practical application of a body of knowledge to instruct others. Yet their average salary is lower than that of many working-class occupations, including some routine manual occupations.

¹² Social Mobility Commission, '[State of the Nation 2024: local to national, mapping opportunities for all](#)', 2024. Published on SOCIALMOBILITY.INDEPENDENT-COMMISSION.UK – see pages 23 to 25.

Relative versus absolute mobility

Absolute mobility rates show the percentage of people who are in a different occupational or income class from their parents, whereas relative measures compare the chances that at least 2 groups have of reaching, versus avoiding, a particular outcome. Low relative mobility means that those who start life in a particular position are more likely than those in another group to be in the same position later in life.

Relative social mobility is useful when we are comparing the chances of one social group (for instance, those from a lower working-class background) of changing their occupational or income category compared to another social group (for instance, those from an intermediate background). However, too much focus on relative social mobility can mask significant improvements in absolute upward mobility.

The current government has expressed particular interest in one specific measure that combines relative and absolute elements – that of intergenerational income elasticity (IGE), which measures the persistence of income levels from one generation to the next. Its relative element is the strength of the link between parents' and children's incomes, while its absolute element is the spread of incomes in one generation versus the next. A higher elasticity implies either a closer link between parents' incomes and that of their children or higher income inequality in the children's generation, or (most probably) a mix of the two. A lower elasticity would mean that the children's income was less dependent on their parents' income, and/or that income inequality had reduced. Of course, if income inequality overall becomes lower then the link between parents' and their children's income has less impact on the children's lives than if income inequality is high, which is one argument in favour of combining both in a single measure. We discuss IGE further on page 26 below.

Long-term versus intermediate mobility outcomes

Typically, social mobility outcomes are measured based on people's occupation or income in their 40s or 50s. However, we have now developed a range of intermediate outcomes, based on people's experiences in their 20s and 30s. This enables us to better understand younger people's trajectory and the challenges they may be facing; it also means that we can understand emerging trends sooner.

Upwards versus downwards mobility

All types of mobility can be either upwards or downwards. Typically, we concentrate on upward mobility, because we want to find out how many people are moving up the occupational or income ladder and support them to do so. However, it is important that we also understand how many people find themselves in lower occupational or income groups than their parents, and why that might be.





Interpreting the evidence

Occupational and income measures

Total absolute occupational mobility has remained stable for decades, and the UK rate is comparable to those of other European countries that are at a similar stage in the evolution of their labour markets.^{13 14}

The same can be said for relative income mobility and relative occupational mobility in the UK; the latter has actually slightly improved over the last decade.¹⁵

However, as the State of the Nation report 2023 demonstrates, upward occupational mobility has slowed for the generations born in the 1980s, compared to their predecessors, while downward mobility has increased.

Upward mobility is still higher than downward mobility, but the surplus of upward over downward mobility is decreasing, since the structure of the labour market is not changing as quickly as it did in the post-war period.¹⁶

Absolute upward income mobility, which was relatively good for people born before the mid-1970s, also seems to have declined for those born from the mid-1980s onwards.¹⁷ More recent data shows that pay progression between generations is stalling, and in some cases reversing, which may also blunt absolute upward income mobility. For instance, real median hourly pay for both graduates and non-graduates aged 30 to 34 years was lower in 2022 than 15 years before.¹⁸

13 Social Mobility Commission, '[State of the Nation 2022: a fresh approach to social mobility](#)', 2022. Published on SOCIALMOBILITY.INDEPENDENT-COMMISSION.UK.

14 Erzsébet Bukodi and John Goldthorpe, '[Social mobility and education in Britain: research, politics and policy](#)', 2019. Published on CAMBRIDGE.ORG.

15 Social Mobility Commission, '[State of the Nation 2023: people and places](#)', 2023. Published on SOCIALMOBILITY.INDEPENDENT-COMMISSION.UK. See page 67, figure 2.10.

16 Social Mobility Commission, '[State of the Nation 2023: people and places](#)', 2023. Published on SOCIALMOBILITY.INDEPENDENT-COMMISSION.UK. See pages 52, figure 2.0 (men) and 55, figure 2.2 (women).

17 Social Mobility Commission, '[State of the Nation 2023: people and places](#)', 2023. Published on SOCIALMOBILITY.INDEPENDENT-COMMISSION.UK. See page 77, figure 2.14.

18 Resolution Foundation, '[An intergenerational audit for the UK](#)', 2021. Published on RESOLUTION FOUNDATION.ORG.

Wider perceptions

As this summary suggests, the overall picture of social mobility is complex. Compared to previous generations, the working class has shrunk and the middle class has expanded, so those born in the 1980s seeking upward mobility are going to experience more intense competition. As we said in the State of the Nation report 2022:

“There are now fewer people at the bottom of the social ladder to make big leaps in social status, and more people starting life higher up, with less room to climb. Together, these changes mean that, although the total mobility rate has stayed the same, younger generations of men and women are more likely to experience downward mobility and less likely to experience upward mobility than their parents or grandparents.”¹⁹

Recent findings suggest that the generation born in the early 1980s is almost as likely to move down as up, though this is probably a reflection of the fact that there are now more people in professional jobs in the first place.

This trend does seem to be associated with higher anxiety about opportunities. The proportion of people saying it is very difficult to move from one class to another has increased from 17% in 2005 to 32% in 2022, while the proportion of people who say that it is “not very difficult” to move from one class to another has declined from 1 in 3 (33%) to just 1 in 9 (11%).²⁰

Closely related to this issue, though not included in the social mobility indicators outlined on pages 16 to 17, is wealth and particularly housing. In 2022, the average house in the UK cost around 9 times as much as the average annual earnings, a level not seen since the 19th century (and



as recently as the mid-1990s, the multiple was only 4 times).²¹ In London, the current multiple is 12 times. Adults from almost all backgrounds are finding it more difficult to buy their first homes. This has a differential impact, depending on family circumstances, geography and social background, which is compounded by rising rents in major cities and increasing difficulties in accessing social housing. Of course, this may also limit young adults’ career opportunities, if they cannot afford to live in the cities where the broadest range of jobs can be found.

The increase in housing prices (and of assets such as non-UK equities which younger people are less likely to own) has also resulted in an increasing disparity in wealth accumulation across generations; and the link between parents’ home ownership and that of their children has become stronger, consistently and significantly, since 1991.^{22 23} The housing issues indicate that measuring social mobility only via occupations or income is now too limited. Consumption is equally important as an indicator of progress in life.

19 Erzsébet Bukodi and others, ‘[The mobility problem in Britain: new findings from the analysis of birth cohort data](#)’, 2014. Published on [ONLINE LIBRARY.WILEY.COM](#).

20 Oliver Heath and Monica Bennett, ‘[British social attitudes: social class](#)’, 2023. Published on [NATCEN.AC.UK](#).

21 Schroders, ‘[What 175 years of data tell us about house price affordability in the UK](#)’, 2023. Published on [SCHRODERS.COM](#).

22 Resolution Foundation, ‘[An intergenerational audit for the UK](#)’, 2021. Published on [RESOLUTIONFOUNDATION.ORG](#).

23 Social Mobility Commission, ‘[State of the Nation 2023: people and places](#)’, 2023. Published on [SOCIALMOBILITY.INDEPENDENT-COMMISSION.UK](#).

Moving forward



Given this background, it is easy to see why the Government has chosen to focus on improving opportunity for all. But how can it most effectively address the many issues that it has identified?

All discussions of social mobility must begin by recognising that many of the things we would like to know more about are constrained by the limitations of the data. In the absence of reliable data, researchers have to build complex models, based on assumptions. Some of these will be more reliable than others – and none of them, by definition, help understand individual pathways and trajectories. Our understanding of these is even more limited.

One of our priorities has been to identify where we need more data and analysis. However, to do this effectively, we also need to decide what the key issues are. As the summary on pages 16 to 17 of the different metrics we use for social mobility suggests, there is no one single approach to understanding social mobility, and no single problem we are trying to address.

Where should policymakers concentrate their efforts?

Conventional approaches to social mobility have focused on addressing low upward mobility from the bottom to the top. These have therefore prioritised supporting academically able ‘disadvantaged’ students to secure places at elite universities (typically members of the Russell Group) and prestigious employers, in order to achieve a better socio-economic balance within elite occupations.

Of course, there are reasons for this approach. It is clearly important that able people from all backgrounds can access professional careers – not just for them as individuals, but to ensure that such professions benefit from having the best people, from a variety of representative backgrounds.

However, this focus on the ‘lucky few’ risks being too narrow, benefiting as it does only a small number of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (it has therefore been described as ‘helicopter mobility’).²⁴ It often assumes that it is the role of admissions and recruitment functions to reduce the gap between applicants from different backgrounds, and has therefore resulted in a focus on ‘contextualised admissions’ and ‘contextualised recruitment’, whereby people from lower socio-economic backgrounds need to meet a lower

bar than other applicants. This certainly helps a small number of people, but it risks social mobility policy becoming a zero-sum game, as we are intervening to help one person at someone else’s expense. We are usually completely unaware of who those missing out might be. It is often assumed that they must be someone ‘advantaged’, with the assumption being that this is fairer, but there do not appear to be any studies which collate this evidence.

This approach also makes social mobility irrelevant to the majority, because it only focuses on long-term upward mobility from the bottom to the top. It pays little attention to shorter-range mobility and very little attention to downward mobility. And it makes relative mobility more important than absolute mobility, when arguably it is absolute social mobility which has been the key driver of better outcomes in recent history.

For broader sustained upward mobility to be possible, and to escape from the zero-sum approach, we need occupational change – a growth of opportunities creating more room in the upper bands of occupation and income. We explore this crucial point in more detail in the Growing Opportunities section on pages 30 to 33.

²⁴ Anna Mountford-Zimdars and others, ‘[Helicopter mobility: changing habitus without challenging structural inequalities, experiences of an international elite education programme](#)’, 2023. Published on BERA-JOURNALS.ONLINELIBRARY.WILEY.COM.



The role of geography and disadvantage

When we consider the evidence relating to social mobility, it is not only socio-economic background which needs to be considered. If we take group outcomes as a measure, we must recognise the differences between groups in terms of ethnicity, sex and disability. These are all important parts of the social mobility story in the UK. While each sheds some light, none is the total explanation. There is a factor however, which has not featured enough – and that is geography. This is illustrated in the State of the Nation report 2023 and in more detail in State of the Nation 2024.²⁵

Closely linked to this is the complex relationship between social mobility and material disadvantage. The latter is undoubtedly a serious problem in the UK; recent Department for Work and Pensions data suggests that, in 2022/23, 25% of children in the UK were living in absolute poverty after housing costs, and 30% were living in relative poverty after housing costs.²⁶ We need to understand when and what role material disadvantage plays in determining life outcomes and how it is related to other factors.²⁷

However, the relationship between the two is by no means deterministic. The evidence shows that many people from the same socio-economic origins do move up (and down) the occupational and income ladders. For instance, SMC data shows that in 2022 only 34% of those aged 25 to 29 years from a lower working-class background worked in a lower working-class occupation or were unemployed; the remaining 66% were working in upper working-class, intermediate or professional occupations.

The factors which sit behind this sort of movement are masked when social mobility is reduced to a question of inequality. This is not to deny the connection between material circumstances and social mobility outcomes – but the question is when and under what circumstances this makes a difference.

This applies for those at the bottom, seeking to move up, but also those in the middle (although this issue is under-researched). Understanding it is important, if the assumption is that obstacles to talent should be removed, as far as possible.



²⁵ Social Mobility Commission, '[Promising prospects](#)', 2024. Published on [SOCIAL-MOBILITY.DATA.GOV.UK](#).

²⁶ UK Parliament, '[Poverty in the UK: statistics](#)', 2024. Published on [COMMONSLIBRARY.PARLIAMENT.UK](#).

²⁷ Susan Mayer, '[What money can't buy: family income and children's life chances](#)', 1997. Published on [HUP.HARVARD.EDU](#)

Is education the answer?

While social mobility in the UK may have stalled on some metrics, education mobility has been a great success. Over the past 20 years, the proportion of students (including disadvantaged students) achieving good GCSEs has significantly increased.²⁸ Far more young people now attend university than a generation ago, even if their parents did not. The socio-economic background gap in university enrolment is narrowing; in 2014, young people from higher professional backgrounds were 3.9 times more likely to be studying for a degree than those from lower working-class backgrounds, while in 2022 they were only 2.2 times more likely.²⁹ University has enabled many young people to combine acquiring higher qualifications with relocation to university towns and cities that offer better employment prospects.

However, there are important geographical differences in achievement. For instance, in 2023, 42.1% of students eligible for free school meals (FSM) in Inner London (West) achieved a Grade 5 or above in both English and maths, compared to 17.3% in Merseyside and 17% in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight.³⁰ And there are variations in progression to higher education. In 2022, over half of FSM-eligible pupils in Inner London progressed to HE by age 19 years in 2022/23, compared to 29% nationally and fewer than a fifth in the South West.³¹

Moreover, while better educational qualifications make upward occupational and income mobility much more likely, they are no guarantee of later success. While the employment rate for graduates has increased over recent years, many of these graduates are in occupations traditionally filled by non-graduates – 33% as of 2023.³² There is a strong geographical factor in this;

rates of graduates working in non-graduate roles are particularly high outside London and the South East.³³ Moreover, the under-utilisation of graduates in the UK – particularly outside of London – has contributed to the erosion of the “graduate pay premium”. Real median pay for graduates aged 30 to 34 year has declined more sharply over the past 15 years than for non-graduates of the same age.³⁴ Coupled with the costs (both upfront and student debt) of university study, this situation has understandably resulted in some of those who have committed their time and effort to gaining a degree questioning the financial value of doing so.

There is a noticeable disparity between the extent to which different ethnic groups in the UK from a disadvantaged background gain a financial benefit from education. Disadvantaged children from all ethnic minority backgrounds get better GCSE results, and are more likely to go to university, than their White British counterparts.³⁵ However, these educational advantages do not necessarily result in better employment prospects. Disadvantaged young White British men, who are least likely of all groups to attend university, have better earnings aged 28 years, compared to their level of educational attainment, than most other ethnic groups. Ethnic minority young people are also underrepresented in apprenticeships.³⁶

When we look at these sorts of disparities, we need to understand more about why some people do not do as well as others. While socio-economic background, gender and ethnicity all play a role, none explain the whole story. Almost certainly, we need to look beyond education to explain this – at geography, the economy, culture, families and communities.

28 Institute for Fiscal Studies, ‘[Education inequalities](#)’, 2022. Published on IFS.ORG.UK. See figure 28.

29 Social Mobility Commission, ‘[State of the Nation 2023: people and places](#)’, 2023 and ‘[State of the Nation 2024: local to national, mapping opportunities for all](#)’, 2024. Published on SOCIALMOBILITY.INDEPENDENT-COMMISSION.UK.

30 Social Mobility Commission, ‘[Attainment at age 16](#)’, 2024. Published on SOCIAL-MOBILITY.DATA.GOV.UK

31 Gov.UK, ‘[Widening participation in higher education](#)’, 2024. Published on EXPLORE-EDUCATION-STATISTICS.SERVICE.GOV.UK.

32 Resolution Foundation, ‘[An intergenerational audit for the UK](#)’, 2023. Published on RESOLUTIONFOUNDATION.ORG.

33 Resolution Foundation, ‘[An intergenerational audit for the UK](#)’, 2023. Published on RESOLUTIONFOUNDATION.ORG.

34 Resolution Foundation, ‘[An intergenerational audit for the UK](#)’, 2023. Published on RESOLUTIONFOUNDATION.ORG.

35 Institute for Fiscal Studies, ‘[Intergenerational mobility in the UK: IFS Deaton review of inequalities](#)’, 2023. Published on IFS.ORG.UK.

36 Institute for Fiscal Studies, ‘[Intergenerational mobility in the UK: IFS Deaton review of inequalities](#)’, 2023. Published on IFS.ORG.UK.

While the employment rate for graduates has increased over recent years, many of these graduates are in occupations traditionally filled by non-graduates – 33% as of 2023. There is a strong geographical factor in this; rates of graduates working in non-graduate roles are particularly high outside London and the South East.



Setting targets

As well as considering what problems we need to solve, we need to decide what policy outcomes we want. At present we do not have any specific short- or medium-term targets for social mobility or any clear idea of how such targets could be defined.

Much campaigning work on social mobility seems to assume (though often without clearly stating this) that the outcomes for each socio-economic background should be the same, and that any discrepancy between group outcomes is therefore a problem, and a challenge to be solved.

However, there may be many reasons for the differences in outcomes – not only across socio-economic backgrounds, but also geographically and across different protected characteristics. If equal group outcomes were to be the measure of success in social mobility terms, it is important to consider what this would actually look like. Defined in these terms, we might have a perfect meritocracy, where people achieve success based purely on their ability rather than their family background. But this might still be a very unequal system, and possibly an unfair one, as equal outcomes at group level would not remove differences within groups. Furthermore, we might still be unclear about the factors which explain different outcomes – arising from a host of issues not directly linked to socio-economic background.

This government's published aim is to make the UK one of the fairest countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, reducing levels of intergenerational income elasticity to that of countries like Denmark, Finland and Norway (that is, from just over 0.4 at present to closer to 0.2).³⁷ No specific timeframe is given for this aspiration, though it is clear from the context that the government realises that this must be a very long-term goal.

This approach does have the benefit of setting a long-term ambition for social mobility, and in this respect is a step forward. However, the practical usefulness of measuring social



mobility through intergenerational income elasticity needs further work. This measure depends on data availability and consistency in measurement across countries. Comparisons are also complex because of different systems and levels of welfare and redistribution, social norms and family structures. It is our intention to work with the government to see how IGE can be used effectively and we will be lobbying for improved data to support this approach.

Of course, setting targets is only a small piece of the picture; we also need to work out how to get there. Clear evidence about the impact and value for money of specific interventions would make it easier to justify spending in future years.

In the light of these points, we are realigning our approach to social mobility with our current challenges, reordering our priorities so that they underpin a more effective programme to improve social mobility.

³⁷ Labour UK, '[Mission breaking down barriers](#)', Published on LABOUR.ORG.UK.

A hand holding a glowing lightbulb with a network of glowing nodes and lines in the background. The background is dark with a green tint, and the lightbulb is the central focus, emitting a warm glow. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

The SMC's new proposed approach

The role of data and analysis

Data is crucial to this exercise and throughout this paper we have highlighted where more data and analysis is needed to develop our understanding of the issues and how to usefully address them.

Since 2022, the SMC has focused on making the best use of the data which is available, for instance, by developing our new Social Mobility Index and our four composite indices, Promising Prospects, Conditions of Childhood, Labour Market Opportunities for Young People, and Innovation and Growth. We have also increased our focus on geography, breaking outcomes down by 203 upper-tier local authority areas.³⁸

However, we could take these analyses much further if we had the right data. For example, there are specific limitations in the UK in terms of data relating to income and households. This is in contrast to, for example, the US – whose researchers have been able to produce much more granular analyses of social mobility, linking income and households, over time and by geography. This has been done to great effect by Raj Chetty, who has led numerous studies on social mobility in the US which use anonymised data from federal income tax returns to map the trends in intergenerational mobility both geographically and over time.³⁹

In December 2022, the SMC produced a report, researched and written by the National Foundation for Educational Research, titled 'Data for Social Mobility: improving the collection and availability

of data on social mobility across government'.⁴⁰ This included a number of recommendations aimed at improving data sharing, data linking and data collection, including that the UK government should seek to develop a household-level dataset. If implemented, these recommendations would hugely improve the quality of information about social mobility.

This work is essential if social mobility is to be taken seriously. In the absence of good quality information, far too much research is based on making inferences from 'proxies', such as free school meals (FSM), the Index of Multiple Deprivation, or other similar measures.⁴¹ This very often leads to research findings that are binary and simplistic, creating very substantial difficulties in terms of who social mobility policies should target.

Loose definitions, supported by inadequate data, make it hard to identify who the 'disadvantaged' really are. This is accepted by a number of practitioners in the field, who have produced reports illustrating the problems, for example, of targeting "widening participation" initiatives for university entry, or of the use of FSM as an indicator.^{42 43} There are many other areas which lack reliable data. Schools and further education, for example, do not systematically collect data about family circumstances, with some evidence on income, but little on parental occupation or educational achievement. Without this, the impact of individual organisations and whole sectors on improving social mobility is difficult to evidence.

38 In some areas of the UK, local government is divided between a county council (upper-tier LA) and a district council (lower-tier LA), which are responsible for different services. In other areas, there is a single-tier (or 'unitary') LA instead.

39 Raj Chetty and others, '[Where is the land of opportunity? The geography of intergenerational mobility in the United States](#)', 2014. Published on ACADEMIC.OUP.COM.

40 Social Mobility Commission, '[Data for social mobility: improving the collection and availability of data across government](#)', 2022. Published on SOCIALMOBILITY.INDEPENDENT-COMMISSION.UK

41 Sutton Trust, '[Measuring disadvantage](#)', 2021. Published on SUTTONTRUST.COM.

42 Sutton Trust, '[25 years of university access](#)', 2023. Published on SUTTONTRUST.COM.

43 Stephen Gorard, Beng Huat See and Nadia Siddiqui, '[Making schools better for disadvantaged students: the international implications of evidence on effective school funding](#)', 2022. Published on ROUTLEDGE.COM.

Rather than following the traditional 'life cycle' approach of starting with young children and moving upwards, we have structured our approach to start by looking at the role of growth in social mobility policy, and then working backwards to understand what is needed at each stage.



Growing opportunities



Our starting point is to recognise the central importance of growing opportunities. By this, we mean access to careers in higher-skilled occupations. This was the key to the ‘golden age’ of social mobility when the economy generated a greater volume of higher-skilled occupations, thereby creating room for upward mobility. The changing shape of the country’s occupational structure has also driven the rise of mass higher education, as degree-level qualifications have become increasingly perceived as synonymous with the cognitive skills needed for intellectually demanding work.⁴⁴

However, as we said earlier, there are signs that this surplus is beginning to decline. It is also evident that the careers in sectors which require this level of qualification are not evenly spread geographically – and are in fact heavily concentrated within specific locations across the country. In particular, the financial and professional service sectors, which have driven economic growth and generated the larger share of the country’s wealth, are concentrated in London and the south-east, the only regions in the UK which pay more tax than they receives back via public spending.⁴⁵

The rest of the country, whose economic structure has changed radically as a consequence of deindustrialisation, is a net recipient of public spending – even major cities such as Birmingham and Manchester. This is linked to the fundamental economic problem which underpins the UK’s political economy: the chronic, long-term challenge of low productivity, which has suppressed not only growth but also improvement in real pay and living standards. In some ways, the UK has never really recovered from the global financial

crisis of 2007 to 2009, with annual GDP growth slowing from 3% on average between 1993 and 2007 to 1.5% between 2009 and 2023.⁴⁶

The UK’s weak productivity growth, and increasing productivity and capability gaps when compared with competitors such as the US, France and Germany, have been much discussed, with most analysts concluding that a lack of investment in physical and human capital is a major cause.⁴⁷ Unsurprisingly, London and the south-east are the only regions with labour productivity above the UK average – and, because of the clustering of well-paid jobs, with notoriously high housing costs.⁴⁸

As the SMC’s recent think piece on productivity and inequality argues, this “spatial agglomeration” restricts opportunities for highly skilled individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds who live in areas without easy access to London and cannot afford (or do not want) to relocate. It also means that lower-skilled people living in London and the south-east face prohibitively high housing costs and an occupationally segregated labour market.⁴⁹

Increasing productivity, particularly away from London and the south-east, must clearly be a priority for policymakers. National policies will always play a part; in particular, the government must ensure that enough attention is paid to creating the fair competitive conditions to allow hard work, talent and enterprise to thrive. Our recent think piece on occupational regulation raised interesting questions about whether some requirements for specific certification or training could be amended or removed to open up access to professions without compromising the quality of service or the safety of the consumer.⁵⁰

44 Brink Lindsey, ‘[Human capitalism: how economic growth has made us smarter-and more unequal](#)’, 2013. Published by PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS.

45 Office for National Statistics, ‘[Country and regional public sector finances. UK: financial year ending 2023](#)’, 2024. Published on ONS.GOV.UK.

46 UK Parliament, ‘[Low growth: the economy’s biggest challenge](#)’, 2024. Published on COMMONSLIBRARY.PARLIAMENT.UK.

47 John Van Reenen and Xuyi Yang, ‘[Cracking the productivity code: an international comparison of UK productivity](#)’, 2024. Published on EPRINTS.LSE.AC.UK.

48 Office for National Statistics, ‘[Regional and subregional labour productivity. UK: 2022](#)’, 2024. Published on ONS.GOV.UK.

49 Social Mobility Commission, ‘[Spatial agglomeration, productivity and inequality](#)’, 2024. Published on SOCIALMOBILITY.INDEPENDENT-COMMISSION.UK.

50 Social Mobility Commission, ‘[Occupational regulation and social mobility in the UK](#)’, 2024. Published on SOCIALMOBILITY.INDEPENDENT-COMMISSION.UK.



However, many of the drivers of productivity are fundamentally local – most obviously the transport network and digital connectivity, but also the complex interplay between employment opportunities and skills acquisition. For example, the proposed Industrial Strategy launched by the government in October 2024 outlines the importance of a place-based approach to skills development and career opportunities across a range of leading sectors and industries.⁵¹

An interesting case study here is the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, established in 2011, which is overseen by one of the UK's first “metro mayors”, with powers over areas including transport, skills, planning and housing. The role has been held since 2017 by Andy Burnham, who has launched a number of local initiatives, including the “Manchester Baccalaureate”, an ambitious plan to create new technical education pathways for students from age 14 years onwards.

Greater Manchester lags behind economically, with productivity 35% lower than London's. But, as a recent Resolution Foundation report argues, a local strategy focused on improving

transport links, increasing city-centre office space and supporting new housing in the right places could drive significant growth, potentially creating more than 200,000 new jobs for both high- and lower-skilled workers.⁵²

The Government has committed to supporting sustained economic growth in partnership with business, trade unions, local leaders and devolved administrations; and the inaugural meeting of the ‘Council of Nations and Regions’ brought together government, metro and local authority (LA) leaders to focus on investment and growth. However, a clear plan for how these and other leaders across civic society can best work collaboratively to address regional disparities is yet to be developed. It is essential that the government's growth mission fulfils its pledge to make innovation and productivity growth central to its delivery plans, and that these elements are more clearly articulated, including within devolution deals.

As our think piece on innovation and social mobility makes clear, any growth-focused local or regional strategy should also concentrate on attracting locally directed investment and promoting private-sector growth and innovation. This will create new higher-skilled jobs and, with the right training structures in place, simultaneously upskill workers in more junior roles.⁵³

A joined-up skills and employment strategy is crucial. It is clear that an increased supply of skilled jobs doesn't automatically result in UK citizens stepping into these jobs – the 2022 Employer Skills Survey suggests over a third of UK job vacancies were due to skills shortages.⁵⁴ Such shortages exist both at the national level and because of the immobility of labour, especially in non-graduate occupations.⁵⁵ Skills England, a new arms-length body, has now been set up to address these issues.⁵⁶

51 Gov.UK, ‘[Invest 2035: the UK's modern industrial strategy](#)’, 2024. Published on GOV.UK.

52 The Economy 2030 Inquiry, ‘[A tale of two cities \(part 2\)](#)’, 2023. Published on ECONOMY2030.RESOLUTIONFOUNDATION.ORG.

53 Social Mobility Commission, ‘[Innovation and social mobility: two sides of the same coin](#)’, 2024. Published on SOCIALMOBILITY.INDEPENDENT-COMMISSION.UK.

54 Department for Education, ‘[Employer skills survey: 2022](#)’, 2023. Published on GOV.UK.

55 Department for Education, ‘[Skills England: driving growth and widening opportunities](#)’, 2024. Published on GOV.UK.

56 Department for Education, ‘[Skills England: driving growth and widening opportunities](#)’, 2024. Published on GOV.UK.

Equally important are the government's proposals to increase devolution, giving more local areas the powers to agree long-term growth plans for specific sectors and set their own priorities for adult education, skills and employment support. There are various competing factors to be weighed up when deciding the nature and scope of any devolution deals – including to what extent devolved authorities should be able to develop their own bespoke educational pathways and qualifications. However, these deals offer genuinely exciting opportunities, potentially enabling local people to take ownership of their own futures and develop innovative solutions for local needs. They will need to focus relentlessly on the ultimate goal, which is to reduce regional disparities by fostering competitive markets and ensuring the whole community has the skills and capacity to engage in and benefit from them.

The SMC will undertake further work around the theme of social mobility and economic opportunities, with a focus on ensuring that the benefits of growth are widely shared, both geographically and across those of all. We also want to understand the progression from education into employment and how the UK can best support young people to develop the skills they need to succeed in today's economy.



Developing talent



Although we place ‘growing opportunities’ at the centre of our strategy for improved social mobility, this does not mean that education is unimportant. Far from it. The education system has a very important role to play in terms of both the economy and social mobility. However, its role in both has often been viewed narrowly by policymakers.

The focus has been on a one-size-fits-all model that prioritises the expansion of higher education for young people as the main way of supplying the higher-level skills required in a post-industrial, service-led, ‘knowledge’ economy. Far less attention has been paid to alternative routes, such as technical education and apprenticeships, including intermediate as well as higher skill levels. Furthermore, too little attention has been paid to the problem of foundation-level learning.⁵⁷

Evaluating access to higher education

The dominant position of higher education in the public discourse about social mobility and extended opportunities is not surprising. There is much to celebrate in terms of improved outcomes in England. More young people than ever are staying in education after GCSEs, with 84% of young people age 16 to 17 years now in full-time education, compared with 50% in the 1980s.⁵⁸ Our State of the Nation reports show that access to higher education has improved considerably for people from different socio-economic backgrounds, offering many a pathway to upward mobility.^{59 60}

Beneath the headline data, some concerns remain – particularly when reviewing the relative (comparative) performance of people from different socio-economic backgrounds, rather than absolute numbers. A total of 14.2% of state-funded pupils in England who were eligible for FSM at age 15 years entered higher education by age 19 years

by 2005/06. The rate has risen fairly steadily over time and stands at 29% for the 2022/23 cohort. However, this compares to 49.8% of non-FSM eligible pupils entering higher education at the same age.⁶¹ This disparity is further compounded when reviewing the variation across different types of qualifications and their subsequent labour market outcomes. Our Labour Market Value of Qualifications report demonstrated that those who graduated from more selective universities typically earned more, and that students from disadvantaged backgrounds who go to university are disproportionately less likely to attend universities or study subjects associated with higher earnings compared to their wealthier peers with similar grades.⁶² This is unsurprising, but demonstrates the extent to which academically able young people from a lower socio-economic background, who are underrepresented at these universities, are missing out on income and opportunities.

57 Learning and Work Institute, ‘[The great skills divide: how learning inequalities risk holding the UK back](#)’, 2024. Published on LEARNINGANDWORK.ORG.UK.

58 Department for Education, ‘[Participation in education, training or employment age 16 to 18](#)’, 2024. Published on EXPLORE-EDUCATION-STATISTICS.SERVICE.GOV.UK. As of 2015, young people in England are required to stay engaged in some form of education or training until aged 18 years.

59 Social Mobility Commission, ‘[State of the Nation 2023: people and places](#)’, 2023. Published on SOCIALMOBILITY.INDEPENDENT-COMMISSION.UK.

60 Social Mobility Commission, ‘[State of the Nation 2024: local to national, mapping opportunities for all](#)’, 2024. Published on SOCIALMOBILITY.INDEPENDENT-COMMISSION.UK.

61 Gov.UK, ‘[Widening participation in higher education](#)’, 2024. Published on EXPLORE-EDUCATION-STATISTICS.SERVICE.GOV.UK.

62 Social Mobility Commission, ‘[Labour market value of higher and further education qualifications](#)’, 2023. Published on SOCIALMOBILITY.INDEPENDENT-COMMISSION.UK.

In response to this situation, different approaches to improving access to higher education have emerged. Some have focused on improving educational performance and offering targeted support to ensure that those from disadvantaged backgrounds can compete fairly and without discrimination. Others argue that the persistent attainment gaps mean that entry criteria should be amended to compensate for socio-economic background. This has led to the widespread practice of ‘contextualised admissions’ among universities and ‘contextualised recruitment’ among employers, which reduces the required grades for applicants from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Different institutions define socio-economic disadvantage in different ways, meaning that there are inconsistencies around who is eligible to take part in the contextualisation process. There is also a lack of clarity about who misses out as a consequence of these interventions, as they haven’t been captured in the ‘target group’. This leads to a lack of transparency about much of this activity.

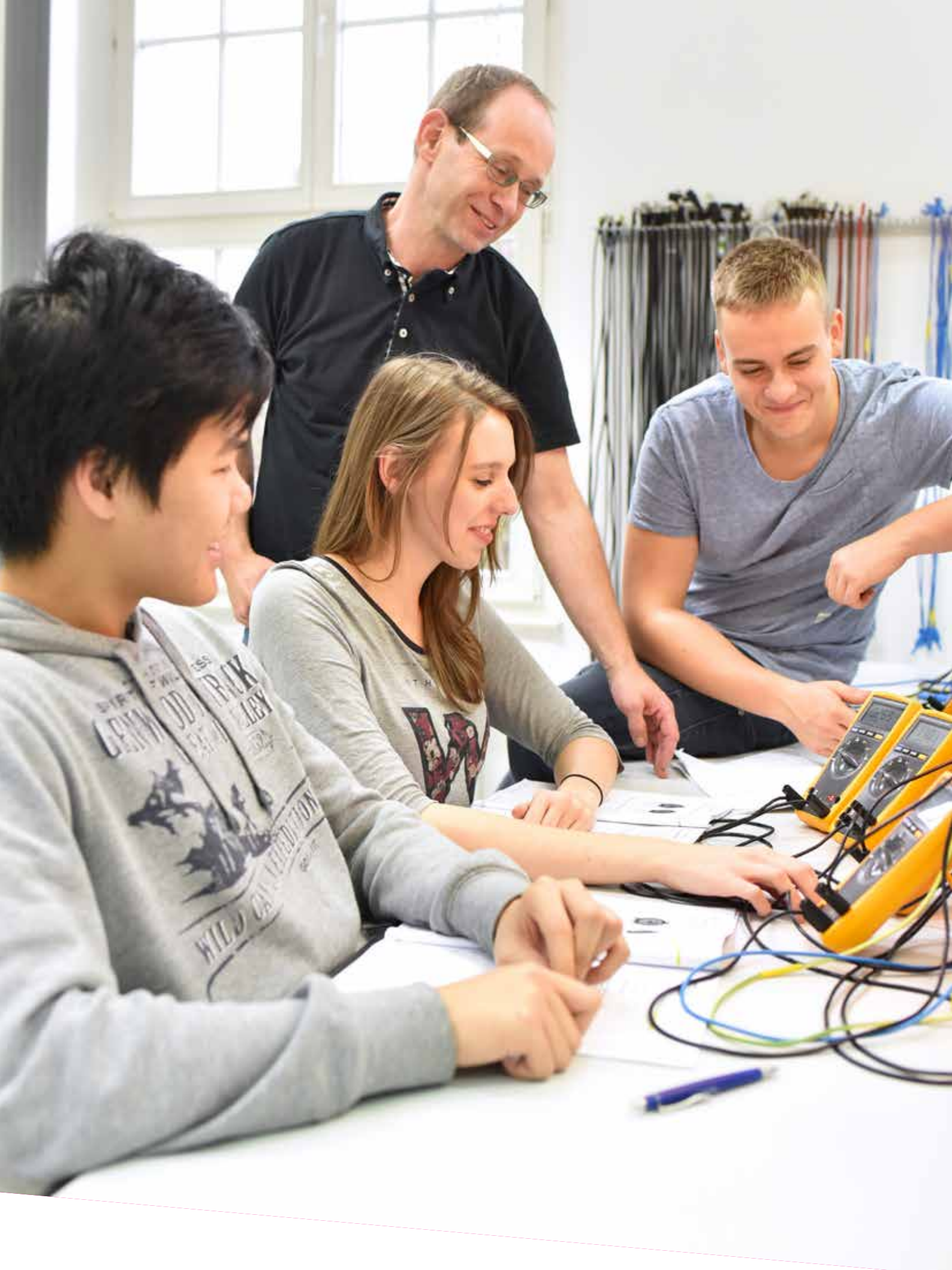
These interventions require further evaluation to understand their impact and identify the best methods for targeting the most disadvantaged.^{63 64} We encourage further work on interventions which prioritise improving disadvantaged students’ skills and knowledge, rather than lowering entry standards for them – as the latter approach risks being a zero-sum game.

However, we also consider that a wider perspective is needed on the link between the education system and the professions. In many respects, the education system, especially post-16 pathways, has been shaped in ways which reflect the dominance of the professions in the economy, with the routes into elite occupations clearly set out, and others less so. We need not only open access to professional occupations but a wider range of opportunities in a wider range of places, and this implies developing a different economic model. If this is going to be achieved, then our education system, especially in terms of post-16 pathways, must reflect this ambition.



63 Sutton Trust, ‘[25 years of university access](#)’, 2023. Published on SUTTONTRUST.COM.

64 Higher Education Policy Institute, ‘[First-in-family-students](#)’, 2022. Published on HEPI.AC.UK.



Alternative pathways – do we know what works?

With over 50% of young people not attending university, developing a stronger evidence base must be a priority.

Evaluating access to higher education is important; however, in social mobility terms our focus should be broader. In particular, we must consider the emerging set of alternative pathways for young people who choose not to take the higher education route, particularly in the form of apprenticeships and a revived and improved system of technical education and training. Over the last decade, there has been a growing interest in these approaches, and proposals to expand these pathways and encourage their uptake. The SMC is keen to champion them and support networks of interested parties who want to join us in this mission.

However, this work is by no means complete. Almost all these pathways face various challenges around implementation and, in social mobility terms, the evidence base for what is most effective remains very limited. With over 50% of young people not attending university, developing a stronger evidence base must be a priority.⁶⁵

To date, most of the social mobility commentary on this topic has concentrated on equality of access.⁶⁶ Assessing the impact of these pathways on actual social mobility is a long-term outcome, and requires more systematic evaluations, which in turn needs us to address the gaps in knowledge. For example, while there is strong data on the labour market value of specific university degrees, comparable evidence on the value of vocational and technical qualifications is much more difficult to obtain. The further education system is complex, with more qualification and institution types than higher education, and this has made it difficult to evaluate comparative values of the different qualifications available.⁶⁷ Furthermore, the destination data, which records the employment outcomes of students and learners after they have completed a course, is substantially less reliable for further education than for higher education.^{68 69}

This whole body of work needs a more systematic approach to evaluating which policy programmes have the most impact. For example, there has been no independent evaluation of the Raising of the Participation Age (RPA) policy from 2013, introduced following the 2011 Wolf Review.⁷⁰ This made it mandatory for all under 18s to be in some form of education or training and required those aged 16 to 19 years who did not have a pass in English or maths GCSE (or equivalent) to retake them alongside their vocational course. We consider that it is likely that this latter policy has opened opportunities for young people to enter careers such as nursing, which would have been closed to them without the English and maths qualifications, but there is no comprehensive evidence base to show this either way.

65 Department for Education, '[Participation measures in higher education](#)', 2021/22. Published on EXPLORE-EDUCATION-STATISTICS.SERVICE.GOV.UK.

66 Social Mobility Commission, '[Apprenticeships and social mobility: fulfilling potential](#)', 2020. Published on SOCIALMOBILITY.INDEPENDENT-COMMISSION.UK.

67 Social Mobility Commission, '[Labour market value of higher and further education qualifications](#)', 2023. Published on SOCIALMOBILITY.INDEPENDENT-COMMISSION.UK.

68 Social Mobility Commission, '[Labour market value of higher and further education qualifications](#)', 2023. Published on SOCIALMOBILITY.INDEPENDENT-COMMISSION.UK.

69 Claudia Hupkau and others, '[Post-compulsory education in England: choices and implications](#)', 2020. Published on CAMBRIDGE.ORG

70 Alison Wolf, '[Review of vocational education: the Wolf report](#)', 2011. Published on GOV.UK.



The Department for Education's (DfE) curriculum review is considering the English and maths age 16 to 19 years requirement and asked for views as part of its Autumn 2024 call for evidence.⁷¹

There is also a question as to whether colleges are funded sufficiently to provide this teaching. The average (median) annual pay for a school teacher is £41,500 compared to £34,500 for a further education college teacher.⁷² This understandably has an effect on turnover and retention: around 25% of college teachers leave the profession after one year compared with 15% of school teachers.⁷³

More recently, there have been changes to technical education, with the introduction of T Levels and the proposed defunding of BTECs (though the new government is reviewing this).⁷⁴ These changes have attracted a great deal of initial criticism, although it is too early to assess any impacts.⁷⁵ What is missing from this debate is historical information about the

destinations of Level 3 learners (that is, those studying for qualifications typically aimed at young people aged 16 to 19 years) who complete their qualification and do not then enrol into university or an apprenticeship. These numbers are large, probably representing the majority of Level 3 learners.⁷⁶

The data which the DfE collects currently is not very illuminating in terms of longer-term outcomes – although it does suggest that short-term outcomes may be disappointing. Relatively few holders of Level 3 qualifications appear to be in employment in the subject which they have studied, which raises questions about those qualifications as a preparation for work. Having a record of their destination is important in determining whether their qualification has led them into a different employment pathway or not. The absence of this data is a reflection of a wider absence of good data on the outcomes for the 50% who do not follow the university route.⁷⁷

71 Department for Education, '[Improving the curriculum and assessment system](#)', 2024. Published on GOV.UK.

72 Institute for Fiscal Studies, '[What has happened to college teacher pay in England?](#)', 2023. Published on IDS.ORG.UK.

73 Institute for Fiscal Studies, '[What has happened to college teacher pay in England?](#)', 2023. Published on IDS.ORG.UK.

74 UK Parliament, '[The future of post-16 qualifications](#)', 2023. Published on PUBLICATIONS.PARLIAMENT.UK.

75 Department for Education, '[T Level Action Plan](#)', 2024. Published on GOV.UK.

76 Department for Education, '[Progression to higher education or training](#)', 2024. Published on EXPLORE-EDUCATION-STATISTICS.SERVICE.GOV.UK.

77 Department for Education, '[Participation Measures in Higher Education](#)', 2021/22. Published on GOV.UK.



Apprenticeship reform

Apprenticeships are recognised as a key post-16 pathway to work and study. However, policy challenges are preventing apprenticeships from reaching their full potential, particularly as a vehicle to improving social mobility. In 2017, the government introduced the Apprenticeship Levy, a tax for employers with an annual pay bill of more than £3 million that funds apprenticeship training. The introduction of the levy has incentivised employers to upskill existing staff, sending them on higher-level management and professional development courses, as opposed to offering entry-level opportunities that generally attract younger workers or people with lower qualifications. Our own data has shown that the levy has led to a drop in apprenticeship starts for people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and this is reinforced by recent findings from other stakeholders including the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and the Youth Futures Foundation.^{78 79}

In response, the government announced

in September 2024 that the levy would be replaced by a new growth and skills levy, which will allow employers more flexibility to spend their levy contributions on training other than apprenticeships. This is a promising start, though the details remain unclear.

However, there is a wider set of questions about how to improve the effectiveness of the apprenticeships system – including looking at the geographical spread of apprenticeship opportunities, the limited number available and the high drop-out rate.⁸⁰ More needs to be known about to what extent apprenticeships are a vehicle for social mobility – as this is often assumed rather than demonstrated. Little research has been done into the reasons why some find the ‘applied’ character of technical and vocational learning more attractive than academic approaches, which is important in terms of understanding who is most suited to each pathway. The apprenticeships system as a whole would benefit from an up-to-date independent review.

⁷⁸ Social Mobility Commission, ‘[Apprenticeships and social mobility](#)’, 2020. Published on SOCIALMOBILITY.INDEPENDENT-COMMISSION.UK. Our report evidenced that there was a 36% decline in disadvantaged apprentice starts between 2015/16 and 2017/18 compared with 23% decline for more privileged apprentices.

⁷⁹ Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and Youth Futures Foundation, ‘[Balancing act: youth apprenticeships and the case for a flexible skills levy](#)’, 2024. Published on CIPD.ORG.UK.

⁸⁰ Social Mobility Commission, ‘[Apprenticeships: bridging the gap for disadvantaged learners?](#)’, 2024. Published on SOCIALMOBILITY.INDEPENDENT-COMMISSION.UK.

Adult skills

Apprenticeships are not the only area of funding provision in need of review. Providing adults with opportunities to upskill and re-skill throughout their lifetime is very important. Many access higher education as mature students and achieve well, often in contrast to their earlier school performance. This aspect of the system receives little attention, but illustrates the importance of providing flexible options for adult learners, and not assuming the higher-education pathways work only for young people aged 18 to 21 years.

Adult learning covers a wide range of provision, including apprenticeships as well as basic skills, literacy, numeracy and lower-level qualifications. Many studies have referenced the reduction in funding since 2010 and, as with other funding programmes, it is the victim of policy churn and a lack of evaluation of 'what works', particularly in areas where there is a high incidence of below-average levels of qualifications.⁸¹

This area of policy has been devolved to Combined Authorities (such as Greater Manchester), where devolution arrangements are in place, enabling a localised approach.⁸² Adult learners represent a significant proportion of the adult population, including many parents who are hoping to improve their skills while juggling childcare. Making significant improvements to intergenerationally low social mobility requires improvements to children's educational outcomes and is unlikely to happen without increasing the literacy and numeracy skills across whole families.⁸³

However, this cannot be achieved without a coherent national policy for adult education funding, including purpose, aims and objectives. Such a policy should set a clear framework within which devolved decision-making can take place, and with an emphasis on proper evaluation, allowing best practice to emerge. As things stand, it is unclear



who adult budgets should prioritise – with considerable amounts spent on English as a second language, some spent on vocational skills, and some on basic skills. What we do not have is a way of prioritising groups – with the obvious one being young parents whose educational attainment is low.

81 Social Mobility Commission, '[The adult skills gap: is falling investment in UK adults stalling social mobility?](#)', 2019. Published on ASSETS. PUBLISHING.SERVICE.GOV.UK.

82 A combined authority is a legal body set up using national legislation that enables a group of two or more councils to collaborate and take collective decisions across council boundaries.

83 Social Mobility Commission, '[The adult skills gap: is falling investment in UK adults stalling social mobility?](#)', 2019. Published on ASSETS. PUBLISHING.SERVICE.GOV.UK.

Economic inactivity and supporting those not in education, employment or training

In 2021, 18.2% of adults, totalling 8.8 million people, reported having no qualification at all ... Many of those people are parents, and parental education levels are arguably the most important indicator of all when it comes to predicting outcomes for children.

While overall educational performance, in terms of schools and progression to higher education, has been improving, the acute problems at the bottom end remain. For example, little has been done to improve the outcomes of those who, at age 16 years, do not have the basic skills needed to acquire higher-level qualifications or develop a career. In 2021, 18.2% of adults, totalling 8.8 million people, reported having no qualification at all.⁸⁴ This “long tail” of low achievement is associated with low pay and dependency on welfare. Many of those people are parents, and parental education levels are arguably the most important indicator of all when it comes to predicting outcomes for children.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of economically inactive adults of working

age in the UK (that is, those who are neither working nor looking for work) has increased substantially, reaching 9.3 million people or 21.8% of the working-age population.⁸⁵ Adults without qualifications or with very limited qualifications are significantly overrepresented in this group, with 53% of adults without qualifications and 31% of adults with qualifications below GCSE level being economically inactive, compared to 11% of adults with degrees and 16% with A-level or equivalent qualifications.⁸⁶ While a significant proportion of economically inactive people are not working because they are studying, incapable of working for health or disability reasons or temporarily out of the workforce due to caring responsibilities, these figures suggest a significant waste of human potential and a drag on the UK's growth prospects.

Recent work by the Centre for Social Justice and the Barnsley-focused Pathways to Work Commission suggests that a significant minority of economically inactive people would actually like to work and are capable of doing so, if they had the right tailored support and could find a job that aligned with their skills and circumstances.^{87 88} The Greater Manchester Working Well: Work and Health programme has sought to put this approach into practice, establishing joined-up health and employment support to enable participants to resolve barriers to work. Initial results have been encouraging; by the end of March 2023 over 10,000 clients – 46% of those who had completed the support programme – had found and started a job.⁸⁹ However, comprehensive and long-term evaluation is needed to understand its overall impact.

84 Office for National Statistics, '[Census 2021: data and analysis](#)', 2021. Published on ONS.GOV.UK.

85 Office for National Statistics, '[Labour market in the regions of the UK: November 2024](#)', 2024. Published on ONS.GOV.UK.

86 Gov.UK, '[Economic inactivity by qualification level](#)', 2023. Published on ETHNICITY-FACTS-FIGURES.SERVICE.GOV.UK.

87 The CSJ estimates that 700,000 people in this group could work in the right circumstances, whereas the Pathways to Work report estimates over 4.5 million. Clearly both estimates are, necessarily, based on a complicated range of assumptions. See, '[Going Dutch: devolving employment support and adult education to tackle economic inactivity](#)', 2024. Published on CENTREFORSOCIALJUSTICE.ORG.UK.

88 Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council, '[Pathways to work commission](#)', 2024. Published on BARNSELEY.GOV.UK.

89 Greater Manchester Combined Authority, '[Working well: work and health programme & job entry: targeted support \(JETS\) evaluation](#)', 2023. Published on GREATERMANCHESTER-CA.GOV.UK.



One of the key findings of our State of the Nation report 2023 was the increased likelihood of young people from a lower working-class background becoming NEETs (not in education, employment or training).^{90 91} These are likely to be the least socially mobile people in the country, and yet have attracted almost no attention in previous social mobility policy.⁹² People who are NEET for longer than six months before age 21 years are more likely to be unemployed, low paid, have no training, a criminal record, and suffer from poor health and depression over the course of their lives.⁹³ This is a key challenge for policymakers.

Many of these young people access Universal Credit, meaning that their experience of unemployment support is managed by the welfare services, typically via Jobcentres. Experiences of the quality of support in Jobcentres are inconsistent, with many NEET young people at risk of being placed into 'any job' as opposed to finding longer-term meaningful work or further education.⁹⁴ If training is involved, it is often short term, with no coherent plan for improving that young

person's skills to the highest level they can achieve.⁹⁵ The lack of tailored support and the focus on rapid employment adversely influences both NEETs – who cannot secure a job with future prospects – and employers, who are receiving applications from a cohort that is untrained for work.⁹⁶

Refreshingly, the government has started to recognise the scale of the issue, and its Get Britain Working white paper of November 2024 sets out an ambitious set of proposals to tackle economic inactivity, including merging Jobcentres with the National Careers Service, improving support on health-related issues and developing a youth guarantee to ensure everyone aged 18 to 21 is in education or employment.⁹⁷ The white paper is explicit about the role of local leadership, particularly in mayoral authorities, several of which will trial the youth guarantee and economic inactivity schemes. These proposals are welcome, but they will take time to implement, and there is a question as to whether the promised £240 million of investment will be sufficient.

90 Department for Education, '[NEET age 16 to 24](#)', 2023, Published on [EXPLORE-EDUCATION-STATISTICS.SERVICE.GOV.UK](#).

91 Social Mobility Commission, '[State of the Nation 2023: people and places](#)', 2023. Published on [SOCIALMOBILITY.INDEPENDENT-COMMISSION.UK](#).

92 Office for National Statistics, '[Young people not in education, employment or training](#)', 2024. Published on [ONS.GOV.UK](#).

93 EDSK, '[Finding a NEET solution](#)', 2022. Published on [EDSK.ORG](#).

94 Institute for Employment Studies, '[Work in progress: interim report of the commission on the future of employment support](#)', 2023. Published on [EMPLOYMENT-STUDIES.CO.UK](#).

95 Melanie Wilkes and others, '[Working together: towards a new public employment service](#)', 2023. Institute for Public Policy Research. Published on [IPPR.ORG](#).

96 Katy Jones and Calum Carson, '[Universal credit and employers: exploring the demand side of UK active labour market policy](#)', 2023. Published on [MMU.AC.UK](#).

97 Department for Work and Pensions, '[Get Britain Working](#)', 2024. Published on [GOV.UK](#).

Our view is that the government, and devolved authorities, should consider extending any joined-up strategy to young people aged 21 to 24 years as well. At present, responsibilities are divided between the DfE, which owns the education and training policy, the Department for Work and Pensions, which supports people who are out of work, and LAs, which have a statutory duty to encourage, enable and assist young people to participate in education or training. This division risks more young people falling through the cracks of statutory provisions. We need a framework for local partnerships, including education, employers, the voluntary sector and other interested agencies, to provide effective interventions, including specialist, wraparound support for young people to support them back into training or work.

As this section illustrates, talent development in its broadest sense is an exciting area. Some parts of that system already work well, others have been improved, and a number of promising initiatives suggest what can be done with political will, funding and a dedication to understanding and addressing local needs. With some additional data and analysis of what works, and backing from national and local government, we have an opportunity to build on these successes and create a genuinely strategic and joined-up system which supports people from all backgrounds to make the most of their talents.



Nurturing talent



Our State of the Nation report 2024 shows that the performance of an average pupil classed as disadvantaged is lower than that of an average pupil who is not known to be disadvantaged.

Our focus on social mobility opportunities for all means that our recommendations started with the economy and that we regard a broad choice of pathways in post-16 learning, supported by detailed analysis of outcomes, and a comprehensive strategy to support people without qualifications into work and training, as vitally important. However, pre-16 education, which includes schools and early years provision, remains very important in setting the foundations for everyone to have a good start in life and the chance to fulfil their potential over their lifetime.

This is another aspect of the social mobility story where there are grounds for optimism. If we compare the current educational performance with that of a decade ago, when the first national social mobility strategy was published, there are some solid

achievements. We can also observe some very encouraging outcomes for all children, as the percentage of children achieving a good level of development by age 5 years improved from 2012/13 to 2018/19 across FSM and non-FSM eligible pupils.⁹⁸ The recent Programme for International Student Assessment, which measures 15-year-olds' ability to use their reading, mathematics and science knowledge, shows England's performance steadily improving up to 2018. England has performed at or above the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's average for mathematics, reading and science, though 2022 scores have decreased across the world. Scotland and Wales do less well, with the difference being explained in terms of curriculum content, curriculum design and pedagogy.¹⁹⁹

Despite these encouraging trends, some challenges remain. Our State of the Nation report 2024 shows that the performance of an average pupil classed as disadvantaged is lower than that of an average pupil who is not known to be disadvantaged.¹⁰⁰ Before the pandemic, the 'disadvantage gap' – the gap in grades between disadvantaged students and their peers – was closing, but it has widened again in recent years.¹⁰¹ However, there are difficulties in comparing the disadvantage gap over time, as, due to the transitional protections covering FSM eligibility as we move from old-style multiple benefits to Universal Credit, a greatly increased number of children are now eligible for FSM. This means that the average child on FSM today is probably not as disadvantaged as the average child on FSM 10 years ago.

98 Social Mobility Commission, '[State of the Nation 2023: people and places](#)', 2023. Published on SOCIALMOBILITY.INDEPENDENT-COMMISSION.UK.

99 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, '[PISA 2022 results \(volume I\)](#)', 2022. Published on OECD.ORG.

100 Social Mobility Commission, '[State of the Nation 2024: local to national, mapping opportunities for all](#)', 2024. Published on SOCIALMOBILITY.INDEPENDENT-COMMISSION.UK.

101 Education Policy Institute, '[Annual report 2024: disadvantage](#)', 2024. Published on EPI.ORG.UK.



As of January 2024, about a quarter (24.6%) of English pupils were eligible for FSM.¹⁰² At key stage 2 (age 11 years), 44% of disadvantaged pupils (around 90,000 pupils) met the expected standard for reading, writing and maths in 2022 to 2023 compared to 66% of other pupils (around 310,000 pupils).^{103 104}

This means that there is a notable gap between the performance of FSM compared to non-FSM pupils, but also that, in raw numbers, around 114,000 disadvantaged pupils and 159,000 other pupils did not meet the expected standard.¹⁰⁵ As a result, any policy action that is targeted mainly on socio-economic background (such as Pupil Premium) will, by design, ignore the majority of pupils who fail to meet the expected standard.

This is another example of the tension between absolute and relative measures. By focusing on the relative performance of

groups by socio-economic background, we may be missing some important insights into those who are the lowest performing. We may also be failing to understand why, among the most disadvantaged, some perform well despite socio-economic background while others do not. If groups are defined loosely and group averages used uncritically, these 'truly disadvantaged' become invisible. Such a blunt measure and binary analysis often hides more than it reveals. As the National Audit Office recently pointed out, emphasis on this measure alone also excludes reporting on any other outcomes for disadvantaged children, which limits our understanding and monitoring of any wider positive effects from DfE's interventions. Further, DfE has not set out how and when it plans to reduce the attainment gap, significantly limiting any assessment of current or future initiatives.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Department for Education, '[Schools, pupils and their characteristics](#)', 2024. Published on EXPLORE-EDUCATION-STATISTICS.SERVICE.GOV.UK.

¹⁰³ Disadvantaged pupils are ordinarily defined as: those who were registered as eligible for FSM at any point in the last 6 years, children looked after by a LA or have left LA care in England and Wales through adoption, a special guardianship order, a residence order or a child arrangements order.

¹⁰⁴ In 2023, 30% of pupils at the end of KS2 were considered disadvantaged.

¹⁰⁵ Gov.UK. 'Attainment by pupil characteristics' from '[Key stage 2 attainment](#)', 2024. Published on EXPLORE-EDUCATION-STATISTICS.SERVICE.GOV.UK

¹⁰⁶ National Audit Office, '[Improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged children](#)', 2024. Published on NAO.ORG.UK.

The role of geography and schools

This is another area of social mobility where geography is a significant factor. There are areas of the country where improved education performance has been particularly strong, such as in London. Less than a quarter (22%) of children receiving FSM in inner London obtained five or more A*–C grades at GCSE or their equivalent (including English and maths) in 2002. In 2013, this had risen to almost half (48%).¹⁰⁷ In 2000–03, London had 9% fewer schools rated “Good” or “Outstanding” by Ofsted than the national average. London now has a higher percentage of schools rated “Outstanding” by Ofsted than any other region in the UK.^{108 109 110}

The significant gap in academic performance between London and other parts of the country needs urgent explanation. There are many potential factors, ranging from the changing demographics of London (including links to values, families and culture), to institutional arrangements (London Challenge on the one hand, new academies and free schools on the other), the quality of teaching and learning (and the capacity to attract the best teachers).¹¹¹

Our State of the Nation report 2024 shows pockets of success stories outside of London too. At age 5 years, FSM-eligible pupils in London, Lincolnshire and the West Midlands are the most likely to achieve a good level of development.¹¹² At age 11 years, FSM-eligible pupils in London, Tees Valley and

Durham were the most likely to meet the expected standard in reading, writing and maths out of all regions.¹¹³ In contrast, pupils in the North West, Devon and West Yorkshire were some of those least likely to reach a good standard of development at age 5 years, while pupils in Cornwall, Cumbria, Lancashire and Cheshire were among the least likely to achieve the expected standard in English and maths GCSE.¹¹⁴ The areas where performance is consistently low are often in post-industrial towns and cities, seaside towns and rural areas.

Drawing on international models, particularly those in the US, we have considered evidence on how different school practices improve outcomes in underperforming areas. US charter schools have been the topic of much debate since their introduction in the early 1990s.¹¹⁵ They are publicly funded but privately managed and were set up to offer more options for schooling – particularly by promoting innovative teaching and learning methods. A recent national study evaluating the academic progress of charter school students in the US found that the typical charter school student had literacy and numeracy skills that outpaced their peers attending more traditional schools.¹¹⁶ Some of these schools, particularly those described as having a “no excuses” approach, can be particularly effective when serving children from low-income families and ethnically diverse backgrounds.¹¹⁷

107 Jo Blanden and others, ‘[No magic bullet in London schools’ success. Just years of steady improvements in quality](#)’, 2015. Published on IFS.ORG.UK.

108 John Lowe, ‘[The London schools revolution](#)’, 2015. Published on PROSPECTMAGAZINE.CO.UK.

109 Jo Blanden and others, ‘[No magic bullet in London schools’ success. Just years of steady improvements in quality](#)’, 2015. Published on IFS.ORG.UK.

110 Ofsted, ‘[State-funded English schools inspections and outcomes as at 31 December 2023](#)’, 2024. Published on GOV.UK.

111 A 2020 DfE report on this issue can be found at: ‘[Examining the London advantage in attainment](#)’.

112 Social Mobility Commission, ‘[State of the Nation 2024: local to national. mapping opportunities for all](#)’, 2024 and ‘[State of the Nation 2023: people and places](#)’, 2023. Published on SOCIALMOBILITY.INDEPENDENT-COMMISSION.UK.

113 Social Mobility Commission, ‘[State of the Nation 2023: people and places](#)’, 2023. Published on SOCIALMOBILITY.INDEPENDENT-COMMISSION.UK.

114 Social Mobility Commission, ‘[State of the Nation 2023: people and places](#)’, 2023. Published on SOCIALMOBILITY.INDEPENDENT-COMMISSION.UK.

115 The Hamilton Project, ‘[Learning from the successes and failures of charter schools](#)’, 2012. Published on HAMILTONPROJECT.ORG.

116 CREDO, ‘[As a matter of fact: the national charter school study III 2023](#)’, 2023. Published by NCSS3.STANFORD.EDU.

117 The charter school sector has grown considerably over the last 15 years in the US, both in terms of schools and students. Some places have taken to charter schools particularly enthusiastically: in New York City alone, 14% of students attend one of 271 charter schools in the city.

The UK also offers examples of where schools adopting such models demonstrate good educational outcomes for their pupils. Even so, these instances are not yet evenly spread across the country – and there is little independent research or evaluation to show where these approaches have been tried but have not worked.

From a social mobility perspective, we argue that the priority must be to find better solutions for those places with persistent educational underperformance. When we come to look for evidence-based interventions, however, we find the same problems as we have described in other areas of policy. Despite a series of area-based solutions, stretching from Excellence in Cities to Education Action Zones and Opportunity Areas, there is insufficient evaluation and no consensus about solutions.

There is no doubt that institutions play a role, as do pedagogical approaches, and practical issues such as recruiting leaders and teachers – and a range of other factors. However, it is also important to gain a better understanding of the social, economic and cultural context in which these interventions take place. The difficulty is how to do this without collapsing into a series of excuses for low achievement and performance. This is a challenge where we are hoping our own deep dives' into social mobility by place will help. They will look not just at economic context, but other key factors that influence educational attainment.



Early years and family support

Similar challenges exist around early years. This is an area where the evidence robustly demonstrates that early educational outcomes predict later ones. For example, below-expected levels of ‘school readiness’ at age 3 years and in-teacher assessment of literacy and numeracy skills at age 5 years are both predictive of failure to attain a grade 4 or higher in GCSE English and maths at age 16 years, even after controlling for family background and individual characteristics.¹¹⁸ This inspired our own It’s Child’s Play parenting campaign pilot, which provides parents with practical resources and easy ways of engaging with children to help them become school ready.¹¹⁹



Although the body of evidence about effective practice is clearer in early years than in other areas of policy, the same issue of policy churn and inconsistency has been evident here. Specialists argue that what we know about effective interventions is not sufficiently threaded through policy.¹²⁰ Early years policy has not sufficiently had a clear

focus on good child development within childcare and family support programmes.¹²¹

A good example we can draw on is Sure Start. This was an ambitious, flagship social policy intended to tackle child poverty. However, a number of evaluations have highlighted its mixed performance across a range of outcomes. This was due in part to the broad range of needs Sure Start attempted to address, along with its competing aims and objectives. Its ambition, broad scope and flexibility meant that it changed focus and scope considerably as the programme was implemented. Further, as our rapid evidence review of Sure Start illustrated, understanding of its impact was undermined by misguided evaluation and poor data collection from the outset.¹²² After the election of the coalition government in 2010, funding for Sure Start was no longer ring-fenced and funding for all forms of children’s centres was significantly reduced under this and the subsequent Conservative governments.¹²³

Using modern econometric methods, however, more recent research has shed new light on the longer-term effects of Sure Start. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) has measured the impact of living within close “proximity to Sure Start” on educational attainment. Access to Sure Start centres between the ages of 0 and 5 years significantly improved the educational achievement of children. Specifically, children who lived within a short distance (2.5 kilometres) of a Sure Start centre for their first 5 years performed 0.8 grades better in one of their GCSEs. Moreover, by secondary age such children were less likely to be recorded as having special educational needs and disabilities, including being less likely to have an Education, Health and Care Plan.¹²⁴

118 Lee Elliot Major and Sam Parsons, ‘[The forgotten fifth: examining the early education trajectories of teenagers who fall below the expected standards in GCSE English language and maths examinations at age 16 – CLS Working Paper 2022/6](#)’, 2022. Published by CLS.UCL.AC.UK.

119 Social Mobility Commission, ‘[It’s Child’s Play](#)’. Published on SOCIALMOBILITY.INDEPENDENT-COMMISSION.UK.

120 Tammy Campbell, ‘[Evidence submission: review of early years](#)’, 2023. Published on EPI.ORG.UK.

121 Naomi Eisenstadt, the first director of the Sure Start Unit in 1999, made these comments when appearing as a guest on the Social Mobility Talks podcast.

122 Social Mobility Commission, ‘[Family and parenting programmes: rapid evidence assessment](#)’, 2023. Published on SOCIALMOBILITY.INDEPENDENT-COMMISSION.UK.

123 Sutton Trust, ‘[Stop start: survival, decline or closure? children’s centres in England](#)’, 2018. Published on SUTTONTRUST.COM.

124 Institute for Fiscal Studies, ‘[The short- and medium-term impacts of Sure Start on educational outcomes](#)’ Published on IFS.ORG.UK.

This work has been greeted by many as evidence of the need to restore the Sure Start programme, but it is important to be clear about what the IFS research so far does and does not tell us. It does appear to establish good evidence of a causal link between the first phase of Sure Start (local programmes) and sustained improvements in educational achievement, particularly for non-White children and for children of all ethnicities who were eligible for FSM. However, it remains unclear what specific elements led to this as there were variations in the programmes delivered across different parts of the country, sometimes even within LA areas. Further research is needed to find the particular reasons for success which can be replicated.

Sure Start was eventually replaced in part by Family Hubs, which had a more targeted approach delivered at a much smaller scale, but worked with families across a wider age range, and were supported by a different funding and partnership model. While the Family Hubs model has been initially evaluated and showed promising signs, it has not produced enough evidence of long-term improvements in children's cognitive and non-cognitive skills. As noted, these skills are among the key predictors of a child's early developmental outcomes and should therefore be central to all early years and family support policies.¹²⁵

Evidence suggests that formal childcare does not always benefit all children in terms of outcomes, possibly because of issues around quality and focus.¹²⁶ As many specialists point out, the success of expanding childcare will depend on whether the provision embraces 'what works' in child development, including partnerships with parents and an appropriately trained workforce.



¹²⁵ Flavio Cunha and others, 'Chapter 12 interpreting the evidence on life cycle skill formation', 2006. Published on SCIEDIRECT.COM.

¹²⁶ Maria Lyons, 'Universal childcare: is it good for children?', 2024. Published on CIVITAS.ORG.UK.

The role of families

A cross-cutting issue, which is often raised in terms of early years but runs across all of our key themes, is the role of supportive and structured family environments in the development of a child's cognitive and non-cognitive skills, not just in early years but throughout schooling as well.¹²⁷ We need to know more about the circumstances that sit behind low achievement and educational underperformance, and to what extent the roles of families can be strengthened.

There are a number of factors that influence the home learning environment, highlighted in another recent report by the IFS.¹²⁸ This review focused on families and inequalities, including a comparison of the different partnering and parenthood behaviours of graduates and non-graduates in the UK. The report noted that “a rarely highlighted feature of family formation in the UK is the extent to which children are born to parents who are not living together at the time of the birth”.

There is a pressing need for a much more robust understanding of the changes in families which have taken place, by socio-economic background and by geography, and the factors – such as cultural expectations and economic opportunity – which explain them.



The areas with the highest incidence of “non-partnered births” are largely those that have the lowest levels of educational attainment.¹²⁹ There is a pressing need for a better understanding of the changes in families which have taken place, by socio-economic background and by geography, and the factors – such as cultural expectations and economic opportunity – which explain them. It seems highly likely that this holds the key to understanding a great deal about the unequal outcomes for children, and the causes of intergenerational immobility.

127 Beng Huat See and Stephen Gorard, ‘[The role of parents in young people’s education—a critical review of the causal evidence](#)’, 2015. Published on TANDFONLINE.COM.

128 Kathleen Kiernan and others, ‘[Families and inequalities](#)’, 2022. Published as part of the Institute for Fiscal Studies Deaton Review of Inequalities on IFS.ORG.UK

129 Kathleen Kiernan and others, ‘[Families and inequalities](#)’, 2022. Published as part of the Institute for Fiscal Studies Deaton Review of Inequalities on IFS.ORG.UK



Without a greater understanding of and policy toward families, other interventions lack context. How interventions like expanding childcare affect any individual child will depend on multiple different factors, including family circumstances and preferences. For example, lone parents, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, are more likely to face barriers to work and support. Therefore, for some families, affordable and accessible childcare is the answer. For other families, the answer can look quite different. Provision for families should allow for flexibility and a combination of in-the-home and out-of-home family support. This is contrary to the current dominant political narratives, which advocate for a one-size-fits-all approach to family support.

We are concerned that current models which focus on state-funded childcare expansion do not go far enough to support families, given that for a UK couple on an average salary, net childcare costs account for a quarter of the average household income.¹³⁰ There are a

variety of proposals for integrating tax, welfare, childcare, family support and related help for families and for concentrating this during the time when families are most under stress, which is when children are young. It is our view that all efforts to improve social mobility and extend opportunity should be underpinned by a dedicated and integrated policy focused on families.¹³¹ This should include consideration of the changing nature of families, the factors which are driving these changes, and the full range of possible interventions and measures.

As for the other areas we have discussed, understanding the challenges that families face in different areas, and developing targeted support to address those challenges, is crucial. Building on our existing work, the SMC will conduct further analysis of the impact of family environment and geography on children's outcomes. This will include place-based and geographical aspects of both family formation and educational achievement, and the wider factors shaping them.

130 World Economic Forum, '[These countries have the highest childcare costs in the world](#)', 2023. Published on WEFORUM.ORG.

131 Centre for Social Justice, '[Give families the credit](#)', 2024. Published on CENTREFORSOCIALJUSTICE.ORG.UK.

The way forward



In Innovation Generation we have laid out the different approaches to measuring social mobility, the challenges facing the concept of social mobility both in theory and in practice, and our proposals for a more coherent approach to improving opportunities for all.

As we have indicated, there are many areas – from specific issues like poor destination data for vocational learners to overarching themes like the lack of household-level datasets – where we need more data and analysis to fully understand what is happening on the ground and what is driving the disparity of outcomes for different groups and in different places. We hope that these gaps will start to be filled, enabling a more informed and detailed conversation. The SMC is planning a broad programme of research and engagement, including a project on the role of the economy in improving social mobility, research into perceptions of social mobility, and a programme of deep dives into areas with high and low social mobility,

In the meantime, there is much that policymakers at all levels can do. Driving economic growth and improving labour market opportunities, especially in areas where social mobility is weaker, is a priority. Alongside this, and closely linked to it, we must develop a larger number of pathways for young people with different interests and backgrounds to improve their skills and gain jobs with decent prospects. And much more

must be done to support people with no qualifications at all, especially those currently not in education, employment or training.

The government has initiated some fresh action in this area, including the creation of Skills England, the Growth and Skills Levy and the Curriculum and Assessment Review, alongside its growth and opportunity missions. Inevitably, it is too soon to know how these plans will lead to real transformation on the ground.

However, change need not only be led from the top – and, as our analysis makes clear, the place-based nature of many of the challenges we have outlined means that a one-size-fits-all approach is often not appropriate. This is a golden opportunity for local policymakers, including devolved administrations and those preparing to take on additional responsibilities. We would urge such policymakers to establish a broad range of partnerships and work with them to develop innovative approaches – while ensuring that any new programmes are thoroughly evaluated so that best practices can be identified and shared.

Our long-term goal is to reach a point where there are multiple routes to success, and a range of pathways to support a broader range of people to develop their individual abilities and talents. This in turn will allow us to address entrenched disadvantages, unlock greater opportunities and create a vibrant, innovative economy for the generations ahead.

We hope you will join us on this journey.