

# **Deep dives: a local perspective on social mobility**

Research report

July 2025

# Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
About the Commission	3
Chair's Foreword	4
Guest Foreword	6
Executive summary	9
Introduction and methodology	12
1. Definitions of social mobility	15
2. Definitions of success	20
3. The contribution of place to social mobility	25
4. Place-based determinants of social mobility	33
Education and skills	33
Employment and the role of employers	36
Housing and local infrastructure	38
Conclusion	42

# 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.

Rob Wilson, Chairman and NED across public, private and third sectors.

## Commissioners

Dr Raghib Ali, Senior Clinical Research Associate at the MRC Epidemiology Unit at the University of Cambridge.

Ryan Henson, Chief Executive Officer at the Coalition for Global Prosperity.

Parminder Kohli, Chair of Shell UK Ltd and Shell Group Executive Vice President Sustainability and Carbon.

Tina Stowell MBE, The Rt Hon Baroness Stowell of Beeston.



This report was produced for the Social Mobility Commission by Public First, a policy, research, opinion and strategy consultancy.



# Chair's Foreword

**Alun Francis OBE,**  
Chair of the Social Mobility Commission

Earlier this year, I called for a rethink into how we approach social mobility through diversifying the pathways to success, so that it means more to a wider variety of people in a wider variety of places.

While there is a consensus that social mobility matters, it does not always play a central role in policymaking. Part of the problem is that policymakers lack a shared definition of what social mobility actually means. Economists look at income mobility, Sociologists focus on class transitions and Educationalists focus on qualification levels and attainment. Another issue is that there is a fundamental disconnect between how policymakers think about social mobility and how the general public experience it.

Here, we are presenting findings from a series of qualitative deep dives into social mobility in two different settings. It is the first in a series of reports which explore social mobility and place. Our research looks at two areas in the North West: Cheshire East and Rochdale, chosen because they sit within the same region, but at opposite ends of the Social Mobility Commission's rankings. While each place has its own specific factors that shape how people think about success and mobility, there are broader lessons here about how perceived decline affects aspiration, how community can give people confidence, and the relationship between individual choices and the opportunities that are actually available.

One of the strongest findings is that when we talk to people, they define social mobility very differently to the policy world. The research shows that people care much more about their own progress compared to where they started - not how they are doing relative to everyone else. Furthermore, their understanding of what social mobility means - and what a successful life looks like - goes beyond job titles and pay packets.

Throughout this research, we consistently found that people's view of successful social mobility, and a successful life, was deeply tied to place. People see themselves as part of their family, their community and their area. Where they are from is part of who they are.

This demonstrates that social mobility is, above all, a value. In different places, there are different conceptions of social mobility and the factors which foster or prevent it from happening. Two themes stand out from the evidence presented in this report: community resilience and ambition. Where communities have security and stability, there appears to be a strong foundation for opportunity and choice, but when these cannot be taken as a 'given', the picture is less certain. When people feel their local area matches their ambition, there is a sense of self-efficacy, and people appear to feel more confident about their own trajectory and that of their place. This sense of efficacy is less evident when community

resilience is diminished.

This brings us to an important challenge. Place-based perceptions of social mobility offer a direct challenge to the 'leave to achieve' model of upward mobility, which assumes that talented young people will, by and large, migrate to more affluent areas of the UK, usually to attend university and/or progress in their careers. Findings from this research show that people value stability, happiness, and staying connected to their community over traditional markers of getting ahead. In fact, those who decided to stay in the area they grew up in often did so in the knowledge that it may have resulted in fewer opportunities.

This strongly suggests that more needs to be done to improve opportunities in those places. This is a position which the Social Mobility Commission has supported for some time. As we keep trying to understand social mobility's role in policy, we need to keep real people, communities and places at the heart of the conversation. Social mobility is not just about individual choices, it is about how those choices are shaped by the places we create through government, business and community decisions. How we build communities, services and resources will determine whether people feel empowered to make the choices that work for them.

However, policymakers also have to be realistic. Future economic growth and innovation is not going to be evenly spread across every place. It will develop in clusters and this will bring advantages to some, but not all. Rochdale, for example, is actively exploring opportunities for economic regeneration through its relationship with the Greater Manchester conurbation. While some places may be able to reinvent themselves, this may not be feasible for all.

This raises a further issue in that place-based perceptions of social mobility are important, but may be a double-edged sword. While they reflect values which are genuine and embody how people actually want to live their lives, there may be circumstances in which they are also part of what holds people back. Social mobility policy has not considered this possibility. It has usually preached to the converted (i.e. providing support for 'leavers to achievers') or reacted in the opposite way when confronted with the 'left behind'. It has been much less successful in considering the more complex cultural, economic and other challenges of social mobility in a period of economic transition.

We do not have easy answers to these challenges, apart from the acknowledgement that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' solution. We believe that 'place-based' social mobility strategies are the way that the different challenges of different places are best addressed. The research we are presenting here is an important milestone in setting out why this approach is so important. Later this year, we will be publishing further work on this theme, including a definitive explanation of what we mean by 'place-based approaches' and associated recommendations for how they could work.

## Guest Foreword



**Professor Philip McCann,**  
Sir Terry Leahy Chair in Urban and Regional Economics, Alliance  
Manchester Business School, University of Manchester

During the last decade, the topic of social mobility has gained increasing attention amongst policymakers and researchers, but as this deep dive research undertaken by Public First for the Social Mobility Commission demonstrates, it reflects a concept and terminology that much of the general public find somewhat opaque. Yet, while the nomenclature may not be familiar, the issues and realities reflected by the social mobility research agenda are indeed very real, and crucial for understanding how much of our society works. This deep dive, focusing on the case of Rochdale and Cheshire East is highly instructive in helping us to think about the whole question of social mobility.

In purely mechanistic and quantitative terms, the notion of social mobility concerns the rate at which individuals from lower social backgrounds transition to higher income backgrounds over time. Social mobility indicators can be developed variously to facilitate comparisons across countries, regions, time-periods, educational backgrounds, employment and professional arenas, and different social, linguistic or ethnicity cohorts, amongst others. However, underlying these social mobility indicators, and especially as they relate to the research here, are four fundamental notions, namely that of agency, fairness, connectedness and pathways for advancement, all of which jump out of this deep dive report.

*Agency* refers to the individual's sense of their own empowerment to take control of their circumstances and shape their own futures. High levels of agency empower people to make choices either to do something or not to do something in a manner which places that decision on a solid footing from the perspective of the decision-maker. In other words, it confers an intrinsic value on the decision-maker in regards to their own choices, and instils pride in one's own autonomy and sense of value. For example, a sense of agency underpins the enhanced expectations, beliefs and aspirations which are essential to motivate difficult activities such as additional education and training, or risky activities such as entrepreneurship, innovation, career-changes or migration. At the same time, rather conservative choices such as decisions not to migrate, or not to undertake a career change are likely to be more solidly grounded when the decision-maker has a strong sense of their own agency.

*Fairness* is also a concept underpinning social mobility research. People wish to feel that they have similar opportunities and a similar basis on which they are able to take either risky or conservative decisions. In situations where agency differs markedly, such as in highly unequal societies, many people feel excluded from what they perceive to be a society

which is inherently tilted against them and their interests. In these situations, lower income groups do not display admiration for higher income groups, because they sense that they have been unfairly denied agency. Success is seen as being primarily due to unequal agency, not hard work or ability. In contrast, in highly socially equal societies with strong social safety nets, such as in Nordic countries, the social admiration for billionaires is remarkably high,<sup>1</sup> because everyone has a sense of fairness in that society provides agency to all. Success, in this case, is perceived as being a result primarily of agency and hard work and ability, not of unfairness. Importantly, both in terms of social perceptions and mechanisms, the level and distribution of agency is determined by the economic, social and institutional system within places.

In terms of the links discussed between social mobility and place, the key underlying themes are connectedness and pathways for advancement. Personal and career enhancement depends heavily on being connected to different people in different ways, and geography is central to these. There is a large literature on social capital associated with the work of Robert Putnam which posits that some communities are closely bonded together in place, sharing similar values and perceptions which are heavily rooted in their specific localities, whereas other places display social networks which bridge different types of people and also places.<sup>2</sup>

In earlier decades, Putnam argues that bonding based on local rootedness provided the sustenance for the flowering of communities, and especially in smaller towns, whereas in more recent decades, changes in technology, economy and society have pulled in different directions. In the modern economy, it appears that the latter type of place characterised by bridging capital have tended to fare much better over recent decades. In particular, in much of the economic geography literature, cities are regarded as exemplars of bridging capital, and cities have therefore been vaunted as pathways for upward social mobility bridging capital.<sup>3</sup> The argument, therefore, is that in large and prosperous cities, in-migrants from other parts of the same country or elsewhere are better able to circumvent any career-enhancement and social-enhancement restrictions imposed by incumbents than in smaller places, where monopoly practices and relationships are likely to be more prevalent. In other words, the social mixing inherent in cities provides individuals with greater agency, higher aspirations, enhanced career-progression opportunities, and therefore also higher upward social mobility possibilities.

The two case studies here, Rochdale and Cheshire East, reflect in part each of the key elements of social mobility. Rochdale is a classic example of a place which has faced numerous adverse economic shocks associated with deindustrialisation over five decades, while Cheshire East is a prosperous high amenity area. Cheshire East has high levels of bridging social capital whereas Rochdale has low levels,<sup>4</sup> even though they are only little more than thirty miles apart. In their own language and phrasing, the various respondents

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<sup>1</sup> Protzer, E., and Summerville, P. (2022) [\*Reclaiming Populism: How Economic Fairness Can Win Back Disenchanted Voters\*](#), Polity Books

<sup>2</sup> Putnam, R. (2000) [\*Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community\*](#), Simon and Schuster

<sup>3</sup> Glaeser, E.L. (2011) [\*Triumph of the City: How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier, and Happier\*](#), Penguin Press

<sup>4</sup> Harris, T. et al., (2025) [\*Social capital in the United Kingdom: evidence from six billion friendships\*](#), Behavioural Insights Team

and interviewees discuss their sense of agency and empowerment (or lack thereof), their aspirations (or fears) for themselves and their communities, the fairness (or unfairness) of their situation, and the need (or lack thereof) for people to migrate away from their own communities to other places in order to succeed. In Rochdale, these outflows of local people are especially pernicious because they are dominated by the young and more highly-skilled.

In both places, people understood that success and opportunities for upward social mobility are very tied to place. Civic pride is also related to a place's prosperity and opportunity. The differences in the local sense of agency are therefore very marked, while at the same time, the sense of fairness of their realities is also clear. In less prosperous places, all of the local opportunities for advancement, upward social mobility and civic pride, are diminished, relative to more prosperous places. Yet, both localities display a great deal of pride-in-place and this provides grounds for optimism, with Rochdale using its strong sense of bonding capital to foster a new economic development agenda.<sup>5</sup> Yet, this particular comparison between places is very different to the US archetype, in that the weaker locality, Rochdale, is a highly urbanised and high population area, whereas the more prosperous locality, Cheshire East, is characterised by small towns and rural areas. As such, this comparison represents something of an inversion of the urban-rural stereotype, pointing to the need for a much more nuanced and finely grained reflection and understanding in the UK context. This deep dive provides many of the building blocks of this much needed, more nuanced understanding.

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<sup>5</sup> Sensier, M. et al., (2024) [Framing a Place-Based Investment Strategy for Rochdale. Productivity Insights Paper No.038](#), The Productivity Institute

# Executive summary

This research represents two deep dives into areas which are geographically in the same region, but which have experienced very different levels of social mobility. Public First, the policy, research, opinion and strategy consultancy we commissioned to carry out the research, spoke to over 170 participants across 22 focus groups held between November 2024 and March 2025, focusing on two contrasting areas in the North West: Cheshire East, a local authority ranked as a ‘Favourable’ area for social mobility according to the Social Mobility Commission’s Promising Prospects index, and Rochdale, ranked as ‘Unfavourable’.<sup>6</sup>

Social mobility was, for many, a relatively unfamiliar term. When the researchers asked participants to explain the concept without an up-front definition, few of them felt instinctively comfortable or confident in explaining it or providing a definition. When they were given a brief definition, participants commonly understood it as a way of moving around different social circles or dealing with different types of people. It was most commonly articulated in terms of upward social mobility, either related to the improving life trajectory of an individual or, particularly among parents, as improving the life chances of their children.

Traditional measures of upward social mobility – higher income and career advancement – were consistently ranked by participants in both areas as less important than stability, personal happiness, work–life balance and community connections. While participants viewed social mobility as generally positive, they prioritised feeling safe, secure and content over material advancement. Income and wealth were understood as important ‘utilities’ that underpin a good life rather than as ends in themselves.

Upward social mobility was generally viewed as a positive thing and something to aspire to. But many participants also articulated the potential downsides associated with upward social mobility, including moving away from core values, being looked down on by new peers, and an associated loss of connection to community and family ties.

However, there was a strong belief that success and a successful life could be obtained without being intergenerationally socially mobile. What participants in both groups felt constitutes a ‘successful life’ was said to have changed over recent generations. Success now entails being happy and healthy over material wealth – although all participants recognised that income is an increasingly important determinant of the stability and security required to achieve a good life. Feeling safe, secure and happy were the most common elements of participants’ own definitions of success and having a good life.

One of the key differences between the two places was that participants in Cheshire East considered it possible for people to be successful and stay in the area, whereas successful,

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<sup>6</sup> Promising Prospects is a composite index which brings together several indicators of social mobility, covering individuals’ education, occupational positions and earnings within a particular local authority. The index adjusts for socio-economic background and measures how well young people from similar backgrounds do in education and the labour market.

upwardly mobile individuals in Rochdale often left “as quickly as possible” in order to find better jobs and careers, as there was a significant ceiling on what could be achieved locally.

However, many people in Rochdale made conscious decisions to stay, despite the challenges and even if moving might have offered better economic opportunities, because of family ties and a sense of belonging to their local community. While many were candid about the disadvantages of the area, these were often outweighed by the pull of established relationships, cultural familiarity and the emotional security provided by extended family networks. The decision to remain was framed not as a lack of ambition, but as a conscious trade-off in favour of stability.

In Cheshire East, participants felt that the reasons for the local authority’s favourable ranking included good-quality schools; good connectivity and transport links, particularly the train lines to Manchester and London; a wide variety of job opportunities; proximity to affluence in the surrounding areas, opportunities for social mixing; access to green spaces and nature; and overall a good quality of life. Overall, it was perceived as an area that had benefited from past investment and was now a “good place to live”, both by those who had lived there all their lives and by those who had moved in from other areas.

By contrast, in Rochdale, people felt that the area and the people who lived there were held back by a lack of investment in the town; a declining, neglected town centre with unreliable and short-term commitments to investment; limited local job opportunities and a lack of investment from employers; a perception that the transport links between the town and other areas were poor; struggling local educational institutions including poor schools; and a sense that it was, at times and in parts, a dangerous place to live. People often felt that opportunities in adjacent cities, including Manchester, though geographically close, were out of reach.

Place, therefore, was a platform for mobility, and social mobility was often linked to the success or decline of the local area. This was about more than just the level of local opportunities that certain places had. The conditions of a local area also affected the personal characteristics that might foster upward mobility, including ambition, work ethic and confidence. Those who had moved away often did so to achieve success that they did not feel would be possible in the place they had grown up, and said that their ability to be physically mobile was a key determinant of upward mobility.

For the people involved in the focus groups, the key determinants of a favourably socially mobile place included:

- A perception of the area as a good place to live, where opportunities are available to succeed.
- A connected area, with good transport links to other areas with opportunities which are matched to the skills of people in the area.
- A place with good-quality schools and educational opportunities.
- The presence of businesses and employers that provide stable, long-term career paths.

- Affordable housing that enables home ownership and the ability for families to stay in the area if they choose.
- Ongoing investment in the local area, including the town centre and other local infrastructure, avoiding cycles of disinvestment and decline,

When these conditions are present, people can achieve success and social mobility while also staying local. In areas lacking these qualities, upward mobility often requires leaving the area entirely – with lasting consequences for those left behind.

# Introduction and methodology

This research was commissioned by the Social Mobility Commission to understand the beliefs, attitudes and perceptions of individuals in the most and least socially mobile areas within a larger region. This was not about comparing the most and least socially mobile places in the UK, but instead about finding two contrasting areas within the same region to explore how attitudes towards social mobility, aspiration, success and place might differ.

Drawing from the Commission's landmark State of the Nation research, specifically the Promising Prospects index,<sup>7</sup> two areas of focus were selected: Cheshire East (focusing on Macclesfield and Wilmslow), a local authority with mostly favourable outcomes; and Rochdale, a local authority with mostly unfavourable outcomes.

While only 40 miles apart, the two areas are in stark contrast to one another: 8.3% of the population in Cheshire East were classified as income-deprived in 2019, compared to 20.1% of the population in Rochdale (making it the 15th most income deprived LA in the country).<sup>8</sup> 23.2% of residents in Rochdale have no formal qualifications compared to 15% in Cheshire East.<sup>9</sup> And life expectancy at birth differs between the two places by 4.5 years for men and 3.1 years for women.<sup>10</sup>

While these differences are important for understanding why the areas experience differing levels of social mobility, they do not tell the full story. Traditional social mobility research focuses heavily on people's eventual socio-economic status and on how different or similar it is to that of their parents. This is often used as a yardstick by which to measure how opportunities and outcomes are distributed across the socio-economic gradient. However, we know that many people place a higher value on having a sense of accomplishment, happiness, life satisfaction and wellbeing. All of these can be correlated with, but are not always explained by, socio-economic backgrounds.

This research was conceived as a way to understand more about what sort of life outcomes really matter to people. Its scope includes understanding people's perceptions of whether they could achieve, or have achieved, these outcomes, and if and how they are shaped by the area they live in. Put another way, we wanted to ask people from different areas and walks of life, living rich and multifaceted lives, with their own unique experiences and backgrounds, what they consider social mobility to be and how it relates to their hopes and aspirations for their own lives, their families and their communities.

In total, Public First conducted 22 focus groups, 11 relating to each area, speaking to over 170 people from a range of backgrounds and socio-economic groups. Six groups were conducted in person and the rest online. Groups were recruited across four different categories:

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<sup>7</sup> Promising Prospects is a composite index which identifies the local authorities where young people who grow up there do better (or worse) than people with the same socio-economic background who grew up elsewhere.

<sup>8</sup> Office for National Statistics (ONS), [Exploring local income deprivation](#), 24 May 2021

<sup>9</sup> Office for National Statistics (ONS), [Census 2021: Census maps](#), 2021

<sup>10</sup> Office for National Statistics (ONS), [Life expectancy for local areas in England, Northern Ireland and Wales: between 2001 to 2003 and 2020 to 2022](#), 26 January 2024

- Families with school-age children growing up in Cheshire East or Rochdale.
- People who grew up in and now live in these areas.
- People who moved into the areas as adults, but who had grown up elsewhere.
- People who grew up in either Cheshire East or Rochdale, but who had since moved away and live somewhere else.

Within each of these four categories, groups were also split into constituent National Readership Survey (NRS) social grades, with some groups made up exclusively of C2DE (working-class) individuals and some only of ABC1 (middle class). Participants also came from a range of ethnic backgrounds.

The core research explored the following questions:

- How well is social mobility understood as a concept, and is it understood to be a good thing?
- How important is social mobility to individuals?
- What do people value in life and does this tally with a mainstream conception of success?
- Do people think they have better or worse opportunities than their parents, and in turn, do parents think they have had better or worse opportunities than their children will have?
- What do people think denotes successful social mobility, and what sort of people are seen to have been successfully socially mobile?
- Is a lack of social mobility purely down to a lack of opportunity, or are other factors at play?

The project engaged with a range of individuals who had experienced different levels of social mobility. The research focused on asking open questions to build an understanding of how people define social mobility, what their aspirations and priorities are, how these aspirations are shaped by place and life circumstances, and what the barriers to mobility are. Each group ended with participants being asked to try to define the key determinants of an upwardly socially mobile place, and to comment on what they thought could be done to help improve life chances for residents in the region.

This report is structured into four chapters, each of which uses the insights from the focus groups to produce a deep dive into attitudes towards social mobility.

Chapter 1 explores how participants defined social mobility, revealing a relatively low level of understanding of the term, and exploring whether social mobility was perceived as a positive, neutral or negative thing.

Chapter 2 builds on this to explore how participants understood success in their own lives, and in the lives of others, forming a picture of how people conceive of their own aspirations and ambitions.

Chapter 3 looks specifically at the role of place, and at how contrasting place-based factors were felt to shape life outcomes and opportunities for residents in Cheshire East and Rochdale.

Chapter 4 explores further what participants felt were the key physical attributes of an upwardly socially mobile place. This chapter looks in more depth at the role of employers and local employment, education and skills, and housing and local transport infrastructure in determining how a place could best enable social mobility.

# 1. Definitions of social mobility

"It's having the options and opportunities throughout your life journey to progress and improve ... and just having the freedom and flexibility to get on in life and have options to do that." *Male procurement manager, 50s, Rochdale (families with children)*

Social mobility was, for many, a relatively unfamiliar term. When the researchers asked participants to explain the concept without an up-front definition, they found that few participants felt instinctively comfortable or confident explaining it or providing a definition.

Often, participants came up with a completely different interpretation, sometimes linking it to public transport, physical mobility or disability mobility schemes.

"Nothing stands out straight away, but I would start thinking about transport links." *Male operations manager, 50s, Rochdale (grew up in area and lives there)*

"Is that holidays in a caravan?" *Male, retired, 60s, Cheshire East (moved to area as an adult)*

"Access to get to places easier, that's my guess, transport and everything, being able to socialise and having the ability to get there." *Female estates project manager, 30s, Cheshire East (grew up in area and lives there)*

"Is it similar to like car mobility? In terms of like, like car mobility is like you get help with getting a car if you're disabled and things like that." *Male probation officer, 30s, Rochdale (moved to area as an adult)*

Those more familiar with the term most commonly understood it as a way of moving around different social circles or dealing with different types of people. It was most commonly articulated in terms of upward social mobility, either related to the improving life trajectory of an individual or, particularly among parents, as improving the life chances of children.

"I'm not too sure. Would it be like moving up in the social class sort of sense? Like going from a lower class to a higher class." *Male technical support worker, 20s, Cheshire East (grew up in area and lives there)*

"I see it as a kind of hierarchy, you know maybe you are moving from the lowest to the highest ... getting to a new level and changing your life around that." *Female student, 20s, Cheshire East (grew up in area and lives there)*

"Do you mean inheritance? That's helping my children." *Female recruiter, 40s, Cheshire East (families with children)*

There was a low level of confidence even among those who gave a more accurate definition of social mobility, which again usually related to progressing or elevating oneself economically into a different standard of living or socio-economic status.

“It’s the idea of progressing yourself, isn’t it, like background. You start maybe working class or from a poor low income background. And it’s about elevating yourself to a different standard of living.” *Male operations manager, 30s, Cheshire East (grew up in area and lives there)*

Following this unprompted discussion, moderators shared with participants the Social Mobility’s Commission core definition:

“A person experiences social mobility when they have different life outcomes from their parents. This could mean a different income level, a different occupational class, or other differences, such as housing or education. Mobility can be upwards or downwards.”

Once a shared definition had been established within the focus groups, some participants were able to articulate their own personal story of experiencing social mobility. Often, they did this in terms of their experience of the education system or housing situation compared to that of their parents (we explore this in more depth in chapter 2). Many participants spoke of their experiences in absolute terms or relative to their own families, and there was a reluctance to compare themselves to others elsewhere in the country.

“My [experience of social mobility] was just because of education. So I got accepted into Kent University so I had to live there and when I finished my Masters I didn’t go back so, because most of the people I met there and I connected with were from London ... there wasn’t any need for me to go back.” *Male geologist, 30s, Kent (grew up in and left Cheshire East)*

“I grew up with working-class parents ... I was fortunate enough to go to a private school on an assisted place. So then I was kind of exposed to people that had far more money than we did ... I’ve kind of had social mobility, in that I went to university, I was the first one in my family to go to university, I’ve had a really good career for the NHS, which is quite a respected sector, and now I kind of earn a decent salary and live in a really lovely house and have a, you know, a nice lifestyle.” *Female mental health nurse, 30s, Cheshire East (moved to area as an adult)*

“I’m answering from my experience compared to my mum and dad and my grandma and grandparents. I think they didn’t have the access to the education, the language was a bit of an issue... my parents didn’t have access to all that, so they weren’t socially mobile as much... I feel I’m more socially mobile and, I think, moving forward I see, and I would push my kids to be even more socially mobile, more than myself.” *Female data analyst, 30s, Rochdale (moved to area as an adult)*

Social mobility was generally viewed as a positive thing and something to aspire to. This view was most confidently held by those who had grown up in either Rochdale or Cheshire East and had left. This group in particular were more assured in asserting the opportunities rather than the downsides of social mobility. Across groups, the ability to be upwardly socially mobile was moderated by finances, and success was defined as having the economic security and freedom to make the life choices that people wanted to make.

"I'd say it's quite a good thing ... I don't think there's anything wrong with wanting to have a better life than you were born into." *Male finance investigator, 30s, Salford (grew up in and left Rochdale)*

"It's good for people to be able to move up in life, but the opportunities have to be there, and you need to have the right goalposts." *Male sales manager, 60s, North Manchester (grew up in and left Rochdale)*

"I think it's a good thing ... where you're born and your family background, the kind of opportunities available to you, they all massively influence how far you go in life". *Male geologist, 30s, Kent (grew up in and left Cheshire East)*

Participants discussed several potential downsides to upward social mobility, including moving away from core values, being looked down on by new peers, and an associated loss of connection to community and family ties. Some struggled to weigh up the trade-offs involved in the 'success' that upward social mobility would bring and the things they would need to leave behind as a result – including their accent and how they presented themselves. This was particularly the case in Rochdale, where family and community connections were particularly important.

"I think that people are too scared to say that they want to be more socially mobile, because there's like a bit of a stigma around being middle class, not that I am middle class, but I think it would be nice if I was. I'd probably have to lose my accent first." *Male finance investigator, 30s, Salford (grew up in and left Rochdale)*

"There is a huge piece around imposter syndrome and trying to be something that you're not because now you've got the money ... so, for me, it comes back to that piece about having people around you who can ground you and give you confidence. And I think that would take some adjustment if you're moving up significantly socially. How, then, is your background and life relatable to those people?" *Female CEO, 50s, Cheshire East (families with children)*

"Well, I just think that [being socially mobile] would be a bit of a downfall. In Rochdale there's more families that are connected and they see each other, meet each other, even though they ring each other. If you're thinking of moving away in a nice house or a nice job, I think it's going to affect you more, moving away from family, that would have a negative

impact.” *Female stay-at-home parent, 40s, Rochdale (grew up in area and lives there)*

“No matter how much I become mobile socially, I think I would always stick to Rochdale. For me it fits all the things I want in life ... I’m happy to be in Rochdale. Whereas, I think, if I was to go to a city I’d go back down the ladder.” *Female data analyst, 30s, Rochdale (moved to area as an adult)*

Some felt that there was a limit on the level of upward mobility they were able to experience and that despite achieving a better education and earning more than they might otherwise, they were still unable to achieve other key outcomes such as home ownership due to increasing house prices.

“My family are very working class. My mum stayed at home. My dad works, and they have like a three bedroom, massive garden driveway kind of house, whereas, like me and my boyfriend now, we’re both scientists, you’d think, oh, okay, that’s like, you know, higher up on the social mobility thing. But realistically, we’re renting like a terraced house, and probably will not be able to afford to buy a house.” *Female automation scientist, 20s, Cheshire East (grew up in area and lives there)*

“I mean a lot of people are finding it harder to improve these days, because you know, my parents sort of moved up and up and up houses-wise ... we saw houses increase in value ... but most people’s housing has cost them a lot now. My daughter is a doctor in London, she’s married to someone in the financial services, so between them they have a good income, and it’s hard to get on the property ladder in London.” *Male sales manager, 60s, Manchester (grew up in and left Rochdale)*

Participants felt that geographical social mobility – in which people move away in search of better opportunities – could have significant negative impacts on the places and people they left behind. The impact on the original area, including the loss of talent and financial resources, was highlighted as a significant negative consequence. A sense of the brain drain associated with social mobility creates what several participants described as a vicious cycle of economic decline: when talented individuals leave smaller towns and cities, they take with them not just their immediate economic contributions but also their potential future investments in local businesses, property and community projects. As one participant noted, this creates a situation where areas become “more and more deprived” because the people most likely to drive economic regeneration are the ones leaving in search of better opportunities elsewhere.

Parents in particular additionally expressed concerns about the loss of family connections when their children move away as a result of being socially mobile, especially if that involves moving to London or other large cities.

“Well the problem with places like Rochdale is, there is a financial drain, if the best people leave, if the people that are going to push the place

forward, they leave, you're left with a massive gap and the area becomes deprived, it becomes poorer." *Male photographer, 50s, Greater Manchester (grew up in and left Rochdale)*

"I wouldn't particularly want [my children] to move to London." *Female retired teacher, 70s, Cheshire East (moved to area as an adult)*

"If you're living in a smaller town, the opportunities to get into those corporate positions aren't on your doorstep, there are a few opportunities, but more and more you've got to go further afield to increase your chances of getting the better jobs. You've got to maybe go to London or go to Birmingham or go to Manchester or go to the bigger cities to get these corporate [opportunities], and then you're leaving your area aren't you? Which is great for your social mobility and not so great for the town." *Female project manager, 50s, Cheshire East (grew up in area and lives there)*

"I think it is quite sad that we are sort of encouraging and pushing our kids to move out of the area, and if I think of the area, all of the lost talent available, skill, and expertise, etc., that other areas and other countries are benefiting from." *Male regional manager, 30s, Rochdale (families with children)*

## 2. Definitions of success

“You’re either happy with what you’ve got, or you’re never going to be happy. If you’ve got enough money and can pay all your bills, treat yourself occasionally, and get to see the sunshine every now and then, that’s my version of happiness.” *Female account manager, 40s, Cheshire East (families with children)*

As set out in the previous chapter, across the focus groups, social mobility was not a well-understood concept (and often a relatively misunderstood one). The traditional definition of upward social mobility was also often not how participants viewed success in their own lives, or what they aspired to have in order to live a happy and fulfilled life.

A majority of participants in both areas – Rochdale and Cheshire East – prioritised being happy and content with what they already had, and finding ways to ensure that what they had was secure and not at risk from external shocks. Feeling safe and secure was overwhelmingly linked to participants’ own definitions of success and having a good life.

“Being happy is a good part of it, your quality of life. It doesn’t necessarily need to be linked to your career success, it can just be – are you happy where you live, and are you comfortable in your home?” *Male operations executive, 30s, Cheshire East (moved to area as an adult)*

“Having a work/life balance, enjoying going to work, enjoying having your free time, your social time, and just being happy and safe and comfortable where you are.” *Female admin worker, 30s, Rochdale (grew up in area and lives there)*

“I’ve stayed in the Rochdale area all my life. I was quite successful, ended up with a quite successful job. My husband was a plumber, a heating engineer, we lived week from week ... But we’re happy now the kids are grown up, they’ve got a good education, they’ve got careers of their own. To me success – it’s contentment ... I’m just content with what I’ve got now and what I’ve achieved.” *Female, retired, 60s, Rochdale (grew up in area and lives there)*

In this context, social mobility was seen as a positive thing in circumstances where it allowed people to feel they had an increased sense of security and material safety. In groups in both areas, traditional values of success (higher income and career advancement) were less valued than stability, personal happiness, work–life balance and community ties. Income and wealth were felt to underpin these but were seen as ‘utilities’ rather than ends in and of themselves. A steady income and a good, well-paid job were perceived as metrics of success not in their own right but as ways of achieving a level of financial security and stability that allowed a comfortable life. Jobs that were well paid but encroached too much on family life or free time were rarely highly prized or sought after.

"I want them [my children] to be successful, but, actually, I don't care what they do as long as they're happy and they're well." *Female mental health nurse, 40s, Rochdale (grew up in area and lives there)*

"All I want is for my children to grow up to be happy and healthy." *Female admin worker, 40s, Cheshire East (grew up in area and lives there)*

"Just being happy, and obviously you still need a steady income to be able to pay the bills, that's very important too, but you know, it's just being able to be happy." *Male teaching assistant, 30s, Rochdale (families with children)*

There was a clear age divide on how this kind of security could be achieved. Younger people tended to be more open to non-traditional routes to success and financial security. For those in their 20s and 30s, technology was facilitating them working flexibly and aspiring to work smarter, not harder, to make their way in the world. Sometimes this meant choosing a paid apprenticeship over a degree at 18 to start earning and find a path to financial security faster, at other times it meant making money online through platforms such as TikTok and YouTube.

"I think it will be easier for them [school children now to get job opportunities] compared to our time because they've got lots of things now, even offline, and online, we've got, you know, work from home and stuff like that, so, and now you don't really need to be somewhere to work there, so that kind of opens up another section on that category of opportunity." *Male geologist, 30s, Kent (grew up in and left Cheshire East)*

"The new generation do have the opportunities available more easily, because if you think about it, you've got social media, a lot of people can post things online and that video can blow up, and, you know, you can have a source of income through that way." *Female student, 20s, Manchester (grew up in and left Rochdale)*

Older participants, on the other hand, were more likely to praise those who had worked hard and been able to forge a comfortable living for themselves over an extended period of consistent and reliable employment.

"My parents were never around, and they used to work a lot. Mum was a teacher. She would tutor till God's hour. My dad worked at a cloth manufacturing facility, and was never in. So for me, the difference there is that I want to be here for my kids. Most nights I'm home six o'clock with the kids. We'll eat dinner together, spend time watching TV and stuff. We'll do it as a family. The family relationship, which I didn't have ... I love my parents dearly, yeah, but they worked their nuts off, and they were never there." *Male director, 40s, Cheshire East (families with children)*

“My mum and dad worked up from the bottom, my dad was a teacher and my mum worked in sort of like the banking sector, so we started at the very bottom and [I] just saw how their struggles to get to where they are now, just like comfortable. Now it just puts that work ethic in me and made me realise that if you do strive and work hard, that anything’s possible.” *Male IT support worker, 40s, Rochdale (families with children)*

Health – both physical and mental – was also key, and good health was widely considered a crucial component of a successful life with many seeing it as a form of wealth and value that was more important than financial assets or income. The ability to be healthy was seen as a facilitating factor in enabling opportunity, including the freedom to study, work or travel.

“All the money in the world can’t help with health.” *Female CEO, 50s, Cheshire East (families with children)*

“I think health is a major thing, health is wealth, and it really is, it’s so true like, I’m getting older and I’ve had relatives that have been ill and stuff, it does, you are nothing without it.” *Female account manager, 30s, Greater Manchester (grew up in and left Cheshire East)*

“I actually think success is when you have good health because, what I know is health is wealth. If you’re not okay health-wise, you might not have the strength and the ability to carry out some certain things like going to work and doing a whole lot of things that will bring money in ... I just feel health is the number one priority.” *Female nurse, 30s, Rochdale (moved to area as an adult)*

“As I’m getting older I feel health is your number one thing. Without your health you haven’t got anything, you know? You might be Steve Jobs, a billionaire, but it doesn’t really matter how much money you’ve got, if you haven’t got your health, So for me health is the number one thing.” *Male photographer, 50s, Greater Manchester (grew up in and left Rochdale)*

“I think positive mental health is really important, especially when you get older as well ... positive mental health, it’ll take you very far, definitely.” *Male roofer, 20s, Rochdale (grew up in area and lives there)*

For parents, success was largely understood in terms of having the ability to secure happiness and stability for themselves and their families. They placed a strong emphasis on ensuring that their children had opportunities in life, but also on their wellbeing and personal contentment.

“I just want [my children] to be happy doing, and not anxious in pursuing [their passion] ... I think [being] successful is, the way I see that, as being content with what you’ve got.” *Female private tutor, 40s, Cheshire East (families with children)*

“Health and happiness. That’s the priority for my children.” *Male graphic designer, 50s, Cheshire East (families with children)*

“What’s really important, because my child is an only child, is that his personal network and group of friends are good people ... so, I just would like him to be surrounded by good, fair, honest, and kind people. I don’t really care which social echelon it’s in.” *Female stay-at-home parent, 50s, Cheshire East (families with children)*

When asked to identify the characteristics of a successful person, a good work ethic and attitude were seen as key features. In particular, parents saw one of their roles as ensuring that their children had a strong work ethic in order that they could go on to be successful.

“I think seeking out opportunities and challenges is a massive measure of success. I want my kids to struggle. I want my kids to face adversity, and I want them to understand what hardship is, and I want them to recognise that hard work generally gets you an element of success.” *Male teacher, 30s, Cheshire East (families with children)*

“If you’ve got that hunger and you’ve got that kind of want to progress I think it’s more about taking the best opportunities possible.” *Male customer service worker, late teens, Rochdale (grew up in area and lives there)*

“My son once said to me, ‘I don’t need a job because you’ve got a business’. And I told him it was my business, not his, and told him he had to think about a career. For me, that work ethic, and delayed gratification is a big piece for young people because they expect everything now.” *Female CEO, 50s, Cheshire East (families with children)*

“[Parenting is] about instilling core values and a work ethic in them. I want her to have a good work–life balance, but not working just isn’t an option.” *Female account manager, 40s, Cheshire East (families with children)*

There were mixed views about whether success was harder to achieve now compared to in previous generations. Parents in both areas expressed concern that their children would struggle to have the same levels of success that they had experienced, citing housing costs, employment uncertainty, a loss of community and declining local prospects. The high costs of living, and rising housing costs in particular, were seen as a key barrier to future generations’ ability to be upwardly socially mobile.

“The price of the house is now eye watering. So I worry, for my children, are they going to be able to afford themselves a house? In terms of social mobility, it’s gone down compared to our parents, when they grew up, because of the cost of living generally.” *Male director, 40s, Cheshire East (families with children)*

“For my parents, if they got ill, it wasn’t just family that were there to look after them, there was actually a whole community of people that were willing to help. And I think that has changed massively over the last 30 years.” *Male teacher, 30s, Cheshire East (families with children)*

“I’m thinking about my parents now, they lived in a council house for years, but now, because you’ve got to rent and the rent is so high and there’s very, very little social housing, it’s a bigger pressure on today’s young families ... And the quality of housing as well, I think, has dropped, and I don’t know whether that’s a social thing. You go round and you see these new council houses they’ve built and the gardens are a mess, there’s rubbish everywhere, nobody takes pride in their area any more. Whereas in my parents’ and my generation we did, you know, you mowed the lawn, you kept everything nice and tidy, and I think, I think they’ve got it hard, I think young people these days have got it hard.” *Female, retired, 60s, Rochdale (grew up in area and lives there)*

Others felt that technology and changing patterns of work (i.e. more hybrid or remote working) meant that there were more opportunities now than in the past if people wanted them – but worried that young people lacked the work ethic and drive to access them.

“In this generation we have got lots more opportunities, things have developed, new technology. If you want, if you’ve got the drive to do something and you can teach yourself these days on the internet. Like self-taught courses. Back in the day when our parents were born they didn’t have that.” *Female teaching assistant, 30s, Cheshire East (grew up in area and lives there)*

“There’s a lot more opportunities, everything’s online, there’s a whole digital world out there so if you want to find out about it, even if you can’t experience it you can go and find out about it, so I think there’s more opportunities for people to change their outcomes.” *Female project manager, 50s, Cheshire East (grew up in area and lives there)*

“It’s a double-edged sword because [speaking to another participant] I agree with you that the world has become such a smaller place, you can find more things, but it’s made a lot of young people very lazy.” *Male regional facilities manager, 40s, Rochdale (moved to area as an adult)*

### 3. The contribution of place to social mobility

“My son, I don’t think he’ll move back here. He’s had his eyes open[ed]. He’s spent time living in parts of Cheshire ... He’s said that he doesn’t think he’ll move back to Rochdale. He’s seen different towns and cities and a different life.” *Male operations manager, 50s, Rochdale (grew up in area and lives there)*

“They [people from the area] might move away for a few years, go to university ... and probably live there for a long time and then decided to come back here, because ... It’s really a nice place to live.” *Male teacher, 30s, Cheshire East (families with children)*

Across this research, it was clear that people often saw success and opportunities for upward social mobility as tied to the prosperity and trajectory of the local area. What distinguished Cheshire East from Rochdale was that in the former, this stability and security was easier to attain. It was felt that success was a compounding factor: if the area is doing well, it is likely to attract more investment and opportunity.

Civic pride was also seen as a powerful catalyst for social mobility by creating both psychological and material pathways to advancement. When individuals that Public First spoke to felt genuinely connected to and proud of their community, they also felt they had a stake in its future prosperity and a greater sense of social cohesion and of safety and security. Feeling positive about the place that participants lived in was strongly correlated to whether they felt like they had opportunities for advancement.

The official Social Mobility Commission Index ranks Cheshire East as ‘Favourable’ when it comes to enabling social mobility and Rochdale as ‘Unfavourable’. As part of the focus groups, participants were shown the ranking of the area where they were based or grew up. They were rarely surprised by the rankings.

Cheshire East, for example, was consistently viewed as a desirable place to live, with opportunities for a good quality of life. Participants were able to cite several positive aspects of the local area. They often said they were proud to live there. They felt that Cheshire East’s social status and the perception that it was a high-income area were drivers of upward social mobility, since they encouraged greater social mixing and motivated people to strive for higher social status. Those who had moved into the area in particular were able to highlight relative advantages compared to places like Oldham, Rochdale or Salford. For many we spoke to who had lived elsewhere, moving to Cheshire East, particularly from working-class areas, was seen as a deliberate step towards improving one’s life and becoming socially mobile. Many had chosen Cheshire East deliberately, because they believed it would be easier to access the quality of life they desired. It had many of the physical attributes and wider opportunities that participants articulated as

defining a 'successful' life to them, including access to nature, good jobs, a healthy environment and financial security.

"I think it's a good place to work, to be honest, and it's got access to the countryside and nice people, loads of shops and stuff." *Male operations executive, 30s, Cheshire East (moved to area as an adult)*

"I think Macclesfield tries very hard to be thriving ... lots of independent shops which are all encouraged, we've got parks and recreation, it's brilliant. The Council is always putting on free events, and it's a very beautiful place – we're a stone's throw from the countryside." *Female job coach, 50s, Cheshire East (grew up in area and lives there)*

"I can just jump on a train every day and go to work and then go to the countryside. It's the best of both worlds." *Male disability lead, 20s, Cheshire East (moved to area as an adult)*

"I moved three years ago. I'm from Liverpool originally, and then I lived in different places within Manchester and then moved to Macclesfield. I've lived in different places ... but it's got really good vibes. I think it's really nice." *Female, currently unemployed, 40s, Cheshire East (moved to area as an adult)*

"I grew up around the Stockport area, and then I moved to Macclesfield to try and better my life a bit. And I feel like it has bettered my life. There's more green spaces. I couldn't be happier around here. I have a nicer house, nice neighbours, and more space. And I feel like it's just a nice community." *Male operations executive, 30s, Cheshire East (moved to area as an adult)*

"We moved to Poynton because we quite liked the village, it's got a nice strip, like shops, restaurants, and bars, and my parents, they've also got family friends in the area." *Female estate agent, 20s, Cheshire East (moved to area as an adult)*

"I'm new to Macclesfield and really like it ... it's very handy for work, I'm near the train station, it's a quick commute to London, and there's loads of restaurants and bars. I've got my daughter into a really nice primary school, and she's really happy." *Female account manager, 40s, Cheshire East (families with children)*

Participants were able to articulate that the reasons for the local authority's 'Favourable' ranking included good-quality schools; good connectivity and transport links, particularly access to the train line to Manchester and London; a wide variety of job opportunities; proximity to affluence in the surrounding areas, providing more opportunities for social mixing; access to green spaces and nature; and overall a good quality of life. Opportunities for work and large employers were also considered key factors influencing the ranking – for example, the presence of large employers such as AstraZeneca in Cheshire East was

considered to have a large impact on local people's outcomes and the general prosperity of the area. Overall, it was perceived as a "good place to live", both by those who had lived there all their lives and by those who had moved in from other areas.

"It's such a varied place to live that there are opportunities for jobs. Obviously, we're not in the capital of the country, but we can get on the train if we need to. We can work from home. We've got good schools achieving good marks to get in on good courses at good universities."  
*Female job coach, 50s, Cheshire East (grew up in area and lives there)*

"There's [Astra]-Zeneca which is great. Been around there for God knows [how many] years." *Male director, 40s, Cheshire East (families with children)*

"Opportunities for social mobility are probably less here versus cities, but I think generally speaking as northern towns go, I do feel like Macclesfield has a lot going on and it's quite big and there's lots of different people and you are well connected to places ... I would say it stands like in quite good stead versus other places." *Female medical writer, 20s, Cheshire East (grew up in area and lives there)*

"Within Macclesfield, we're sort of protected from all the problems, the crime and all the stuff going on, but you can still get a job, can't you? I think it's quite a good place to live." *Male operations manager, 30s, Cheshire East (grew up in area and lives there)*

"If you are happy where you live, if you're comfortable in your home, you get on with neighbours, you've got green spaces, there's fresh air and stuff, there's limited crime or no crime ... I think Macclesfield provides those things quite abundantly, really. I would say that I'm happy and, in a way, successful because of that." *Male operations executive, 30s, Cheshire East (moved to area as an adult)*

Rochdale, by contrast, was perceived as a place in decline, and in turn, those in Rochdale generally had a more negative view of the opportunities for social mobility available to people who lived there. They were equally unsurprised by its ranking as an 'Unfavourable' area when it comes to its social mobility prospects. Reasons for this low ranking and perceived lack of opportunity included a lack of public investment in the town and a declining, neglected town centre; limited local job opportunities and a lack of investment by employers; a perception that the transport links between the town and other areas were poor; a struggling local education ecosystem and poor schools; and a sense that it was, at times and in parts, a dangerous place to live. Those who had moved into or stayed in the area often cited their reasons for doing so as being connected to family or other local communities rather than being about improving their prospects in areas such as work or education.

"Here's a bit of a glass ceiling about what you can achieve locally." *Female nurse, 40s, Rochdale (grew up in area and lives there)*

“Because there isn’t a lot in Rochdale, it makes me aspire for my children to have more than I have ... So it’s kind of a positive, because it gives me that drive to push them forward, but it’s also a negative because there isn’t a lot of stuff here, and I want my children to experience more than what is available in that shell.” *Female health worker, 40s, Rochdale (families with children)*

“I think they need to feel safe, like [other participant’s name] said before, obviously you know, Rochdale is not, it doesn’t class as a safe place, so the kids need to feel a lot, do you know, secure in, when they grow up and feel safe.” *Male driver, 30s, Rochdale (families with children)*

“There were some wealthy places in Rochdale. But there are parts of Rochdale now I wouldn’t walk through. I’ve started to think I’m the wrong age to walk through some of these places on my own.” *Male operations manager, 50s, Rochdale (grew up in area and lives there)*

In Rochdale in particular, issues of crime and antisocial behaviour were raised consistently as things which were holding back the area from improving.

“I have just thought of Rochdale as a not-safe place ever since I was little. My house got broken into a few months ago. I just don’t like it. I feel like anywhere outside of Rochdale ... would be so much better than living here.” *Female hairdresser, 20s, Rochdale (grew up in area and lives there)*

“It’s just depressing there’s just so many boarded shops and things like that and it’s just sort of like negative news all the time. You know, I’ve got a couple of young children ... but you just don’t feel safe any more, I don’t think.” *Female credit controller, 40s, Rochdale (moved to area as an adult)*

“There has been a bit of development in the town centre in Rochdale but it feels quite dark ... I don’t know if dark’s right ... not dangerous but a bit, a bit scary. A bit rundown, I suppose.” *Female probation officer, 40s, Rochdale (moved to area as an adult)*

“I think there’s a huge drug problem in Rochdale and I think the drug problem has a knock-on effect, which causes more thieving, burglaries, car thefts, violence. I do worry about my grandchildren growing up in Rochdale with all this about.” *Female, retired, 60s, Rochdale (moved to area as an adult)*

A local area being viewed as ‘in decline’ puts a ceiling on people’s ambitions – often at a hyper-local level (i.e. living in a poor neighbourhood or part of town). Revitalising the town centre and fostering a sense of civic pride were viewed as ways to restore ambition and optimism. Improving local areas would in turn improve how socially mobile these places could be. While there was a list of specific ways in which this could be done, they centred around one core idea: that fostering a sense of pride and optimism in an area was essential to restoring ambition and providing more opportunities.

“Town was dead, it was all pound, we used to call it the pound shop, pound town, because that’s what Rochdale was referred as because it was just pound shops everywhere.” *Female admin assistant, 30s, Rochdale (families with children)*

“The policymakers that live in London and stuff, they don’t really care about a small town like Rochdale. I just feel as though, for many years it’s been one of those forgotten things, we live under the shadow of Manchester.” *Male teaching assistant, 30s, Rochdale (families with children)*

“There’s been lots of investment in pockets of Rochdale but not the wider Rochdale area. So I think where we’re seeing lots of investment around shopping and I suppose those sorts of things. We’re losing investment in other areas, and I think we’ve got massive areas of deprivation and lack of investment ... all you have to do is drive down to two minutes in any direction, you can see that.” *Female nurse, 40s, Rochdale (grew up in area and lives there)*

One of the key differences between the two places was that in Cheshire East it was considered possible for people to be successful and stay in the area, whereas in Rochdale, successful, upwardly mobile individuals often left “as quickly as possible” in order to find better jobs and careers, with there being a significant ceiling on what could be achieved locally. Those who had grown up and left Rochdale had all moved to places with more opportunities and better connections; their reasons for moving often felt like ‘pushes’ away from the area. However, those who had left Cheshire East had done so for reasons often unconnected to the place, and they felt they had more reasons to return. They were being ‘pulled’ to other parts of the country for university, or for specific graduate schemes, not because of any particular desire to leave Cheshire East.

“You can be successful and stay here, definitely – you can make your own success.” *Male, retired, 60s, Cheshire East (moved to area as an adult)*

“People want to move into the area, people don’t want to generally move out of the area, they want to move into the area. So that has got to say something for itself, you know.” *Female retired teacher, 70s, Cheshire East (moved to area as an adult)*

“I also know a couple of guys who have moved to Cheshire. They’ve made successful businesses, and they’ve gone as quickly as possible.” *Male operations manager, 50s, Rochdale (grew up in area and lives there)*

“My two best friends live in London, and they personally have moved straight from university, out of Rochdale, they went to London, and their careers have gone so much faster than ours up in the north, with me and my other friends who’ve been left in the north.” *Female human resources manager, 40s, Rochdale (families with children)*

"I feel like the next generation ... like a lot of my cousins who have been to uni, they're now working away because job opportunities are a lot better. They get paid better so they don't stay in Rochdale. They have all moved away." *Male head of design, 40s, Rochdale (moved to area as an adult)*

"But I don't think I know anybody who I grew up with who has had a successful career and stayed local." *Female carer, 50s, Rochdale (families with children)*

Many participants in Rochdale mentioned staying in the area despite challenges because of family ties and a sense of belonging to their local community, even if moving might have offered better economic opportunities. While many were candid about the perceived disadvantages of the area, these were often outweighed by the pull of established relationships, cultural familiarity and the emotional security provided by extended family networks. The decision to remain was framed not as a lack of ambition but as a conscious trade-off in favour of stability.

"Apart from family and friends that are local there's not much else that would keep me in the Rochdale borough." *Female human resources manager, 40s, Rochdale (families with children)*

"I want to be near, in a community where there is a mosque, especially when it's doing Ramadan and things like that, we want that community in that bond ... I've got a good family, even though you might be, you know, working class, not having lots of money, the community is more powerful than having money." *Male head of design, 40s, Rochdale (moved to area as an adult)*

"What I love about Rochdale is that it's really close knit and it's just home for me." *Female safety officer, 30s, Rochdale (moved to area as an adult)*

"You feel part of, like a sense of belonging, part of your community, don't you? I'm lucky enough to have lovely neighbours and my local Facebook groups that are set up for Rochdale or nearby village." *Female, retired, 60s, Rochdale (grew up in area and lives there)*

"A lot of the people that I know are from Rochdale [and] live in Rochdale. Their parents [are] from Rochdale, grandparents in Rochdale, brothers, sisters. Yeah. I don't know many people from my area that have sort of moved into it, they're people that seem to have been there their whole lives, and the whole family lived there." *Female reward manager, 50s, Rochdale (moved to area as an adult)*

Place, therefore, was a platform for mobility, and social mobility was often seen as linked to the success or decline of the local area. The conditions of the local area had a knock-on impact on overall drivers of social mobility (including ambition, work ethic and opportunities). Those who had moved away often did so to achieve success that they did

not feel would be possible in the place they had grown up, and said that their ability to be physically mobile was a key determinant of upward mobility.

Reasons for moving away varied by area. For example, those who moved from Cheshire East were often seeking more affordable housing or better earning potential in areas such as London; however, almost all retained a positive view of the area.

“I’ve got a lot of friends who’ve stayed in Macclesfield and at the moment we’re on kind of roughly similar salaries but I think like trajectory-wise of moving away and going for a different kind of like graduate-based job, I will end up earning a lot more than those that have stayed in Macclesfield and kind of not got their degree or moved out.” *Male accountant, 20s, Greater Manchester (grew up in and left Cheshire East)*

“You can still come back and live at home with your mum while you’re getting your foot on that career path, if that’s what you want to do. I think Macclesfield is perfect for that.” *Female job coach, 50s, Cheshire East (grew up in area and lives there)*

“It’s definitely changed a lot for me, I think if I stayed in Macclesfield, which as I said quite a lot of my friends have, it’s just quite like a little bubble and I feel like moving away has really like opened up opportunities, not only like with jobs but meeting people from different cultures, different places in the country, like just seeing that there’s like more to life and I feel like now I’ve been more up for kind of like travelling or going to live in another the country.” *Female Research Assistant, 20s, Salford (grew up in and left Cheshire East)*

Similarly, many moved from Rochdale in order to access better job prospects and educational opportunities for themselves and their children. However, in contrast to Cheshire East, seeking improved personal safety and quality of life were key drivers for leaving the area.

“A lot of my friends had already left Rochdale, so it didn’t really feel like there was anything worth staying for and the job situation was a similar thing for me as well, like if I wanted to get a good job, I’d have had to commute to Manchester every day, so I just felt like there was a lot more opportunity in Preston, and like I said the housing was cheaper as well, so I could get a better house for the money that I had.” *Female accountant, 40s, Preston (grew up in and left Rochdale)*

“I worry about the lack of opportunities, because I’ve got two small children, and I think some of my worries are that I see that there isn’t lots of structure there for children at the moment and that we’re seeing lots of kind of erm ... unsociable behaviour and an increase in that sort of thing, even just going through Heywood at the night time you see that. I do think you see lots of the deprivation within people within Rochdale, I think there are areas that are nice, but I think you still see lots of

homelessness, you see lots of people that are definitely struggling. So I do worry about that." *Female nurse, 40s, Preston (grew up in and left Rochdale)*

"The reason I had to move out of Rochdale, I'll be honest is I don't think there were enough jobs in Rochdale, I wasn't willing to commit to a daily long commute, be it on the train, or public transport, Metro, or bus, or anything, of an hour or more. And there just weren't any jobs, even as far as I'm aware now, the only main source of like a big employer in Rochdale is JD Sports I think, and which is a factory or warehouse type job. And it's quite sad actually because when I speak to my contacts in Rochdale, still, a lot of them feel the same way, that there is no option but to go out of Rochdale, every morning, be stuck in that traffic, spend all that money commuting, because the jobs just aren't there." *Female solicitor, 20s, Salford (grew up in and left Rochdale)*

Individuals could 'overcome' place-based disadvantage, but often only in a specific set of circumstances: a good education; a university place; the opportunity of a job or career pathway that allowed them to leave the area. The cost of this was the subsequent loss of community and connection, meaning that often it was felt that individuals needed a certain amount of personal ambition and confidence in order to achieve this.

"I think men here, they have to grow up with a hard exterior around this town. We can't be frightened of anything ... you're classed as a ruffian because you've grown up in Rochdale, and you've had to fend for yourself. It changes the exterior of people, but it also changes your thought process as a person as well." *Male operations manager, 50s, Rochdale (grew up in area and lives there)*

"So I've never pushed my daughter ever. And she's the one who's decided where she's going and what she's doing, and she's been a proper grafter always. She's worked. She does 60 hour weeks at work when she's at uni. That comes from somewhere. And even though she's from Rochdale, and she's Rochdale born and bred, she's going to be successful ... even though she is from Rochdale." *Female rewards manager, 50s, Rochdale (moved to area as an adult)*

## 4. Place-based determinants of social mobility

“You need a safe place to go home to at the end of the day ... you need to have access to a decent education, you need to be surrounded by an environment and a local community. They say it’s community, it takes a village to raise a child, you want people to look around and be proud of where they are and want to achieve ... I think otherwise, you’ve got no safe front door, you’re in an area that looks dreadful because there’s no investment, you’ve got an education system that doesn’t help you, so you’re [not] going to be able to achieve anything ... why would you bother?” *Female nurse, 40s, Rochdale (grew up in area and lives there)*

The focus groups showed clearly that place serves as a platform for social mobility, with local conditions directly impacting residents’ ambitions, opportunities and life outcomes. Public First also asked participants to identify what features make an area conducive to upward social mobility. These are not the only determinants of overall social mobility, but they were the ones which spoke to characteristics of a socially mobile place rather than a socially mobile individual.

Across both sets of groups, participants articulated three specific factors – education and skills; employers and local employment; and housing and local infrastructure – that either enabled or constrained social mobility in their local area. They drew on their experiences of living in either Cheshire East and Rochdale, as well as on comparisons with other places they had visited or lived.

### Education and skills

The quality of education accessible in an area was seen as having an important impact on opportunities for social mobility. Good schools in particular were highly prized in a local area and a key feature of what distinguished a ‘good’ area to live and have a family from a ‘bad’ one.

“I just found out recently that my daughter’s expecting, so they’re already starting to think: where are we going to live? To make sure we’ve got the right schools, you know? And it’s very, very important to get the right start in life. And education is one of the most important things that you can have.” *Male sales worker, 60s, North Manchester (grew up in and left Rochdale)*

“It’s a postcode lottery, isn’t it, with education ... in poorer communities, they do get lesser education.” *Female admin manager, 40s, Cheshire East (families with children)*

“It’s all about education, mobility is about education, and bettering yourself with education and with knowledge.” *Male photographer, 50s, Manchester (grew up in and left Rochdale)*

In Cheshire East, participants generally described the local education system as having good schools, with some exceptional schools that were well known and a place at which was highly sought-after.

“I think [the schools in the area are] excellent, my personal experience, excellent. I’ve got one in primary school and one in high school.” *Female private tutor, 40s, Cheshire East (families with children)*

“Access to free education around Macclesfield is really good. We mentioned about the quality of education of the state schools around here, it’s really positive. So it doesn’t surprise me that someone who is born poor, they still have access to a good quality of education.” *Male teacher, 30s, Cheshire East (families with children)*

“So the eldest has just done her mocks, her GCSEs and she’s getting mostly 9s, and that wasn’t my educational standard. So, you know, the school is doing amazing things for her, but there are some excellent state schools around here as well.” *Female solicitor, 40s, Cheshire East (moved to area as an adult)*

In Rochdale, the picture on education was much more mixed: participants generally felt that the schooling system was more ‘up and down’, particularly at a secondary level. While some parents and residents identified a handful of schools as performing well and offering dedicated teachers or tailored support, there was a prevailing sense that the overall quality of education varied significantly across the borough. This inconsistency was viewed as a structural barrier to social mobility, with participants expressing frustration that educational success in Rochdale too often depended on ‘luck’ or being in the right catchment area, rather than on a reliably high standard of education across the board.

“There are some good schools and there are some really poor schools ... it’s a really mixed area, there’s good and bad.” *Female health worker, 40s, Rochdale (families with children)*

“The education system, especially high school, is shocking at the moment.” *Female human resources manager, 40s, Rochdale (families with children)*

Because security – including job security – was highly prized, participants tended to favour a local education system which focused on technical and vocational education, linked to good local jobs. In Rochdale, where local economic conditions were perceived as more precarious, this preference was even more pronounced: participants described technical education not just as a means of personal advancement but as a critical lever for community-level economic resilience. There was a strong call for more investment in local colleges, practical

training facilities and employer partnerships, and a view that expanding access to these routes could enhance both individual prospects and the wider economic fabric of the town.

“Because if you’ve got opportunities in close proximity to you, it requires less effort. To better my education or training or something, if I’ve got a learning institute on my doorstep, I’m more likely to take that up than if I had to travel two hours.” *Female trainee solicitor, 20s, Salford (grew up in and left Rochdale)*

“If you’ve got a good occupation and you’ve got a good one that’ll bring a good steady income in, it will open out, [and] open [up] opportunities as well.” *Female human resources manager, 40s, Rochdale (families with children)*

“It’s not really the best job but they get paid really well. Like, especially, plumbers, electricians, if they’re doing well, sorry, they get paid really well.” *Female delivery driver, 30s, Cheshire East (grew up in area and lives there)*

In contrast, many parents and younger participants expressed scepticism about the value of university degrees, citing high tuition costs, significant debt burdens, and the perceived mismatch between academic qualifications and available job opportunities. Vocational training, apprenticeships and work-based learning were frequently praised as more pragmatic, cost-effective routes that could lead to secure and well-paid employment. This view was especially strong among parents in Rochdale but also prevalent among those in Cheshire East.

“I personally didn’t go to university because I didn’t know what I wanted to do, and obviously it’s expensive to go to university now. I thought, well why would I spend so much money on going if I didn’t know exactly what I wanted to do.” *Female estate agent, 20s, Cheshire East (moved to area as an adult)*

“Job opportunities for [the] younger generation when they’re leaving school, they need more options for, even if they don’t go to do any further education, what are their other options? Because I had that issue with my son, where there was not enough apprenticeships going for them, and it wasn’t just my kid, I was hearing it from other parents as well, there weren’t apprenticeships going ... it’s a better option for most kids.” *Female teaching assistant, 30s, Rochdale (grew up in area and lives there)*

“Education is important obviously for better job opportunities but I just feel by the time they’ve left university, they’re in about £60,000, £70,000 worth of debt. So a lot of the kids are thinking, is it even worth going through that route and going to university or is it better off doing an apprenticeship where you can study and earn an income at the same time? Which is a better opportunity for people to do something? My daughter’s at university but by the time she finishes she’s going to be in

£60,000 debt.” *Female admin worker, 30s, Rochdale (families with children)*

“It’s such like an old wives’ tale to say that you are going to earn £20,000 starting wage because you’ve been to university? Yeah, it was said 25 years ago, and it wasn’t even true then. So what’s going to make it true now? You know apprenticeships and you know work experience while you train and earn is by far and away, should be pushed in secondary schools.”

*Male teacher, 30s, Cheshire East (families with children)*

## Employment and the role of employers

As established in earlier chapters, having a steady income and a good job were consistently seen as contributors to a successful life. One of the features of a socially mobile place, therefore, was a high enough volume of local employers who could provide good jobs, opportunities and routes to advancement without people having to move away.

This was a key distinguishing factor between the two places. In Rochdale, participants described a historical period of industrial decline which had led to limited local job opportunities, which either held people back or forced them to relocate. A lack of secure jobs, and a rise in insecure work, left people feeling like they could not have the level of security and stability they desired for a good life.

“I think it’s safe to say I am one of the oldest in the room. I’m 57, and I lived in Rochdale my whole life; I was born in Birch Hill, and I’ve seen a steady decline. We were a proud town, and we came from the cotton mill industry.” *Male operations manager, 50s, Rochdale (grew up in area and lives there)*

“People have [to] go out to find jobs, better jobs, to get better pay, better money ... whereas there’s not many jobs in Rochdale.” *Male driver, 30s, Rochdale (grew up in area and lives there)*

“Job-wise I work in Leeds, I couldn’t find any employment in the local borough, so for me there’s quite a few elements that make it not ideal.” *Female human resources manager, 40s, Rochdale (families with children)*

“You’ve not got a secure employment here. Everything’s on funding basis, so people are in contracts for only a year or six months, or they’re having to do work through agencies. So employment is not permanent like it used to be back in the day, you know, when you’d have a permanent position.” *Female admin worker, 30s, Rochdale (families with children)*

A lack of opportunities locally was a push factor particularly for young people when they considered whether they would stay in the area or leave. For many, the perceived absence of stable, well-paying employment meant that staying in the area was not considered a viable option. They often viewed outward migration not as an aspirational choice but as a necessary step in order to access the types of opportunities they believed were essential to secure a good life.

“As soon as I get a good job I’m moving out of Rochdale. My dad always tells me, because he’s a Rochdale local, and he works from home ... he always says ‘If you just have your eyes like set on Rochdale, then you’re not going to find as much as if you were to branch out a bit’.” *Male customer services worker, late teens, Rochdale (grew up in area and lives there)*

“I’ve said it for ages: I don’t want to stay here. There’s not one thing in Rochdale that I’m going to keep in my life.” *Female hairdresser, late teens, Rochdale (grew up in area and lives there)*

“I do think a lot of people, young children will move out because there’s better opportunities than there is in Rochdale.” *Female admin worker, 30s, Rochdale (families with children)*

In Cheshire East, by contrast, anchor employers such as AstraZeneca and the local hospital provided the opportunity not just for jobs but for a stable career over a lifetime if people wanted it. Very rarely did participants in the Cheshire East groups talk about being unsatisfied with the levels of employment in their area or unable to find good work that suited their skill level and provided future opportunities. This sense of employment stability was fundamental to how residents in Cheshire East conceptualised both personal and intergenerational success. Many reflected that the presence of large, reputable employers embedded within the community gave the area a tangible sense of economic reliability and professional possibility.

“AstraZeneca does the whole world for our community in terms of apprenticeships and global opportunities for people who work within their business.” *Female CEO, 50s, Cheshire East (families with children)*

“We’ve got a hospital here, so that’s a good source of employment, and we’ve got AstraZeneca which is big ... those are two big employers within the town, so from that aspect, there’s opportunities there.” *Female mental health nurse, 30s, Cheshire East (moved to area as an adult)*

“We’ve got the great hospital of Macclesfield as well which is a big employer in the area and is the main hospital on this side of Cheshire. So, we’re all lucky to have that on our doorstep.” *Female stay-at-home parent, 40s, Cheshire East (families with children)*

“AstraZeneca as well. It’s a huge employer in the town.” *Male graphic designer, 50s, Cheshire East (families with children)*

“There are lots of businesses here, there’s lots of factories in the area, not massive factories, but you know, we’ve got Alderley Park here, Congleton’s got its manufacturing, Macclesfield’s got its manufacturing, so the area isn’t short of work.” *Male, retired, 60s, Cheshire East (moved to area as an adult)*

People felt strongly that good employers help to drive investment and improvement in places, making them more desirable and increasing future opportunities. In Cheshire East, where such employers were present and visible, participants linked their presence to a positive feedback loop of prosperity. In Rochdale, the absence of large, stable employers was consistently cited as a barrier to local regeneration. Without firms investing in the area, or providing meaningful routes into stable employment, there was a sense of drift, both at a community level, where high street decay and youth disengagement were frequently mentioned, and at an individual level, where people felt limited in their ability to plan for the future.

“If there’s no money invested in the place, it’s the public money from the local council, or from government, but the private money is massive, if you take away private funding from any area, because the people that are successful leave, and they leave with their money, then it leaves a massive hole there. And I think that’s kind of what’s happened with Rochdale ... so public funding, it’s got to be better targeted, it’s got to work with the private sector, to bring stuff into town, to bring opportunities, to bring jobs.” *Male photographer, 50s, Greater Manchester (grew up in and left Rochdale)*

“Rochdale Council, they don’t help businesses come to this region and then therefore create jobs. They don’t help them at all.” *Male facilities manager, 40s, Rochdale (moved to area as an adult)*

“If we could get other, similar employers here, the government would invest more and help the areas that look a bit tired.” *Female CEO, 50s, Cheshire East (families with children)*

## Housing and local infrastructure

In both locations, home ownership was seen as a key indicator of success and mobility, particularly because of the security it provided. Housing was frequently cited, alongside a good job, as a key life outcome that contributed to social mobility, and having a safe and secure place to live was often described as part of what makes for a successful life.

“I think housing is really important. We’ve talked a lot about social mobility being influenced by who we surround ourselves with, who is around us, the opportunities we have, and places that have better and worse social mobility. That just depends on where you live, so I think housing is a massive step towards upward social mobility or downward social mobility.” *Male disability lead, 20s, Cheshire East (moved to area as an adult)*

“So success to me, [a] few years ago was, you know, nice house, good job, career.” *Female civil servant, 40s, Cheshire East (moved to area as an adult)*

“[Success is] having a steady job, a good job, and a safe place to live in.”  
*Female personal assistant, 40s, Rochdale (families with children)*

“A good career that you’re happy in the ability to build upon, a home that you live in where you feel safe.” *Female automation scientist, 20s, Cheshire East (grew up in area and lives there)*

“Having your own home, it just gives you that stability, nobody can take that off you, you’re always going to have a roof over your own head.”  
*Female nurse, 40s, Rochdale (grew up in area and lives there)*

The ability to own one’s home was therefore seen as a core tenet of social mobility and security, but it was increasingly difficult to achieve. There was a sense of perceived downward mobility in terms of housing security compared to previous generations. Many of the participants below the age of 50 noted that their parents had got onto the housing ladder early and now own their own homes. By contrast, because of soaring prices, it is much more difficult for this generation to buy their first property. Even if an individual is upwardly socially mobile, they often still found it more difficult than their parents did to buy a home. This is therefore one of the key challenges facing upward social mobility for individuals – the question of whether upward mobility is actually worth it if property ownership is still such a long way off.

“We’ve got to make it easier to buy houses. I think that’s going to be the biggest challenge. Like my daughters, in the next 10 to 15 years ... it’s going to be difficult for them.” *Male operations manager, 30s, Cheshire East (grew up in area and lives there)*

“We should have been worried about 15 years ago when house prices started to go like that [makes upwards motion], and people who were less than 30 kind of went actually, we’re just going to rent for a little bit now because we can’t afford but actually renting has become the cycle that you get into and people struggling to get out of, because the amount of money they need for a deposit is getting bigger and bigger and bigger.”  
*Male teacher, 30s, Cheshire East (families with children)*

“If you’ve got a generation of young people coming up, a cohort of people that aren’t able to afford to live anywhere other than these areas that have much poorer social mobility opportunity, then that’s just going to worsen the problem, isn’t it?” *Male disability lead, 20s, Cheshire East (moved to area as an adult)*

In Cheshire East, parents in particular worried that their children might be ‘priced out’ and unable to stay. There were some examples of housing being used as a reason why people had moved away from Cheshire East (because of the higher costs). By contrast in Rochdale, housing affordability was seen as (sometimes the only) upside to living and staying in the area.

“Yeah so I moved to Heywood [an area of Rochdale] in 2010, 2011, me and my ex-partner, we were kind of drawn here because at the time there was a new-build development going on ... we saw a house and it was like, that’s a really good price, you know, compared to other areas we were looking at.” *Female recruiter, 40s, Rochdale (moved to area as an adult)*

“[Moving away from Cheshire East has] helped me with like getting on the property ladder because I wouldn’t be able to afford like a house in Macclesfield.” *Male accountant, 20s, Greater Manchester (grew up in and left Cheshire East)*

“Affordable housing would keep them there. When I tried to get the property ladder where I grew up, I had to move into a rough area. But people are being driven out of where they grew up, so they’re away from their families.” *Female recruiter, 40s, Cheshire East (families with children)*

“That’s one good thing about Rochdale in terms of the wider kind of Greater Manchester areas, houses in Rochdale are affordable. Although you still need a lot for your mortgages and you still need a massive deposit and stuff like that, it is in the reach of more people within Rochdale.” *Female nurse, 40s, Rochdale (grew up in area and lives there)*

“It’s part of why people stay around Rochdale as well, because it’s affordable and I think if they branch out anywhere else, it’s going to be unaffordable.” *Male roofer, 20s, Rochdale (grew up in area and lives there)*

Transport infrastructure and connectivity were also important attributes of socially mobile places. Good local transport provided access to jobs and wider opportunities; poor local transport infrastructure held people back. When even small commutes were difficult, better transport connections were particularly desirable as they were critical for accessing better job opportunities, given limited local employment options. In Cheshire East, there were easy transport links to London and Manchester which provided a better platform for success.

“I think we’re quite lucky that we have got a good train route, you know, we’ve got a station in Macclesfield. You can get on the train, the trains aren’t perfect, but we’re on a line that goes to London or, you know, we’re just on a line that goes to Manchester. We’re pretty all right for getting trains around the country.” *Female human resources coordinator, 50s, Cheshire East (grew up in area and lives there)*

“If you took it from a public transport point of view, the buses in Macclesfield have reduced, so I would say potentially from a social mobility point of view that could have decreased some people’s opportunities, if they don’t have cars and rely on taxis or buses, and with taxis being quite expensive, it might mean that they’re kind of able to not access things as regularly as other people might.” *Female public relations manager, 30s, Cheshire East (grew up in area and lives there)*

“Yeah, so I live in Rochdale but I also work in Manchester so I do travel and I do use the trams, so I do think the trams are quite good because obviously in the past Rochdale had just, you know, the buses and stuff. So now like Oldham or Rochdale have both got the tram system which I think is really beneficial. I think not only does it bring people travelling to Rochdale like, but I think also takes people out as well, so it’s good.”

*Female personal assistant, 40s, Rochdale (families with children)*

“Metrolink would be the instant thing that would lift [Rochdale] up ... just extend the Bury line to Heywood and Rochdale, and then send it into town and whatever else, so yeah, I think better transport. At the minute there’s like the 17, and the 163 bus, and I think that’s probably about it.”

*Male finance investigator, 30s, Salford (grew up in and left Rochdale)*

In Rochdale, on the other hand, lack of sufficient, reliable, affordable and time-efficient transport links into bigger cities were a major barrier to accessing the kinds of employment that make people upwardly socially mobile.

However, there was an indication that transport links alone would not solve the social mobility problems in Rochdale. The costs of commuting remain a barrier; the lack of diverse, high-quality jobs within Rochdale is forcing people to look elsewhere; and building a reliance on commuting as the only way to access opportunity does not help to address the local problems.

“Once those children [in Rochdale] do leave education, I think there needs to be job opportunities, there is absolutely none. And I think this whole concept of everyone from Rochdale will have to travel to Manchester, that needs to change, the opportunities need to be built within Rochdale.”

*Female trainee solicitor, 20s, Salford (grew up in and left Rochdale)*

“I don’t think I know anybody who I grew up with who has had ... a successful career staying local.”

*Female carer, 50s, Rochdale (families with children)*

“[If you are] working in Manchester, it’s better to just live there and commute from there rather than spending all that time on, in, on traffic.”

*Female finance manager, 50s, Rochdale (families with children)*

# Conclusion

The main aims of this report were to understand the beliefs, attitudes and perceptions of individuals within two areas with different social mobility contexts. This research highlights that, for the local areas (Cheshire East and Rochdale), there exists a multifaceted conception of social mobility and success.

The findings suggest that, for many of the participants, social mobility remained an unfamiliar term. Once given a definition though, participants often recognised social mobility through personal narratives of education, employment, home ownership, and how these experiences compared to their parents. Participants generally associated upward social mobility with improved life chances and opportunities that may result in a more stable, secure, and content life.

In both areas, whilst traditional economic indicators such as income and career progression were recognised as important, they were often viewed as utilities that are necessary for a good quality of life rather than ultimate markers of success. Participants consistently ranked these traditional measures as less important than stability, safety, happiness and community connections. Overall though, social mobility itself was seen as a generally positive endeavour.

It is also clear that place-based factors have a significant influence on the possibilities for social mobility. In Cheshire East, the perception of the area as a desirable place to live, with good schools, transport links to Manchester and London and a strong local economy with a variety of job opportunities, facilitates upward mobility. In Rochdale, perceptions of decline, limited local opportunities, a lack of investment in the town and struggling local schools all constrain residents' aspirations for success, and result in some individuals feeling compelled to leave in order to achieve their ambitions.

Place can function either as a platform for success and upward mobility or as a limiting force. Opportunities for upward mobility, therefore, can be linked to a number of key determinants: the presence of good quality education, stable employment with long-term career paths, an accessible housing market, consistent investment in the local area, and transport infrastructure with connections to other regions. When these elements are present, this creates the perception that the local area possesses opportunities for upward mobility.



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