



Regional Insights: Creating fairer chances across the regions

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About the Commission

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

Chair

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

Deputy Chairs

Resham Kotecha, Head of Policy at the Open Data Institute

Rob Wilson, Chairman and non-executive director across public, private and third sectors

Commissioners

Dr Raghieb Ali, Senior Clinical Research Associate at the Medical Research Council Epidemiology Unit at the University of Cambridge

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

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

Tina Stowell MBE, The Rt Hon Baroness Stowell of Beeston

Foreword

Alun Francis OBE

Chair

Social Mobility Commission



Foreword - Alun Francis OBE, Chair, Social Mobility Commission

At the Social Mobility Commission, we argue that social mobility is vital to the overall wellbeing of our society. But policy-makers have been focused on the wrong social mobility problem. Attention has concentrated on what the academics call ‘relative social mobility’, which measures the chances people from different socio-economic backgrounds have in terms of achieving specific (usually elite) outcomes. While relative social mobility can always be improved, there is no evidence that these chances have significantly deteriorated, or that the United Kingdom performs particularly badly compared with other countries. What we do have, however, is an increasingly acute problem of ‘absolute social mobility’. This is the measure of the progress of one generation against another, to see how much things have improved.

There are a number of indicators which support the view that there is a problem of absolute social mobility, including low growth and productivity, the geographical spread of opportunity, the uneven distribution of higher-paid occupations, and the extent to which some people, who often live in the same places, have persistently poor outcomes in terms of income, education, health, housing and general wellbeing. We have, therefore, advocated for a change in the focus of social mobility policy, away from programmes to help the ‘lucky few’ progress to elite employment, and towards a broader strategy which makes social mobility relevant to a wider variety of people in a wider variety of places.

This approach means revisiting some of the key building blocks of traditional social mobility policy, such as families, early years, education and skills. We place a much greater focus on the role of the economy in generating the opportunity for social mobility, with a particular focus on the role of innovation. Starting from this position, our view is that having a ‘one-size-fits-all’ national strategy for social mobility is not working.

We set out an explanatory framework for a new approach to social mobility policy in our 2024 publication ‘Innovation generation’. We have presented a series of reports on the importance of innovation and place in understanding where opportunity is

most limited, and how it might be opened up. Our recent research report 'Deep dives: A local perspective on social mobility' took an in-depth look at how perceptions of place and the aspirations of people are central to how we develop our approach to social mobility. Our report 'Innovation, investment and inclusion: A framework for regional renewal', published in October 2025, provides a range of policy recommendations for central and local government to boost investment in left-behind areas, support entrepreneurship and build skills. This builds on previous work by the Social Mobility Commission, including 'Innovation and social mobility: Two sides of the same coin', to emphasise the importance of a competitive, innovative economy in producing the opportunities needed for people to get ahead and achieve social mobility.

This research has strengthened our resolve that a place-based approach is the way forward. This is good for social mobility, but it is also good for place-based policy. Adding social mobility into the mix, especially in the way we have described it, will sharpen the focus and add momentum to existing place-based policy.

But we didn't want to simply make recommendations without talking to stakeholders and partners. To this end, a number of our Commissioners, led by Ryan Henson, engaged in a series of regional roundtables, where they met local partners, to develop our understanding of opportunity bottlenecks and the issues that a place-based approach should address. I am very grateful to the Commissioners who led the work, and to all of the regional partners who contributed.

The resulting report, 'Regional insights: Creating fairer chances across the regions', contains a summary of our findings along with recommendations which emerged from the roundtables. We also share some examples of best practice from the regions we have visited so far.

From the vast range of issues which were covered, four major themes stand out. These are:

- the importance of work for young people
- the need for better transport
- the need to prevent welfare traps

- the importance of having a sense of belonging and place

The findings highlighted in this report provide real, practical insights into the significant opportunity bottlenecks holding back our regions and the people who live there. We present these findings here in order to share them with a wider audience.

Our intention is that, together with the work we have completed on innovation, investment and enterprise this year, these four themes will inform our further work as we move into 2026, to deliver a place-based strategy for social mobility and improving opportunity for all.



Guest Foreword

Mayor Richard Parker

West Midlands Combined Authority



Guest Foreword - Mayor Richard Parker, West Midlands Combined Authority

The insights in this report speak directly to the ambitions set out in my West Midlands Growth Plan and the delivery programme, West Midlands Works. Both are built on the principle that economic growth and social mobility go hand in hand.

Social mobility is about opening-up new opportunities and my approach to economic growth is about unlocking as many of these opportunities as possible – for people and places in the West Midlands that have been denied them for far too long.

The Growth Plan commits to creating good jobs, accelerating housing delivery, and improving transport and connectivity, because these are the foundations of inclusive prosperity. Similarly, West Midlands Works focuses on equipping people with the skills and confidence to access those opportunities, tackling barriers such as economic inactivity and poor careers advice.

The themes highlighted here, helping young people experience work, improving transport links, breaking welfare dependency, and fostering pride in place, are not abstract ideas. They are the practical levers that underpin our regional strategy. For example, our investment in transport through devolved powers ensures that opportunity is not limited by geography. Our skills programmes and employer partnerships mirror the call for early interventions and better careers guidance. And our commitment to community-led regeneration reflects the importance of belonging and local pride.

By aligning these findings with our Growth Plan and West Midlands Works, we are reinforcing a shared mission: to make the West Midlands a region where everyone has a fair chance to succeed, wherever they start. This report strengthens that case and provides valuable evidence to guide the next phase of delivery.





Executive Summary

Executive Summary:

Since the publication of our report 'Innovation generation' in autumn 2024, the Social Mobility Commission (SMC) has been clear about its focus on place-based approaches to improving social mobility.

This report provides an overview of the conversations we have had during 2025 in different parts of the United Kingdom. The Commission visited West Midlands Combined Authority, Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, Greater Manchester Combined Authority, and Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council, and held roundtables to speak to local residents, employers, educators, combined authority officials and others. We have also visited Scotland and Wales, and we plan to visit Northern Ireland in 2026, as well as other English regions.

The report's recommendations are structured around four themes:

- the importance of work for young people
- the need for better transport
- the need to prevent welfare traps
- the importance of having a sense of belonging and place

These themes emerged time and again in the conversations we had. We have put together the key findings of the roundtables and formed provisional policy proposals based on the collective views of our stakeholders. We hope that this report will instigate further discussions.

There is no one single measure of success when it comes to social mobility. Equalising resources and outcomes across the UK does not work. Devolved authorities must have the powers, resources and confidence to lead – and to take their residents with them.

Introduction

Introduction:

Following our 'Innovation generation' report, the Social Mobility Commission wants to make meaningful policy recommendations that work to close the disadvantage gap. If we believe in the value of a place-based approach to social mobility, we need to understand regional differences.

This is why we undertook a series of regional, exploratory engagement events over the course of 2025 with a wide range of external stakeholders to gain insights from local people in specific places, to help us understand the socio-economic, health and educational profile of local residents and how holistic, data-driven approaches can reduce economic inactivity and create opportunity. This report is informed by this series of roundtables and visits, drawing out the key themes that arose from our discussions.

We would like to thank all those who gave their time. Further details of participating individuals and organisations can be found in Annex A. To preserve anonymity, we have not attributed any comments below to specific individuals. Finally, we would like to thank the following devolved authorities for their involvement in the regional roundtable discussions: West Midlands Combined Authority, Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council, Glasgow City Council and Neath Port Talbot Council.



Theme 1:

Let young people
experience work

Theme 1: Let young people experience work

A recurring theme from our regional engagement series was that young people need more support, before they leave secondary education, to be able to experience the world of work. Our engagement shows that a lack of cultural and social capital has a negative effect on children's outcomes, and the old tenet 'Work hard and you'll do well' is less likely to be true for younger people now than it has ever been. The increase in the numbers of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) is worrying: there are now nearly a million young people aged 16 to 24 in the UK who fall into this category.¹ We also cannot expect young people to aspire to careers that they do not see as possible for themselves, unless they're provided with the right support. For these reasons, our recommendations aim to give young people the confidence to make informed decisions about their future, the type of skills they want to develop and the range of opportunities that are available to them.

Recommendation 1: Use further education colleges, including technical excellence colleges, for longer-term planning to support young people and build collaboration with local employers

While colleges have their own arrangements for employer involvement, place-based leaders should work collectively with providers in their area to ensure that this is comprehensive and that skills supply and demand are coordinated to best effect. Technical excellence colleges may help in particular sectors, but there is a need for more coherent geographical coordination. Collaboration between further education (FE) colleges and local employers is key to ensuring that young people receive ongoing guidance, mentoring and support. Helping young people to navigate the transition from FE into work increases their chances of sustained employment.

An example of this working in practice can be found in the Greater Manchester Further Education Innovation Programme (GMFEIP), where FE colleges across the region are directly connected to local, innovative businesses building partnerships for training and practical support for apprentices and staff. GMFEIP's approach

¹ Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2025), [Young people not in education, employment or training \(NEET\), UK: August 2025](#)

showcases how long-term collaboration between FE colleges and local employers can drive innovation and inclusion while addressing skills gaps.

Recommendation 2: Intervene early for young people who are at risk of NEET indicators

The Office for National Statistics estimates that nearly a million young people are NEET.² Early support can prevent disengagement from education, training or work before it becomes a long-term pattern. Currently, much research considers the risk factors experienced by young people across the UK, which include compounded disadvantages, low levels of educational qualification, disability, mental health conditions,³ low socio-economic status, region and ethnicity.⁴ But support for young people who are NEET must also take into consideration the regional profile of underlying risk factors for young people.

Recommendation 3: Make it easier to navigate careers advice

There is a recognised need for substantially improved careers advice and guidance that takes into account a range of vocational, technical and academic routes. This support should be provided to young people before Year 11, and it should include equal promotion of all post-school options so that they are seen as equally attractive, without the assumption that university is the best or only route to success.

The new V levels are an example of how this can be achieved. The aim is that by 2027, V levels will exist as an option for further study alongside T levels and A levels and will use nationally set content that is linked to job-specific requirements and standards.⁵ If this is implemented effectively, it will ensure that the skills that young people gain are aligned with what employers value.

Recommendation 4: Guarantee an entitlement to employer engagement for young people

² ONS, Young people not in education, employment or training

³ J. Crowley and others (2025), [Risk factors for being NEET among young people](#)

⁴ A. Baloch (2025), [Youth jobs gap: Exploring compound disadvantage](#)

⁵ Department for Education (DfE) (2025), [New V levels and post-16 qualifications explained](#)

Employers should work more closely with schools and colleges in their local area to provide each young person with a minimum of five guaranteed high-quality work experience or taster days tailored to the needs of the local economy before the age of 18. As well as giving students first-hand insight into different sectors of work, this will allow them to develop skills such as communication, problem-solving and teamwork. Career days also increase awareness and access to information, helping to ensure that opportunities are offered equally to all students, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Third sector and social impact organisations, such as Uptree,⁶ can play a vital role in this provision by helping employers design and deliver high-quality, locally tailored experiences of work at scale.

Recommendation 5: Devolve the Skills and Growth Levy

Adult skills are already devolved, but central government should consider also devolving the Skills and Growth Levy and brokering higher-skills strategies between colleges and universities.

Devolution also ensures stronger partnerships between employers, training providers and FE institutions.

Case study: Greater Manchester Baccalaureate (MBacc)

The MBacc is a new technical education pathway introduced in Greater Manchester to better align education with the needs of the local economy. It has been designed as an alternative to the traditional English Baccalaureate (EBacc), which the government's 'Curriculum and assessment review' released in early November 2025, advised should be abolished,⁷ and it provides students with clear routes into key sectors that are vital to Greater Manchester's economic growth.

Students following the MBacc will study essential GCSEs, including English language and literature, maths, sciences, and information and communication technology (ICT). As well as core subjects, they will be guided into one of seven specialised career gateways: health and social care; digital and technology; engineering and manufacturing; construction and the green economy; financial and

⁶ Uptree (2025), [Uptree](#)

⁷ DfE (2025), [Curriculum and assessment review: Final report](#)

professional services; education and early years; and creative, culture and sport. These gateways reflect key growth industries in Greater Manchester and aim to provide young people with the relevant knowledge and skills needed to succeed in these fields.

A core feature of the MBacc is its focus on practical experience. Students complete at least 50 hours of workplace experience between Years 9 and 11, ensuring that they gain exposure to real-world employment settings. The initiative also aims to deliver 1,000 additional T level placements, further strengthening links between education providers and businesses. By working closely with industry leaders and local employers, the MBacc ensures that education and training are closely aligned with workforce demands, helping to boost productivity and drive inclusive economic growth.

Through the MBacc, Greater Manchester aims to provide an equitable alternative to traditional academic routes, equipping students with the skills and experiences necessary to thrive in the region's evolving economic landscape.

Case study: The Sandwell Colleges

Sandwell College, part of the Sandwell Colleges, is taking a forward-thinking, employer-led approach to T levels, ensuring that students gain the skills, confidence and professional insight needed for successful careers. Through strong industry partnerships, learners benefit from high-quality placements that blend academic study with meaningful hands-on experience. In engineering, students work directly with Hydrapower Dynamics, gaining real-world workshop exposure to fluid handling assembly and the opportunity to progress into roles such as junior engineers or fabricator welders. These placements function as extended job interviews. So far more than 20 learners have been supported and six have progressed into full-time engineering roles.

Similarly, T level health students at Cadbury Sixth Form College, also part of the Sandwell Colleges, have benefited from a structured 45-day placement programme with Moundsley Hall Care Village. Over 6,000 hours of support have been delivered, enriching residents' wellbeing while giving students invaluable experience. All 16 of

the learners who completed placements last year received job offers, easing workforce pressures and reinforcing the impact of employer engagement.

This commitment to community and industry collaboration is embedded throughout Sandwell college's approach to education, in order to upskill local communities, forge impactful employer partnerships and create meaningful employment opportunities. Sandwell College also has pioneered the Sector-Based Work Academy Programme (SWAP) – a form of strategic workforce programme designed to provide unemployed individuals with pre-employment training, hands-on work experience and guaranteed job interviews. These programmes have been significantly expanded across Birmingham and the wider West Midlands, tailored in collaboration with leading employers, such as Sandwell and West Birmingham NHS Trust, Doocey Group, West Midlands Fire Service, and Compass Group, to meet industry needs, ensuring that job-ready candidates can seamlessly transition into employment.

The SMC spoke with students at Sandwell College who stated that this type of real-life training had given them practical skills for their chosen courses and taught them softer skills needed for the world of work, such as learning to talk to colleagues. One student recounted their experience of the engineering industry:

I didn't know much about engineering at the time. It wasn't at the top of my list. It was more just, I'd like to know a bit more about welding. So then fast forward past a year, about half a year after that, was the second year where we did all our workshop stuff ... it was constant physical work, maintenance, machine running, learning absolutely everything there is. And then towards the end of the course, we were told that we had to do a compulsory work experience for completing the course, which is where we started at Hydropower Dynamics and they took us on for, I think it was, a nine-week period and we took a liking to it, me and a few of us, and we was like, this seems like a good place to work and we like the people, it's a good atmosphere, and we know what we're doing here because we've been here for so



Transport for
Greater Manchester

Theme 2: Transport

Theme 2: Transport

Poor transport is a block to opportunities in areas of persistent disadvantage, such as coastal areas or areas that previously relied on industry. For example, analysis by the SMC shows that the prospects for social mobility are less favourable particularly in places that in the past relied on mining (e.g. Wakefield and North Lanarkshire), manufacturing (e.g. Kirklees) or ports (e.g. Hartlepool, Hull and Grimsby).⁸ The decline of these sectors has left enduring challenges in attracting new investment and jobs to these regions.

Therefore it may not be feasible to create new jobs in areas of persistent disadvantage, such as small, rural or coastal areas, but it makes sense, economically, to provide good transport links to economic hubs in bigger towns and cities. In such areas, these better links can provide access to a selection of employers and training opportunities that would otherwise be inaccessible.

When we visited Barnsley to find out more about the area's Pathways to Work programme, learners (and their tutors) at Wellington House in the town centre told us that they are comfortable taking one bus journey at the most to get to their places of work. Transport connections need to be easier and more frequent.

During our visit to Wales, transport connectivity was a major topic of conversation. Councils are still having to rely on 'community buses' for residents to be able to access acute needs, such as GP appointments. If this issue is not overcome, a significant number of people will be excluded from emerging opportunities.

In Glasgow, we noted that recent and ongoing improvements to transport linked to infrastructure have been crucial to residents' ability to access training, skills, employment and other opportunities. One example of this is the Govan–Partick Bridge, which improves access in and out of the city, particularly the Clyde Waterfront and West End Innovation Quarter.

⁸ SMC (2024), [State of the Nation 2024: Local to national, mapping opportunities for all](#)

Recommendation 6: Devolved authorities should provide free or reduced public transport fares for young people

This recommendation was made in our recent report ‘Innovation, investment and inclusion’, and we want to reiterate it here. Elected officials must be proactive in offering support to young people seeking education or work. Free public transport is already provided for older people, and devolved authorities should now recognise the benefits of offering a similar level of support to younger people who are eager to contribute but who are held back by obstacles that are in the power of local leaders to change – such as a lack of accessible transport links. Free or discounted public transport fares for young people would ensure that transport costs do not form a barrier to accessing education and employment opportunities.

For example, Scotland offers free bus travel for young people under 22, and Greater Manchester’s Bee Network provides discounted bus travel for 18- to 21-year-olds and free local bus travel for 16-to 18-year-olds, which is also available for care leavers aged 18-25. Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council also offers a free bus pass for children aged 5 to 18. West Midlands Combined Authority takes a similar approach: students in the area can receive discounted fares on buses, trains and trams. For those starting new jobs or apprenticeships in the region, two four-week travel passes are also available for free.

Recommendation 7: The government should devolve transport decisions

Our regional research suggests that all local transport decisions should be devolved, rather than the piecemeal approach currently in place. The government must ensure a fairer distribution of central funding and long-term investment in public networks. The ‘English devolution white paper’ published by the government in December 2024 includes transport and local infrastructure as one of its seven ‘areas of competence’⁹ but does not go far enough in obligating all authorities to have a statutory local transport plan.

Recommendation 8: The government should ensure greater devolution of transport networks

⁹ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2024), [English devolution white paper](#)

More fairness is needed around where money from central government goes. The Industrial Strategy¹⁰ mentions deepened support for the Oxford–Cambridge growth corridor, but will that help the most socio-economically disadvantaged people in this country?

While we recognise the support the government has shown in proposing longer-term transport settlements, it must also look at the success of devolved transport systems and take into consideration the fact that people rely on public transport that is affordable and reliable. Full devolution of defined local services will bring opportunity into local areas and can be managed successfully at a local level. An example of this is the rail services currently operated by the combined authority in the Liverpool City Region.

Recommendation 9: Introduce a National Rural Mobility Fund

This fund should target areas with little evening or weekend transport provision or with a commute of longer than 45 minutes to jobs or training in key growth sectors, as listed in the Industrial Strategy.

Case study: Bee Network, Greater Manchester Combined Authority

Greater Manchester saw impressive economic growth as it entered the twenty-first century, with more people living and working in the urban centre. However, a fragmented bus network and congested roads have made accessing opportunities difficult for many across the ten boroughs that form the city region.

Bus franchising was identified as a way to improve this, bringing a complex and uncoordinated system of privately operated and managed routes and services into public control, with accountability under an elected mayor with devolved transport powers working alongside the leaders of Greater Manchester's councils. In 2021, Mayor Andy Burnham formally took the decision to bring the bus network under public control, with the process completed in early 2025.

Buses might be the most visible element of the Bee Network in their eye-catching yellow livery, but they are just one part of a public transport system that also


¹⁰ Department for Business and Trade (2025), [Industrial strategy](#)

includes the Metrolink tram network. March 2025 saw the introduction of tap-and-go ticketing across bus and trams, providing more affordable, easy-to-understand capped fares, with over 17 million such journeys taken at the time of writing.

The Bee Network also features high-quality walking and cycling routes – with more being delivered every year. Investment in active travel, connected to wider investment in local places, provides a safe and cheap way to access amenities and opportunities and supports the creation of better places which work for everyone.

The next step for the Bee Network will see Greater Manchester use its devolved powers to integrate commuter rail services into the network. Eight lines and 64 stations will be integrated by 2028 bringing improved services, simpler fares and more accessible stations. By bringing together central and local government funding, under local leadership with a clear understanding of local priorities, the Bee Network has made moving around Greater Manchester easier, cheaper, safer and more accessible for everyone – a tangible benefit of devolution in action.



A man in a blue shirt and jeans is standing in a classroom, pointing at a whiteboard. He is holding a pair of glasses in his left hand. In the foreground, several students are seated at desks, looking towards the whiteboard. The image has a green tint.

Theme 3:

Prevent welfare traps

Many areas find themselves with large numbers of people unemployed and economically inactive, many of them on welfare for long periods of time. The economic inactivity rate is currently highest in Northern Ireland (27%) and the North East (26%, compared with 18% in the South East).¹¹ Both central and local government must therefore focus on getting people off welfare where possible. Recent research from the National Audit Office shows a lack of work coaches in DWP for Universal Credit claimants,¹² and our engagement for this report revealed that many economically inactive people have unmet needs around access to training, employment, health and transport.

The government must focus on opportunity, not need. The latest government initiatives focus on a 'youth guarantee' to provide a college place, an apprenticeship or one-to-one support for young people in receipt of benefits. But is a centralised approach going to be as successful as the approaches already happening in some devolved regions? Recent research shows that more and more graduates are claiming benefits – 639,000 did so between March and May 2025.¹³ How have these graduates ended up on welfare? Is it because there are no jobs where they live and perhaps studied? Is university seen as the obvious route to higher skills because there are fewer higher-level apprenticeships or because these apprenticeships are less well promoted?

We also need to consider how digital exclusion affects job-seekers, and people who live in more remote areas. A consistent message we heard was that barriers to information sharing are impeding collaborative efforts between central government, local government and community-based stakeholders, particularly in identifying and supporting those in most need. This must change in order to enable place-based, collaborative, holistic approaches which reach those who can benefit the most.

¹¹ ONS (2025), [Labour market in the regions of the UK: November 2025](#)

¹² National Audit Office (2025), [Work coach shortage leads DWP to reduce support for Universal Credit claimants](#)

¹³ UK Parliament (2025), [Universal Credit: Questions for Cabinet Office \(UIN 68832, tabled on 17 July 2025\)](#)

Recommendation 10: Government should improve data sharing

The Treasury, the Department for Education and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) all have their own data sets, but they do not share their knowledge or their data. Government should be able to see holistically what the data is saying, and each department should be willing to share its data and evidence to create cohesive policy and to benefit local governing structures, whether currently devolved or not.

Recommendation 11: SMC will work with partner organisations to monitor the effectiveness of DWP-supported initiatives

We have seen some good examples of joint working between government departments such as the DWP, philanthropic organisations like the Steve Morgan Foundation, local residents and third-sector organisations during our engagement. The Commission will soon be visiting a JobsPlus pilot site in Toxteth,¹⁴ and we have seen and heard first hand how beneficial programmes such as Cradle to Career in Northwood in Kirkby can be. We will continue to gather evidence on the effectiveness of these programmes, including the Youth Guarantee Trailblazer sites that receive extra funding to test innovative approaches to get young people into education, employment or training.

Recommendation 12: Support offered must adequately address the skills gaps of people who are not economically active and the skills needed by employers

Economic factors shape the supply of opportunities. The SMC's recent report 'Innovation, investment and inclusion' states that enterprise cannot flourish without skills. We want to see job rotation pilots scaled nationally: this would have wide economic benefits not only in workforce skills growth but also for employers to train their future employees to ensure their business needs are met. Recently, employers of all sizes have volunteered to be part of a Vanguards Taskforce, at the forefront of the 'Keep Britain working' review,¹⁵ commissioned by the government, but produced independently. This Taskforce aims to develop and test the success of

¹⁴ Communities that Work (2025), [Communities that Work - Jobs plus](#)

¹⁵ DWP and DBT (2025), [Keep Britain Working Review: Final report](#)

workplace health initiatives in order to increase return-to-work rates, reduce sickness absence and improve disability employment rates.¹⁶

Recommendation 13: Provide more support for adult literacy and numeracy

In England, 18% of adults have a poor level of literacy.¹⁷ While this is a complicated issue, involving numerous risk factors, that the government must address, it is also dependent on the role of individuals, their personal responsibility and their initiative where possible.

Case study: DWP national partnership teams

At the SMC's Manchester Symposium earlier this year, our Chair Alun Francis talked about DWP national partnership teams in his closing address. Is this government support high profile enough to be making a difference?

Delivered by Jobcentre Plus, colleges and training providers, the DWP's Sector-Based Work Academy Programme (SWAP) aims to help unemployed people gain sector-specific skills and secure employment in England and Scotland. It does this by aligning immediate recruitment needs with longer-term workforce development, offering employers a cost-free way to identify and recruit talent who understands the employer, the job role, and the skills they can bring. Participation in the programme is coordinated by Jobcentre Plus, who work with training providers and employers to design the programme, organise placements and support with the interview process.

Case study: Job Rotation Pilot, Coventry City Council

The Coventry Job Rotation Pilot (JRP) is an innovative welfare-to-work initiative launched by Coventry City Council in partnership with Severn Trent and other local employers. The model works by enabling employees in participating companies to take time off for training or upskilling, while economically inactive individuals temporarily fill their roles. This provides paid work experience for inactive individuals while encouraging existing employees to develop their skills further.

¹⁶ DWP (2025), [Employers join forces with government to tackle ill-health and keep Britain working](#)

¹⁷ DfE (2024), [Survey of adult skills 2023: National report for England](#)

Candidates for the temporary ('backfill') positions attended work-readiness sessions before their placements, which lasted up to 12 weeks. At the same time, existing employees undertook leadership and management training through Coventry's providers, with some training being delivered directly by employers.

In total, the JRP received funding of £1.06 million. The DWP provided £740,000 to support 160 participants (80 existing staff and 80 backfill workers) with a wage subsidy of £3,600 per backfill. The cost per participant was £4,625 and the results were positive: seven employers were engaged, 72 employees were upskilled, and 64 backfills were placed. Those in backfill positions were predominantly under the age of 25, with existing staff mainly between 25 and 50.

Overall, employers reported productivity gains, better retention and lower training costs, and the existing staff valued the opportunities for upskilling. Those in backfill positions showed increased confidence, and 96% stated they would recommend the programme. The pilot reported that 83% of these individuals came off Universal Credit after completing the programme.





Theme 4:

A sense of belonging

Theme 4: A sense of belonging

People need to feel a sense of belonging where they live: this was a theme that arose in all of the places we visited as part of our engagement. To improve outcomes, residents need to see for themselves that success is achievable in their neighbourhood. Local initiatives that benefit the areas in which people live are the best example of this.

Our stakeholders told us that where there is a lack of community cohesion, there are seldom-reached people with unmet needs. The nature of a community matters, and local devolved leaders understand their communities far better than central government ever can. Several stakeholders we spoke to across combined and local authorities told us that in places that are working to improve the sense of local pride and cohesion through community-driven programmes and gathering demographic insight at ward or borough level, outcomes are improving, and economic inactivity and crime are reducing. Local knowledge should be capitalised on.

The government has recently announced its 'Pride in Place' strategy, which builds on the Plan for Neighbourhoods. The SMC has closely followed the work of ICON, the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods that SMC Chair Alun Francis sits on. ICON's aim is to improve disadvantaged neighbourhoods in England, informing the government by drawing on what has worked in the past. With its allocation of funding of up to £20 million to be shared among 169 neighbourhoods across Britain, and new local neighbourhood boards being set up to decide locally where the allocated pot of money is best spent, this is a welcome development. But it won't reach every area of persistent disadvantage or every person unable to access local opportunities.

Our 'Innovation, investment and inclusion' report also highlighted the economic imperative of building pride in place. To attract private investment, businesses will be looking for places where people want to live: offering good-quality leisure, culture and living conditions is a crucial part of attracting and retaining skills and investment in regions across the UK.

We need to join up social action to improve the social contract, and working with community organisations and creating a network of trusted partners can help to achieve this. Social action and data analysis by local authorities are key.

Recommendation 14: Require ward-level data dashboards

This is especially important since the profiles of each protected characteristic and of socio-economic status can differ greatly even between areas of close geographic proximity. The Civic Data Co-operative in Liverpool City Region, funded by the combined authority, gathers residents' data to develop policy in the city region, particularly in health and care development. West Midlands Combined Authority also gathers data at a ward level to evidence what will work in geographic pockets across the authority area.

Recommendation 15: Ensure strong local leadership, setting out what success looks like

In Liverpool City Region, the SMC heard about a locality approach: when provision is based more locally, often the uptake and level of consistent engagement is greater. This means that combined authority programmes based at trusted locations such as community centres can reach residents who are less likely to engage with central services. Co-locating, co-design and co-delivery with communities can be transformational in how residents feel about themselves, and they then bring others onboard. Facilitation by organisations such as C2C (Cradle to Career) works to involve residents in decisions that directly affect them.

Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council purchased the Alhambra Shopping Centre in the town centre in 2023 and is relocating some hospital outpatient services there to make them easier for residents to access. This is a great example of embedding services in trusted locations in order to improve engagement with local people.

During our visit to Greater Manchester, the combined authority described an uneven playing field, where success often depends on chance rather than opportunity. The combined authority recognises that those who require the most support include children at the very beginning of their lives, as well as individuals in poverty,

struggling with educational attainment, in a cycle of insecurity. The focus is on the 'people element', empowering people to create positive change.

In the West Midlands, we heard about the importance of keeping investment in local communities – the need for a system-wide approach, with local organisations embedded in their communities.

When we met officials from Glasgow City Council, they told us “inclusive growth and the creation of opportunities equals life improvement”.

Case study: Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council (BMBC)

Barnsley Council recently refreshed its Love Where You Live strategy, originally launched in 2013. This case study evidences how community and resident-led policies have positive impacts on residents' quality of life and outcomes.

In 2013 Barnsley Council's Stronger Communities Programme shifted from traditional service delivery to a community partnership model called 'area working'. This actively involves elected members, communities and civil society organisations in designing, delivering and reviewing services through devolved decision-making.

To target resources in the most cost-effective way to meet local needs, BMBC increased community involvement, moving from 'doing things for' to 'working with' residents and community groups.

BMBC also established Area Councils, where elected members make evidence-based decisions on commissioning services to meet the needs of their communities.

At a ward level, Ward Alliances were developed. Each involved the three elected members from that ward alongside community representatives, a devolved budget and decision-making powers. The Ward Alliances involve local residents and groups to inform local shared priorities and budget allocation. Their co-designed strategies have increased local buy-in and involvement across Barnsley.

This shift to working with the local community has resulted in more communities engaging in local decision-making, as well as an increase in volunteer hours and in the number of active local groups. Using their budget allocation powers, Ward

Alliances have supported a range of local projects and have empowered communities to come together and feel united in a sense of pride in their area.

This community impact has contributed to national recognition of BMBC's work: it won both the Local Government Chronicle's Council of the Year title and the Municipal Journal Local Authority of the Year award in 2023 – making it the only council to have won both awards in the same year.

Following violent disorder in 2024, Barnsley expanded the Love Where You Live programme from focusing mainly on volunteering and pride of place to seeking to create a sense of belonging, unity and inclusion. The council invested £3.5 million in delivering some targeted programmes of work:

What BMBC wants to achieve:

- visibly improve local places and involve people in this change
- better inform residents on what is happening in their community and how they can be involved
- improve community intelligence and allow all voices to be heard
- increase social connections between people from different backgrounds

How BMBC wants to achieve this:

- investment into ward projects – supporting pride of place and having the resources to deliver capital projects in each of our communities
- investment into unity and inclusion grants – supporting the voluntary and community sector to break down the barriers and celebrate unity and inclusion
- investment into Neighbourhood Services – developing local caretaker teams to work alongside communities and to restore pride of place
- investment into culture and museums – to further enhance the cultural strategy and embrace belonging
- investment into communications, ward-based plans and celebrating communities – developing local newsletters and ensuring local sign up, developing an events page so everyone knows what is happening in their

local community, and recruiting a new team to deliver celebratory stories across the borough

- investment in understanding whether people feel welcomed in Barnsley – delivering a survey locally in communities to understand what more BMBC needs to do to make people feel welcome in the borough
- investment into inclusive volunteering – ensuring all volunteering experiences are inclusive for everyone



Conclusion and Next Steps

Conclusion and Next Steps:

The insights that the SMC has gathered in 2025 highlight the urgent need for a place-based approach to social mobility. We believe that everyone deserves a fair chance to succeed – and success looks different for everyone. Social mobility is a value. It's about having opportunities where you are, and individuals having a personal choice of whether to leave the place they grew up in or to stay there.

This report is a staging post. It is our way of sharing the views of the many people and organisations we have met and spoken to this year and highlighting the topics that came up again and again. The overarching themes, as set out in this report, are some of the main areas where gains can be made to improve the lives of everyone in this country.

We recognise that improving social mobility is a long-term goal. There are no quick wins, although the approach of organisations such as the West Midlands and Liverpool City Region Combined Authorities in testing, learning and moving on is one that at least recognises quickly when something has not worked. We will continue to work with existing and new stakeholders to monitor local insights and devolved decision-making. Only a place-based approach led by local insights and addressing real, local challenges, will affect real, local change.



Annex: Combined Authorities and Stakeholders

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|--|---|---|
| Aaina Hub | Cradle to Career | KPMG |
| ABP (Associated British Ports) | Crown Estate | Liverpool City Region Combined Authority |
| Association of Colleges | DDI (Data-Driven Innovation) | Liverpool John Moores University |
| Atkins Realis | Dechomai Ltd | Manchester Good Employment Charter |
| Back on Track | Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) | Manchester Metropolitan University |
| BAE Systems | FARE Scotland | Matchstick Creative |
| Barnsley and Rotherham Chamber of Commerce | Glasgow Chamber of Commerce | Mayor's Jobs for Everyone Taskforce (West Midlands) |
| Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council | Glasgow City Council | Merseyside Youth Association |
| Birmingham Citizens | Glasgow City Region | Miss Macaroon |
| Birmingham City Council | GCVS (Glasgow Council for the Voluntary Sector) | Movement to Work |
| Birmingham Metropolitan College | Go North West | Neath Port Talbot Council |
| Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council | Grant Thornton Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce | Neighbourly Lab |
| BobbAI | Greater Manchester Combined Authority | NHS Knowsley |
| British Rototherm | Greater Manchester Further Education Innovation Programme | NMIS (National Manufacturing Institute Scotland) |
| Cabinet Office | Greater Manchester Good Employment Charter | North East Combined Authority |
| Catch 22 | Halton Flamgard | North West Business Leadership Team |
| Celtic Freeport | Hexigone Inhibitors Ltd | NPTC (Neath Port Talbot Group of Colleges) |
| Celtic Sea, Pembroke Net Zero Centre | High Value Manufacturing Catapult | Pathways to Work |
| CENSIS | ICON | Prosper |
| City of Glasgow College | Industry Wales | Regional Learning and Skills Partnership for South-West Wales |
| City of Liverpool College | JobsPlus | |
| CodeBase | Knowsley Council | |
| Coleg Gwent | | |
| Communities that Work | | |
| Coventry City Council | | |

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| Right to Succeed | St Basils | West Midlands Combined Authority |
| Rochdale Borough Council | Swansea University | West of England Combined Authority |
| Sandwell Colleges | The Hunter Foundation | Wigan and Leigh College |
| Scottish EDGE | Transport for Greater Manchester | WMCA Disabilities Taskforce |
| Scottish Government | TUC Midlands (Trades Union Congress) | WMCA Race Equalities Taskforce |
| Scottish National Investment Bank | TUC North West (Trades Union Congress) | WMCA Homelessness Taskforce |
| Severn Trent | Universities West Midlands | WMCA Mayor's Jobs for Everyone Taskforce |
| Southway Housing Trust | University of Liverpool | |
| SYMCA (South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority) | Uptree | |
| South Yorkshire ICB (Integrated Care Board) | Wall Colmonoy | |
| Spectra | Welsh Government | |



**Social Mobility
Commission**

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