



**Social Mobility
Commission**

Perceptions of social mobility in the UK

*Unpacking public attitudes and evolving
aspirations*

Research report

December 2025

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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, Chair 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

Chair's foreword

This report shows that most people do not measure their own success in terms of climbing the class ladder. And it demonstrates that income and occupation – the conventional measures of social mobility – are not that important to them either. Security, stability and quality of life are recurring themes, reinforcing our view that too much social mobility policy in the United Kingdom has been focused on the wrong problem.

For most social mobility champions – in charities and universities and among employers – the primary challenge is to improve long-term upward mobility for those at the bottom, so that the composition of elites is more diverse. Education is the 'magic bullet', and access to elite universities and elite employment is the measure of success.

We have persistently questioned this focus. Long-term upward mobility is an important aspect of social mobility, but our evidence does not suggest that the United Kingdom compares badly with other countries on these measures.¹ It nevertheless tends to be the model which preoccupies much of the social mobility arena.

We commissioned this research to find out what real people in the UK think about social mobility. We explored peoples' perceptions of their own mobility, their sense of inequality and what constitutes success in life.

When asked what success looks like, people place less value on professional or managerial occupations, or even earning a high income, than they do on work-life balance, job security and doing work they care about. The measures they regard as the most important are health, physical and mental wellbeing, relationships with family and friends, education, and social connectedness. Owning a home and having savings are also valued.

Our respondents clearly do not think that life in the United Kingdom is fair. They agree that the gaps between social classes are large, and few agree that those in the most influential positions are either the hardest working or the most talented. But the importance they attach to inequality varies. Ironically, those from working-class backgrounds are the *least* concerned about it. And *all* respondents, irrespective of their socio-economic origins, regard other issues – inflation, the NHS and the economy – as much more pressing.

What also stands out is how people see their own class identity. Most of our respondents consider they are better off than their parents but do not consider that they have changed social class. There is a discrepancy between this and the data using 'objective' definitions of class. Because of occupational change, less than one third (32%) of people are working class based on their job,² but in our poll more than half (53%) considered themselves working class when presented with the

¹ Social Mobility Commission (SMC) (2024), [State of the Nation: Local to national, mapping opportunities for all](#)

² SMC (2024), [State of the Nation 2024: Data about social mobility in the UK](#)

choice of 'working class', 'middle class' or 'upper class'. Similarly, the majority of people (70%) from lower-working-class backgrounds have experienced upward social mobility when comparing their parents' occupation with their own,³ but most (76%) of the respondents to our poll reported being in the same social class as their parents.

These discrepancies are interesting for many reasons, but one thing is clear: people do not see working-class origins as something to be escaped from. Nor do they necessarily see class primarily in terms of competition with other people. It is a form of solidarity which links them to the people they care about and is something to be proud of.

This research substantiates our view that we do have a social mobility problem in the United Kingdom – but not the one that tends to get the most attention. People want opportunities to improve and make progress on their own terms, without abandoning who they are or where they come from.

Helpfully, the research also reveals that the general public have clear views about how this might be achieved. In terms of improving opportunities, people remain fairly meritocratic: many rate personal characteristics as an important determinant of individual success. But they also appear to consider that family and place are very influential. When respondents were asked about whether increased investment in each of 6 possible areas would improve opportunities, university was seen as important, particularly among younger respondents. This may be because they are more aware of the lack of alternative options across much of the country. Even so, investment in universities was not the area most likely to be rated (to 'a great' or 'some' extent) as improving opportunities for people to succeed. It was not even in the top 3 out of the 6 possible areas for increased investment that we presented. The areas of investment which the general public believe will improve opportunity most are apprenticeships, job creation and schools.

³ SMC, State of the Nation 2024

Executive summary

This report presents public perceptions of social mobility, inequality and what constitutes a successful life in the UK in 2025. It complements objective mobility data by providing an understanding of people's subjective views of their own social mobility, their perceptions of unequal opportunity in society, the aspirations they hold for themselves and their children, and effective routes to success. The results are based on polling data from Ipsos involving 5,276 UK adults (aged 18+), providing a snapshot of public opinion in March 2025. The survey explored several important themes:

- How do people describe their own class compared with that of their parents?
- Do people feel better or worse off than their parents across core aspects of social mobility?
- How concerned are people about class differences and inequality more broadly?
- What constitutes success in life, and how does this align with traditional social mobility outcomes?
- What are the most effective routes to a successful life?

Key findings

Chapter 1: Perceptions of class and social mobility in the UK

- When presented with the choice of 'working class', 'middle class' or 'upper class', most respondents described their parents' social class as working class (65%). When describing their own class, working-class identification decreased to 53%. For the middle-class, the trend was reversed, going from 27% to 36% between parents and children respectively.
- Among those who gave a definitive answer to both their own and their parents' social class (n = 4,803), a significant majority (76%) reported being in the same social class as their parents, while only 17% reported upward mobility and 7% downward mobility.
- Respondents generally appeared to understand social mobility in broad terms. When shown 5 factors (occupation, education, income, wealth, and housing) and asked the extent to which each indicates that someone is in a higher social class than that of their parents, they rated an average of 3.48 out of 5 indicators as showing this either 'to a great extent' or 'to some extent'.⁴
- Class identity can be 'sticky' despite personal progress. Of those who reported being in the same class as their parents (n = 3,524), a large majority (74%) said they were better off than their parents on at least one of the 5 mobility metrics presented (in addition to a sixth metric, 'overall standard of living'). On average, this group said they were better off across 2.23 of the 5 metrics.

⁴ The dimensions we used are shown in the appendix, Q3 (see also Figure 2). They reflect the 5 key 'mobility outcomes' measures used in social mobility research (occupation, education, income, wealth and housing), which also informed our own social mobility index. See M. Thaning (2019), [Multidimensional intergenerational inequality: Resource specificity in education, occupation, and income](#); M. Hällsten and M. Thaning (2021), [Wealth as one of the 'big four' SES dimensions in intergenerational transmission](#); J. Blanden and others (2021), [Trends in intergenerational home ownership and wealth transmission](#). See Appendix for full question wording.

- People tended to think social mobility is becoming more difficult: 55% of respondents believed it 'is becoming harder' for people from less advantaged backgrounds to move up in British society, and just 12% believed it 'is becoming easier'.
- However, they were more optimistic about their own progress on mobility metrics than that of others. When asked whether they are personally better or worse off than their parents across the 5 mobility metrics, respondents were more likely to say they were better off across 4 of them (they were evenly split on housing). However, when asked if people in general were better or worse off, they were more likely to say worse off across 4 of them (with the exception of education).

Chapter 2: Perceptions of inequalities and whether they matter in the UK

- The vast majority of respondents (75%) perceived substantial gaps between social classes in the UK today, with 28% selecting 'very large' and a further 47% selecting 'fairly large' when asked about the size of these gaps. Respondents' reported level of concern with inequality more broadly was lower (60% 'very' or 'fairly' concerned) than it was for other major issues presented, such as inflation, the UK economy and the NHS (around 90% concern for each).
- In terms of the proportions rating themselves 'very' or 'fairly' concerned, concern with inequality was higher among specific groups, including ethnic minorities (79%), disabled people (67%), women (65%) and younger people (71% of 18- to 24-year-olds). Notably, despite being most likely to perceive large class gaps (with 80% saying they are 'very' or 'fairly' large), respondents identifying as working class appeared to have the lowest level of concern for inequality (59% working class, 61% middle class and 73% upper class rating themselves as 'very' or 'fairly' concerned).⁵
- 90% of respondents said that personal characteristics are 'very' or 'fairly' important in determining how successful you are in life, compared with 81% for family circumstances and 79% for the area you grew up in. However, many appeared to be sceptical that those in the most influential positions are necessarily the hardest working (28% agreed) or have the most natural ability (31% agreed).

Chapter 3: What constitutes success and what do people value?

- When asked how important various things are to them, people were less likely to rate key mobility outcomes as 'very' or 'fairly' important and typically appeared to have a preference for less 'materialistic' values. Of the 6 outcomes presented, those that people were most likely to rate as important to them were 'physical and mental wellbeing' (95% rating it as 'very' or 'fairly' important), 'having good relationships with family and friends' (94%), 'having a high standard of education' (73%) and 'having a good social life' (72%). 'Earning a high income' (65%) and 'having a job regarded as professional or managerial' (44%) were the least likely to be considered as important.
- When asked what constitutes success in terms of what people have the means to do, people tended to prefer security over luxury. Respondents were presented with a

⁵ Base sizes of the subgroups referenced: ethnic minorities, n = 674; disabled people, n = 1,222; women, n = 2,688; 18-24 year olds; n = 495; working class, n = 2,414; middle class, n = 2,250; upper class, n = 199.

list of 6 possible indicators of success to choose from. 'Owning their own home' (70%) and 'having savings or investments' (63%) were the indicators chosen most often. 'Owning luxury items' was least likely to be selected (26%).

- When asked what constitutes success in terms of someone's occupation, respondents were most likely to choose 'having a good work-life balance' (63%) from the list of 8 potential answers. This was followed by 'job security' (56%) and 'work they feel passionate about' (53%). These factors significantly outweighed traditional indicators of career success such as 'having a highly paid job' (40%) or 'having a job regarded as professional/managerial' (26%).

Chapter 4: Best routes for everyone to succeed

- When asked to rate the extent to which investment in each of 6 areas would help, a large proportion of respondents felt that investing in 'apprenticeships' (83% selected 'to a great' or 'to some' extent), 'job creation' (82%) and 'schools' (82%) would help people to achieve success regardless of their background. Support for university education was comparatively lower at 67%.
- Similarly, when asked what singular pathway would give someone from a disadvantaged background the best chance of going on to earn a high income, 'apprenticeships' were by far the most popular response (selected by 39% of respondents). The next most popular options were 'going into higher education to obtain an academic degree' and 'going into higher education to obtain technical/vocational qualifications' (16% each).
- That said, levels of support for apprenticeships compared with university differed between age groups. Young people were on the whole more likely to choose an academic degree as the one thing that would give someone the best possible chance and were less likely to choose apprenticeships as their answer than the sample as a whole, while the reverse was true for older people.

Conclusion

This report shows that public views on social mobility are complex. People express social pessimism, seeing mobility as uncommon and increasingly difficult, yet many feel that they themselves are better off than their parents in terms of education, living standards and income. Despite these improvements, most respondents still identify with the same social class as their parents, suggesting that in the eyes of the public, class is not purely an economic category but is rooted in personal identity and cultural origins.

Perceptions of inequality are also mixed: while the gap between classes is seen as large, concern about inequality is lower than for other issues such as inflation, the economy or the NHS. Concern is highest among groups with specific characteristics, such as people from ethnic minorities and younger people. Surprisingly, in the survey those who identified as working class were no less likely to perceive large class gaps than the whole sample, and they were the social class group least likely to be concerned about inequality. This indicates that concerns about inequality are shaped more by personal characteristics than by class and that working-class people do not necessarily relate to definitions of inequality.

When considering what constitutes success, respondents prioritised personal wellbeing, financial security, and family and relationships over high income or prestigious jobs, highlighting stability and security as central to their sense of success. This challenges traditional views of success as being related to education, income and profession. While personal characteristics were most likely to be seen as important in driving success, family background and the area where someone grew up continue to be seen as influential.

People's views on how to improve opportunities favour practical routes over higher education: they prioritise apprenticeships, schools, job creation and housing, and they see universities as less effective in this respect.

Collectively, these findings show that in the eyes of the public, successful social mobility can come from incremental improvements in economic and social stability, both within and between generations. This challenges the notion of social mobility being rooted in moving between objective social classes, particularly when family background, the area where someone grew up and class identity are entwined. A place-based approach to improving incremental social mobility opportunities provides a credible route to addressing geographic disparities and enabling more people to access a broader concept of social mobility success.

Introduction

Research on social mobility has traditionally focused on objective outcomes, evaluating the success of individuals from specific socio-economic backgrounds in achieving endpoints such as high income, university degrees and professional occupations, or in surpassing their parents across these metrics. Using these yardsticks, many have found that social mobility in the UK is low and/or in decline.⁶ Our own research suggests a more mixed picture,⁷ highlighting progress in areas such as educational mobility alongside challenges in wealth and housing.

Implicit in this research, and in wider conversations around social mobility, is the assumption that endpoints like a high income, a professional job or educational attainment represent natural or universal aspirations, or at least desirable outcomes. Recent research challenges this, revealing a disconnect between traditional social mobility outcomes and people's actual priorities. Studies have consistently shown that the public values health, happiness and relationships above wealth, career progression and material advancement.⁸ Qualitative work indicates that many prioritise work-life balance or proximity to family over financial gain.⁹ These findings underscore the need for primary research into public perceptions of social mobility, as individual and collective beliefs about opportunity, fairness and success shape people's values and what they prioritise in life.

This report uses survey data from an Ipsos poll of 5,276 UK adults (aged 18+) to add to this evidence base. It draws on data collected between 21 and 30 March 2025, using a sample weighted to be representative of the age, gender and geographical profile of the UK, including booster samples for Scotland and Wales.¹⁰ The results represent a snapshot of public opinion and are not intended to suggest a total population result. As with all polling data, some of the results may be influenced, to an unknown degree, by social desirability bias, where respondents over-report socially acceptable views and under-report unpopular ones.

The report explores several themes, including how people describe their own social class and its determinants; their concerns about class disparities and broader inequality; and their definitions of a successful life. It also explores the perceived effectiveness of pathways to success, such as education, vocational training and job creation. By focusing on these subjective dimensions and perceptions, the report complements objective analyses such as those in our State of the Nation reports, which track key mobility outcomes and the drivers of social mobility.¹¹

We find that members of the public have complicated but consistent views when it comes to social mobility, inequality and success. We explore these views in more detail below.

⁶ For example, see S. Krutikova and others (2023), [Social mobility continues to fall – and moving up is harder if you grow up in the North or Midlands](#); Sutton Trust (2025), [What is social mobility?](#)

⁷ SMC (2023), [State of the Nation 2023: People and places](#)

⁸ See SMC (2021), [Social Mobility Barometer 2021: Public views on social mobility](#); Social Mobility Commission (2025), [Deep dives: A local perspective on social mobility](#); K. Latham (2024), [Social mobility and opportunity: What the public thinks](#); T. Berger and P. Engzell (2020), [Trends and disparities in subjective upward mobility since 1940](#); A. Gugushvili (2022), [Information about inequality of opportunity increases downward mobility perceptions: A population-wide randomized survey experiment](#)

⁹ Social Mobility Commission (2025), [Deep dives: A local perspective on social mobility](#)

¹⁰ The survey method is outlined in the appendix to this report

¹¹ For example, see Social Mobility Commission (2024) [State of the Nation: Local to National, Mapping Opportunities for all](#) and Social Mobility Commission (2023) [State of the Nation: People and Places](#).

Chapter 1 looks at perceptions of class and mobility. We find that most people identify with their parents' social class and view mobility as rare, despite many self-reporting some form of upward mobility. Chapter 2 examines attitudes to inequality, noting that while class gaps are widely perceived, inequality is a less pressing concern than issues such as the economy or the NHS. Chapter 3 investigates people's perceptions of success, highlighting a preference for focusing on wellbeing, health, social relationships and work-life balance over objective social mobility outcomes. Finally, Chapter 4 identifies the routes to success favoured by the public, demonstrating their strong support for vocational pathways such as apprenticeships over university education.

Chapter 1: Perceptions of class and social mobility in the UK

As part of this survey, we asked about how respondents considered both their socio-economic background (the social class of their parents growing up) and their socio-economic status (their social class today). Social class is highly subjective, and people can use different aspects of their lives to inform their understanding of their socio-economic background and socio-economic status.¹² We should therefore not expect these results to align perfectly with more empirical analysis of the class composition of the UK, which typically uses more objectively defined measures such as the National Statistics Socio-economic classification (NS-SEC)¹³ or Social Grade.¹⁴ However, using self-identification of socio-economic background and socio-economic status provides valuable insights into how people perceive their own class, what they feel defines social class and how that informs their view of social mobility.

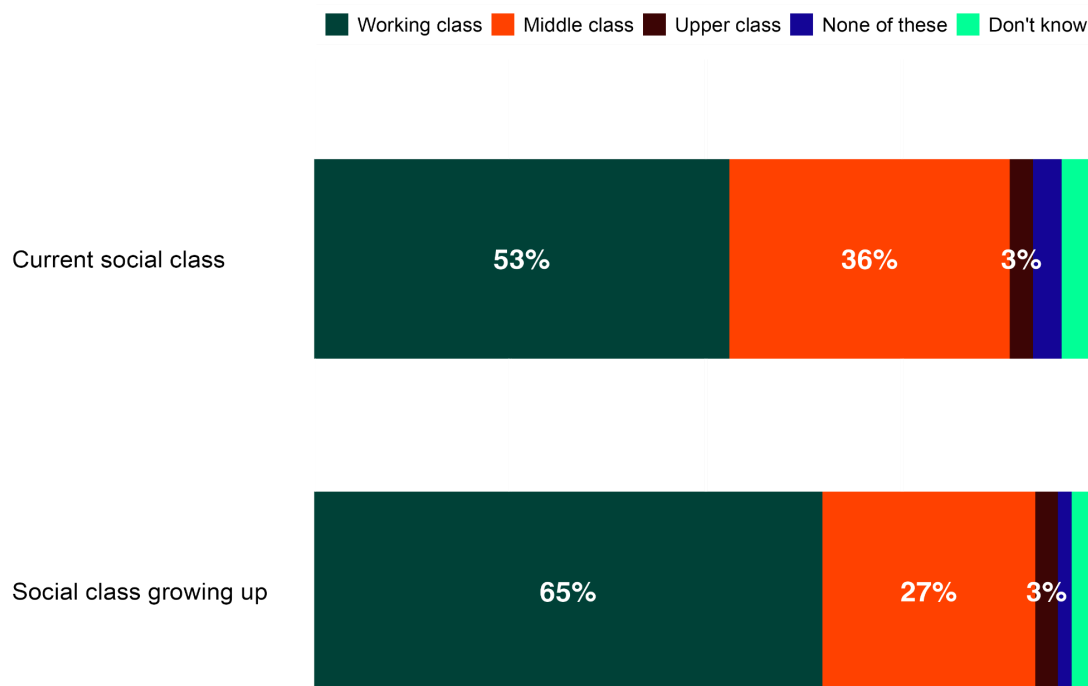
Respondents were asked to say whether they identified as ‘working class’, ‘middle class’ or ‘upper class’, or to select ‘none of these’ or ‘don’t know’ instead. We found that most people (65%) described their socio-economic background as ‘working class’. Less than a third (27%) considered their parents to be ‘middle class’, and just 3% ‘upper class’. When asked about their current social class, the proportion of those saying ‘working class’ decreased to 53%, while the proportion saying ‘middle class’ increased to 36% and ‘upper class’ remained consistent at 3% (see Figure 1).

¹² For example, see D. Difford (2024), [How do Britons define social class?](#)

¹³ ONS (2021), [The National Statistics Socio-economic classification \(NS-SEC\)](#)

¹⁴ ONS (2023), [Approximated Social Grade data](#)

Figure 1: Self-reported class when growing up vs current social class



Note: Respondents were asked how they would describe 'the social class of your parent(s)/guardian(s) when you were a child' and 'your current social class'. The percentages for 'none of the above' and 'don't know' are 5% or below. They are not displayed in the figure for presentational purposes but are included in overall calculations.

Source: Online Ipsos survey of 5,276 UK adults, online fieldwork conducted 21st – 30th March 2025.

Among those (n = 4,803) who gave a definitive answer to both questions (i.e. excluding those who ticked 'don't know' or 'prefer not to say' to at least one of the questions), a significant majority (76%) reported being in the same social class as their parents; 17% reported being in a higher social class (i.e. being upwardly mobile) and 7% reported in a lower social class (i.e. being downwardly mobile). In other words, most respondents report experiencing neither upward nor downward mobility in class through their lives.

Respondents tended to think the same of others when it came to the likelihood of moving from one class to another. For example, just 15% of respondents said that 'more than half of people' end up in a different social class than that of their parents, while 43% said 'less than half of people do'. Taken in conjunction, it appears that the public view social mobility between classes as uncommon, both for themselves and for others.

People view upward social mobility as rare, but possible

We find several explanations for the view of social mobility as something of a rarity. First, there is a perception that social mobility in the UK is in decline or is becoming more difficult.¹⁵ Our survey found that 55% of respondents believed it 'is becoming harder' for people from less advantaged backgrounds to move up in British society, while 12% believed it 'is becoming easier' and 23% thought it 'is staying much the same'. This is consistent with previous research: NatCen's British Social Attitudes polling, for instance, found that

¹⁵ O. Heath and M. Bennett (2023), [Social class](#)

the proportion of people saying it was ‘very difficult’ to move from one class to another increased from 17% in 2005 to 32% in 2022, while the proportion of people who said that it was ‘not very difficult’ declined from 1 in 3 (33%) to just 1 in 9 (11%) over the same period.¹⁶ More recent research by the Sutton Trust also found that a larger proportion of people feel it is becoming harder for someone to move from working class to middle class today compared with 50 years ago (a view that was held disproportionately by younger people).¹⁷

However, it is also true that around half (51%) of respondents in our sample agreed that ‘it is reasonably easy for someone to be in a different social class to that of their parents’ (51% ‘strongly agree’ or ‘tend to agree’, 17% ‘tend to disagree’ or ‘strongly disagree’). So while individuals tend to believe social mobility is both rare and increasingly difficult, they continue to see it as theoretically possible.

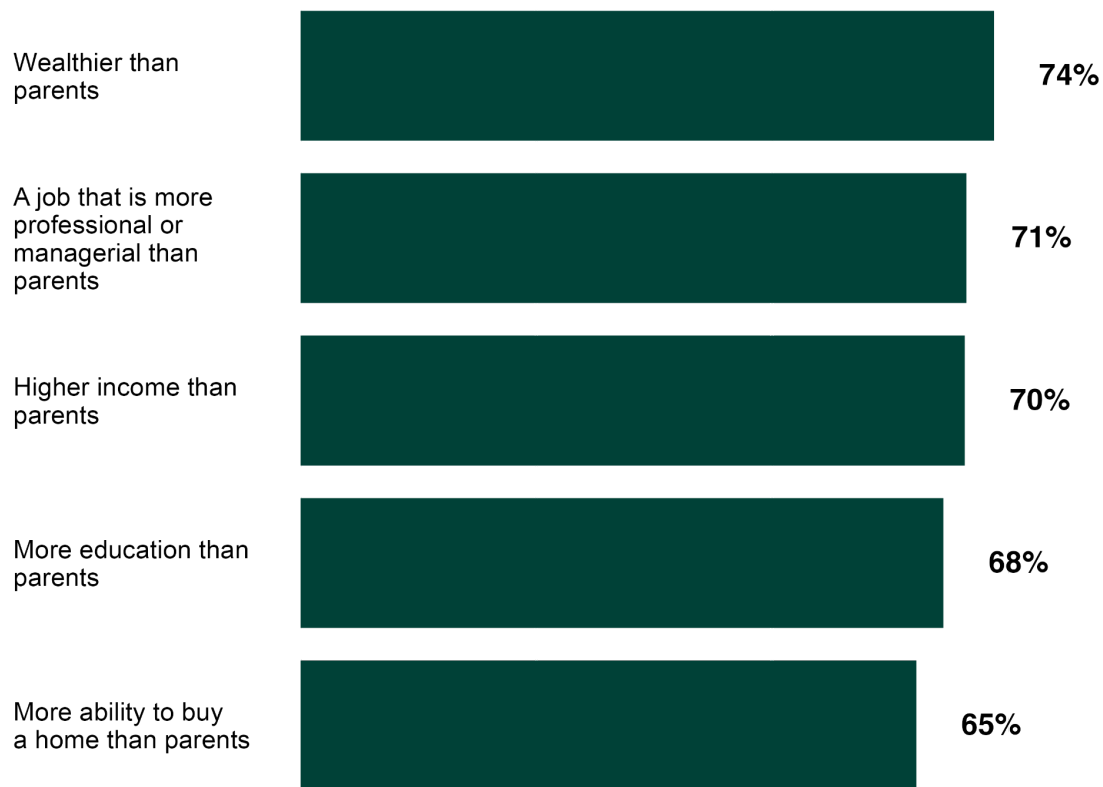
Related to this, respondents tended to have a fairly broad definition of social mobility, typically saying that there were several possible ways to be upwardly mobile. The survey provided several potential ‘measures’ of social mobility¹⁸ and asked respondents the extent to which each of them, independently, indicates that someone is in a higher social class than that of their parents. Looking at the proportion of respondents selecting ‘to a great extent’ or ‘to some extent’ for each measure respectively, a majority felt each option indicated that someone was in a higher social class than that of their parents (see Figure 2). The average number of mobility metrics which survey respondents felt were valid indicators (i.e. for which they selected ‘to a great extent’ or ‘to some extent’) was 3.48. It was also much more common to select multiple indicators of social mobility than just one: 84% of respondents rated at least 2 of the metrics as indicators (‘to a great’ or ‘to some’ extent) that someone is of a higher social class than that of their parents, while 42% rated all 5 in this way. In contrast, 11% did not rate any in this way and 7% did so for only one. This suggests that the key measures of social mobility align with public views of what the concept describes, and that people tend to believe there are several valid indicators of upward mobility.

¹⁶ O. Heath and M. Bennett (2023), [Social class](#)

¹⁷ K. Latham (2024), [Social mobility and opportunity](#)

¹⁸ The options we used (see Figure 2) were selected to reflect the key five ‘mobility outcomes’ measures used in social mobility research (occupation, education, income, wealth and housing; please refer to appendix Q3 for full question wording), which also informed our own social mobility index. See Thaning, [Multidimensional intergenerational inequality](#); Hällsten and Thaning, [Wealth as one of the ‘big four’](#); Blanden and others, [Trends in intergenerational home ownership](#)

Figure 2: Public views on what indicates someone is in a higher class than their parents



Note: Percentages represent the proportion of respondents who said each factor indicates 'to a great extent' or 'to some extent' that someone is in a higher class than that of their parents. For full question wording, see Q3 in the appendix.

Source: IPSOS survey of 5,276 UK Adults, online fieldwork conducted 21st – 30th March 2025.

Empirical evidence suggests that this is not an unreasonable viewpoint. For example, as outlined in our 'State of the Nation' reports,¹⁹ the UK has made significant progress on educational mobility, with the socio-economic gap in university enrolment almost halving between 2014 to 2022. Meanwhile, people are more likely to be upwardly mobile than downwardly mobile across income and occupation, though the opposite is true for wealth and housing. Progress in social mobility is therefore a mixed picture.

Despite evidence of upward mobility, individuals' class identity often 'sticks' to the social class in which they grew up

All of the above presents a contradiction in public attitudes. On one hand, most people consider themselves to be in the same class as their parents and view social mobility as something which a minority of people experience in their lives. However, a majority also believe that social mobility is 'relatively easy' and that there are multiple ways to achieve it. Further to this, many people report being better off than their parents across the key mobility metrics, which aligns with empirical evidence on the subject. Therefore, the view of

¹⁹ For example, see SMC, State of the Nation: [Local to national](#); SMC, State of the Nation 2023: [People and places](#)

social mobility as an uncommon occurrence cannot be explained simply by people believing it to be in decline.

There are a number of other potential reasons for the perceived lack of social mobility in the UK. First, there are no set criteria for how people define social class, and many factors do not relate to someone's present economic footing. Someone may progress up the socio-economic gradient (thereby experiencing upward mobility) but continue to define themselves as working class because they define their class by other metrics. For example, recent YouGov polling finds that while someone's current job or income matters most when it comes to determining social class, people also feel that a number of other factors are important – such as which social activities someone participates in (71%), their parents' jobs (70%), their accent (52%) and where they are from (50%).²⁰

Another related factor seems to be that, in many cases, individuals will identify with the social class that they grew up in, irrespective of later life outcomes.²¹ This is sometimes referred to as the 'stickiness' of class identity.²² For example, in the British Social Attitudes survey (2016), 61% of respondents who were in professional or managerial jobs but whose father was in a routine or semi-routine job described themselves as working class, compared with only 24% whose father occupied a similar position to themselves.²³

We find some evidence of this in our own survey. Among those who reported being in the same class as their parents (n = 3,524), 74% said they were better off in terms of at least one of the 5 social mobility metrics.²⁴ On average, this group of respondents said that they were better off across 2.23 of the 5 metrics. Furthermore, 47% of those in the same class as their parents said they were better off in terms of their 'overall standard of living', while just 22% said they were worse off. This provides further evidence of the 'stickiness' of the class identity that one grew up in.

Looking specifically at the group who reported being upwardly mobile, it appears that the breadth and extent of a person's mobility has an impact on their likelihood of seeing themselves as being in a different class to the one they grew up in. Our data suggests that in most cases, a person must experience multiple forms of 'long-range' upward mobility in order for their class identity to shift. For example, those who reported being in a higher social class than their parents (n = 960) reported being better off across 3.53 of the 5 mobility metrics on average. More than 4 in 10 (43%) reported being better off across all 5, and 75% said they were better off in terms of their overall standard of living. They tended to have a higher household income than the group who reported being in the same class as their parents (32% compared with 22% had a gross household annual income of £55,000 or over). And they were more likely to have a Bachelor's degree or higher (43% compared with 30%), to be homeowners (81% compared with 64%), to be in the higher 'social grades'

²⁰ D. Difford (2024), [How do Britons define social class?](#)

²¹ N.D. Grawe (2006), [Lifecycle bias in estimates of intergenerational earnings persistence](#); G.S. Fields (2021), [Exploring concepts of social mobility](#)

²² E.R. Johnson and others (2025), [Sticky social class: A dynamic perspective on subjective social class in the workplace](#)

²³ J. Curtice and others (2016), [British Social Attitudes 33](#)

²⁴ Respondents were asked: 'Thinking about each of the following areas, would you say that you are personally better off, worse off, or about the same compared with how it was for your parent(s) while you were growing up?' The options were aligned to the key areas of social mobility: 'your career/job', 'your level of education', 'your income level', 'your level of wealth' and 'your ability to buy a home'. They were also given an additional response option for 'your overall standard of living': this is not included in the data on the average number of areas selected. Proportions represent those responding 'much better off' or 'slightly better off' across the key social mobility metrics. See appendix for question Q10 wording.

(47% classified as AB, compared with 25%²⁵) and to be in the least deprived quintile on the Index of Multiple Deprivation (25% compared with 17%).

This suggests that while self-reported social class tends to be quite resilient to life outcomes, it is not immune to them. However, the threshold for upward mobility is quite high: individuals who see themselves as being upwardly mobile are typically those who have experienced multiple forms of upward mobility and ended up at the top end of the key social mobility metrics.

Individuals are optimistic about their own social mobility prospects but pessimistic about those of society

As mentioned above, survey respondents did not just report low levels of social mobility for themselves: they also felt that social mobility was rare in society as a whole. Answers to other questions in the survey help to illustrate what drives this viewpoint. As shown in Figure 3, across all areas respondents were asked about, they were more likely to say that they themselves were better off than their parents than that people in general are. This is a well-established phenomenon, sometimes referred to as ‘individual optimism and social pessimism’,²⁶ where people are optimistic about their own circumstances but pessimistic about society as a whole. This results in people underestimating the mobility prospects of others.²⁷ There are parallels in polling data across other issues. For example, recent research from Pew Research Centre found that US citizens are much more likely to expect their own financial situation to improve than to expect the economy as a whole to do so.²⁸

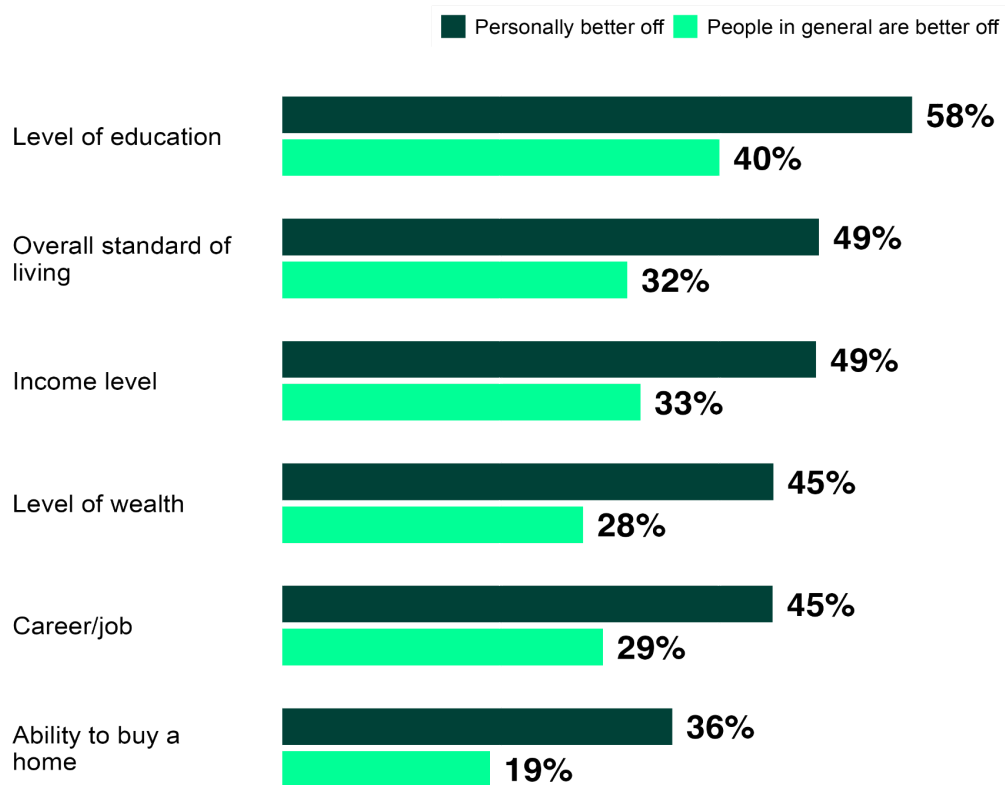
²⁵ Social grade AB represents those in higher and intermediate managerial, administrative and professional occupations

²⁶ M. Roser and H. Ritchie (2024), [Optimism and pessimism](#)

²⁷ J. Matamoros-Lima and others (2024), [\(Mis\)perception in social mobility: Optimistic bias for personal \(but not societal\) mobility beliefs](#)

²⁸ Pew Research Center (2024), [Views of the nation's economy](#)

Figure 3: Public views on whether people feel personally better off than their parents and think that people in general are better off

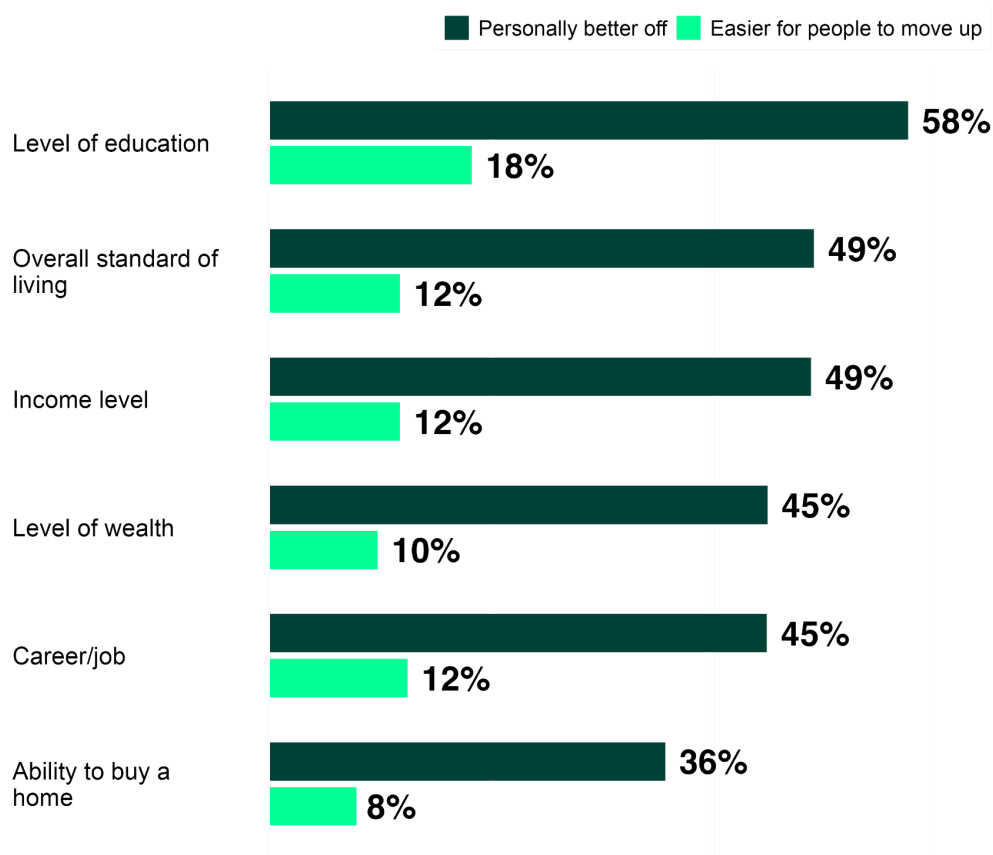


Note: The figure shows the proportion of respondents who believe that they are either 'much' or 'slightly' personally better off than their parents (dark green) and who think people in general are either 'much' or 'slightly' better off than their parents (light green).

Source: IPSOS survey of 5,276 UK Adults, online fieldwork conducted 21st – 30th March 2025.

We also asked respondents whether it is becoming easier or harder for people from less advantaged backgrounds to move up in British society. As Figure 4 shows, this is the area where individual optimism and social pessimism is most pronounced. Across all metrics, respondents were significantly more likely to say they themselves were 'much' or 'slightly' better off than that it 'is becoming easier' for people from disadvantaged backgrounds to move up in British society. At the same time, respondents felt that it 'is becoming harder' across each mobility indicator – with particularly sharp gaps in 'ability to buy a home' (69% harder, 8% easier), 'level of wealth' (55% harder, 10% easier) and 'level of income' (50% harder, 12% easier).

Figure 4: Public views on whether people feel personally better off than their parents and whether they think it is easier for people from disadvantaged backgrounds to move up



Note: The figure shows the proportion of respondents who believe that they are personally 'much' or 'slightly' better off than their parents (dark green) and whether they think it 'is becoming easier' for people from less advantaged backgrounds to move up in British society (light green).

Source: IPSOS survey of 5,276 UK Adults, online fieldwork conducted 21st – 30th March 2025.

Chapter 2: Public perceptions of inequalities in the UK

Perceived class gaps in the UK are substantial: 75% of respondents in our survey believed there to be a ‘very large’ or ‘fairly large’ gap between social classes, while 17% felt that the gap was ‘very small’ or ‘fairly small’ gap and just 1% felt there was ‘no gap’. This is broadly consistent with previous research. The Sutton Trust, for example, found that 83% of people felt there was a ‘big gap’ between different social classes in the UK while 11% felt there was a ‘small gap’.²⁹ Survey respondents typically felt that inequalities across the socio-economic gradient were multifaceted. For example, 69% agreed (choosing ‘strongly agree’, or ‘tend to agree’) that ‘there are large differences in the opportunities available to those in different classes’ and 68% agreed that there are large differences in ‘how people from the different classes are seen by others in UK society’.

The responses appear to follow a similar pattern of variation according to self-identified social class: the lower respondents placed themselves on the class gradient, the higher their perception of large class gaps tended to be. This was true for the belief that there are large class gaps in the UK (80% working class, 73% middle class, 58% upper class) and for agreement that ‘there are large differences in the opportunities available to those in different classes’ (74% working class, 66% middle class, 64% upper class). The only exception was agreement in terms of whether there are large differences between classes in ‘how people from different classes are seen by others in UK society’ (72% working class, 65% middle class and 73% upper class selected either ‘strongly agree’ or ‘tend to agree’).³⁰

Inequality matters, but it is not seen as the most urgent issue facing the UK

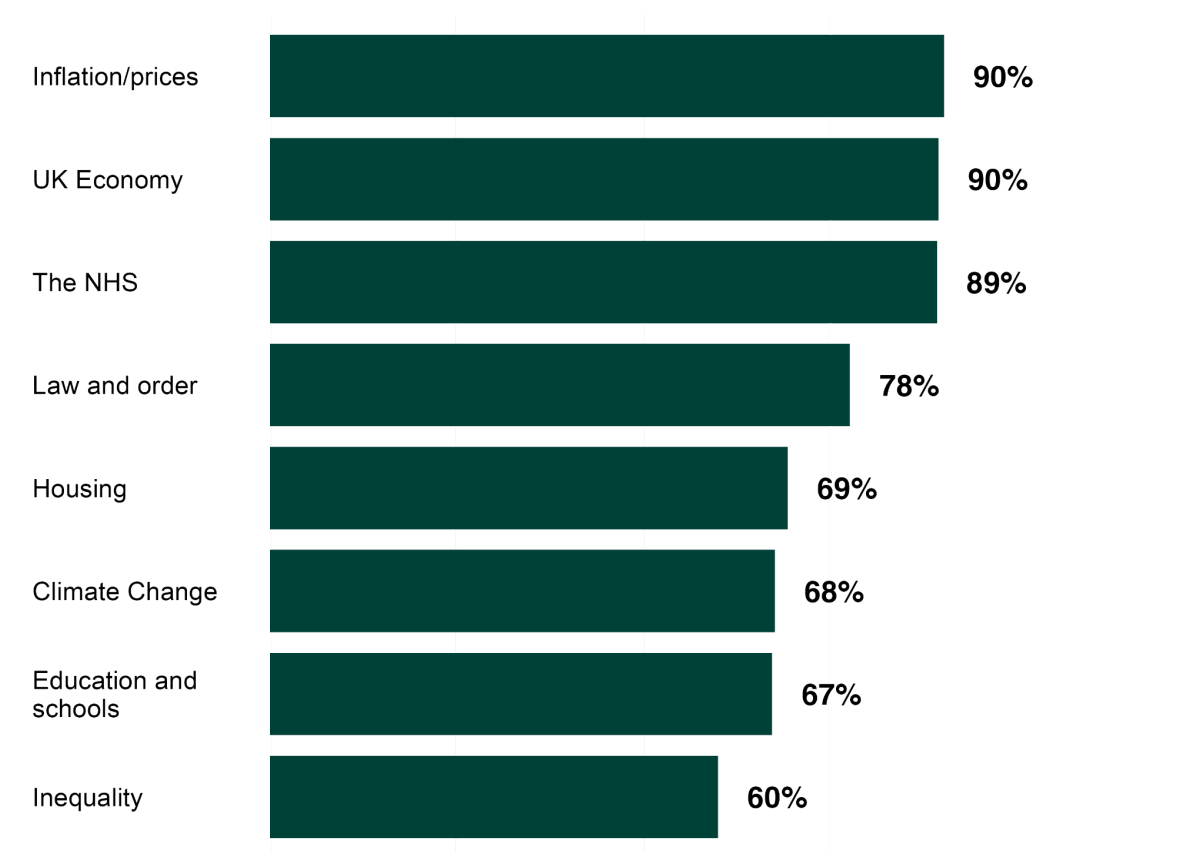
Although respondents perceived large inequalities between social classes, their level of concern for inequality more broadly was somewhat lower than their level of concern for other issues. As shown in Figure 5, the majority of respondents (60%) said they were ‘very concerned’ or ‘fairly concerned’ about inequality, but their level of concern was higher for all 7 other issues we asked about. The level of concern for ‘inflation’, ‘the UK economy’ and ‘the NHS’ was considerably higher, at around 90%. This is consistent with previous polling on inequality. Research by the Fairness Foundation, for example, found that 85% of their sample considered inequality to be an important issue facing Britain, but that 43% said it is ‘Important but not the most urgent’ concern.³¹

²⁹ K. Latham (2024), [Social mobility and opportunity](#)

³⁰ Base sizes of class subgroups are as follows: working class, n = 2,414; middle class, n = 2,250; upper class, n = 199.

³¹ K. Beaver (2023), [Britons worry about inequality but put equal opportunities before equal outcomes](#)

Figure 5: Public concern for possible issues facing the UK



Note: Percentages indicate the proportion of respondents who reported being 'very concerned' or 'fairly concerned' for each issue. The full question text can be found at Q4 in the appendix.

Source: IPSOS survey of 5,276 UK Adults, online fieldwork conducted 21st – 30th March 2025.

There is further evidence of this pattern elsewhere in the survey. For instance, we asked a range of questions about people's values regarding individuals in 'influential positions'. The answers present a common pattern: people appear to see value in those in influential positions having a mix of backgrounds, but they place greater value on them having the required skills or competencies to do the job. For example, 76% agreed (selecting 'strongly agree' or 'tend to agree') that 'organisations benefit by having influential people coming from a range of different backgrounds' and 74% agreed that 'people in influential positions should come from a range of different backgrounds', but 81% agreed that 'people in influential positions should have secured the role they hold based on their own merit' and 80% that 'people in influential positions must have the skills or qualifications required to do their jobs effectively'. Meanwhile, 70% agreed that 'the family background of someone in a high-paid job does not matter, so long as they have the ability to do the job effectively'. This further underscores that while respondents showed concern about inequality and unequal representation, they did not consider these the most pressing or important issues.

Ethnic minorities, young people, parents, disabled people and women all show higher concern for inequality than members of the working class

Reported concern for inequality is higher among specific groups. In terms of the proportions rating themselves ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ concerned, ethnic minorities (79%), those with children (68%), those with disabilities (67%) and women (65%) all had a higher level of concern for inequality than the sample as a whole. Concern was also higher among young people (71% of those aged 18 to 24) and declined progressively among each older age cohort until ages 55 to 64. Those aged 55 to 64 and 65+ were the least likely age groups to rate themselves as ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ concerned, 49% and 51% respectively.³² Other polls have found a similar pattern. For instance, recent polling by Ipsos and Fairness Foundation found that Millennials were more likely than Generation X or Baby Boomers to say inequality was one of the top issues facing Britain. Generation Z were a slight outlier here, showing more concern than Generation X and Boomers but less concern than Millennials.³³

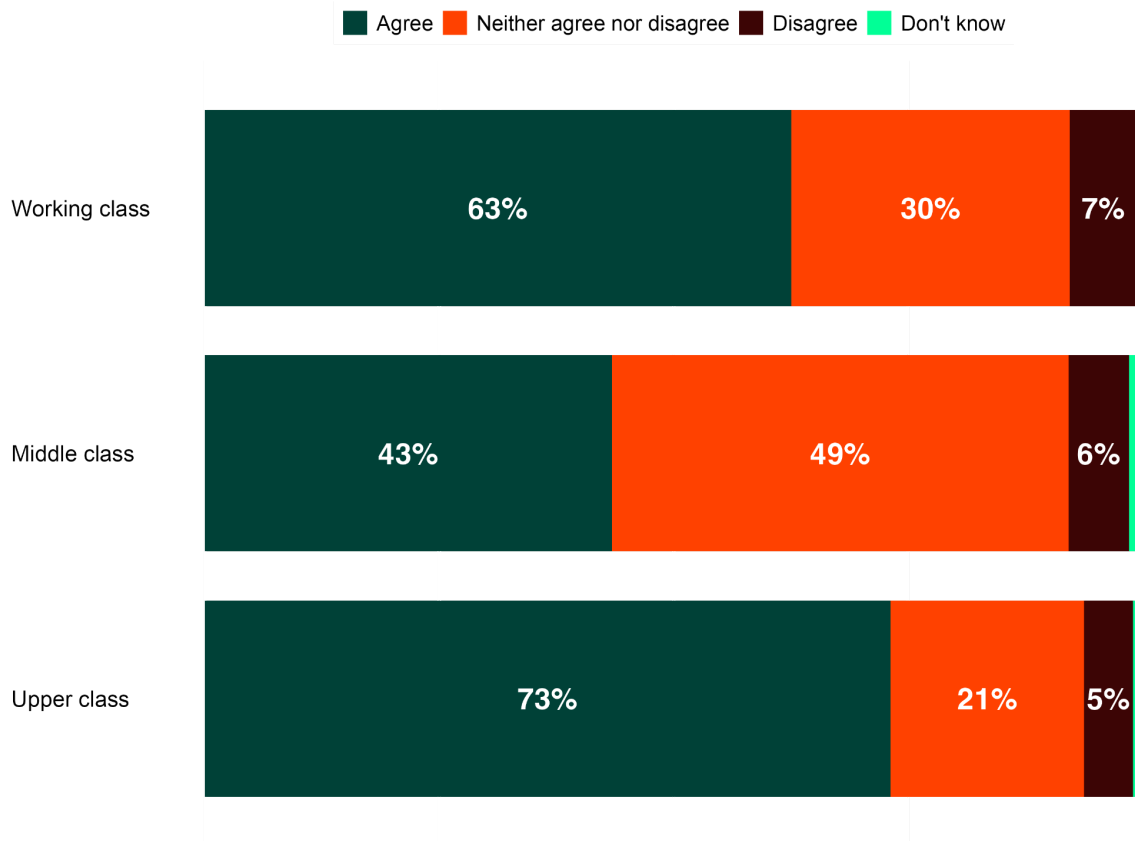
Interestingly, those who identified as working class were no more likely than the sample as a whole to rate themselves as ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ concerned about inequality (59% compared with 60%). They also exhibited the lowest level of concern for inequality of any class (59% working class, 61% middle class, 73% upper class), even though they were also the group most likely to believe there are large differences between social classes in the UK.

This was a consistent theme throughout the survey: those who identified as working class were the most likely to perceive large class gaps but the least likely to be concerned by inequality. A possible explanation for this comes from elsewhere in the survey. First, those who identified as working class appear to place less emphasis on their relative position on the socio-economic gradient. For example, just 36% of working-class respondents said ‘climbing the social ladder’ was important to them, compared with 46% of middle-class respondents and 85% of upper-class respondents. Second, as shown in Figure 6, those identifying as working class were more likely to express being proud of belonging to that class than those from middle-class backgrounds (but less so than those who considered themselves upper class). Taken together, this suggests that those who self-identify as working class are generally less enthused by the prospect of being upwardly mobile. This may explain why their level of concern for inequality is lower than that of other social classes even though they are more likely to perceive large gaps between the classes.

³² Base sizes of the subgroups referenced: ethnic minority, n = 674; children in household, n = 1,693; disability, n = 1,222; women, n = 2,688; aged 18–24, n = 495; aged 55+, n = 2,100.

³³ K. Beaver (2023), [Britons worry about inequality](#), Ipsos

Figure 6: Proportion of respondents who agreed/disagreed that they were 'proud' to be in their social class



Note: The figure shows the proportions of respondents who selected 'strongly agree' or 'tend to agree' that they are proud to be in their social class, who 'neither agree nor disagree', and who 'strongly disagree' or 'tend to disagree'. Where the label is not shown, the value is 1% or less. Base sizes: working class, n = 2,414; middle class, n = 1,886; upper class, n = 199.

Source: IPSOS survey of 5,276 UK Adults, online fieldwork conducted 21st -30th March 2025.

Success in life is seen as driven by personal characteristics, but background and location matter

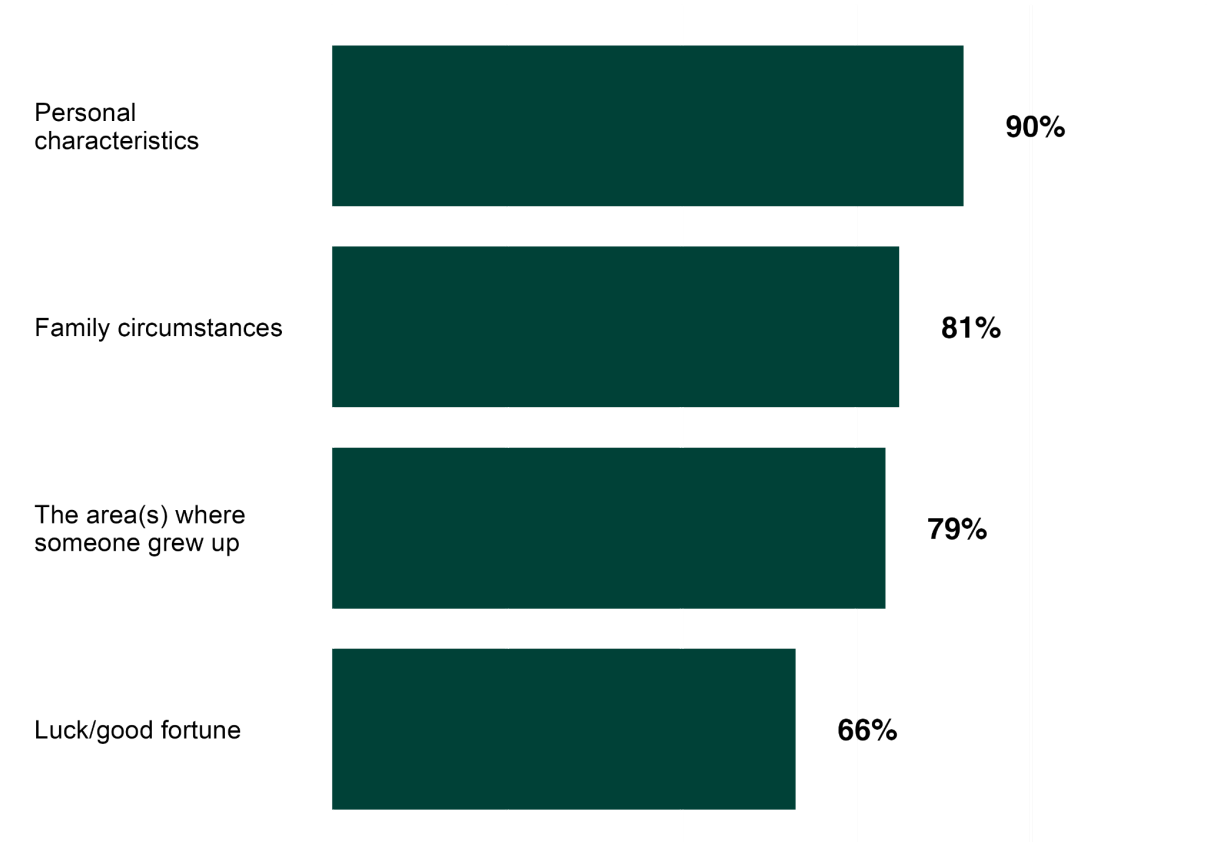
Participants' views on the role of individuals in navigating inequalities are complex. On one hand, respondents appeared to be quite sceptical about the abilities of those in the most influential or well-paid professions. They were more likely to 'strongly' or 'tend to' disagree than agree that 'those in high-paying jobs tend to be those that are the hardest working' (38% disagree, 28% agree). Meanwhile, they were evenly split on whether 'those in high-paying jobs tend to be those that have the most natural ability' (31% agree, 31% disagree). Taking this together with the widely held view that there are substantial class gaps in the UK, it appears that many people think these gaps are not driven by ability alone. This is consistent with wider research which finds that most people believe those from wealthier backgrounds have more opportunities.³⁴

At the same time, in terms of the proportions rating personal characteristics, family circumstances, the area where someone grew up and luck/good fortune as 'very' or 'fairly'

³⁴ K. Latham (2024), [Social mobility and opportunity](#); S. Kerr and others (2025), [Talking about wealth inequality](#)

important to their success, respondents typically felt that individual abilities and endeavours were more important than anything else. As illustrated in Figure 7, ‘personal characteristics’ was the factor most likely to be seen as important in influencing someone’s chances of being successful in life (90%). This was followed by ‘family circumstances’ (81%), ‘the area where someone grew up’ (79%), and ‘luck or good fortune’ (66%). Almost two-thirds (61%) of people also agreed (selecting ‘strongly agree’ or ‘tend to agree’) that ‘natural ability is more important than family background in determining someone’s success in life’, while just 13% disagreed. Finally, participants were much more likely to agree than disagree that ‘hard work pays off’ (68% agree, 11% disagree). This suggests that while people believe there are large inequalities in the UK which cannot be explained simply by individual differences, they maintain that individuals themselves are ultimately the most influential factor when it comes to determining success in life.

Figure 7: Public views on factors influencing an individual’s chances of being successful



Note: The figure shows the proportion of respondents who selected ‘very important’ or ‘fairly important’ when presented with the 4 factors shown and asked ‘How important, or not, would you say that each of the following typically is, in terms of influencing a person’s chances of being successful in life?’

Source: IPSOS survey of 5,276 UK Adults, online fieldwork conducted 21st -30th March 2025.

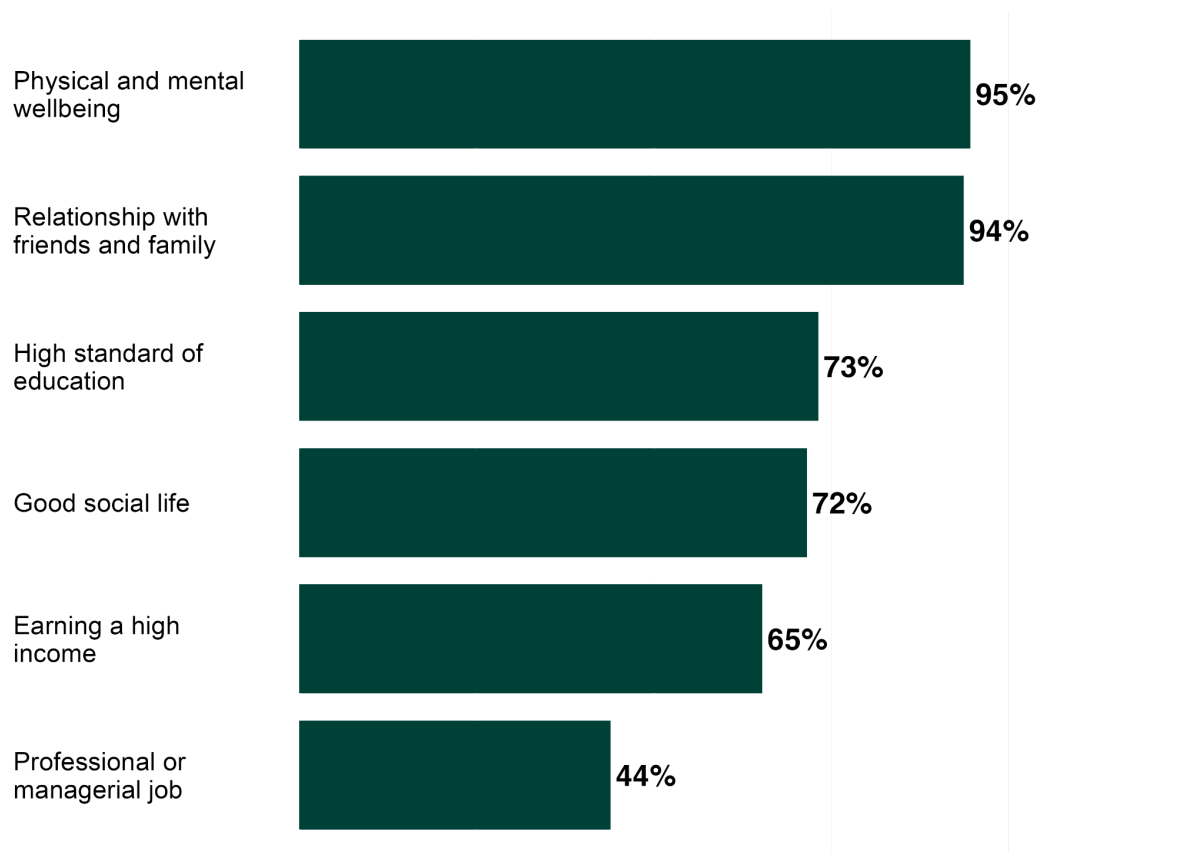
Chapter 3: What constitutes success and what do people value?

Wellbeing and social relationships outrank job status and income as important life values

We also wanted to explore the relative importance of social mobility outcomes when compared with other life values. To do this, we asked respondents about their priorities in life, their priorities for their children (for those that were parents or guardians) and what they felt indicated success. This allowed us to probe the relative importance of key social mobility outcomes. Across all of these areas, we found a consistent pattern: the traditional markers of both success and upward mobility are held in relatively lower esteem compared with other life values.

We asked respondents whether a series of options were important to them (see Figure 8). These included things relating to overall health and happiness (such as 'physical and mental wellbeing', 'having good relationships with friends and family' and 'having a good social life'). We also included key social mobility outcomes such as 'having a high standard of education', 'earning a high income' and 'having a professional or managerial job'. On the whole, respondents strongly favoured the options that related to overall health and happiness: of the 6 areas presented to them, the ones that respondents were most likely to rate as 'very' or 'fairly' important to them were 'physical and mental wellbeing' (95%) and 'having good relationships with friends and family' (94%). These were followed by 'having a high standard of education' (73%) and 'having a good social life' (72%). The 2 areas which were least likely to receive a rating of 'very' or 'fairly' important were 'earning a high income' (65%) and 'having a job that is regarded as professional or managerial' (44%). These findings strongly suggest that people's reported priorities in life are less aligned with key social mobility outcomes than might be expected, while health and relationships in particular are held in much higher esteem than income and career status.

Figure 8: Personal importance of various life aspects



Note: The figure shows the proportion of respondents who rated each area as either 'very' or 'fairly' important.

Source: IPSOS survey of 5,276 UK Adults, online fieldwork conducted 21st – 30th March 2025.

Evidence from the Workforce Institute supports this. The Institute found that 81% of employees would prioritise their mental health over a high-paying job, and that the majority would take a pay cut in favour of a job that supported their mental wellbeing.³⁵ Another study comparing 33 countries suggests that this finding is not uncommon: people with 'unlimited wants' (meaning that they desired as much money as they could possibly obtain) were identified in each of the participating countries, but they were always a minority.³⁶ This study also found that the UK had a lower proportion of people who expressed 'unlimited wants' than other countries.³⁷ This suggests that in their personal life, when thinking about possible trade-offs between happiness, wellbeing and material possessions, people tend to prioritise psychological, emotional and personal factors. This is why our respondents were most likely to prioritise good health and strong relationships with friends and family over anything else.

This type of thinking also manifests in what people think describes a 'better life' for someone (see Figure 9). More than half of respondents (56%) selected 'being in better health than their parents' from the 6 options presented. 'Having a higher level of wealth than that of their parents' and 'having a higher income than their parents' also featured

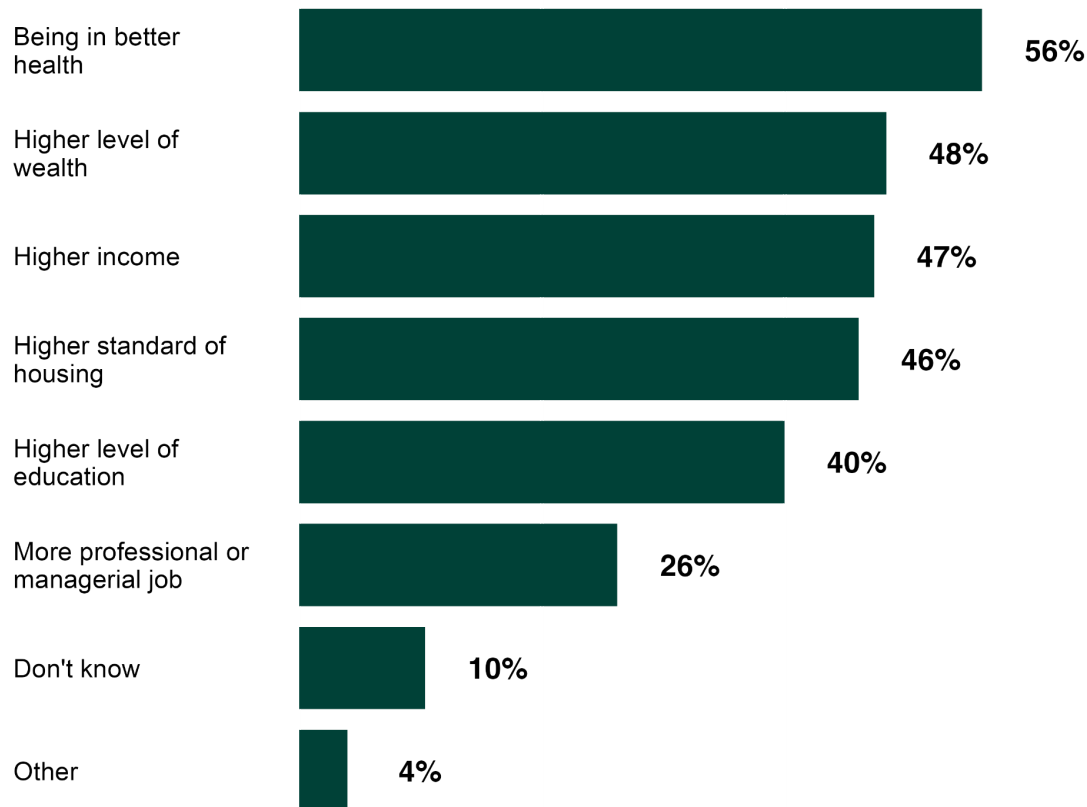
³⁵ UKG (2023), [Mental health at work: Managers and money](#)

³⁶ P.G. Bain and R. Bongiorno (2022), [Evidence from 33 countries challenges the assumption of unlimited wants](#)

³⁷ University of Bath (2022), [Who wants to be a billionaire? Most don't – which is good news for the planet](#)

highly (48% and 47% respectively). Evidence from the Sutton Trust adds to this: when prompted about what a better life for their children would look like, respondents mentioned factors such as better health, happiness, feeling safe in their community and better education.³⁸

Figure 9: Public views of what would be a 'better life' for their children



Note: Respondents were asked: 'Parents will often say that they want a 'better life' for their children. For you, which of the following describes what you think a 'better life' for someone would be?' Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages sum to more than 100%. Full answer option text is available in the appendix (Q20).

Source: IPSOS survey of 5,276 UK Adults, online fieldwork conducted 21st – 30th March 2025.

People's views of success in life also prioritise wellbeing over status

We also asked people what constitutes success, in life overall, in their career and in what they have the means to do. With these questions, we wanted to test whether people's views of success were aligned with what was important to them personally. Drawing on all of the information presented so far, we might speculate that while people prioritise things such as health, happiness and relationships, their view of 'success' might be more aligned to the key social mobility outcomes.

However, we find no evidence of this. In fact, people's view of success was highly aligned with what they considered to be important. For example, when considering factors for

³⁸ K. Latham (2024), [Social mobility and opportunity](#)

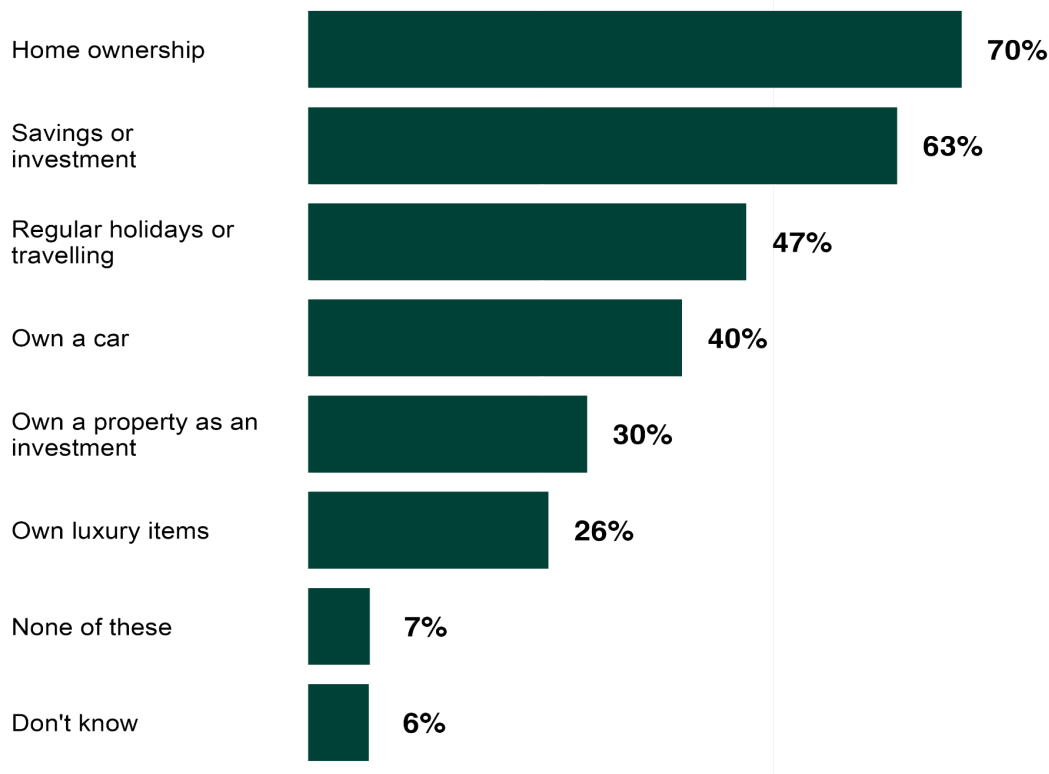
measuring a person's overall success, respondents predominantly highlighted 'personal wellbeing' (66%), 'financial security' (64%) and 'family and relationships' (55%), with smaller proportions selecting options such as 'having a high income' (31%) or 'having a professional or managerial job' (23%).

It is interesting that of all the 'economically motivated' options, 'financial security' was by far the most likely to be seen as an indicator of success (64%). It was selected by more respondents than 'having a high income' (31%) or 'having a professional or managerial job' (23%). This underscores another consistent theme in public attitudes towards success: people often value security and stability more than being materially better off than others or having outwardly recognised indicators of success. Qualitative research by the Social Mobility Commission reveals a similar way of thinking. For example, in recent focus groups in the North West of England, people typically viewed social mobility outcomes such as high income, wealth or having a good career as 'utilities' rather than aspirations in themselves.³⁹

Figure 10 provides further illustration of the emphasis that people place on financial stability. The chart plots the proportion of respondents who felt each option represented 'success in terms of what someone has the means to do'. The most frequently chosen indicator was 'own their own home' (70%), closely followed by 'have savings and investments' (63%). In stark contrast, 'own luxury items' ranked significantly lower, considered important by just 26% of respondents.

³⁹ SMC (2025), [Deep dives: a local perspective on social mobility](#).

Figure 10: Public views on success in terms of material means



Note: The figure shows the proportion of respondents who selected each item as describing 'success' in terms of what someone has the financial means to do. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages sum to more than 100%.

Source: IPSOS survey of 5,276 UK Adults, online fieldwork conducted 21st – 30th March 2025.

Perceptions of occupational success prioritise work–life balance, security and work that people feel passionate about

Occupational class is often used as a means of measuring social mobility.⁴⁰ Analytical classes of occupations such as the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC)⁴¹ place occupations in socio-economic categories: those that are more routine or manual are considered 'lower' occupations whereas managerial or professional occupations are considered 'higher'. A key measure of social mobility is whether someone is in a 'higher' class than their parents according to the NS-SEC classification.⁴² In our research, we wanted to drill down specifically into what constitutes occupational success for the public, and whether it aligns with the NS-SEC classification.

The results suggest that respondents have broader – or more subjective – definitions of

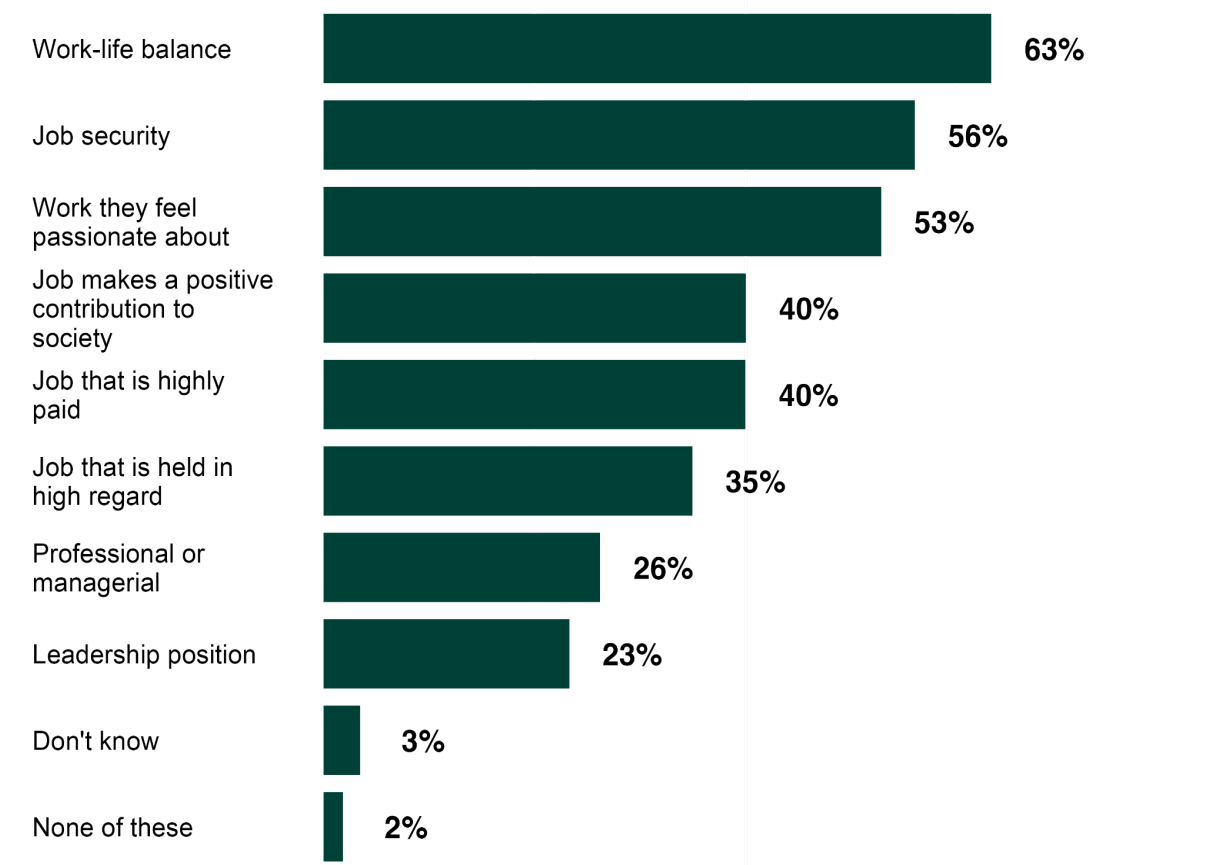
⁴⁰ For example see S. Stopforth and others (2024), [Do you like school? Social class, gender, ethnicity and pupils' educational enjoyment](#); Y. Yu (2025), [Where are inequalities produced? Comparing the variations of graduate employment between the UK's districts and universities](#); K. Metsis and others (2024), [OP126 Measuring health inequalities among young people: Utilising data from the UK censuses, prescribing information system, and systematic review of qualitative studies](#)

⁴¹ ONS, [The National Statistics Socio-economic classification](#)

⁴² For example, see SMC, [State of the Nation: Local to National. Mapping Opportunities for all](#) and [People and Places](#)

occupational success. As shown in Figure 11, the marker of occupational success most often selected from the 8 options presented to respondents was ‘having a good work–life balance’ (63%). This was followed closely by ‘having good job security’ (56%) and ‘doing work that they feel passionate about’ (53%). Other indicators chosen less frequently included ‘having a job that makes a positive contribution to society’ (40%) and ‘having a highly paid job’ (also 40%). ‘Working in a job that is well-regarded by others’ (35%), ‘having a job regarded as professional or managerial’ (26%) and ‘holding a leadership position’ (23%) were selected by a smaller proportion of respondents.

Figure 11: Personal importance of various job characteristics



Note: Respondents were asked ‘Which of the following would you say describes “success” in terms of someone’s occupation?’ and presented with the options above. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages sum to more than 100%. The full answer option wordings and question text can be found in the appendix (see Q16).

Source: IPSOS survey of 5,276 UK Adults, online fieldwork conducted 21st – 30th March 2025.

This shows that as well as favouring things such as health, happiness and relationships over career success or having a high income, people’s view of career success itself usually prioritises work–life balance, job security and feeling passionate about what they do. Interestingly, the least-selected options tended to be those that are most typically used to judge career success, such as being well paid, being in a professional or managerial role, being held in wide regard, or holding a leadership position.

Other research has also identified this trend. A survey by Deloitte found that today’s workers (particularly younger workers) are less likely to view a successful career purely in

terms of climbing the career ladder or becoming leaders in the workplace, and more likely to say that success involves having a career you are passionate about. In Deloitte's survey, 89% of Gen Z and 92% of Millennials said that a sense of purpose in their career was important for job satisfaction and wellbeing, and around 45% stated that they had left a role because it lacked purpose.⁴³

There are a range of potential explanations for this. Some have suggested that it might have been driven partly by the COVID-19 pandemic. Ajduković (2022) argued that people may have experienced specific 'realisations' that may have deterred younger workers from pursuing career goals – such as the value of time, the opportunity for better family relationships and individual wellbeing.⁴⁴ Others have suggested that witnessing 'burn-out' and economic insecurity among previous generations may have led Gen Z to value a work-life balance just as much as a high salary.⁴⁵

Whatever the drivers of these trends, they present a conundrum when it comes to our understanding of social mobility. Both occupation and income are often used as ways of measuring a person's level of mobility. In this respect, they are treated as endpoints in themselves. However, our findings suggest that neither occupation nor income are considered to be the main indicators of career success by respondents. Further to this, responses to our survey suggest that those who consider themselves working class are the least likely to prioritise key social mobility outcomes. They were the least likely to say that 'having a job regarded as professional or managerial' was important to them (the proportions rating this as 'very' or 'fairly' important were 38% working class, 52% middle class and 84% upper class).⁴⁶ They were also the least likely to say 'having a highly paid job' was important to them (64% working class, 70% middle class, 82% upper class) and, as established in Chapter 2, the least likely to say that climbing the social ladder was personally important to them.

⁴³ Deloitte (2025), [2025 Gen Z and Millennial survey: Growth and the pursuit of money, meaning, and well-being](#)

⁴⁴ M. Ajduković and others (2022), [Is there anything good about the COVID-19 pandemic? Perceptions of the positive consequences at the beginning of the pandemic](#)

⁴⁵ A. Francis (2022), [Gen Z: The workers who want it all](#); EY (2022), [How will success be defined in the future?](#)

⁴⁶ Base sizes of class subgroups are as follows: working class, n = 2,414; middle class, n = 2,250; upper class, n = 199

Chapter 4: Best routes for everyone to succeed

People see apprenticeships as providing opportunity for disadvantaged young people

Beyond understanding what people aspire to, our research also focused on the public's view of the most effective mechanisms for providing greater opportunities for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. A clear and consistent message emerges from our findings: people display limited enthusiasm for the role of university, usually favouring technical routes like apprenticeships.

We asked respondents whether they felt that investment in different areas would improve opportunities for people to succeed, regardless of their background (see Figure 12). People were most likely to say that investment in 'apprenticeships' (83%), 'schools' and 'job creation' (both 82%), and 'housing' (76%) would achieve this 'to a great extent' or 'to some extent'. The options least likely to be rated as improving opportunities were 'universities' and 'childcare centres' (67% respectively), although – as might be expected – households with children aged under 18 (n = 1,693) were more likely to say 'childcare centres' (74%) than those without children (64%, n = 3,583).

Figure 12: Public views on increased investment improving opportunities for success



Note: The figure shows the proportion of respondents who felt that increasing investment in each area would improve opportunities for people to succeed, regardless of their background. Responses are grouped by level of agreement: 'to a great extent' and 'to some extent', and 'hardly at all' and 'not at all'.

Source: IPSOS survey of 5,276 UK Adults, online fieldwork conducted 21st – 30th March 2025.

We also asked respondents to identify the single thing that would give someone from a less advantaged background the best possible chance to earn a high income. Of the 5 options presented, the most frequently selected was 'going into on-the-job training

through an apprenticeship' (39%). The proportion of people who selected this was more than twice as large as the proportion selecting the next most popular options, 'going into higher education to obtain an academic degree' and 'going into higher education to obtain technical or vocational qualifications' (both 16%). The least popular options were 'starting their own business' and 'going straight into employment (excluding apprenticeships)', both at 9%.

The answers to both of these questions strongly suggest that the public sees apprenticeships as a more effective way to increase opportunities, at both the individual and the collective level, than universities. This is broadly in line with wider polling data: a recent Ipsos poll found that only around half of respondents (49%) thought it would be 'worth it' for the young people they knew to go to university and 35% thought 'too many' people go to university in the UK.⁴⁷

People cited several reasons for perceiving university as less appealing, including high fees (51%), student debt (51%), high living expenses (43%) and not needing to attend university to get a good job (40%).⁴⁸ Empirical evidence suggests that these concerns are not unfounded. Many commentators have pointed to the issue of 'over-supply' or 'under-utilisation' of graduates in the UK labour market.⁴⁹ For many, while there is a financial return in obtaining a degree, it is decreasing compared with previous generations, as evidenced by the decline in the graduate pay premium⁵⁰ and the greater proportion of those with degrees in non-graduate roles.⁵¹

In contrast, the public tends to have more positive attitudes about the role of apprenticeships. According to polling from 2023, 44% of people in the UK think apprenticeships offer young people better job prospects and preparation for the workplace than university, while just 11% think the opposite.⁵² Other research has found that people tend to see multiple benefits to undertaking apprenticeships, including 'preparing people for the world of work' (83%), 'providing a valuable qualification' (78%), 'providing a worthwhile alternative to university' (77%) and 'being viewed positively by employers' (70%).⁵³

But while people have more favourable views of apprenticeships than university, there appears to be a disconnect between attitudes and behaviour. In 2023, 554,465 students were accepted through UCAS (the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) to start an undergraduate course in the 2023 cycle,⁵⁴ significantly higher than the number of apprenticeships that started in the same year (339,580).⁵⁵ Furthermore, the number of young people considered to be 'disadvantaged' going to university has increased in recent

⁴⁷ G. Skinner and others (2024), [Three in four Britons concerned that people from poorer backgrounds are put off university because of the cost](#)

⁴⁸ G. Skinner and others (2024), [Three in four Britons concerned that people from poorer backgrounds are put off university because of the cost](#)

⁴⁹ For example, see Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2022), [What is the scale and impact of graduate overqualification in the UK?](#); Organisation for Economic Development and Co-operation (2024), [Do adults have the skills they need to thrive in a changing world? Survey of adult skills](#); M. Broome and others (2023), [An intergenerational audit for the UK: 2023](#)

⁵⁰ P. Wiltshire (2024), [The fall in graduate salaries shows the argument for mass entry to higher education has failed](#)

⁵¹ Broome and others, (2023) [An intergenerational audit for the UK](#)

⁵² Multiverse (2023), [The case for apprenticeships in 2023](#)

⁵³ R. Glaister (2024), [Most Britons are positive about apprenticeships and the opportunities that they provide](#)

⁵⁴ Universities UK (2025), [Higher education in numbers](#)

⁵⁵ A. Murray (2025), [Apprenticeship statistics](#)

years.⁵⁶

Some of this contradiction can be explained by the fact that young people, who make up the majority of university students and apprentices, are slightly less enthusiastic about apprenticeships than older people⁵⁷ and slightly more positive about universities.⁵⁸ We found evidence of this in our own survey: 90% of those aged 65+ (n = 1,237) said that investing in apprenticeships would improve opportunities for all to succeed regardless of their background (to either 'some' or 'a great' extent), compared with 77% of those aged 18 to 24 (n = 495). Meanwhile, 63% of those aged 65+ said the same for universities, compared with 74% of those aged 18 to 24. Similarly, around half (49%) of those aged 65+ chose 'going into on-the-job training through an apprenticeship' as the thing that would give someone from a less advantaged background the best chance of going on to earn a high income, compared with 33% of 18- to 24-year-olds. Meanwhile, just 13% of those aged 65+ selected 'going into higher education to obtain an academic degree', compared with 20% of those aged 18 to 24.

⁵⁶ UCAS (2024), [Number of disadvantaged students getting a place at university hits record high](#).

⁵⁷ R. Glaister (2024), [Most Britons are positive about apprenticeships and the opportunities that they provide](#)

⁵⁸ Kings College London (2023), [Still worth it? Attitudes to university education among graduates, parents and the public](#)

Conclusion

This report provides important insights into how people view social mobility, and how it relates to broader concepts of equality, opportunity and success. Respondents exhibited social pessimism, perceiving social mobility as uncommon and becoming more difficult over time. In contrast, they were more optimistic about their own social mobility, with many reporting being better off than their parents in areas such as education, standard of living and income. Despite these improvements, however, people tended to consider themselves as being in the same class as their parents. This ‘stickiness’ of class identity suggests that people do not view class as a socio-economic concept but as something rooted in personal identity and cultural origins.

Respondents viewed inequality in the UK as of less concern than issues such as inflation, the economy and the NHS, despite perceiving the gap between classes as being large. The perception of large class gaps was higher for people from ethnic minorities, those with children, disabled people, women and young adults. This suggests that perceptions of inequality are influenced by personal characteristics rather than class, and that working-class people do not relate to definitions of inequality. Indeed, those who identified as working class were no more likely to perceive large class gaps than the whole sample, and they were the social class group least likely to be concerned about inequality.

Success in life was reflected in wider priorities than simply social class for our respondents, with hard work and personal characteristics seen as the primary drivers. Respondents identified physical and mental wellbeing and relationships with family and friends as most important to them, while traditional social mobility metrics such as education, high income and a professional job were deemed less important. Personal characteristics were seen as the most important factor in influencing someone’s success in life, followed by family background and the area where someone grew up.

While traditional social mobility policies have focused on people from lower socio-economic backgrounds getting into elite occupations, this research indicates a contrasting view of how people define success. Rather than occupational and class mobility, respondents aspired for their children to have better health, wealth and housing, and they prioritised work–life balance, job security and enjoyment above status. Apprenticeships, schools, job creation and housing were viewed as the most important investment priorities to support success.

Taken together, these findings indicate that success within social mobility can come from smaller intergenerational and intra-generational improvements in economic and social stability, rather than solely from an upward movement in objective social class. The perception that family background and the area where someone grew up influences social class is enduring and, to a degree, bound up in people’s identities. For this reason, a place-based approach to improving education, housing and employment opportunities provides a credible route to addressing geographical disparities and enabling more people to access a broader concept of social mobility success.

Appendix: Survey research – technical note

For the Social Mobility Commission, Ipsos interviewed a representative quota sample of 5,276 adults aged 18+ in the United Kingdom using its online i:omnibus between 21 and 30 March 2025. The sample obtained is representative of the population with quotas on age, gender, region and working status. Regional sample boosts were applied to ensure minimum sample sizes in each UK nation, with the final sample containing 4,049 respondents in England, 500 respondents in Wales, 558 respondents in Scotland and 169 respondents in Northern Ireland. The data was weighted to the known offline population proportions for age, working status and social grade within gender, and for government office region and education, to reflect the adult population of the United Kingdom.

Full responses to the questions in this survey can be viewed at:
<https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/perceptions-social-mobility-uk>

Additional information on full question wordings

Full question text is shown here for questions that are reported on in the main body of this report in instances where the reporting truncates or paraphrases question or answer option wordings.

Q3

To what extent, if at all, would you say that each of the following indicate that someone is in a higher social class (e.g., middle rather than working, upper rather than middle, etc.) than that of their parents?

STATEMENTS TO RATE (PRESENTED IN RANDOM ORDER)

1. Having a job regarded as more professional/managerial than that of their parents
2. Having a higher income than their parents had
3. Having a higher level of education (e.g., A-levels, degree, postgraduate qualifications, etc.) than their parents
4. Having a higher level of wealth (i.e., assets, property, savings, investments, etc.) than their parents had
5. Having more ability to be able to buy a home than their parents had

ANSWER OPTIONS TO USE TO RATE STATEMENTS (1–4 SHOWN TO c.50% OF SAMPLE IN REVERSE ORDER)

1. To a great extent
2. To some extent
3. Hardly at all
4. Not at all
5. Don't know

Q4

Thinking about possible issues in UK society ...

How concerned, or not, are you about each of the following?

PROGRESSIVE GRID

PRESENTED IN RANDOM ORDER

1. Climate change (also called global warming)
2. The UK economy
3. Inflation/prices
4. The NHS
5. Housing
6. Inequality
7. Education & schools
8. Law & order

COLUMNS – FORWARD/REVERSE 1–4

1. Very concerned
2. Fairly concerned
3. Not very concerned
4. Not at all concerned
5. Don't know

Q10

Thinking about each of the following areas, would you say that you are personally **better off**, **worse off**, or **about the same** compared to how it was for your parent(s) while you were growing up (i.e., from when you were born until you turned 18)?

I am ...

PROGRESSIVE GRID

ROWS, PRESENTED IN RANDOM ORDER

1. Your career/job
2. Your level of education
3. Your income level
4. Your level of wealth (e.g., assets, savings, etc.)
5. Your ability to buy a home
6. Your overall standard of living

SINGLE CODE, FORWARD/REVERSE CODES 1–5

1. Much better off
2. Slightly better off
3. About the same
4. Slightly worse off
5. Much worse off
6. Not applicable
7. Don't know
8. Prefer not to answer

Q16

Thinking about success in terms of **occupations**.

Which of the following would you say describes 'success' in terms of someone's occupation?

Please select all that apply.

MULTI CODE 1–8, RANDOMISE 1–8

1. Having a highly paid job

2. Having a job regarded as professional/managerial
3. Doing work that they feel passionate about
4. Having a good work-life balance
5. Having good job security
6. Holding a leadership position
7. Working in a job that is well-regarded by others
8. Having a job that makes a positive contribution to society
9. None of these
10. Don't know

Q20

Parents will often say that they want a 'better life' for their children. For you, which of the following describes what you think a 'better life' for someone would be?

Please select all that apply.

MULTI CODE 1-7, RANDOMISE 1-6

1. Having a higher income than their parents (i.e., in today's money)
2. Having a job regarded as more professional/managerial than that of their parents
3. Having a higher level of education than their parents
4. Having a higher level of wealth (e.g., assets, savings, etc.) than that of their parents
5. Having a higher standard of housing than their parents
6. Being in better health than their parents
7. Other
8. Don't know



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