

Birbalsingh launches ambitious framework to chart steps to success

The Social Mobility Commission has drawn up a new index, which will monitor actual mobility for the first time by comparing someone's circumstances at birth with their outcomes in their thirties and fifties. The index provides a richer, systematic and more consistent view of how people are progressing at school, at work and financially compared with their parents and their peers.

The [State of the Nation 2022 – A fresh approach to social mobility](#) includes findings from the first phase and shows a mixed picture with both cause for celebration and areas of concern. There are, for example, clear signs that some educational attainment gaps are closing between disadvantaged and advantaged children, particularly at key stages 2 and 4 (ages 11 and 16). However, the analysis in the 150-page report also shows that two-thirds of disadvantaged pupils and more than a third of all other pupils fail to achieve a good pass in English and Maths at GCSE.

More measurements will be added next year including a regional breakdown and data on other characteristics such as sex, ethnicity and disability. This will allow the SMC to analyse the effects of personal characteristics and geographical location on where people end up in terms of the job they do, and how much they earn – invaluable in helping early thinking about policy solutions.

Katharine Birbalsingh, SMC chair, and her deputy, Alun Francis, want any future policy on social mobility to be firmly based on solid evidence. “We want to get at the reasons why social mobility happens, when it happens, and why some people buck the trend,” says Birbalsingh.

“That is why we want to see government, both local and national, placing social mobility at the heart of levelling up by using the findings from our index to inform and evaluate success, and to make sure that their benefits are reaching those who need them most.”

The Commission's aim is consistency over time so that data can be compared annually – and at longer intervals of 5 or 10 years – to show trends in social mobility. The new metrics were carefully selected with input from experts in economics, sociology and education as well as other stakeholders in government, business and the charity sector.

“The new Social Mobility Index draws on leading international research to provide a game-changing framework for monitoring and understanding how young people's chances of mobility are evolving,” said Anthony Heath, Emeritus Professor of Sociology at Oxford University, who helped develop the index. “It will provide early signs of barriers that need to be tackled so that we can move towards an equal playing field for all.”

Until now there has been more emphasis on the factors which can enable or

hinder social mobility, (referred to in the report as 'drivers') such as education and work opportunities for young people. Birbalsingh and Francis argue there has been much less data on actual outcomes in later life such as what occupation someone is in, where they live and what they earn in middle age compared with their parents.

But they point out there are also other important areas that impact on social mobility which are less explored – diversity of talent, family values and culture. They are hard to measure so they are often not given sufficient weight, says Birbalsingh. "Where we can, we want to find ways to measure them."

Public opinion also matters to the Commission. "We plan to undertake research to get a better understanding of what real people actually think about social mobility, so we can ensure the work of the Commission is aligned to their needs and wants," says Birbalsingh.

The State of the Nation also sets out the key priorities which the Commission intends to focus on over the next few years. These include:

Education – covering early years, schools and universities, but also other routes to work such as further education and apprenticeships. The SMC is also keen to understand more about how it can help families and parents.

Employment – The SMC will go beyond the large professional firms in the City, many of whom already have plans for more diverse workforces, to look at how small businesses of all types can generate opportunity. It will also look at the impact that certain qualifications – particularly degrees and technical qualifications – can have on social mobility.

Enterprise and the economy – The Commission will look at the creation of opportunities, their geographical spread and the role of enterprise in sometimes challenging social mobility hierarchies – all central to the Government's levelling up agenda. It will focus on local neighbourhoods where educational and economic opportunities are poor across generations.

The Commission has made the new index one of its first priorities – to better inform policy advice. But it recognises that there are still many gaps in the data that Whitehall holds and a lack of join-up across Departments. It argues that without better data, policy advice often has to rely on elaborate guesswork.

"The government's Equality Data Programme is a good start, but we believe there are areas where government can go even further," says Birbalsingh. "For example, in the UK, the tax records of parents and children aren't linked, as they are in other countries like the USA, making measurement of income mobility much more difficult." The SMC will outline more specific recommendations for clearer and more joined-up data in the near future.

Other findings from the report:

- There are still more people moving upward, to a higher occupational level than their parents, than people moving downward. But this surplus

is smaller than before. This is largely because the professional class has grown in the last 70 years so there are more people already starting at the top, where moving further upwards is not possible.

- The relative chances of people from different occupational backgrounds reaching higher-level jobs have not worsened over the decades, and may even have improved.
- The gap in educational performance between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children aged 11 was around 13% smaller in 2019 than in 2011. We will need to monitor how the impact of Covid-19 might affect this in future years.
- However, significant gaps remain. In the 2020 to 2021 academic year, only 31.7% of disadvantaged pupils achieved a grade 5 or above in GCSE English and Maths compared with 59.2% of all other pupils. This also means that two-thirds of disadvantaged pupils and more than a third of all other pupils fail to achieve a strong pass in both English and Maths at GCSE.
- The gaps between professional and working-class backgrounds for both university participation and degree attainment have also narrowed between 2014 and 2021.
- The rate of young people from working-class backgrounds not in employment, education or training (NEET) has decreased since 2014 and was the lowest reported on record in 2021 at 12.4%. The gap between class backgrounds has also narrowed.
- The gap in current occupational levels has also narrowed. In 2014, men aged 25 to 29 from a professional background were 1.9 times more likely to be in a professional job than men from a working-class background. By 2021, this dropped to 1.6 times more likely. For women, the drop was from 2.3 times more likely to 1.6 times more likely.

What is the Social Mobility Index?

'Social mobility' refers to the link between our starting point in life, and where we end up. The new Index will be able to measure this, in terms of occupation, income, education and other outcomes. We'll be able to compare this across the UK by geographical regions, sex, ethnicity, disability.

- **Drivers** – conditions that make social mobility easier, such as the availability of good education and work opportunities for young people. Drivers tell us about nationwide background conditions that can affect social mobility.
- **Early life (intermediate) outcomes** – the progress that people make from their start point in life to where they are in their 20s and 30s, such as in employment, or educational attainment at 16. This is broken down by people's socio-economic background.
- **Mobility outcomes** – progress to a later end point in life, such as employment or income when people are in their 50s. We have only included a few illustrative measures of mobility outcomes this year, but will add more in future.

The new index builds on the Commission's earlier index which introduced the idea of social mobility 'cold' and 'hot' spots and, with next year's regional analysis, will give those working on social mobility even richer insights to

inform their work. At the time of its publication, the Commission itself acknowledged that by necessity the old index was imperfect and looked more at measures of disadvantage than social mobility outcomes.

About the Social Mobility 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:

Katharine Birbalsingh CBE is the Chair of the Social Mobility Commission and Headmistress and co-founder of Michaela Community School in Wembley, London.

Alun Francis OBE is the Deputy Chair of the Social Mobility Commission and Principal and Chief Executive of Oldham College since 2010.

The Chair and Deputy Chair will both be available for broadcast and radio interviews.

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