

Birbalsingh to be appointed as chair of Social Mobility Commission

- Michaela Community School Headmistress, Katharine Birbalsingh, preferred candidate for role of Chair of the Social Mobility Commission
- Chief Executive of Oldham College, Alun Francis, to be named deputy with recruitment underway for a range of new Commissioners
- Priorities will be addressing regional disparities, improving evidence base and holding government to account

The appointment of Ms Birbalsingh will see a renewed focus from the Commission on areas such as regional disparities, employment, education and enterprise.

Ms Birbalsingh brings a wealth of experience to the role from the UK's education sector as the founder and headmistress of Michaela Community School, a free school which was established in London in 2014. The success of Michaela, including its positive impact on ethnic minority children and the track record it has on social mobility, were all part of the reason that Ms Birbalsingh was considered the best candidate for the role.

In the 2020 Queen's Birthday Honours Ms Birbalsingh was appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) for services to education.

Minister for Women and Equalities, Liz Truss, said:

"This country has incredible potential and to unleash it we must harness the talent of all our people, regardless of background or where they live. I want Katharine to focus on education, enterprise and employment so we can level-up opportunity across Britain and give everyone the chance to succeed.

"By expecting high standards and not indulging the soft bigotry of low expectations she is producing amazing results at Michaela school and giving children the best chance in life. She will bring that same attitude to the Commission and be a loud champion of equality of opportunity.

"I am focused on closing the education gap, employment gap and enterprise gap across Britain and am working closely with Cabinet colleagues to do that. Our equality work will address the worries that keep people up at night – like having a good job and getting their child a good education – not tokenistic issues divorced from their everyday concerns."

Katharine Birbalsingh CBE, Headmistress of Michaela High School, said:

"As we recover from the pandemic, this is the moment to develop a culture in our society which provides an equal chance for all.

"From education, to early years in the home and onto the world of work, improving social mobility is more vital than ever, and I look forward to taking up this important role.

“My immediate priorities will include developing a sound evidence base from which change can flow. On the one hand, I want to inspire real action that will encourage people to seize the opportunities available to them, and on the other, I want to ensure that the government and other public bodies are delivering on their commitments to providing such opportunities, so that we really can ‘level up’ every region of the UK.”

Alongside the appointment of Ms Birbalsingh, the Minister for Women & Equalities’ is also announcing her intention to appoint Alun Francis as a Commissioner and the Deputy Chair of the SMC. Mr Francis is currently the Principal and Chief Executive of Oldham College where he has overseen its transition into a focal point for the local community. Prior to that he served as Director of Transforming Learning, leading Oldham Council’s Building Schools for the Future Programme from 2007-2010.

Alun Francis, Principal & Chief Executive of Oldham College, said:

“We have a unique opportunity to reshape social mobility policy, so that it retains a focus on promoting merit and high achievement, but delivers a wider variety of opportunities, for a wider variety of people, in a wider variety of places.

“Our remit will cover education, employment and enterprise and I am looking forward to working with Katharine and the Social Mobility Commission to champion this agenda. We bring different experiences and skills, but we have a common purpose and are determined to help bring real benefits to people and places across the country.”

The new leadership team of the SMC will make the case for social mobility within and outside of government, oversee work to strengthen the evidence base upon which policy decisions are made and improve public understanding of how opportunity is created and made accessible to all.

Before taking up the new role Ms Birbalsingh will give evidence at a pre-appointment scrutiny session of the Women and Equalities Select Committee; it is anticipated that this will take place in the coming weeks.

The selection of a new Chair will be followed by a public appointments campaign to appoint new Commissioners later in the autumn. The campaign will ensure that there is a strong functioning board as the tenures of all current Commissioners end in late October.