Bucking the trend: a fresh approach to social mobility

It is a great privilege to be here, as Chair of the Social Mobility Commission with Alun Francis, my Deputy Chair, who is a principal of an FE college in Oldham.

We want to chart a new course for the Commission, as it reports on the state of social mobility in this country.

We are very aware that this is a difficult time to be taking over. We have had a pandemic, followed by a European war and a cost of living crisis.

There were already many challenges to deal with before. It will be even harder now. This makes it all the more important that we try to approach the challenge of improving social mobility with clarity, and that we make recommendations that are going to make a difference.

We want to bring a fresh approach and some new questions.

“What can we do for those young people and adults who have not followed the higher education pathway, but still need a route to high skills and good occupational opportunities?

“What more should be done about those at the very bottom – particularly those with low levels of basic literacy and numeracy – who cannot take advantage of higher learning and are unable to access higher paid work?

“What to do about the geographical aspects of this – both in terms of local neighbourhoods where, for a whole variety of reasons, educational and economic outcomes and opportunities appear to be poor, across generations;

We want to move away from the notion that social mobility should just be about the “long” upward mobility from the bottom into the top, i.e. the person who is born into a family in social housing and becomes an accountant, banker or big CEO.

There is nothing wrong with this view of social mobility, but it is not enough. We want to promote a broader view of social mobility, for a wider range of people, who want to improve their lives, sometimes in smaller steps.

So this means looking at how to improve opportunities for those at the bottom – not just by making elite pathways for a few – but by thinking about those who would otherwise be left behind – those who either did not want to, or could not “leave to achieve”.

This means thinking differently and collecting and using data differently,

It means being clearer about where mobility is working well – and being clearer about the various factors which help to make this happen.

It also means being clearer about obstacles which hold people back – and how they can be overcome.

Today, I would like to introduce you to some of the thinking that will inform this fresh approach.

We are going to move away from the popular narrative about social mobility – which we refer to as the "Dick Whittington model".

In this model, the focus is on "big leap" upward mobility, from bottom to top in one generation – breaking from the circumstances you are born into to achieve (in various combinations) fame, fortune and occupational status.

For the folklore version of Dick Whittington there was a definite "levelling up" aspect to his mobility. He grew up in Lancashire but had to leave for London to make his dreams come true.

If he was born in Lancashire today, his route to an elite profession might still take him along this same geographical route – from the north to London. Instead of a picnic and a cat, he would now need to take with him some brilliant educational credentials – and then find his way through the door of an elite professional company – to make his way in life.

Much social mobility work has been dominated by trying to make this "Dick Whittington model" fairer.

Attention is then focussed on how to make sure opportunities are shared equally.

This is usually done by identifying the gaps in opportunity between the disadvantaged and everyone else. Where disparities or gaps can be found between these two groups, they are presented as evidence of inequalities of opportunity and it is recommended that policy should focus on closing the gaps – so that the opportunities in managerial and professional jobs for both groups are more equal.

Frequently – but not always – this approach is accompanied by the view that social mobility is in decline. This is usually inferred from data relating to inequality. If inequality is increasing – or simply not decreasing – the argument goes: then opportunity is not fair, so social mobility will be in decline.

You may be familiar with the metaphor of the ladder. The ladder represents opportunity for upward mobility – stepping from one rung to another. But if the rungs are further apart, because of growing inequality, where the richest person is further and further away from the poorest person, then the challenge of moving from one rung to another is harder.

This often leads to a fairly pessimistic and dismal set of conclusions about the capacity of people to overcome the circumstances into which they are born.

There is no consensus about what measures work well – and quite a lot of

confusion about what we are actually measuring. Most of the time, policy debates appear to be talking about social mobility, but are using evidence which is about inequality.

Inequality is clearly an important theme in social mobility, and inequality does shape and affect opportunity. But inequality and social mobility are not the same thing, and we should be careful not to conflate them.

- We could reduce inequality, for example, without improving social mobility: we could just reduce the gap between the top and the bottom, without improving the movement in between.

- Similarly, we could improve social mobility without reducing inequality – by moving a higher percentage of people from the bottom to the top, but allowing the gap between the two to increase.

We need to collect the evidence and look at it carefully before we come to any conclusions.

If we don't, we can quickly end up in a very dismal place, with a slightly caricatured binary view of society divided into two groups:

- A group at the bottom which has very little chance of improving their situation, because it cannot overcome the inequality which separates it from everyone else – no matter what measures may be put in place to support their social mobility.

- Another group – which includes everyone not in the bottom group – whose achievements and accomplishments are not attributed to their efforts, but are a by-product of their relative levels of privilege.

Neither group has any agency. Everyone is quite literally a prisoner of the circumstances into which they were born.

Are things really this bad? Is it really so impossible for people to succeed despite their circumstances, no matter what interventions and support we provide?

What actually is going on?

Despite the popular narrative, it's not true that social mobility is getting worse on all counts. In reality the picture is complex. On some measures it is doing better than others, and on some – such as occupational mobility – it has been fairly stable for decades

There have been big changes in the economy, as the service industry has grown. In the latter part of the twentieth century, the occupational structure shifted considerably – creating more white-collar than blue-collar

jobs. So more people were able to move “up” the occupational hierarchy compared to their parents.

But more recently, while we are still generating professional and managerial jobs, the rate has slowed. There are fewer people born into families who have routine and manual occupations, and more born into families with professional and managerial jobs. There is competition from those wishing to “move up” at the same time as more people being “at risk” of moving down. This is often referred to as the problem of “less room at the top”, which makes it look like social mobility is worsening when it might not be.

Of course, occupational mobility is only one aspect. There is less consensus about mobility in income and in other things like housing or wealth.

Given this evidence, we need to stop presenting social mobility in this way. For some people it feeds the view that the country is less open to talent than it has been in the past. There are clearly areas where we need to improve, but there are also areas where we are doing relatively well. As usual, the truth is more complex.

Those born nearer to the top have advantages over those born nearer to the bottom. But we need to be careful about moving from this general observation to the conclusion that nobody has agency, or that the gaps and disparities between the “disadvantaged” and everyone else are set in stone.

We need a more analytical approach if we want to understand what is going on.

Some of the evidence for this will be presented in The State of the Nation report for 2022, which the Commission team is currently working on. This is our annual report to parliament on the overall picture of social mobility.

A big concern in the Report is the need for clearer definitions and measurements of social mobility, and for the first time, we will be including the best scientific measures of actual social mobility outcomes, looking at the same person’s starting and ending point. We will also be revisiting the conditions that help or hinder social mobility and tracking outcomes in early adulthood.

The aim is to present a more nuanced picture, from which we can be more focused in our analysis and understanding of what works well and what does not.

What we can say at this point is that the picture is more encouraging than people have come to expect. There are some significant improvements and – very often – a narrowing of gaps between disadvantaged groups and everyone else.

This is important because structural issues do shape opportunities. But as I’ve said, we should be considering a wider range of explanations, not just inequality alone.

This is because human beings may be born into circumstances, not of their own choosing, but they also retain agency.

So it is important to pay attention to some of the issues that social mobility policy is not always comfortable talking about.

For example:

- Diversity of talent – This is often referred to in passing, but rarely analysed in detail. And when it is mentioned, the focus is nearly always on cognitive ability. This is hugely important, but other forms of talent and ability can be ignored – perhaps because society tends to mainly respect the type of cognitive ability that will secure a lucrative professional job. Instead, we believe that other talents and other jobs should be valued too.
- Families are frequently mentioned in terms of social mobility, but mainly as vehicles for passing on privilege. It is widely acknowledged by experts in the field, that in terms of shaping opportunity for children, families play a bigger role than any other institution. We are keen to spend more time talking about families, and parenting, and the central role these have in shaping outcomes.
- Culture and values on a broader level also need to feature more strongly. These are sometimes acknowledged, but are probably not given sufficient weight – in terms of their positive and negative implications for social mobility. I addressed issues of culture in the recent documentary about our school, Michaela. We should not underestimate the impact of culture and values

It is also important to think in a more nuanced way about the distribution of opportunity.

Part of the problem may be to do with definitions and data. We live in a world where we can get lots of data and that's a good thing. But we also have to be thoughtful about how we use and interpret it.

Take for example, the way we think about occupational mobility. In the usual model that the Government uses for classifying occupations, there are eight categories. These are often collapsed into just three. But the number of categories we use does a lot to determine whether we think social mobility is high or low. The more categories we have, the more movement we will find. The fewer categories we have, the more we lose focus on the shorter mobilities between them.

When it comes to looking at inequality, things can be equally simplistic. Much of the research drops into a model which separates the disadvantaged on one side and everyone else on the other. The definitions of "disadvantage" may differ, depending on whether occupation, income, free school meals, or the index of multiple deprivation are used. Furthermore, they obscure differences between people in the same category, as well as people who move between categories and don't rigidly fit into either. There is a huge amount of research into the dynamics of poverty – who moves in and out temporarily, who gets "stuck", and what circumstances shape this. So we should not treat "the disadvantaged" as all being the same.

Similarly, there is a problem with the way "everyone else" is grouped

together. Any model which places the state-educated children of one parent police officers, or primary school teachers or local government officers from Hartlepool into the same category as the elite public school educated children of rock stars from Notting Hill and the CEOs of the FTSE top 100 companies, and labels them all as “non-disadvantaged” – is probably not telling us as much as we need to know.

This however, is exactly what quite a lot of social mobility research does. It reduces social mobility to a contest between these two groups. This then stops us from thinking about social mobility for everyone.

It can end up improving the condition of a small number, without changing the opportunities for everyone else.

We need to recognise that social mobility has many forms, and one size does not fit all.

Consider this:

If a child of parents who were long-term unemployed, or who never worked, gets a job in their local area, isn’t that a success worth celebrating? Would we really want to say that it doesn’t count as mobility, simply because they’re not an accountant or lawyer?

I mean do we all want to be lawyers? I certainly don’t want to be a lawyer. I don’t suspect many of you do. I do hope we don’t have any lawyers in the room.

Surely not – yet much analysis of social mobility wouldn’t even notice that it had happened.

We need to know a lot more about what people think about social mobility. Research of this kind will challenge us all to think about the wider range of factors which influence ambition and aspiration.

We want to think about the opportunities we create for those who will not access the elite pathway – who this model often “leaves behind”.

We have, over the last generation, had too much focus on a one size fits all model for social mobility, which tends to consider higher education expansion as the key means of improving opportunity.

While many have benefited from this, and it’s good that some have, it is time to consider those who have not. And this brings me back to the questions I posed at the start:

- What to do for those young people and adults who have not followed the higher education pathway, but still need a route to high skills and good occupational opportunities?
- What more should be done about those at the very bottom – particularly those with low levels of basic literacy and numeracy?
- What to do about the geographical aspects of this – local opportunities and outcomes?

All of these issues and themes directly link to the challenge of “Levelling Up”.

In the Dick Whittington view, the best option is to promote a leave to achieve approach. But the unforeseen consequence of this is to make things worse for the people and places they are leaving behind.

Social mobility policy needs to mean something for those people and those places – and for us, the link between social mobility policy and Levelling Up Missions and Targets in the government’s White Paper is critical.

They are not identical, but the overlap is considerable. The whole point of levelling up should be to create more opportunity for more people in more places – and a refocussed social mobility policy can be a powerful tool for both directing these efforts, measuring them, and holding stakeholders to account for delivering them.

So, where then does this leave us?

We will be focussing on three interconnected themes:

- Education – which includes early years, schools and universities, but also other routes such as further education and apprenticeships – and as we have said, we will be keen to understand more about how we can help families and parents.
- Employment – a lot will focus on employers, but not just large professional firms. We will also look at the role of smaller enterprises in generating opportunity, and at how the value of qualifications – particularly degrees and technical qualifications – is shaped by wider issues in the labour market, including levels of regulation.
- Enterprise and the economy – and we are interested in the creation of opportunities, their geographical spread, and the role of enterprise in sometimes consolidating and sometimes disrupting traditional social mobility hierarchies. In the era of “levelling up” these themes need to have much more attention because they are central to ensuring better opportunities are available.

But we will also be prepared to look at these differently to try and capture the wider range of factors which help or hinder opportunity.

We want to look at a wider range of social mobility journeys, so that policy is not solely focussed on the success of a small number.

We want to develop a strong evidence base of what works, and an equally sharp focus on obstacles to opportunity.

In conclusion, we want to champion a fresh approach, which sees social mobility as the process of enabling everyone to find and apply their talents in ways that they enjoy and gives them purpose, and for our wider society and economy.

This does not mean we reject all of the work that has already been done – but it means going further.

It will require us to start thinking differently – about how we define social mobility, measure it and assess it – and about what really works if we want to make more opportunities for more people in more places.

It is going to be a big, but exciting challenge.