

Open letter to the Prime Minister from Social Mobility Commissioners

Three years ago, we were appointed as a different kind of commission – diverse, non-political, first-time public appointees drawn from all walks of life and all areas of the UK. Since that appointment, our research has broken new ground, deepening knowledge of geographical inequalities, showing how social class and background can hold people back in the workplace, and demonstrating that the choices people make are circumscribed by the impacts of economic status and place. And yet despite these structural challenges we believe we have also begun to show a positive way forward, building networks of influence beyond the Westminster bubble, working directly with employers, and engaging with local leaders across all parts of the country.

But the fundamental truth of social mobility remains stark. Without a more equal society, we cannot build a mobile society. And Britain today is far from equal.

We recognise the many ways in which your government has aligned itself with our findings and our mission. The idea of ‘levelling up’ the country – of removing the geographical and social impediments that cause Britain to be so unequal – is laudable, and is marked by your acceding to our request that social mobility be put at the heart of government, and not seen as just a matter for education. We welcome the appointment of a new Chair and commissioners, and trust that they will build on the foundations we have laid.

Because our work can only be a foundation. To address social mobility is to play the long game – to look at effects over decades, not parliamentary cycles.

As such, our last piece of work may prove to be our most important. As the new Chair and deputy Chair have said in their first public pronouncements, the ways we measure social mobility are challenging, and the first [Social mobility index](#) produced by the previous commission back in 2017 was at times crude. We have therefore developed a new piece of work which looks forward, setting benchmarks for progress over the next five years, the next ten years, the next thirty years. We hand this work over to the new commission to use as a tool – because if we do not have continuity and cooperation in our fight against inequality, if we cannot hold ourselves to account on a consistent set of metrics over a number of years, and if we cannot resist switching course when the political wind changes, we will get nowhere.

But we need to move fast. We write now at clearly the most critical time in living memory. The pandemic will have an enormous impact for decades to come. People have lost their jobs, their loved ones, their way of life. With the ending of furlough, benefit changes and a cost of living crisis there are more difficulties ahead. But there is now a huge opportunity to rebuild people’s lives. Trains, bridges and roads are important but people,

especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, should not be overlooked. They need skills, training, opportunity, support and hope, wherever they live.

We believe the work we have done can provide a framework for how to tackle this. Our [practical guidance to employers](#) showing why they should and how they can recruit and retain a more socially diverse workforce has been adopted by organisations up and down the country. Our last [State of the nation](#) report provided a comprehensive, evidence-led post pandemic recovery programme. And our other reports, based on world class research, have included dozens of practical recommendations to close attainment gaps at all levels from birth to work and address geographical inequalities. Ministers, educators and employers now need to act on them.

Our recommendations and research fall into three broad categories – Geography, Education and Employment.

Geography

The Commission's research shows clearly that geographical inequality is not just about north and south. Our landmark report [The long shadow of deprivation](#) highlighted the importance of looking at inequalities both between regions and within them. It identified a true postcode lottery, with those from disadvantaged backgrounds with the same level of education often having very different earnings even when living in neighbouring areas. It's clear that education is not the only answer. Local labour markets matter too.

A separate study, [Moving out to move on](#), showed how important it is to build up local employment opportunities and training in relevant skills to ensure moving to London or big cities (a choice not open to all) is not the only way to get better opportunities. We have repeatedly made the case for greater powers for metro-mayors and other local leaders and we welcome signs from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on this. We are pleased with the focus on geography in the incoming deputy Chair's Policy Exchange piece as many of the comments mirror proposals we have made during our term as commissioners.

Education

One of our key, consistent recommendations from our body of educational research is for a student premium for those aged 16-19 to mirror the pupil premium given to primary and secondary students. It is also vital that further education funding is equalised with school funding. The current Commission launched in a further education college and we have set out recommendations on adult skills in numerous reports, and we hope that the appointment of a college leader in the next commission indicates the prioritisation of this sector. But warm words need to be matched with concrete plans.

Across the wider education picture, a better funded, more comprehensive catch-up programme to help students who lost out on learning during the pandemic (as proposed by many bodies, ranging from the Education Policy

Institute, to the Association for School and College Leaders, to the government's own recovery commissioner Sir Kevan Collins) is essential. Early signs show the attainment gap has already widened during the pandemic. And while we must begin a return to normal service in education, the risk is that when grading is brought down next summer, it is those who have experienced the most disruption from coronavirus that will be left high and dry unless we act now.

Crucially, the fact that the Social Mobility Commission (SMC) has recently moved to the Cabinet Office should not mean that social mobility is overlooked within the Department for Education. It is critical that social mobility continues to be a core objective for the Department and that projects like the Opportunity Areas can continue.

Employers and business

We have developed key tools and advice to help employers recruit a more socially diverse workforce. Crucially we focussed on identifying the one most important question for employers to ask to measure socioeconomic background. Masterclasses, round tables and other events have followed creating a domino effect as thousands of employers start adopting our proposals.

It still pays to be privileged in Britain and career progression for those from disadvantaged backgrounds can often be restricted even if they do get the job. Our ground-breaking report [Navigating the labyrinth: Socio-economic background and career progression within the Civil Service](#), showed how few people from working-class backgrounds make it to senior levels. Other reports, addressing the bottom end of the pay scale, have looked at adult training and the progression from low pay.

We are delighted at the focus from the new Chair and deputy on social mobility for all – but if we ignore the huge gaps in representation at the top, we run the risk of embedding inequality for the next generation. Who wields power matters.

The way forward

In the immediate term we must not forget that attainment gaps occur from birth and therefore it is vital that the poorest families are given the best support possible. With furlough ending and the £20 uplift in Universal credit taken away, many families in poverty are finding it hard to get by. We urge you and the Chancellor to look at our recent proposals to help struggling families. We believe the cost must be levied on those who can most afford to pay, and we urge HM Treasury to consider the recommendations of tax experts on how to reform the tax system to enable rather than hinder social mobility.

Looking further, we hope that our revised framework for assessing social mobility, looking at new measures such as housing, wealth, employment and regional disparities, will be taken up by the new Chair. The importance of data to measure and track progress cannot be underestimated. Other areas of work, nearly completed, which we pass on include a study on digital inequalities and research into the link between poor health and social

mobility.

But this handover isn't just about the work. It is about the ethos of the Commission. We hand over a brightly burning torch with a sense of pride of what we have achieved over the last three years. As a group of commissioners we are drawn from across regions, different generations and ethnicities and we are acutely aware of the challenges you face when you are working class. But as our research has shown, time and time again, it is fruitless to pit different groups against each other, or focus on one characteristic at the expense of another. We need to look holistically and dispassionately at the hard facts of inequality, without bending them to emotional narratives that might feel politically useful but that run the risk of sewing discord and division.

We wish the next Chair and her commissioners well and hope they will build on this programme, making it even stronger through their own experiences. We hope you and your ministers will help drive this through. But it is for others to do so too. Teachers, employers, business leaders, metro mayors and council leaders need to play their part. Only together can we make a difference.

Signed

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