

Press release: An analysis of 2 decades of efforts to improve social mobility

Two decades of government efforts to improve social mobility have failed to deliver enough progress in reducing the gap between Britain's 'haves and have nots', the Social Mobility Commission warns today (28 June 2017) in a hard-hitting new report.

The commission, an independent body that monitors progress on social mobility, calls on current and future governments to learn 5 key lessons from the mistakes and successes of the past 20 years.

It warns that without deep-seated reform, social and economic divisions in British society are set to widen with consequences for community cohesion and economic prosperity.

The '[Time for change](#)' report examines various public policies pursued over the last 20 years and assesses the impact they have had – for good or ill – on social mobility in Britain.

The in-depth analysis, carried out for the first time, covers 4 life stages from the early years and school through to training and further/higher education and then into the world of work. It gives 'red', 'amber' and 'green' ratings depending on how successful governments have been in translating policy into positive social outcomes.

Damningly, the report is not able to give a single 'green' rating to any of the life stages. Both early years and schools are given an 'amber' rating, while young people and working lives receives a 'red'. Overall, only 7 policies score a green while 14 score 'amber' and 16 'red'.

While the report says that some policies – such as increasing employment and getting more working-class young people into university – have had a positive impact, overall the report concludes that 'too little' has been done to break the link between socio-economic background and social progress.

It says that over 20 years new divides have opened up in Britain, across geographies, income groups and generations – and that many policies of the past are no longer 'fit for purpose'. It comes up with 5 key lessons from the past and makes recommendations for government which includes:

- successive governments have failed to make social mobility the cornerstone of domestic policy – so in future they should develop a strategic cross-departmental social mobility plan
- long-term progress has too often been sacrificed to short-term change – so 10 year targets should be implemented to ensure public money is spent effectively

- how policies have been designed has often been misaligned from the objective of securing higher levels of social mobility – so public policy should be subjected to a new social mobility test
- public resources have not been properly lined up behind social mobility policies – so future budgets should identify how public spending addresses geographical, wealth and generational inequalities
- governments have overly limited their scope of action – so in future they should be more active in building a national coalition with councils, communities and employers to improve social mobility

The Rt Hon Alan Milburn, Chair of the Social Mobility Commission, said:

As the general election seems to demonstrate, the public mood is sour and whole tracts of Britain feel left behind. There is a mood for change in Britain.

When more and more people feel like they are losing out, social mobility matters more than ever before. Higher social mobility can be a rallying point to prove that modern capitalist economies like our own are capable of creating better, fairer and more inclusive societies. It is the best antidote to the growth of political populism, both right and left, that we have witnessed around the world.

For 2 decades, successive governments have made the pursuit of higher levels of social mobility one of the holy grails of public policy. While there has been some progress, it has not gone far enough towards translating welcome political sentiments into positive social outcomes.

In fact, what is so striking about this new analysis is how divided we have become as a nation. A new geographical divide has opened up, a new income divide has opened up and a new generational divide has opened up.

If we go on like this, these divisions are set to widen, not narrow. There is a growing sense in the nation that these divisions are not sustainable, socially, economically or politically. There is hunger for change. The policies of the past have brought some progress, but many are no longer fit for purpose in our changing world. New approaches are needed if Britain is to become a fairer and more equal country.

Main findings from the report

Early years

- child poverty has risen in the aftermath of the recession and there is currently no prospect of it ending
- early years services have become a welcome part of the education system

in Britain, but despite billions of investment the attainment gap has only begun to shrink recently

- at current rates of progress, it will take 15 years before all children are school ready and 40 years before the attainment gap between poor 5 year olds and their better-off counterparts is closed

Schools

- spending on education is 50% higher than what it was in 1997 and increased for the first decade, but has fallen in the second
- despite reforms to schools and success in improving results and raising standards, two-thirds of children on free school meals do not get good GCSEs
- there has been significant progress in reducing the attainment gap between poorer pupils and their better-off classmates at primary school, but the gap increases substantially at secondary school
- there is currently no prospect of the gap between poorer and wealthier children being eliminated at either GCSE or A level
- geographical inequality amongst the poorest children in England has increased as attainment in London schools has improved far faster than the rest of the country

Young people

- progress such as the school age rising to 18, access to higher education widened and the recreation of apprenticeships should be welcomed but progress is too slow
- labour market outcomes for young people are poor – while youth unemployment has fallen, the number of young people who are NEET has barely changed
- young people's wages have fallen 16% – taking pay to below 1997 levels
- the number of young people receiving careers advice or work experience has fallen and more new apprenticeships have gone to older workers than younger ones
- despite university access widening, retention and graduate outcomes for disadvantaged students have barely improved
- at current rates of progress, it will take 120 years before disadvantaged young people are as likely as their better-off peers to achieve A level or equivalent qualifications – in higher education, it will take 80 years before the participation gap closes

Working lives

- employment rates are the highest on record and extreme low pay has been eliminated, but 1 in 5 people in the UK are stuck on low pay – a higher proportion than other comparable nations
- wages have stagnated in real terms with living standards falling – particularly for young people
- regional inequalities have risen with London and the south moving ahead while other parts of the country fall behind – output per person in London is £43,629 compared to less than £19,000 in the North East
- the highest-paid and best-paid jobs remain deeply elitist, while some

progress is being made – it is painfully slow

Recommendations in the report

Early years

The government should:

- establish a new national ambition to ensure that within a decade every child, regardless of background, is school ready by the age of 5 and that the attainment gap between poorer 5 year olds and their peers has been halved
- focus childcare policy on improving teaching for the poorest children by doubling the early years pupil premium to enable childcare providers to offer extra support for disadvantaged children
- support early years' teachers by shifting regulatory emphasis and funding from teacher qualifications to continuing professional development
- restore funding for parenting programmes and experiment with online classes to achieve scale without undermining quality – using funding from both health and education budgets and shared objectives across both departments.

Schools

The government should:

- introduce a new ambition that, within a decade, the attainment gap between poorer children and their better off classmates should be closed at GCSE level
- align inspection regimes and redistribute resources behind the new drive to close the attainment gap
- abandon plans to extend grammar schools and instead focus on developing new collaborative approaches to turning around failing schools
- introduce effective incentives to attract and retain good-quality teachers in the schools that need them most, including a new emphasis on continuing professional development
- develop a more balanced curriculum incorporating social and emotional learning, alongside careers advice, within the formal school timetable

Young people

The government should:

- set a new aim to have the attainment gap in level 3 qualifications within the next decade through new policies including [T levels](#), apprenticeships, and extra support and accountability reforms for further education colleges
- refocus apprenticeships policy on young people and on higher quality apprenticeships
- ensure careers advice and support is available in all schools via greater emphasis on destinations measures plus increased training and

time in the curriculum

- ensure that higher education is available via further education colleges in social mobility cold spots
- encourage universities to focus on helping students succeed in the labour market by measuring graduate outcomes and offering better careers advice and work experience opportunities

Working lives

The government should:

- introduce a new ambition to make the UK the country with the lowest level of low pay in the OECD by 2030
- increase the number of high-skilled jobs in the regions and particularly in social mobility cold spots, by encouraging and incentivising public sector bodies and private companies to base themselves in those areas
- devolve accountability and resources to enable the development of local skills strategies that bring employers to those areas
- forge a new concordant with employers behind a national drive to improve career progression underpinned by increased investment in skills policies – including high-quality apprenticeships
- make socio-economic diversity in professional employment a priority by encouraging all large employers to make access and progression fairer, with the Civil Service leading the way as an exemplar employer

Notes for editors

1. The Social Mobility Commission is an 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 United Kingdom and to promote social mobility in England. It currently consists of 4 commissioners and is supported by a small secretariat.
2. The commission board currently comprises:
 - Alan Milburn (Chair)
 - Baroness Gillian Shephard (Deputy Chair)
 - Paul Gregg, Professor of Economic and Social Policy, University of Bath
 - David Johnston, Chief Executive of the Social Mobility Foundation
3. The functions of the commission include:
 - monitoring progress on improving social mobility
 - providing published advice to ministers on matters relating to social mobility
 - undertaking social mobility advocacy