

Speech: Justine Greening: our ambition is to leave no community behind

Thank you for that introduction and thank you to Reform, KPMG and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation for bringing us all together today. I'm so pleased to have this chance to speak to all of you.

I'm going to talk about three things:

- Firstly, the problem: why Britain has never cracked social mobility;
- Secondly, solutions: my ambitions for helping everyone to become the best version of themselves through their education; and
- Thirdly, everyone's problem needs everyone's solution – if we're going to achieve anything then social mobility, equality of opportunity needs to be a common ambition – with schools, colleges, universities, but also businesses, civil society, local communities all playing their part.

The problem

So, firstly, setting out the problem. And I think of all the speeches I've made, this might be the most personal.

Because social mobility has been such an important part of my own life, I didn't think I'd get to where I am now. Looking ahead as a child, I'm not sure I could ever have guessed I'd be doing what I'm doing.

I went back to my old school last month, Oakwood Comprehensive in Rotherham. We all start somewhere and that school was my start.

I spoke to some of the children who are there now, and met some of the teachers who taught me. It was a fantastic visit. And as I looked at the children there now, you can't help ask a simple question: who could they be.

And that question matters because too often in this country the answer to that question – for any child – is too much about where they happen to start.

The reality is that in modern Britain where you start still too often decides where you finish.

This is a defining challenge for us as a nation. We have talent spread evenly across this great country – the problem is that opportunity isn't.

And for many people it's a whole lifespan of missed opportunities. If you start school behind on your vocabulary and language skills, often you don't catch up.

By the time you're 11 you're on a different path to your better off classmates, by the time you're 16 and leaving school – you're in a totally different place.

And once you enter the workforce, you may well have fallen too far behind to even think about competing for the most rewarding jobs. And, worst of all it's always been like that for some people and some places in Britain.

But it doesn't have to be.

And if we want to move things on from purely discussing the problem to articulating a real solution then we have to start by asking why haven't we cracked it already? Why has social mobility been static for so long?

And I think it comes down to a number of things:

- A simplistic search for the silver bullet policy, a magic wand that grants equality of opportunity at a stroke.
- The fact that so many worthy social mobility initiatives have been driven by government alone. And that has meant chopping and changing on policy – with no longevity to any approach.
- There's been insufficient involvement from businesses, employers – who are, in any country, the opportunity makers.
- Too often improving social mobility has been done to local communities rather than with them. We've had one size fits all policies, when what works in Derby is often, generally, going to be different to what works in Scarborough.
- And for an individual, government's attempts to improve their prospects have tended to come at sporadic moments in their life – sometimes when it's already too late.

A new approach

So how do we move towards a solution?

I'm an optimist – I was optimistic about what I could achieve in my life and I'm optimistic about us changing the status quo in Britain today, and making sure that every child can go as far as their talent and hard work takes them.

To achieve this, I believe we need a new approach that's:

- Comprehensive – not just one silver bullet, but a portfolio, a strategy.

- An approach that works across someone's whole life.
- A national strategy – but tailored for different local areas.
- And a common mission that is shared not just by government but also by business, civil society and communities.

And today, I'm launching a [plan](#) which puts improving social mobility at the heart of all our education policy, for the first time. Schools and teachers are at the centre of this but they can't tackle this on their own.

This will be driven by a Department for Education that finally now has all the right pieces under the same roof: from early years, to schools, to universities, to technical education, to apprenticeships, to adult learning.

And our plan doesn't shy away from the complexities of tackling social mobility but it does put a structure, an architecture to it, to enable us to work in a more coordinated way.

So how does it fit together?

This plan is about education but it sits alongside wider Government efforts to create jobs, invest in housing and our new [Industrial Strategy](#).

Crucially, the overarching ambition of this plan is to leave no community behind. We will relentlessly target effort and resources at the parts of our country where people have the toughest challenges and fewest opportunities.

I'm talking about those places where disadvantage builds and then accumulates. Where the schools and colleges struggle. Teachers aren't attracted to work there, businesses don't grow and invest there because there isn't a ready-made skilled workforce on their doorstep.

And so talented young people, and these communities produce every bit as much talent as many others, have to leave to find opportunity elsewhere and the place stays as it was and local businesses still don't do any better.

We need to reverse these negative cycles and that starts with education.

Right now we are now investing £41 billion in schools and that's due to go up. Resourcing does matter. If we could buy our way out of this problem we'd have done it by now – but I'm determined to be more strategic about that investment and make sure our resources are targeted at those communities and schools that need them most.

So we'll be targeting over £800 million of our current investment towards the more disadvantaged people and places.

I'm clear that this is the right thing to do – because everyone deserves a fair shot in life.

But unlocking Britain's hidden talent is also the smart thing if we want to build a Britain that's fit for the future. It's an economic imperative as well as a social one.

Because if we could even just improve the attainment of disadvantaged children across the whole country to the same level as disadvantaged children in London, this alone would provide a boost of more than £20 billion to our economy.

And, ultimately, there is no question that if we're going to make the most of ourselves as a country, and make Brexit a success then we need to make sure every person and every place is fulfilling its potential.

Lifestage ambitions

So all that means that no community left behind is our first overarching ambition. We will also take a whole life approach with four core life stage ambitions for overcoming disadvantage at every stage of someone's life.

These ambitions are logical, they may seem obvious – but in the past we haven't structured our work together like this. And if we achieve them, we can change this country for the better.

So, Ambition One starts at the beginning with the early years, improving early language and literacy so all children have the best start to their education, and can get on the right path, literally from day one.

And the research is clear – falling behind early on has a profound impact. Some children simply have less vocabulary, less reading ability, poorer language skills, so they can't understand as much when they get to school and they can't communicate as well as they need to.

And, actually, it is incredibly difficult for them to ever to catch up. If you're not at the expected standard in language aged 5 then you're eleven times less likely to achieve the expected level in maths at age 11.

That is why I am putting early language and literacy, closing the word gap, right at the top of my to do list.

We're introducing new English hubs that will train specialist teachers in literacy and closing the word gap – these specialists will focus on the schools that need this most, in the most disadvantaged areas of the country.

Today I'm also announcing £50 million investment for nurseries in schools, which will be targeted at disadvantaged children so that the children who can benefit the most from high quality provision have more high quality places available.

We are also investing £20 million in the development of early years professionals.

And we will mobilise others who are in a position to help. We will train Health Visitors who routinely check on a child's health at the age of two, on

how to identify children who are already getting left behind on language skills – and how to support the parents who, overwhelmingly, want to do their best for their children but need to know better how.

Ambition Two and we move into school years, a more established part of the strategy. Closing the attainment gap, and making sure every child is at a good school where they can achieve their true potential.

We start here from a strong base – the reforms we've made over the last seven years have transformed much of the education system.

And standards are rising:

- There are an 1.9 million more children in good or outstanding schools since 2010.
- And thanks to our increased emphasis on phonics pupils in English schools are rising up the international league table in reading and literacy.

But it's not everywhere and it's not for every child.

In eleven London boroughs all children attend a good or outstanding secondary school; but only one in five pupils in Blackpool and Knowsley do.

This is a systemic problem and to change things we need to shift our focus. By investing in the teaching, the professionals on the frontline – developing the home grown teaching talent that's already there and is the key to school improvement. And tomorrow I'll be launching a consultation on strengthening Qualified Teacher Status.

And we will make schools in the more challenged areas real career hotspots by investing in the development of the teachers who go to build a career there.

And we'll do more to make sure our strongest tools for school improvement are targeted towards the areas that need the most.

At the same time, we're working on a new targeted approach for the most vulnerable children – Looked After Children, Children in Need, Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities. It's not acceptable that these children's life chances are so much worse than their peers – they deserve a fair chance, like everyone else.

And for those bright children from less well off backgrounds who need a bit of extra help to fulfil their potential, I'm announcing a £23 million Future Talent programme, something I know the Sutton Trust has called for, for some time.

The attainment gap is closing but with our Ambition Two we need to work out how to close it once and for all.

Ambition Three is improving post 16 choices so all young people have the world class skills and qualifications to get on.

A key area here is technical education. We know that for too long, too many students going to Further Education colleges to gain a vocational or technical qualification have had to settle for second best.

They've had to navigate between thousands and thousands of possible qualifications – many of which hold little value to employers and don't actually lead to the job they were hoping for.

And this, disproportionately, affects the most left behind places and people. Just under 75% of young people in Barnsley do Further Education – whereas in Kensington it's 20%.

So in the greatest shake-up of Technical Education in 70 years we are introducing new T-Levels for 16 to 19 year olds, a proper, high quality alternative to A-Levels focused on routes to skilled employment. These will be backed by £500 million investment per year, and goes alongside our wider investment in apprenticeships and new Institutes of Technology.

And this is fundamental: unless we can strengthen post 16 education routes and make them gold standard for all our young people we won't crack social mobility and we won't make the most of our investment in those young people whilst they're in schools and early years.

In summary – no more compromising on quality in Technical Education.

Ambition Four is making sure everyone can make smart career choices and progress in their careers so when young people do make the leap from education to the job market, it's about more than just going into 'work'. It's about a career, not just a job.

In the past, this has been an area where we've essentially let people walk down a career of blind alleys – and not just at age 16 or 18. We haven't offered enough guidance or support to people in work either.

And so too many people don't get on the career path they'd like or that would suit or stretch them, because they lack the networks, the smart advice, the life skills and the confidence that employers look for.

So instead of careers with progression, these people end up trapped in low paying jobs.

We all lose from this.

Because Britain needs more skilled workers. We need more trained engineers, more modern construction workers, more coders.

But you can't aim for an opportunity if you don't know it exists – and that's why we need businesses to show people the path forward into careers that they never thought were for people like them.

Alongside our Ambition 3, work on technical education, it's why for the first time my department is building an unprecedented partnership with businesses up and down the country,

It's why we held our first ever [Skills Summit](#) with major employers at the DfE two weeks ago.

And I believe business is up for this. In fact, we've got leading businesses and employers who are Skills Partners – committed to work with us.

And we will work together to create millions of career encounters for students, thousands of technical work placements, 3 million apprenticeships, many more in work retraining opportunities.

To achieve all this we must inspire, incentivise and also insist businesses of all sizes to reach out to the places that need the most support, following the example of businesses like KPMG who are second in the Social Mobility Employers Index.

All of this is a journey – but we have already made a start.

A common ambition

This leads me into my final point. This needs to be for everyone, everywhere, delivered by everybody.

This plan I'm launching today is a call to arms to join our national mission: to make a better offer to everyone growing up in this country,

To make life about what you can be – not where or how you start. For everyone to have the chance to become the best version of themselves.

I've said that social mobility initiatives in the past have had no longevity – that's why this time we want to focus on building lasting success through partnership.

And so I'm asking employers, education professionals, communities, voluntary groups and many more to come together and join a united effort to put social mobility at the heart of your work.

This partnership is particularly vital at local level, and I believe we can already point to places where working in Partnership works.

I've established local [Opportunity Areas](#) in 12 of the places where poor social mobility is most entrenched, bringing together local schools, colleges, local businesses and local authorities to work with us and identify some of the key problems in their areas; be that the lack of good careers advice or too many children starting school behind on their vocabulary.

And they're coming up with practical, concrete solutions and priorities. This is what we need – last mile politics, with national policy, but tailored at a local level and making sure it works in practice.

And it's great to have some of the chairs and board members from Opportunity Areas here today. Thank you for everything you are already doing.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we all know what the prize is here. It's every young person with opportunity on their doorstep – so they don't have to move away from their roots to find it.

It's communities feeling they have an actual stake in this country, an equal shot – no longer having to watch their best talent get up and go.

It's businesses having the skilled workers they need to create prosperity and compete. It's our economy finally operating to its true potential – a post-Brexit Britain that leads the world in skills, productivity and prosperity.

This is about lifting all of us up, smoothing the path for everyone – it's all of us doing better. I believe, together, we can do something transformative.

I've said social mobility has been an important part of my own life. And one of the key things I've learnt is that optimism matters. A belief you can get to where you want to be.

I have optimism now that as a country we can crack this and get to where we need to be. It will take collective determination, persistence, single-mindedness, sheer bloody-mindedness. And an unbreakable conviction that things can change.

That's how I think about this, that's how I feel about this. If you care too, if you want equality of opportunity, now is the moment and you need to get involved.

I want everyone to get on board. But for those who want to stay focused on talking about the problem rather than helping with solutions, I ask just one thing – don't complain change isn't happening fast enough.

I want the widest coalition possible, one that goes way beyond government. It's decision time if you want to play your part.

No country has got this right yet – but Britain can lead the way.

This should be what we stand for in the 21st century. A country like no other that has unlocked the talents of everyone for the benefit of all. It is possible, and it is now time to make it a reality.

Thank you.