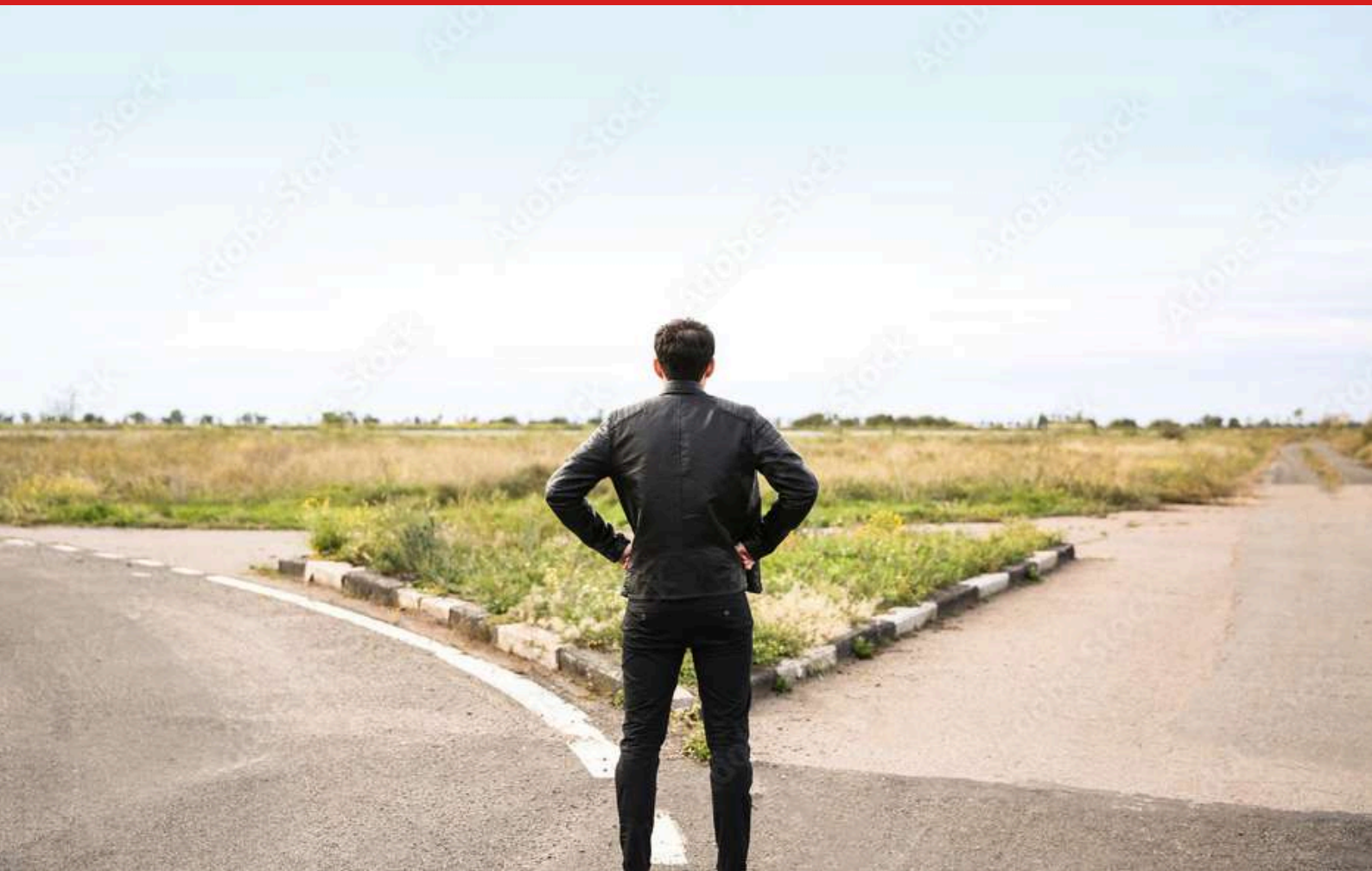


Where We Are:

A report on the Social Mobility Landscape

**ANDREW RANGER MP AND
JACK THURLOW**



FOREWORD

The Social Mobility landscape has changed significantly. More students from low-income backgrounds than ever are attending university, vocational routes are on the up and the Cabinet is 92% state educated.

Before becoming an MP, I spent over 30 years in the hospitality industry and now as MP, I am determined to do whatever I can to help advance social mobility on both a local and national scale.

For a long time and rightly so, there was a high focus on getting those from low-income backgrounds to universities and particularly Russell Group universities. This has had an incredible impact. However, as we know, the job market is ever changing in what it demands and the competitive nature that accompanies it. We must reckon with a new reality whereby a degree is not necessarily enough of the key to unlock success.

Now more than ever, our young people need to be prepared and supported to enter the world of work. Degree apprenticeships and apprenticeships in general are on the rise, work experience and internships are now becoming a necessity rather than a nicety.

Without the right focus and actions on this, we are in danger of failing too many young people and social mobility failing too.



We are seeing an increasingly prevalent postcode lottery, where a young person's prospects are determined by where they grow up. With the salary of your father a determinant of future success, and additionally within this an increasing rural and city divide.

As we all know the social mobility landscape is an incredibly vast field. Whilst we may, by instinct, find at its heart education, its remit touches health, economic and endless other indicators. So the message here is that when social mobility succeeds so do we all.

I have spent the past few months researching and discussing the social mobility landscape in Britain, through the lens of 3 challenges: this report summarises what is succeeding, the challenge we face, and possible solutions to them. I do not claim to be right or wrong but merely reflective, hopeful, and ambitious.

Andrew

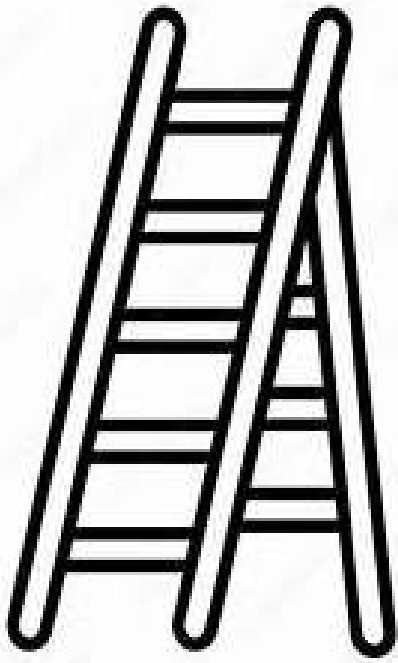


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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report, highlights three major challenges we need to tackle:

1

Access and Awareness

Too often, the support available to young people is fragmented, complex, or simply hidden from view. We need a more joined-up approach to outreach and support, so that young people don't miss out just because they don't know where to look.

2

Reaching the Quiet Middle

There's a group of young people—quiet, overlooked, often underestimated—who aren't being reached by the current system. They're not causing trouble or waving for attention, but they're drifting. I believe we need to do more to identify and support these individuals, with targeted, personalised help that meets them where they are.

3

The Postcode Lottery

Where you grow up still has far too much influence on where you end up. In rural and coastal communities, I heard about brilliant young people with limited local opportunities and long journeys to access basic services. That's why I'm calling for a dedicated Rural Social Mobility Strategy, alongside better local partnerships to bring opportunities closer to home.

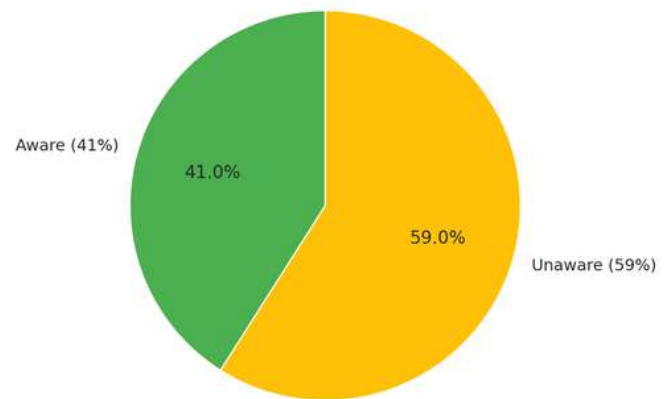
WHAT ABOUT ACCESS?

Awareness of Access Programmes Among Disadvantaged Pupils

One of the fundamental questions when beginning this project was about the current availability and the scope of social mobility opportunities in Britain. With this in mind, I set out to meet and engage with as much of the social mobility sector as possible, and 5 months later, I'm sure I've still only met a small percentage of it!

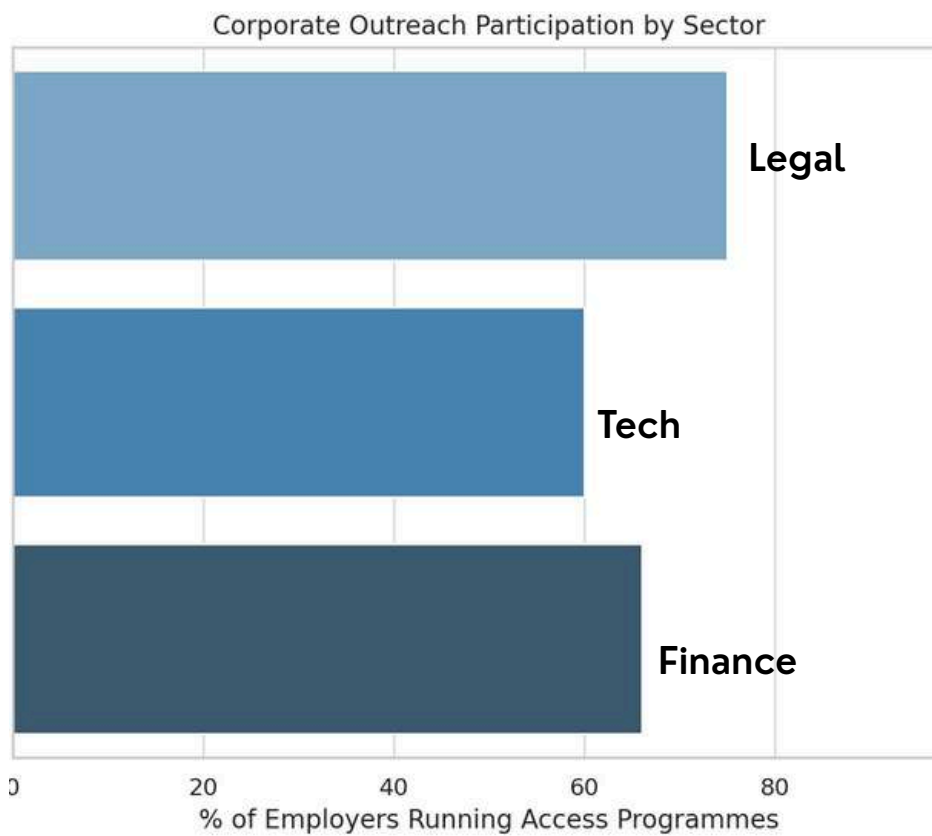
Even early on, one striking thing became clear, IT IS THERE! Stakeholder after stakeholder spoke about the incredible work they are doing and programmes they are running for young people: from summer schools to mentorship programmes to career pathways. It is abundantly clear we as a country do not suffer from a lack of organisations or charities doing work in this space. Hundreds of them are active across the country, trying to improve social mobility.

It is not just necessarily charities and organisations either, there is clearly a great will within the private sector to ensure that they are playing their role in improving social mobility. In some cases through programmes that support young people from university to the early stages of their careers, breaking the gap mentioned previously which is ever increasing between graduates and career opportunities. For others, they are harnessing the tech revolution to allow them to identify students who would most benefit from the opportunities that they are offering. (67% of top UK employers now run access and outreach programmes – Social Mobility Foundation Employer Index, 2024).



Many of the stakeholders commented precisely that: what the sector did not suffer from was a lack of opportunities, but a feeling of fragmentation and lack of streamlining. A common comment was that we are doing work in this space, we know others who are too, but how can we create a system that means the social mobility sector is flowing as one rather than lots of fragmented participants who are co-existing.

“There are estimated to be over 1,500 organisations actively working to improve access and mobility in the UK” (Social Mobility Commission, 2023).



It is therefore pertinent that we ask the question: if all the above is there, how do we ensure every young person who would benefit from participating in a social mobility programme is at the least aware of such opportunities? This is a big question of course, but one where the right answer could be transformational not just for young people, but for those running programmes and initiatives too.

Outreach as we know, is a costly business and there are clear limitations to the individual output a single organisation can provide (only 41% of disadvantaged pupils are aware of the full range of access programmes available in their area – Education Policy Institute, 2023).

Expanding knowledge of access and opportunity would need to be implemented in a context of recognising the limitations of each organisation and the amount of young people they can practically support. However, it would also mean these organisations have the opportunity of working and interacting with young people they may not have come across previously. Additionally, it presents a real chance of partnership working between the organisations. For example, a system of referral between them could ensure no one misses out on such a chance.

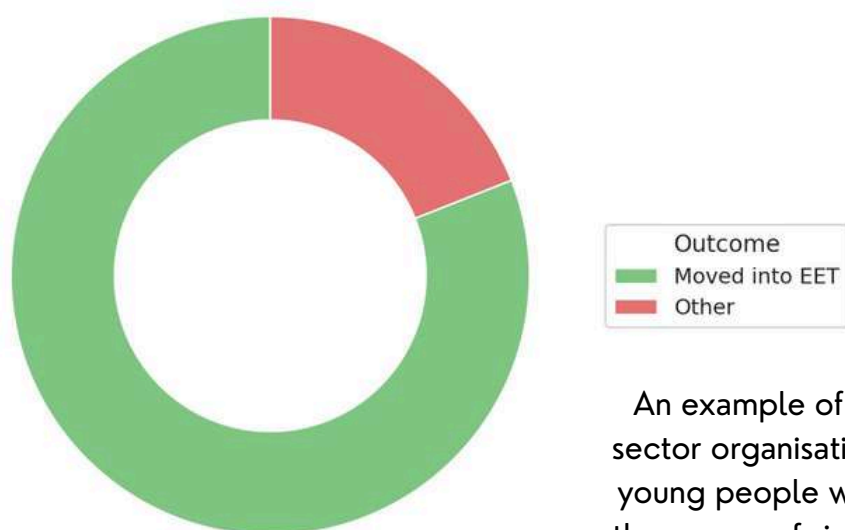
This would be no small task, it would require, the bringing together of potentially 100s of stakeholders to reach a common goal, but if achieved could potentially have incredible implications for social mobility in Britain. For example, MP's, many of whom will have such programs running within their constituencies, will be able to easily direct and communicate available opportunities to those that need them. For schools and colleges it could mean they are able to better support their students, and for parents and the students to see a chance to broaden horizons.

THE QUIET MIDDLE

A further question is how are we or how can we reach everyone who needs support. This is not so much a question of accessibility but about a particular sector of young people, who may be lacking confidence, social skills, the right circumstances that allow them to succeed.

The term 'Quiet Middle' is not used to suggest that these individuals lack ability—in fact, quite the opposite. It reflects a common pattern we see: capable individuals who, for various reasons, tend to fly under the radar, yet have much to offer that remains untapped.

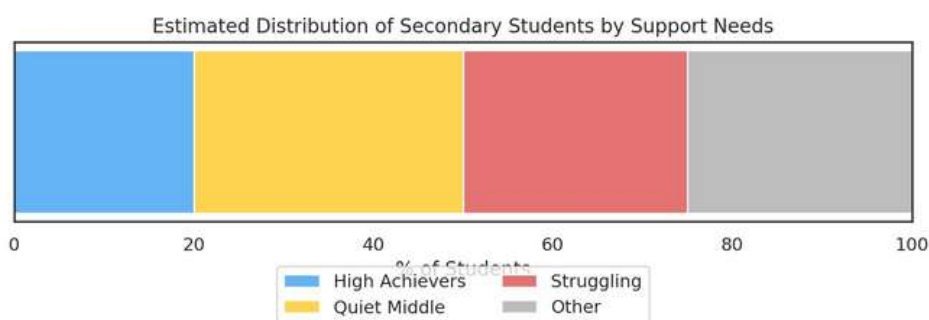
We Mind The Gap: Participant Outcomes



An example of this comes from Wrexham where a 3rd sector organisation called We Mind The Gap works with young people who may fit the above description. Over the course of six months, they work with the 16-25 aged cohort on those fundamental skills, and helping them to utilise their talents and skills so they are ready to then enter the world of work or higher education. (81% of participants move into education, employment, or training – We Mind The Gap Impact Report, 2023).

We Mind the Gap is of course not the only organisation doing such work, but this group of young people often appear overlooked by society. There is much in place to ensure that those who are thriving or struggling academically are given the right and best opportunities to succeed, but what of those stuck in the middle who may not qualify for such programmes but would still thrive and benefit from targeted support, we cannot and should not leave this group behind.

How we do so is far from simple but is one that needs an answer. It is also a question of practicality and how such groups are specifically targeted. It would of course be unfair to put all of this task onto already overstretched teachers, schools, colleges and the like. But if they were equipped with the tools to do so, it may perhaps be achievable.



an estimated 30% of secondary students fall into the 'quiet middle' and are underserved – National Foundation for Educational Research, 2022).

We do however owe it to young people to find such a solution, social mobility can surely not truly mean social mobility without it being achieved for those that fall under this category.

Any possible solution must attempt to leave behind the same old approaches and instead focus on a more individual approach, one that centres around the young person, their ambitions and circumstances. Tailored to what works for them, rather than for the system. This is far from an easy solution to implement, but from the research undertaken it is needed. With the implications and possibilities of how AI will impact society becoming clearer every day – this is one tool that could be harnessed for improving social mobility purposes, whether that is personalised training or educational pathways, predictive analysis to those in the community who could most benefit. So let's embrace it and what it can do for the quiet middle.

When we say we are ambitious for young people, this must mean for all of them. Our education system, however unintentionally is one that at several stages can "write off" too many young people. We know that in this "written off" cohort there are so many who have so much to offer, so let's head to the back of the class and find them.



POSTCODE LOTTERY

Speaking with one young social mobility programme participant based in the Midlands, he commented that amongst his peers he was one of only a few to go to university or engage in a social mobility programme. He spoke passionately that many of them could, and should have gone on to take advantage of greater opportunities and achievements. In just one conversation, the postcode lottery that exists with access to social mobility programmes is starkly revealed, with several key barriers highlighted:

Seeing is Believing – young people in rural areas and further away from the big cities are less likely to hear about social mobility programmes and the associated success stories from their communities. According to the Social Mobility Commission, young people in rural and coastal areas are 30% less likely to engage with outreach or career support programmes compared to their urban counterparts.

Affordability and Location – Many of the bigger social mobility opportunities can be centred around the big cities (London, Manchester, Birmingham etc), and whilst many of these opportunities are subsidised, this is not always possible due to the individual limitations a charity or organisation faces. Crucially, we must also recognise that for a young person based somewhere not near a city, the time and effort required to reach such opportunities adds an extra barrier to access. Going to a big city and navigating all that comes with it can be quite a daunting task to undertake for those not familiar with them. Research by the Education Policy Institute (2023) found that students from remote or rural postcodes are 50% less likely to apply for university enrichment or internship programmes due to travel barriers and limited access to transport.

Quality not Quantity – Since the Covid-19 pandemic, online accessibility to social mobility programmes for young people has vastly improved. This should of course, in theory, benefit those particularly in rural and out-of-city communities—and I believe in many cases that they are. But we must also endeavour to ensure that, wherever possible, the quality of programmes is of the highest standard so that the young people who participate in them are reaping the full benefits from them. Significantly, a 2022 report by the Learning and Work Institute revealed that 40% of rural learners feel online-only support lacks personalisation and engagement compared to in-person options.

Also critical to rural success are partnerships between colleges, schools, and local businesses or higher educational institutions—highlighting to young people from pre-GCSEs right through to graduate level, the possibilities afforded to them or helping to spark their entrepreneurial spirit. In North Wales, Coleg Cambria’s longstanding collaboration with Airbus has created tailored engineering pathways that not only develop technical skills but also offer direct routes into employment for local students. Similarly, Wrexham University’s partnership with the Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre Cymru has opened doors for young people to gain hands-on experience in cutting-edge sectors, from aerospace to renewable energy. Another strong example is the Wrexham-based "Careers in Care" initiative, which brings together local schools and healthcare providers to encourage careers in health and social care—an area of growing regional demand. It is clear to me that we should be even more ambitious in our pursuit of such partnerships, knowing what they can consequently go on to provide for young people. According to the Careers & Enterprise Company, schools in regions with strong employer partnerships saw a 17% increase in positive outcomes post-GCSE, including apprenticeships and college placements.



BACKING BUSINESS

Finally, what can we do to encourage even more businesses and industry to invest in rural talent? Social mobility is time and investment for business—but as we know, a worthwhile one given the value these young people regularly add to companies. For many young people, all they need is a chance to highlight what they can do. And as discussed earlier, this is a particular challenge for those from rural communities. So if we can switch up the dynamic to where it is business coming to young people and not the other way around, it presents a possible win-win scenario. Young people are exposed to opportunities they may not have otherwise, and the business benefits from the talent they may not have otherwise come across. Research by PwC (2023) shows that companies engaged in regional and rural talent development report a 28% increase in long-term retention and employee satisfaction, indicating a strong business case for rural social mobility investment.

Looking ahead, this should include thinking about how we can incentivise business to do so, whether through targeted tax relief, grant schemes, or public-private partnerships that make rural outreach not only feasible but attractive. It should also involve collaboration with local schools, colleges, and youth organisations to create clearer pathways into work—such as rural apprenticeship hubs, digital mentoring programmes, and on-site skills development schemes. By embedding this kind of thinking into industrial strategy, we can help ensure that geography no longer dictates opportunity. Rural Britain is full of potential; now we need a system that unlocks it.

THINKING RURALLY

A further lever could be found through a Rural Social Mobility Strategy, focusing specifically on rural areas that see elevated levels of deprivation and pupils from low-income backgrounds. The Social Mobility Commission's 2023 report revealed that coastal and rural areas in England are among the lowest ranked for social mobility, with North Lincolnshire, West Somerset, and Herefordshire among the bottom 10% nationally.

This would not necessarily mean creating something entirely new but better utilising the tools already available in the pursuit of improving social mobility rurally. This strategy could also go further, with specific strategies for identified areas using available data. It could bring together educational institutions, charities, organisations all in the pursuit of this strategy and importantly it would also mean meeting communities where they are, not from the centre.

Crucially, this would require a shift in how support is designed and delivered—from centralised models to community-led approaches. Success would depend on working with local people who have deep knowledge of their area and a vested interest in its future—whether headteachers, youth workers, parish councils, or local employers. In doing so, this strategy would not only aim to raise aspirations but also build local capacity, ensuring that communities are active partners in shaping their own futures, rather than passive recipients of top-down policy.

We know that the longer a divide is left unchallenged, the worse it will grow. Therefore, it is imperative that we see tackling the postcode lottery as something that should be top of the social mobility agenda going forward.

A CALL TO ACTION

Too often in politics, conversations become conclusions. But now, more than ever, we must turn words into action.

To government: It's time to lead a coordinated national effort. We need a dedicated Rural Social Mobility Strategy to close the growing divide between city and countryside. We must bring together data, funding, and partnerships to ensure talent does not go unnoticed simply because of geography. Social mobility should be a cross-departmental priority—embedded in education, business, transport, and digital policy alike.

To educators and schools: We ask you to help us reach the “quiet middle”—the capable but overlooked students who fall between the cracks of existing support. Equip your staff with the tools to identify and nurture this group, and forge stronger connections with local businesses, apprenticeship providers, and outreach programmes.

To business and industry: Invest in future potential, not just polished CVs. Build bridges to rural and underrepresented communities. Make the first move—bring opportunity to young people where they are. The return is real: loyalty, creativity, and new perspectives from a broader talent pool.

To MPs and policymakers: Know what's on offer in your constituencies. Champion it. Convene local actors and use the power of Parliament to push for meaningful change. Social mobility is not a side project—it is the lifeblood of a fair and thriving nation.

And to all of us: This is a shared endeavour. Whether we are parents, mentors, employers, or policymakers, we each have a role to play in ensuring the circumstances of a young person's birth do not define their future. The time to act is now.

Let's not wait for another report to tell us what we already know. Let's get on with it—and build a Britain where talent truly meets opportunity, wherever it is found.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1

Create a National Social Mobility Opportunities Hub

Work with government, employers, charities, and education providers to develop a single online platform where young people, parents, teachers, and MPs can access a centralised directory of social mobility programmes, mentorship schemes, internships, and apprenticeships. Additionally this would also support partnerships and referrals between existing providers. This would reduce fragmentation and ensure that no opportunity remains hidden.

2

Develop a Rural Social Mobility Strategy

Commission of a dedicated strategy to address rural and coastal social mobility challenges, drawing on data and lived experience. This would include improving digital infrastructure, funding for local transport initiatives, and incentivising employers to establish local outreach programmes in these areas.

3

Expand Partnerships Between Business and Education

Expand schemes that foster collaboration between schools, colleges, and local employers—especially in rural areas—to create tangible career pipelines. These partnerships should include in-school visits, career events, workplace tasters, and co-designed vocational pathways.

4

Leverage Data to Target Support More Effectively

Support the development of data-sharing protocols across relevant organisations to map social mobility cold spots more accurately. Encourage wider use of platforms like Zero Gravity to identify and nurture high-potential students in areas of low opportunity.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As a country we face many challenges, but this report shows we have young people brimming with potential who through access to the right opportunity and the right guidance, can go on to make a valuable impact in business, government, education and across society.

Placing improving social mobility in the best possible position to succeed must be a top priority. That is our responsibility—and our opportunity. That is why the words of this report have aimed to reflect the sector, because those who work in social mobility know it best, what is working, the challenges it faces and what can be done to address these challenges.

I have been inspired by the people I have met through this report making stage: the passion, the drive, and energy to achieve change and the work that is in progress to support and achieve this and I would like to thank every individual, organisation or business that has taken time to meet with me to discuss this endeavour.

The time is right for a renewed national conversation about social mobility, where the Government, businesses and organisations can come together in pursuit of something that could not be more important, because as I said at the start of this report, when social mobility succeeds, we all do.

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