

UNLOCKING REGIONAL BARRIERS TO SOCIAL MOBILITY: INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BUSINESS AND POLICYMAKERS



Global Compact
Network UK

**SLAUGHTER
AND MAY**

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FOREWORD



This is an important moment for social mobility, defined as the link between a person's socio-economic background and their outcomes in adulthood. Ongoing economic uncertainty, persistent skills shortages, and widening regional inequality are highlighting the limits of existing approaches to skills, recruitment, and growth. Without deliberate action to widen access and strengthen regional talent pipelines, barriers to opportunity are likely to persist, even as employers continue to face challenges in recruiting and retaining the skills they need.

The UN Global Compact exists to inspire and shape action that supports thriving businesses and a sustainable world. The UK Network helps over 900 companies, from multinationals to a wide range of SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises), embed sustainability into how they operate and grow. Through engagement with businesses across sectors, we see that long-term prosperity is achieved, not by trading off purpose and performance, but by aligning them. *Unlocking Regional Barriers to Social Mobility* builds on this work, translating our mission into practical action on one of the UK's most pressing challenges. It provides clear evidence and recommendations for businesses and

policymakers on the value of a place-based approach to social mobility, and how to put it into practice.

This report takes a clear stance. Social mobility cannot be delivered by focusing only on exceptional individuals or isolated interventions. Progress depends on systemic, long-term change that reaches the millions of UK citizens who are furthest from opportunity and supports the thousands of SMEs and local employers that underpin regional economies. Our stance is informed by speaking directly to businesses, government, academics, and civil society across the UK and listening to what they need. A consistent message emerged:

Effective action requires stronger local coordination, sustained cross-sector partnerships, and a clearer focus on outcomes rather than activity.

We urge businesses and policymakers to act on the evidence and recommendations in this report by committing to coordinated, place-based approaches that widen access to opportunity across the UK.

We are grateful to our partner, Slaughter and May, who have provided invaluable support and expertise throughout this work. As recognised trailblazers in tackling barriers to social mobility, their commitment has helped shape and strengthen this initiative.



Steve Kenzie
Executive Director,
UN Global Compact Network UK

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



This report examines the regional disparities shaping social mobility across the UK and demonstrates how advancing socio-economic inclusion can support more productive workplaces, a stronger economy, and greater social cohesion. Drawing on regional consultations across all four UK nations, it provides actionable, place-based recommendations for business and government to remove barriers to opportunity and drive meaningful change.

The UK is one of the most [regionally unequal economies](#) in the developed world, with a growing gap between the wealthiest individuals and the majority of the population. This disparity highlights the urgent need to address income inequality and promote economic inclusivity. By improving social mobility, businesses can generate significant economic impact and gain a competitive advantage by widening access to high-performing talent and strengthening employee engagement and retention. As the UK looks to strengthen its economy, investing in social mobility is both timely and necessary.

This research is informed by direct engagement with business leaders, policymakers, local authorities, and civil society organisations. By engaging directly at the regional level, the report moves beyond national averages and London-centric research to reflect the lived realities that must shape effective social mobility action. This first-hand engagement ensures the recommendations reflect the complexity of local contexts, rather than one-size-fits-all solutions.

In response to the Social Mobility Commission's State of the Nation 2024 findings, which highlight persistent regional inequalities and weaker mobility outcomes in rural and former

industrial areas across the UK, this research used the evidence to identify priority regions for in-depth qualitative enquiry. These were Northern Ireland (represented by Belfast), Cardiff Capital Region (represented by Cardiff), West Yorkshire (represented by Leeds), Glasgow City Region (represented by Glasgow), and Devon (represented by Exeter).

The findings show that both businesses and policymakers play a critical role in widening access to opportunity, reshaping pathways into work, and improving outcomes for individuals and employers alike.

KEY FINDINGS:

This research identified five common barriers to social mobility across the UK:

- 1 Limited cross-sector collaboration
- 2 Weaknesses in data collection, use, and accountability
- 3 Barriers linked to mindsets: confidence and workplace inclusion
- 4 Transport constraints in post-industrial and peripheral region
- 5 Complexity and uneven access to apprenticeships and skills pathways

Recommendations overview

GOVERNMENT AND BUSINESS

Recommendation 1: Government and business should collaborate to establish regional social mobility hubs to strengthen local coordination and improve access to opportunity.

- Create coordinated, local hubs linking employers, educators, local authorities, and civil society to reduce fragmentation of approaches, organisations, and activities that are working towards advancing social mobility.
- Support sustained outreach, inclusive recruitment standards, and clear signposting to education, training, and employment pathways, with clear SME guidelines.
- Implement through a phased approach, starting with national coordination, regional pilots, and scaled delivery embedded within existing structures.

BUSINESS

Recommendation 2: Businesses should improve how they collect, analyse, and act on socio-economic data about their workforce by setting social mobility targets and conducting place-based analysis.

- Collect and analyse consistent socio-economic background data to track outreach, recruitment, progression, pay, and retention.
- Apply a place-based lens to identify how the workforce compares with local labour markets regionally to identify disparities and target interventions.
- Set clear social mobility targets and embed accountability into leadership priorities.

Recommendation 3: Businesses should adopt inclusive place-based outreach, recruitment, and workplace practices to reach and support those furthest from the labour market.

- Identify under-represented groups and design targeted outreach, recruitment, and progression pathways.
- Work with trusted community partners and adapt practices to address barriers such as transport, confidence, networks, and unintended academic filters.

GOVERNMENT

Recommendation 4: Policymakers need to improve transport links and affordability to unlock access to education and employment.

- Align transport planning with employer needs, training schedules, and apprenticeship routes to improve access and retention.
- Target transport cold spots and prioritise affordability for learners and apprentices.

Recommendation 5: The Government must ensure the Growth and Skills Levy delivers equitable, place-based access to apprenticeships and skills opportunities.

- Provide clear, early implementation guidance on the new levy to reduce uncertainty and enable employers, especially SMEs, to engage confidently.
- Extend levy flexibility to support apprentice wages as well as training costs, strengthening participation in SME-dominated regions.
- Improve navigation and learner support through regional social mobility hubs.

INTRODUCTION



WHAT IS SOCIAL MOBILITY?

[Social mobility](#) is commonly defined as the link between a person's socio-economic background and their outcomes in adulthood. [In the UK, this link remains stronger than in any other developed country.](#) Where someone starts in life continues to determine where they end up. As a result, individuals face restricted life chances, employers face persistent skills shortages and underutilised talent, and sustainable economic growth is limited.

The [Social Mobility Commission](#) (SMC) estimates that unequal opportunity costs the UK economy around £39 billion each year through lost productivity, poorer health outcomes, and reduced participation.

The UK workplace is not a level playing field. Although only around 7% of the UK population attend private schools, individuals educated in the independent sector remain disproportionately represented in positions of influence, with [around 36% of people in top leadership roles coming from private education.](#) These inequalities are compounded in former industrial heartlands, including Yorkshire, the North East, the Midlands, Wales and Scotland, where [decades of economic restructuring and underinvestment have entrenched disadvantage and limited access to opportunity.](#)

Across the regional consultations, participants did not always frame their experiences using the language of 'social mobility' as it is commonly used in policy and research. Instead, they spoke in practical terms about access to education, employment,

progression, and long-term life chances, reflecting their lived realities and local contexts. This diversity of perspectives is a key finding in itself and a strength of the report, highlighting the importance of grounding social mobility policy and practice in locally relevant language and experience. By capturing how social mobility is understood in practice, the report offers an opportunity to help businesses and policymakers think differently about the issue.

THE BUSINESS CASE FOR ACTION

While socio-economic background remains an overlooked dimension of diversity, the business case for action is clear. Broadening access to talent enables organisations to draw from wider recruitment pools, improve retention, and strengthen performance.

According to [research by Accenture](#), profits of organisations concentrating on social mobility are 1.4x higher than their competitors without this focus. This is down to an emphasis on inclusion which improves talent pools by bringing different attributes, skills, and mindsets into the organisation and enables employees to perform more effectively. [Evidence](#) also finds that employees from lower socio-economic backgrounds perform at least as well as, and often better than, their more advantaged peers. [Recent research](#) into seven leading law firms found that state-educated employees were 75 per cent more likely to feature in the top decile of performers and were also the most likely to leave, demonstrating that firms are losing valuable talent.



BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

As of early 2026, economic growth and skills development are central priorities for the UK's Labour government. In 2024, an estimated [72% of UK businesses](#) reported experiencing skills gaps in technology-related areas, including AI, data analytics, and cybersecurity. Improving social mobility can help address these gaps by removing financial, educational, and geographic barriers that prevent capable individuals from accessing technical training, higher education, and early-career digital roles, thereby expanding the pool of skilled workers available to employers.

[Recent analysis](#) from Skills England reinforces the scale and nature of this challenge. Demand for workers in priority occupations across key sectors is projected to grow significantly by 2030, with around two thirds of roles requiring qualifications at Level 4 or above. This highlights a critical need not only to widen access into entry-level roles, but to support progression into higher-level skills pathways that align with the UK's long-term economic growth priorities.

However, evidence from the [Social Mobility Employers Index](#) and the [UK Social Mobility Awards 2024 report](#) shows employers are heavily focused on entry-point interventions, particularly recruitment and outreach. While 66% reported inclusive recruitment activity and 84% targeted outreach to disadvantaged groups, action on progression and retention remains limited. Only 34% collect socio-economic data and just 22% support progression for employees from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

This imbalance suggests that an over-focus on recruitment alone will not be sufficient to address the UK's evolving skills needs. Without stronger investment in progression, retention, and skills development, businesses risk missing opportunities to build the higher-level capabilities required for future growth.

POLICY ENVIRONMENT

The UK's social mobility policy landscape in early 2026 is characterised by strong evidence and scrutiny, but a continued absence of a single, coherent national strategy.

At the centre of the system is the [Social Mobility Commission](#) (SMC), an independent body responsible for monitoring progress and advising government. Its flagship [State of the Nation 2025 report](#) provides the most authoritative assessment of mobility outcomes across education, work, income, and place. The report highlights persistent structural inequalities, with family background remaining a dominant determinant of life chances. Parliamentary scrutiny has intensified through [House of Lords inquiries](#) into social mobility. [Evidence submitted to Lords committees](#) consistently points to fragmented policy delivery, a lack of place-based solutions, and limited devolution of powers to local actors as key barriers to progress.

The skills policy context has evolved significantly in 2025. [Skills England](#) was established to replace the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE), with a mandate to align training provision more closely with labour market demand. In parallel, reforms to the apprenticeship levy introduced the [Growth and Skills Levy](#), expanding the use of employer funds to include shorter courses and targeted upskilling. These reforms aim to widen access to skills pathways and respond to economic change. However, concerns remain about implementation, employer engagement, and regional focus.

Evidence from the policy landscape points to a shared conclusion: place matters in addressing inequality. Advancing social mobility will require an overarching strategy that prioritises regional context, collaborates with employers, and supports long-term investment.

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH



WHY A REGIONAL APPROACH IS ESSENTIAL

The case for a regional approach is well established. The [UK is one of the most regionally unequal economies in the developed world](#), which has a significant impact on economic prosperity and social justice. The [SMC's State of the Nation 2024](#) states that one of the key barriers to advancing social mobility is insufficient attention to regional disparities.

The report shows that mobility prospects are strongest in London and the Southeast, and weakest in rural areas and former industrial regions across the North, Midlands, Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland. Entrenched disadvantage in these places has persisted for decades, underscoring the limits of current policy. As the [Social Mobility Policy Committee](#) has noted, meaningful progress depends on strategies designed with deep understanding of local context.

For businesses of all sizes, the conclusion is clear: action that fails to reflect local realities is not a viable option. Just as no organisation would expect a single customer strategy to perform equally well in every market, a generic approach to social mobility is unlikely to deliver impact. A place-based strategy allows organisations to understand local barriers and unlock talent that would otherwise remain overlooked.

THE CONSULTATIONS

The UN Global Compact Network UK, in partnership with Slaughter and May, convened regional consultations in Belfast,

Cardiff, Leeds, Glasgow, and Exeter during September and October 2025. By examining regions individually, this report identifies common barriers, place-specific challenges, and practical opportunities for action.

We partnered with key organisations working in the social mobility space to drive impact and useful findings. We are grateful to our partner, Slaughter and May, as well as our collaborators: The 93% Club; The Bridge Group; EMEEN Network; Leadership Through Sport and Business (LTSB); OAHA; Progress Together; Queen's University Belfast; The Social Mobility Commission; and the University of Exeter for their support throughout this project.

These findings build on the UN Global Compact Network UK's wider work on [diversity, equity, and inclusion](#) and aim to equip businesses and policymakers with the insight needed to create fairer and more inclusive workforces across the UK.

INTERSECTIONALITY

Social mobility does not operate in isolation from other dimensions of inequality. A person's socio-economic background intersects with factors such as gender, ethnicity, disability, caring responsibilities, and geography, to shape barriers and opportunities available to them. Evidence shows that these overlapping factors can compound disadvantage, meaning that individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds who also face structural discrimination are often furthest from opportunity.

This report adopts an intersectional lens throughout, ensuring that insights on intersecting barriers from every consultation directly shaped the analysis and recommendations. By doing so, it moves beyond one-dimensional approaches to social mobility and highlights the need for inclusive interventions that reflect the lived realities of communities across the UK.

In this report, “those furthest from the labour market” refers to individuals and groups who face multiple barriers to accessing and progressing in work. This includes, but is not limited to, those who face multiple forms of structural discrimination, young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), people in areas with limited transport and employment opportunities, and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds with weaker access to networks, information, and support.

APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

This report uses a mixed-methods, place-based approach to understand social mobility challenges across the UK and identify evidence-based solutions. It draws on in-person regional consultations, quantitative survey data, and qualitative analysis to capture both local context and cross-cutting themes.

Five regions, represented by the cities of Exeter, Leeds, Glasgow, Belfast and Cardiff, were selected based on [social mobility outcomes](#) and the presence of UN Global Compact Network UK business members.

The research was delivered in four phases: initial scoping and region selection; consultations and data collection; analysis and synthesis; and review, validation, and case study development. In total, 77 participants from business, government, education, civil society and community organisations contributed through structured consultations.

Findings were analysed using a consistent thematic framework to identify shared and place-specific barriers, and recommendations were shaped and prioritised by participants based on impact and feasibility. This approach ensures the insights and recommendations reflect lived experience and regional realities.

While the methodology provides rich, place-based insight, it is not intended to be statistically representative of all regions or stakeholder groups. The findings reflect the perspectives of those who participated in the consultations and surveys. One limitation therefore is that young people directly impacted by these insights were not consulted. We intend to do further work on reaching this stakeholder group in the future.

You can find a full description of the research approach, methodology, and limitations on our [website](#).



FRAMEWORK

To structure evidence from the consultations, this report uses an analytical framework that groups barriers to social mobility into five interconnected categories. The framework reflects the reality that barriers to opportunity are rarely isolated and emerge from the interaction between infrastructure, systems, institutions, and lived experience.

THE FRAMEWORK CONSISTS OF FIVE CATEGORIES:



1. STRUCTURAL FACTORS

Structural factors: The physical, economic, and geographic conditions that shape access to opportunity, including transport connectivity, housing affordability, and the distribution of jobs and education.



2. SYSTEMIC FACTORS

The design and interaction of public systems, including education, skills, employment, and transport. They capture issues such as fragmentation, complexity, and misalignment between national policy and local delivery.



3. SOCIAL FACTORS

Informal barriers that influence how individuals navigate opportunity, including access to social networks, confidence, awareness of pathways, and cultural capital.



4. SKILLS FACTORS

Access to, and progression through, education and training pathways, including the availability of entry routes, progression opportunities, and alignment with local labour market demand.



5. BUSINESS FACTORS

Employer practices and capacity, including recruitment, progression, use of socio-economic data, and engagement with local skills systems, which shape how accessible opportunities are in practice.

Regional barriers matrix

The matrix below illustrates how social mobility barriers cluster across regions, highlighting both common challenges and place-specific issues identified through the consultations.

Note: This is not an exhaustive list of challenges. Barriers not mapped to a specific region may still be present but were not raised in that consultation.

CATEGORY	BARRIER	BELFAST	CARDIFF	LEEDS	GLASGOW	EXETER
Structural	Poor transport links and affordability	X	X	X	X	X
	Welfare system encouraging unemployment	X			X	
	Underinvestment in housing	X				X
Social	Mindset and confidence	X	X	X	X	X
	Isolated communities		X			X
	Working class identity and culture		X		X	
	Lack of role models	X		X	X	
Social/systemic	Post-conflict legacy	X				
Systemic/skills	Apprenticeship system complexity	X	X	X	X	X
Skills	Lack of digital and AI skills	X				X
	School curriculum doesn't reflect labour market needs	X			X	
Systemic	Poor social value requirements in procurement			X		
	Lack of long-term government funding and initiatives				X	X
	Definition of social mobility isn't fit for purpose					X
	National policy doesn't match local needs	X	X			X
	Not enough incentives for business to act				X	
Business	Data and measurement gaps	X	X	X	X	X
	Non-inclusive recruitment practices and culture	X	X	X	X	X
	SMEs don't have the resources or knowledge to act	X			X	X
	Limited access to entry level jobs		X		X	
	Lack of hyper-local opportunities			X		X
	Short-term initiatives and funding cycles			X	X	
	Unable to navigate confusing policy landscape				X	
	Difficult to access work experience	X	X			X
Cross-cutting	Inconsistent engagement between schools, business, government, and civil society	X	X	X	X	X

COMMON THEMES



Consultations across the five regions revealed clear barriers to social mobility. While these challenges manifest differently by place, strong overlaps emerged. Analysis of the data identified five cross-cutting themes that were evident in all regions.



Theme 1: Limited cross-sector collaboration

Across all five regions, the most frequently cited challenge was the fragmentation of approaches, organisations, and activities that are working towards advancing social mobility. While many effective initiatives exist, participants described a system that is short-term, poorly connected, and lacking a shared strategic direction. The absence of sustained coordination between government, employers, education providers, local authorities, and civil society was seen as a fundamental barrier to long-term impact, despite good intentions and deployment of resources.

This fragmentation creates confusion and inefficiency for all stakeholders. Employers, particularly SMEs, reported difficulty navigating multiple short-term government initiatives. Activities such as work experience, mentoring, and internships can be transformative, but frequently lack follow-through or long-term

accountability. There was clear evidence that one-off engagements with schools lacked impact.

Educators highlighted limited insight into local labour market needs and challenges in building meaningful relationships with employers. Government and local authorities were seen to operate through siloed initiatives with inconsistent regional coordination, weak outcome tracking, and limited adaptation to local contexts.

Community organisations and charities were recognised as trusted connectors, particularly for those furthest from opportunity, but face constraints around capacity, funding, and ownership that can inhibit joined-up working and reinforce duplication. There was strong consensus that there is currently an absence of a single, trusted, place-based mechanism responsible for coordinating activity, supporting navigation, and tracking long-term outcomes, which is minimising larger, sustained impact.

“ Everything that’s happening across the private sector and government is quite disparate. There’s no central place that’s actually accountable for the progress we’re making or where the gaps are.”
Glasgow Consultation Participant



Theme 2: Weaknesses in data collection, use, and accountability

The consultations highlighted significant disparity in how businesses collect, analyse, and use data on the socio-economic background (SEB) of their workforce. While awareness of the importance of measurement is growing, current practice across UK businesses remains limited. Collecting SEB data helps businesses understand who they are reaching, where barriers exist, and whether their recruitment and development practices are working. It enables more targeted action, better use of limited resources, stronger workforce planning, and improved retention and productivity by ensuring talent is identified, supported, and developed fairly.

SEB data is widely under-collected, in part because many employers lack clarity on what to measure and how to collect it effectively. Even where data is collected, response rates are often low, possibly reflecting limited employee trust in how the data will be used. [A 2023 survey by the Investment Association](#) found

that only 40% of UK investment and fund management firms were collecting SEB data, and of those, just 14% achieved response rates of 80% or higher. This reflects the broader situation across many sectors in the UK.

The lack of robust data creates a wider challenge: businesses struggle to define success, target effort, and measure impact over time. Social mobility outcomes emerge over long time horizons, yet many organisations lack longitudinal tracking that links recruitment, retention, progression, and pay outcomes by SEB. Without this, employers who are interested in increasing socio-economic diversity find it difficult to identify where barriers exist or assess whether interventions are effective.

Where data is collected, it is rarely analysed through a place-based lens. Large employers with multiple sites often rely on national averages, masking regional variation. This limits the ability to target resources effectively, identify underperformance, or replicate successful local practice.

Finally, socio-economic data is rarely embedded in leadership objectives or performance frameworks. Unlike gender or ethnicity, it is often treated as discretionary rather than business-critical, contributing to inconsistent action and short-term investment.

“ If you don't know what you're trying to fix, you're just using a shotgun approach.”

Exeter Consultation Participant



Theme 3: Barriers linked to mindset: confidence and workplace inclusion

Participants highlighted mindset as a significant but often underestimated barrier to social mobility. Young people in many communities were described as having limited expectations of what is achievable, shaped by cultural norms and a lack of visible role models. Participants emphasised that many individuals self-select out of pathways even when opportunities exist. These dynamics also affect progression once in employment. Across the UK, people from a lower socioeconomic background are [28% less likely](#) to hold management roles.

These dynamics were evident across regions, though they manifested differently by place. In Belfast, participants described a self-deprecating mindset linked to cultural and familial expectations about who certain courses or careers are intended for. In Leeds, providers reported difficulty engaging white working-class boys, with entrenched attitudes in some families

deprioritising education. Similar confidence and aspiration gaps were raised in rural and coastal areas, where limited exposure to professional environments further narrows perceived options.

Participants were clear that this is not simply a social or education issue, but also a challenge for employers. Where recruitment and progression models assume confidence and familiarity with professional norms, they systematically disadvantage those furthest from the labour market. Standardised recruitment criteria, opaque progression pathways, and workplace cultures that rely on informal networks can unintentionally exclude capable individuals and contribute to early attrition.

There was strong consensus that addressing confidence and aspiration requires intentional, place-based approaches. Employers need to understand who is under-represented or progressing more slowly in specific regions, and why, and to adapt recruitment practices and workplace cultures accordingly. Without this, talent remains untapped and inequalities are reproduced even in growing labour markets.

“ You're born with a glass ceiling on you... your parents have a fixed mindset as well. They don't believe certain things are for people like us.”

Cardiff Consultation Participant

Theme 4:

Transport constraints in post-industrial and peripheral regions

Transport and physical access to opportunity emerged as one of the most persistent structural barriers to social mobility, particularly in post-industrial, rural, coastal, and peripheral communities. Participants highlighted that jobs, education, or training opportunities in growth centres do not translate into access for surrounding areas where transport is unreliable, infrequent, or unaffordable.

This challenge was especially acute in regions shaped by post-industrial decline. [Analysis from the SMC](#) shows that social mobility outcomes are least favourable in places historically reliant on mining, manufacturing, or ports, where economic restructuring has not been matched by sustained investment in connectivity. These regions often face a double disadvantage: fewer local opportunities and limited ability to reach those that do exist.

Transport constraints undermine both individual progression and employer investment. In Exeter and surrounding areas, large rural and coastal communities were described as effectively “landlocked”, with long distances to employment centres and limited public transport options. In Cardiff, employers reported being unable to fill apprenticeship places despite available funding, because potential candidates could not reach construction sites or training locations.



Participants stressed that affordability is as significant as availability. Even where transport links exist, high costs disproportionately affect young people, apprentices, and those in low-paid or entry-level work.

“ Some apprentices are getting up at half past five in the morning just to get to work because of the lack of buses.”

Cardiff Consultation Participant



Theme 5:

Complexity and uneven access to apprenticeships and skills pathways

The apprenticeship system was identified as a high-potential but underutilised lever for social mobility, widely described as complex and difficult to navigate. Participants highlighted significant inconsistency between the different skills systems across the UK. Employers operating in multiple regions described confusion arising from differing rules, eligibility criteria, and funding arrangements.

As a result, substantial funding was reported to remain unspent, with SMEs particularly constrained by administrative burden,

financial risk, and limited capacity. This underutilisation was seen as a missed opportunity to address skills shortages. These concerns were echoed nationally by the [Social Mobility Policy Committee](#) who concluded in 2025 that the Apprenticeship Levy was not sufficiently flexible and therefore disincentivises employers to support social mobility.

Since the consultations, the policy context has shifted. [The government has confirmed that the Apprenticeship Levy will be replaced by the Growth and Skills Levy from April 2026](#), broadening the scope of levy-funded training. While the intent of reform is widely welcomed, the evidence gathered through consultations remains highly relevant to delivery. Employers and providers stressed that without clarity, targeted SME support, and place-based implementation, reforms risk reproducing the same barriers that limited uptake under the previous system.

Overall, the evidence suggests that while reform is necessary, policy change alone will not deliver equitable outcomes. The impact of the Growth and Skills Levy will depend on how effectively it is implemented across regions, particularly for SMEs and those furthest from opportunity.

“ The apprenticeship was meant to be the incentive for businesses, but it’s just too complicated.”

Glasgow Consultation Participant

REGIONAL INSIGHTS

In this section, we share data from the [SMC's Social Mobility Index](#), blended with distinctive regional insights from our consultations to provide context on each region. The Social Mobility Index is a UK measurement framework that brings together data on how socio-economic background affects people's outcomes across life stages and the factors that influence those outcomes, such as childhood conditions, education, and labour market opportunities. It allows comparison across areas by assigning each area a composite score based on this data. Areas are then grouped on a scale from least favourable, through middling, to most favourable.

West Yorkshire

SOCIAL MOBILITY ACROSS WEST YORKSHIRE (SMC'S SOCIAL MOBILITY INDEX 2018–2024)				
LOCAL AUTHORITY	PROMISING PROSPECTS	CONDITIONS OF CHILDHOOD	LABOUR MARKET OPPORTUNITIES	INNOVATION AND GROWTH
Leeds	Middling	Middling	Upper middling	Middling
Bradford	Middling	Unfavourable	Lower middling	Middling
Wakefield	Middling	Lower middling	Middling	Lower middling
Calderdale	Middling	Middling	Middling	Middling
Kirklees	Middling	Lower middling	Middling	Middling

This profile highlights a region with mostly average outcomes, demonstrating it has some strengths but also many barriers remain. Conditions of childhood indicators are notably weaker across much of the region, reflecting persistent challenges linked to poverty, parental education, and occupational background.

DISTINCTIVE REGIONAL INSIGHTS FROM THE CONSULTATION

Systemic and structural factors: West Yorkshire exemplifies the challenge facing many middle-performing regions: growth exists, but opportunity does not reach all communities. Participants consistently pointed to the legacy of post-industrial decline in parts of the region, where new industries have not replaced historic employment at the same scale. This has resulted in limited local labour markets and a strong reliance on opportunities concentrated in Leeds.

Business and skills factors: Consultation participants emphasised that mobility is highly constrained by place. Many people want, or need, to stay close to home due to family, cost, or transport constraints. However, apprenticeships and early career opportunities are disproportionately concentrated in Leeds, creating barriers for residents in surrounding towns with weaker transport connectivity. This reinforces the need for hyper-local approaches that bring opportunity closer to where people live, rather than assuming mobility towards city centres. It is an opportunity for business to rethink traditional locations around city centres and choose to focus on bringing opportunity closer to where available pools of talent are based.

Social factors: Participants described a mindset shaped by multi-generational unemployment, where long-term investment in education is perceived as risky or unattainable. White working-class boys were repeatedly cited as one of



the most disadvantaged groups in this context. One employer highlighted difficulty not only in recruiting young men from these backgrounds onto programmes, but also in sustaining engagement over time.

WHAT WEST YORKSHIRE SHOWS US

West Yorkshire illustrates how social mobility barriers persist in places that are neither failing nor thriving, where economic growth exists, but opportunity remains uneven due to post-industrial legacies, labour opportunities focused only in city centres, and cultural barriers to engagement.

CASE STUDY – PLACE-BASED EMPLOYER DECISIONS

PwC opened an office in Bradford in 2019 as part of a deliberate strategy to widen access to opportunity beyond major city centres. As a result, 34.5% of the team in the Bradford office come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, compared to 13.6% across the firm nationally. This illustrates how locating opportunities differently can materially shift who is able to access them.



Northern Ireland

SOCIAL MOBILITY ACROSS NORTHERN IRELAND (SMC'S SOCIAL MOBILITY INDEX 2018–2024)

LOCAL AUTHORITY	PROMISING PROSPECTS	CONDITIONS OF CHILDHOOD	LABOUR MARKET OPPORTUNITIES	INNOVATION AND GROWTH
Northern Ireland	Least favourable	Middling	Lower middling	Middling

This profile points to a region where early-life conditions and innovation capacity are not translating into strong pathways from education into work. The particularly weak performance on Promising Prospects highlights systemic challenges in alignment between education, skills, and labour market demand.

DISTINCTIVE REGIONAL INSIGHTS FROM THE CONSULTATION

Systemic and structural factors: Northern Ireland's social mobility challenges are shaped by a set of deeply contextual factors not present in other parts of the UK. Participants repeatedly emphasised that the legacy of conflict continues to influence opportunity structures, social cohesion, and institutional collaboration. Areas most affected by violence during the Troubles were identified as those still experiencing the highest levels of deprivation today.

Structural underinvestment emerged as a defining challenge. Participants highlighted weaknesses in housing, childcare, energy, and water infrastructure, contributing to high levels of poverty and instability for families. These conditions were seen as directly undermining educational attainment and limiting young people's ability to access and sustain employment, even where motivation and aspiration exist. Intersectionality, especially ethnicity, disability, and caring responsibilities, was repeatedly raised as compounding disadvantage, with structural and systemic barriers experienced most acutely by those from lower SEBs who face additional forms of discrimination.

Social factors: Historic community divisions were reported to continue affecting collaboration between schools, limiting shared provision and constraining young people's exposure to wider networks and opportunities. Participants stressed that cross-community education and employment pathways remain essential to improving long-term social mobility outcomes.

Business and skills factors: A further theme was the misalignment between the curriculum and current and future labour market needs. Employers and educators alike described a disconnect between what young people are trained for and the opportunities available locally, reinforcing the weak transition from education into work reflected in the [SMC data](#). Participants noted that this contributes to both underemployment and the outward migration of talent.

WHAT NORTHERN IRELAND SHOWS US

Northern Ireland illustrates how social mobility cannot be addressed through generic, UK-wide approaches alone. Its post-conflict history, patterns of segregation, and infrastructure deficits create a distinct mobility context. Improving social mobility in Northern Ireland will require long-term, place-specific strategies that treat social mobility as a core component of economic and social renewal.



Glasgow City Region

SOCIAL MOBILITY ACROSS THE GLASGOW CITY REGION (SMC'S SOCIAL MOBILITY INDEX 2018–2024)

LOCAL AUTHORITY	PROMISING PROSPECTS	CONDITIONS OF CHILDHOOD	LABOUR MARKET OPPORTUNITIES	INNOVATION AND GROWTH
East Dunbartonshire	Lower middling	Most favourable	Lower middling	Upper middling
East Renfrewshire	Middling	Most favourable	Lower middling	Middling
Glasgow City	Middling	Lower middling	Upper middling	Upper middling
Inverclyde	Middling	Lower middling	Lower middling	Lower middling
North Lanarkshire	Lower middling	Unfavourable	Lower middling	Lower middling
Renfrewshire	Lower middling	Middling	Middling	Middling
South Lanarkshire	Middling	Middling	Middling	Lower middling
West Dunbartonshire	Lower middling	Unfavourable	Middling	Lower middling

This profile highlights an uneven region, where strong performance in some areas coexists with persistent disadvantage in others. The region benefits from a rich international trade heritage through Port Glasgow and a diverse economic base. However, these strengths are constrained by [worsening business survival rates, uneven productivity across local authorities, and high levels of economic inactivity linked to long-term sickness and skills gaps](#) – all of which have direct implications for social mobility.

DISTINCTIVE REGIONAL INSIGHTS FROM THE CONSULTATION

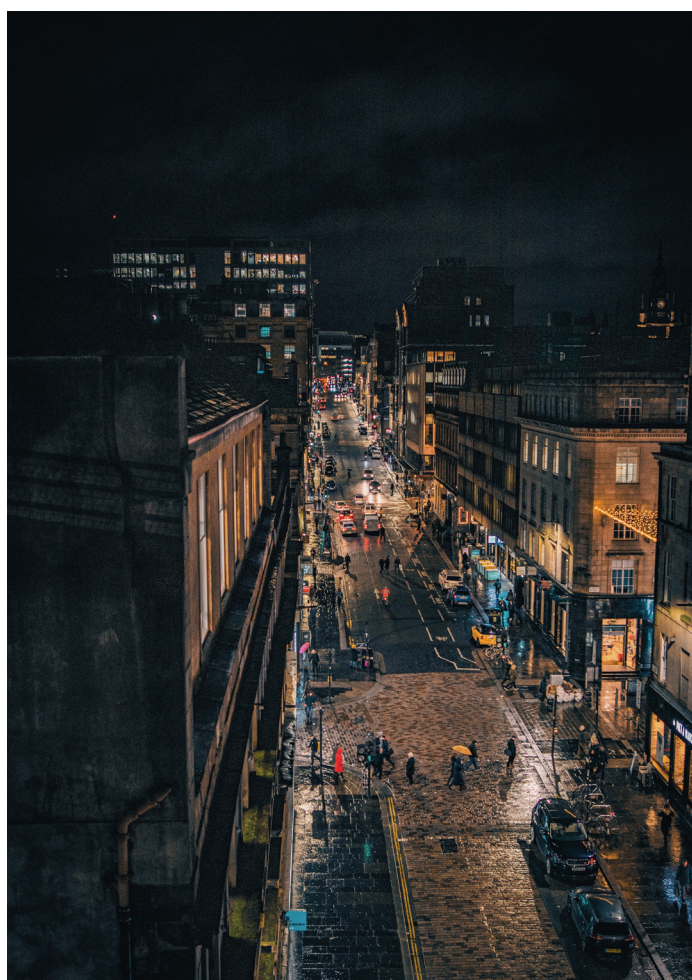
While participants echoed many of the common challenges seen elsewhere, including confidence and cultural barriers, poverty, weak progression pathways, and complexity for SMEs, the Glasgow consultation highlighted a distinctive issue: the sheer complexity of its opportunity landscape that makes opportunity difficult to see, navigate, and sustain.

Systemic factors: Glasgow benefits from a high level of activity and innovation, with a breadth of initiatives that is a valuable model for many other regions. However, participants described the landscape of programmes, initiatives, and organisations, spanning employability, skills, anti-poverty, education, and financial support, as crowded and operating in silos rather than as a coherent system.

For individuals and employers alike, navigating this landscape was described as confusing and time-consuming. Additionally, accountability for long-term outcomes is weak. As a result, it is often unclear whether high volumes of engagement translate into sustained employment, progression, or improved mobility outcomes.

WHAT GLASGOW CITY REGION SHOWS US

The region illustrates how social mobility can be constrained not by a lack of provision, but by fragmented systems and weak coordination. It demonstrates the importance of simplifying access, improving navigation, and strengthening accountability across complex regional ecosystems.



Cardiff Capital Region

SOCIAL MOBILITY ACROSS THE CARDIFF CAPITAL REGION (SMC'S SOCIAL MOBILITY INDEX 2018–2024)				
LOCAL AUTHORITY	PROMISING PROSPECTS	CONDITIONS OF CHILDHOOD	LABOUR MARKET OPPORTUNITIES	INNOVATION AND GROWTH
Blaenau Gwent	Lower middling	Unfavourable	Lower middling	Unfavourable
Bridgend	Lower middling	Middling	Lower middling	Middling
Caerphilly	Unfavourable	Lower middling	Lower middling	Lower middling
Cardiff	Lower middling	Upper middling	Middling	Upper middling
Merthyr Tydfil	Middling	Unfavourable	Lower middling	Unfavourable
Monmouthshire	Middling	Middling	Middling	Middling
Newport	Lower middling	Lower middling	Middling	Middling
Rhondda Cynon Taf	Least favourable	Unfavourable	Lower middling	Lower middling
Torfaen	Lower middling	Lower middling	Middling	Lower middling
Vale of Glamorgan	Middling	Middling	Middling	Middling



This profile reflects a region where economic opportunity and innovation are concentrated in Cardiff, while surrounding communities, particularly in the Valleys, experience significantly weaker childhood conditions, labour market access, and entry routes into employment.

DISTINCTIVE REGIONAL INSIGHTS FROM THE CONSULTATION

Structural factors: In South Wales and the Valleys, transport constraints were identified as an acute barrier. Participants described how poor reliability and long journey times restrict access to employment and training opportunities concentrated in Cardiff and other urban centres.

One large construction firm reported that, despite having funding and capacity for apprentices, recruitment was hindered by candidates' inability to reach worksites consistently.

Business and skills factors: A further distinctive challenge relates to divergent apprenticeship and skills frameworks in Wales. Participants highlighted that differences from the English system create specific barriers for both learners and employers.

Examples included the absence of certain professional apprenticeship routes available elsewhere in the UK, greater complexity in navigating levy-equivalent funding, and a lack of clear entry-level pathways for those with lower initial qualifications.

WHAT THE CARDIFF CAPITAL REGION SHOWS US

The Cardiff Capital Region illustrates how social mobility can be shaped by the combined effects of geography, transport infrastructure, and devolved policy design.

It highlights the risk that economic growth concentrated in a major city can widen, rather than narrow, regional inequalities unless accompanied by accessible transport, entry-level opportunities, and skills pathways that reflect local starting points.





Devon

SOCIAL MOBILITY ACROSS NORTHERN IRELAND (SMC'S SOCIAL MOBILITY INDEX 2018–2024)				
LOCAL AUTHORITY	PROMISING PROSPECTS	CONDITIONS OF CHILDHOOD	LABOUR MARKET OPPORTUNITIES	INNOVATION AND GROWTH
Devon County Council	Unfavourable	Middling	Lower middling	Middling

This profile points to a county where early-life conditions are not uniformly poor, but where pathways from education into sustained, well-paid employment are weak, reflecting limited local labour market depth and progression opportunities.

DISTINCTIVE REGIONAL INSIGHTS FROM THE CONSULTATION

Structural and systemic factors: Participants consistently described Devon as a region defined by geographic isolation. Large rural and coastal communities, limited urban centres, and weak transport infrastructure combine to restrict access to education, training, and employment.

The consultation also challenged traditional narratives of social mobility itself. In rural and coastal contexts, participants questioned the emphasis on 'upward' mobility into elite professions, noting that such pathways are structurally limited. Instead, there was support for recognising lateral mobility, job quality, security, and dignity as equally valid measures of progress.

Business and skills factors: The region's SME-dominated economy emerged as a defining constraint. With most businesses employing only a small number of staff, employers described how every hire represents a significant financial risk. While apprenticeships are valued, many SMEs struggle to sustain them, and flat organisational structures limit progression.

Secondly, the dominance of industries such as care, tourism, and hospitality further shapes social mobility outcomes. These sectors provide essential services and substantial employment, yet are typically low paid, insecure, and undervalued. Participants

argued that this is not a failure of individual aspiration, but a systemic devaluation of work that disproportionately affects women and coastal communities, reinforcing stigma and limiting perceptions of success.

WHAT DEVON SHOWS US

Devon demonstrates how social mobility policy can fall short in rural, SME-dominated economies where geography, labour market structure, and undervaluation of essential work constrain opportunity. It highlights the need for place-based approaches that recognise local labour markets, support SMEs, improve connectivity, and broaden definitions of progression beyond narrow, urban-centric models of success.



Exeter consultation

FINDING SOLUTIONS

CHALLENGES



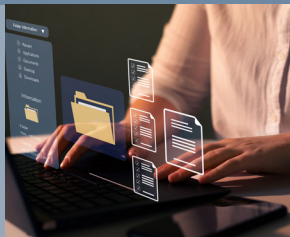
SOLUTIONS

1. Limited cross-sector collaboration



1. Establish regional social mobility hubs

2. Weaknesses in data collection, use, and accountability



2. Collect socio-economic data, conduct place-based analysis and set social mobility targets

3. Barriers linked to mindsets: confidence and workplace inclusion



3. Adopt inclusive place-based outreach, recruitment and workplace practices

4. Transport constraints in post-industrial and peripheral regions



4. Improve transport links and affordability, funding and prioritising cold spots

5. Underutilisation and complexity of apprenticeship and skills system



5. Ensure the Growth and Skills Levy delivers equitable, place-based access to opportunities

GOVERNMENT AND BUSINESS RECOMMENDATIONS



Recommendation 1:

Government and business should collaborate to establish regional social mobility hubs to strengthen local coordination and improve access to opportunity

The regional consultations revealed a consistent challenge across the UK: social mobility and employability initiatives are fragmented, short-term, and difficult for both employers and individuals to navigate. While many effective organisations and programmes already exist, including national and devolved bodies focused on careers and skills, they often operate with limited coordination, shared learning, or accountability.

To address this, the report recommends strengthening regional coordination through social mobility hubs, designed not as new standalone institutions, but as a convening platform that brings together existing organisations, employers, education providers, local authorities, and civil society to improve access to opportunity and progression across regions.

This need for stronger local coordination was raised consistently in every region visited and is echoed in the [House of Lords Social Mobility Committee's report](#), published in November 2025, which identified local partnerships as a template for progress.

CORE FUNCTIONS OF REGIONAL SOCIAL MOBILITY HUBS:

- 1. Place-based employer networks:** Coordinating employers around shared standards, inclusive recruitment practices, and pooled initiatives, with particular support for SME participation.
- 2. Sustained, coordinated outreach:** Aligning employer engagement with schools, community organisations, and job centres to move beyond one-off activity towards structured, multi-year pathways, particularly for NEET and marginalised groups.
- 3. Clear navigation and signposting:** Improving access to information on local education, training, and employment pathways by aligning and signposting existing provision, supported through schools and community partners.

Additional functions, depending on local need, could include mapping and quality-assuring initiatives, managing shared referral pathways, coordinating innovative use of apprenticeship levy transfers for SMEs, and supporting regional data collection and outcome tracking.



ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES:

Regional social mobility hubs should be publicly mandated, regionally anchored, and business enabled. No single actor can own them alone without undermining legitimacy, sustainability, or impact.

ROLE OF GOVERNMENT:

These hubs should be publicly mandated. Local or devolved government should provide the strategic mandate and accountability, ensuring alignment with regional economic, skills, and education priorities. Local authorities in some regions may also lead on the implementation of the hubs in collaboration with a business-led board.

ROLE OF EMPLOYERS:

In some regions, day-to-day delivery should be anchored by business organisations, such as Chambers of Commerce, employer networks or business-led boards, to ensure the hubs remain practical, employer-led, and accessible to SMEs.

A PHASED APPROACH TO IMPLEMENTATION:

Given the scale of cross-sector collaboration required, and variation in regional capacity, the report recommends a phased approach that builds on existing infrastructure and tests delivery models before wider rollout. In the first 12-18 months, we'd expect to see improved navigation, increased SME engagement, and more sustainable partnerships.

PHASE 1 (MONTHS 1-3): ESTABLISH A NATIONAL COORDINATION AND ADVISORY GROUP

As an initial outcome of this report, a national coordination and advisory group should be convened to map existing social mobility initiatives and partnerships and explore how they can collaborate more effectively. This group would bring together representatives from business, government, education, civil society, and organisations already operating in this space, such as careers and skills bodies across the UK nations.

PHASE 2 (MONTHS 3-12): PILOT CROSS-SECTOR SOCIAL MOBILITY HUBS IN TWO REGIONS

Building on Phase 1, cross-sector social mobility hubs should be piloted in two regions with differing economic and governance contexts. These pilots would test how they work in practice and provide the data to improve and adapt the model ahead of the full roll out.

PHASE 3 (MONTHS 12-24): ESTABLISH REGIONAL SOCIAL MOBILITY HUBS AT SCALE

Building on the pilots, regional social mobility hubs will be established across the UK, operating within a framework with national minimum standards but regionally tailored delivery models.

By focusing on coordination rather than new programmes, this recommendation is low-risk and scalable. It improves the effectiveness of what already exists, strengthens accountability, and provides a clearer entry point for employers and individuals navigating a complex system.

CASE STUDY: THE CARDIFF COMMITMENT – A MODEL OF REGIONAL COLLABORATION

The [Cardiff Commitment](#) is a city-wide partnership, led by the council, that brings together over 400 employers, education providers, public agencies, and community organisations to expand opportunities for young people, enabling them to gain the right skills to support employers in the Cardiff Capital Region.

Between 2022 and 2024, over 41,000 pupils engaged in programmes, with 152 completing work experience placements and receiving 100% positive feedback on student readiness for work. This initiative is a fantastic example of how sustained, place-based, cross-sector collaboration can transform local pathways into education and employment and is a useful blueprint for the regional social mobility hubs.

BUSINESS RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 2:

Businesses should improve how they collect, analyse, and act on socio-economic data about their workforce by setting social mobility targets and conducting place-based analysis

To unlock value, businesses should improve how they collect, analyse, and act on socio-economic data about their workforce, particularly through a place-based lens. Used effectively, this data enables organisations to expand and diversify their talent pipelines, reduce skills shortages, improve retention, and increase productivity by ensuring roles are filled and progressed based on potential rather than background.

Businesses should not only collect SEB data but also understand how to use it to identify barriers, target interventions, and measure impact, for example through benchmarking against sector standards, tracking recruitment and progression outcomes, and evaluating the effectiveness of inclusion initiatives.

COLLECT EMPLOYEE AND CANDIDATE DATA ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND:

Businesses should treat socio-economic diversity with the same rigour as other characteristics such as gender and ethnicity. The key metric to measure is parental occupation at age 14, which is currently the [best measure to assess someone's socio-economic background \(SEB\)](#), because it is easy to understand, accessible across ages and nationalities, and gives the clearest picture of employees' backgrounds.

Businesses should commit to tracking outcomes, not just participation. This includes analysing recruitment sources, progression rates, pay outcomes, and retention by SEB and by place. Experience from gender and ethnicity data collection shows that employee confidence increases when data collection is clearly linked to action and accountability. Applying these principles to socio-economic data can help address resistance and improve data quality.

Without socio-economic data, businesses risk missing talent, misdirecting inclusion efforts, weakening return on investment, and failing to target resources where they are needed most.

GEOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN OF DATA:

For large employers with regional offices or multiple sites, this data should be analysed by location, not just at a national level. A place-based approach enables organisations to identify how social mobility outcomes vary across regions, uncovering where talent pipelines are working well and where barriers persist.

National averages often mask regional underperformance, leading to inefficient allocation of resources and missed opportunities to replicate effective local practice. Analysing outcomes by place allows businesses to design targeted, cost-effective interventions aligned to local labour markets, transport access, and skills ecosystems. Over time, place-based data can also support collaboration through regional social mobility hubs, helping businesses align efforts.

SET TARGETS AND EMBED SOCIAL MOBILITY INTO LEADERSHIP PRIORITIES:

To deliver return on investment, social mobility must be treated as a business objective, not discretionary activity. By setting clear social mobility targets and embedding them into leadership performance frameworks, this can unlock latent talent and allow for it to thrive, mirroring approaches that have accelerated progress on gender and ethnicity. Where accountability is explicit, action is more consistent, outcomes improve, and investment is sustained beyond short-term leadership cycles. Ensuring there is a Social Mobility strategy that is embedded into leadership objectives ensures that workforce data is actively used to inform decision-making.

APPROACH FOR SMEs: A MINIMUM VIABLE STARTING POINT

Collecting socio-economic data can feel difficult, but it does not need to be complex. SMEs can start by asking one voluntary question at recruitment or onboarding, focusing on parental occupation at age 14. Being clear about why the data is being collected and how it will be used helps build trust and improve response rates. Even basic analysis, such as looking at where candidates come from or who progresses, can highlight barriers and opportunities. As confidence grows, businesses can expand their data collection over time. Shared tools and guidance through regional social mobility hubs can also help reduce the burden on smaller employers.

FOR ORGANISATIONS SEEKING TO BE RECOGNISED AS LEADERS

For more advanced organisations, publicly reporting on the SEB pay gap is an important next step. Transparency creates accountability and helps keep social mobility on the leadership

agenda. A small number of employers have started to report on SEB pay gaps, but progress remains limited. The report recommends that organisations follow the same approach used for gender pay gap reporting, including clear methods, narrative context, and action plans.

Public reporting strengthens accountability to deliver, data quality, drives action, and signals leadership across the wider business community.

You can find more information on how to collect and analyse SEB data using the [SMC's employer tool kit](#).

CASE STUDY: SETTING THE DIRECTION – HOW SOCIAL MOBILITY TARGETS ARE DRIVING ACCOUNTABILITY AT SLAUGHTER AND MAY

Slaughter and May demonstrate how setting clear, long-term social mobility targets can strengthen accountability and accelerate progress across an organisation. In 2023, the firm became the first major law firm to publish social mobility targets backed by a comprehensive action plan, providing a clear framework for sustained change.

Establishing these targets has helped embed social mobility as a leadership priority, sharpened organisational focus on representation and progression, and enabled progress to be tracked transparently over time. By setting out a clear direction and publicly committing to measurable outcomes, Slaughter and May illustrate how target setting can support deliberate decision making and provide a strong foundation for long-term improvement in socio-economic diversity across the legal sector.

Recommendation 3:

Adopt place-based outreach, inclusive recruitment and workplace practices to reach and support those furthest from the labour market

Businesses should use place-based socio-economic data to support local communities and provide an opportunity for talent to succeed. This can build understanding of specific regions and what barriers young people and their workforce are facing. Inclusive outreach, recruitment and workplace practices should then be designed in response to this evidence.

The aim is not to apply a standard set of initiatives nationally, but to target interventions where they will deliver the greatest impact. A place-based approach to inclusive outreach and recruitment has significant commercial value by enabling businesses to widen access to untapped talent pools, reduce recruitment and attrition costs, and build more resilient regional workforces.

For example, this may include:

- Working through trusted local partners, schools, colleges, youth services, and community organisations to reach candidates who are NEET, have lower confidence, or weaker networks.
- Providing remote working options in places where transport infrastructure is poor.
- Covering expenses for candidates that need to travel for interviews or assessments in places where transport is difficult or expensive.
- Creating initiatives that target specific groups of disadvantaged people in the region.
- Including local social impact initiatives and community outreach as part of employees' career progression metrics.
- Introducing locally relevant socio-economic awareness training for all employees. For example, on accent bias or cultural inclusion.
- Adapting recruitment criteria where academic attainment acts as an unintended barrier.

HOW TO GET STARTED

Action on inclusive recruitment should be seen as a journey of continuous improvement, not dependent on having perfect data from the outset. Don't worry if your data systems are still developing – there are many well-evidenced regional barriers to opportunity, such as limited access to networks, confidence gaps, transport constraints, and affordability which are already well understood and employers can take practical steps now to address them.

Start where you are. Learn as you go. Improve with evidence.

CASE STUDY: BROWNE JACOBSON – TACKLING ACCENT BIAS TO WIDEN PROGRESSION

Browne Jacobson has designed and is offering accent bias and socio-economic awareness training to address cultural barriers that can quietly shape opportunity within professional workplaces across the UK. The training is informed by sociolinguistic [research](#) obtained through research with University of Nottingham.

[Evidence](#) shows that accents linked to post-industrial cities and some ethnic minority communities are often evaluated less positively, with certain regional voices more likely to attract negative stereotypes. With offices around the country, Browne Jacobson is advancing social mobility by challenging assumptions about what sounds "professional," supporting colleagues with lower confidence to participate fully, and creating fairer hiring and client practices in each region where the firm operates.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Policymakers have a central role in shaping an enabling environment in which businesses can accelerate progress on reducing socio-economic inequality in the workplace. When public policy aligns with business leadership, it can improve outcomes across regions and sectors.

Recommendation 4:

Improve transport links and affordability to unlock access to opportunity

Affordable, reliable transport is a critical enabler of social mobility. Evidence from regional consultations highlights that transport barriers not only limit individual progression but also restrict employers' access to talent and undermine the effectiveness of skills and apprenticeship investment.

While recognising ongoing fiscal constraints, policymakers should move beyond viewing transport as a standalone infrastructure issue and instead integrate it into economic growth, skills, and social mobility strategies.

The report recommends five priority areas:

DEVOLVED GOVERNMENTS AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES:

- **Coordinate with employers on route planning:** Local and combined authorities should work with employers, particularly in manufacturing, logistics, and industrial zones,

to align bus, cycling, and active travel routes with shift patterns, training schedules, and apprenticeship start and finish times. This would improve take-up and retention while reducing recruitment friction for employers.

- **Prioritise 'cold spots' and rural areas:** Transport investment should be targeted at poorly connected communities, including coastal towns and rural areas, where limited physical mobility prevents residents from accessing nearby economic centres.
- **Reduce transport costs for learners and apprentices through targeted affordability measures:** Devolved authorities should introduce or scale schemes providing free or deeply discounted public transport for apprentices and learners aged 16–25. This would help ensure that travel costs do not act as a barrier to accessing or completing education, apprenticeships, and early-career opportunities. This approach aligns with calls from the SMC and builds on existing models in Scotland and Wales. Crucially, it links transport affordability directly to skills participation and workforce entry.



NATIONAL AND DEVOLVED GOVERNMENTS:

- **Complement physical transport improvements with flexible and virtual opportunities:** National and devolved government should encourage and enable employers to offer high-quality virtual, hybrid, and locally delivered training, work experience, and early-career opportunities for individuals in social mobility cold spots. This could be supported through targeted incentives, guidance, and tax reliefs that encourage businesses to engage with underrepresented regions, reducing reliance on travel where appropriate while expanding access to opportunity.
- National government should make clear that transport affordability must not be a barrier to participation in education, training, or apprenticeships, and should require devolved and local authorities to demonstrate how this is being addressed within transport and skills strategies. National government should set minimum expectations for apprentice and learner transport support, linked to funding and accountability frameworks.

Recommendation 5:

Ensure the Growth and Skills Levy delivers equitable, place-based access to apprenticeships and skills opportunities

The government's April 2026 rollout of the [Growth and Skills Levy](#), replacing the previous Apprenticeship Levy, represents a significant and welcome shift in the post-16 skills landscape. The reforms have the potential to unlock more opportunities, particularly for young people, SMEs, and those currently furthest from the labour market. With this report launching alongside the reforms, the focus now must shift from policy intent to delivery, ensuring that the promise of policy translates into meaningful change on the ground.

Evidence from consultations across regions underscores persistent barriers that reforms alone, however well-intentioned, will not automatically resolve. Employers and learners alike have identified uncertainty about eligible uses of levy funds, administrative complexity, uneven engagement by SMEs, and regional disparities in access and take-up as risks that could limit the reforms' impact.

To realise the full potential of the Growth and Skills Levy for social mobility, policy makers should prioritise clarity, place-based delivery, and targeted support. Regional social mobility hubs can act as key delivery mechanisms to support the successful implementation of the reforms.

Action 1: Publish implementation guidance within the first 30 days of rollout.

Within the first 30 days of the Growth and Skills Levy going live, government should publish detailed operational guidance for employers across all four nations. This must include the definition and parameters of any new 'apprenticeship units' and short-course provision, supported by worked examples for employers, providers, and learners. This early clarity will reduce uncertainty, prevent delayed uptake, and enable employers (particularly SMEs) to plan confidently and invest in training pathways.

Action 2: Enable the levy reforms to work for SMEs by supporting apprentice wages as well as training costs

In many disadvantaged regions across the UK, local economies are dominated by SMEs. Reforms to the Growth & Skills Levy

must therefore work for small employers if they are to create real opportunities for young people there. The removal of the 5 per cent co-investment requirement for SMEs is an important step, as training costs for eligible under 25 apprentices will be fully funded. However, training costs are not the main barrier for many SMEs, with many wanting to hire apprentices but unable to afford wage costs. Without further support, these reforms may not lead to more apprentice starts or completions.

The report calls on government to allow levy funds to be used for apprentice wages as well as training. Through the levy transfer system, large employers could pass unused funds to SMEs or charities. This would significantly reduce the financial risk for SMEs, making it easier to create entry-level opportunities and expand access to apprenticeships in SME-dominated regions.

Action 3: Strengthen navigation and learner support across regions.

Learners and employers alike report that the complexity of the current system, even post-reform, presents a barrier to access. Government should invest in accessible, impartial careers guidance and local outreach, particularly for those furthest from opportunity.

Regional social mobility hubs can play a central role by acting as a trusted local single point of truth: coordinating employer engagement, offering clear signposting to apprenticeship and training opportunities, supporting SMEs with implementation guidance, and helping learners navigate entry, progression, and completion across fragmented systems.

By taking these actions, government can ensure that a once-in-a-generation reform delivers transformative results. Aligning the report launch with these reforms provides an opportunity to amplify this momentum: reforms set the direction; now we must ensure they are delivered in ways that widen access, reduce regional disparities, and make apprenticeships a meaningful route into sustained, quality employment for all.

CONCLUSION



There is encouraging progress underway across the UK to advance social mobility, with government, employers, and communities taking important steps towards creating wider opportunity and more productive workplaces. The evidence in this report demonstrates that implementation is now the decisive factor: nationally designed reforms will only deliver transformative impact if they are shaped and delivered through a regional lens.

Local partnership emerged repeatedly as the foundation of success by coordinating employers, educators, and civil society around shared, long-term objectives. This place-based approach reflects the realities of the UK's diverse economies, many of which are led by SMEs and characterised by peripheral labour markets and transport cold spots.

For business, action on social mobility is a source of competitive advantage, widening access to high-performing talent and strengthening engagement and retention. For policymakers,

the 2026 skills reforms provide momentum and direction. The challenge now is to convert that momentum into equitable outcomes in every region and for every background.

This report has shown that social mobility is a shared economic and social challenge, experienced differently in Belfast, Cardiff, Leeds, Glasgow, Exeter, and the communities around them. By bringing regional voices together, it demonstrates that progress depends less on the number of programmes and more on the strength of the local systems that connect them; transport that reaches opportunity, apprenticeships that are accessible to all, and workplaces that recognise potential in every community. Taken as a whole, the findings offer a practical blueprint for how business and policy can work side by side to widen opportunity.

The direction is increasingly clear; the task ahead is to stay focused on delivery, collaboration, and the long term so that opportunity in the UK becomes genuinely open to everyone.

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