



Department
for Education

Government response to the Education Select Committee report into the future of the Social Mobility Commission

May 2018



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**Presented to Parliament
by the Secretary of State for Education
by Command of Her Majesty**

May 2018



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Government response to the Education Select Committee report into the future of the Social Mobility Commission

The Education Select Committee published the report of its enquiry into the future of the Social Mobility Commission on 22nd March 2018. This document sets out the government's response to the Committee's report.

Introduction

We welcome the Committee's recognition of the importance of the Social Mobility Commission's role. We are committed to improving social mobility and see the Commission as a vital partner in this work. We value the wide-ranging work carried out by the Commission, including their research programme, their State of the Nation annual reports and both the Social Mobility Index and the Social Mobility Employer Index, which has been invaluable in keeping a focus on social mobility across government, business and wider society.

Social mobility is a cross-government priority. The government's Industrial Strategy, published in November, sets out a clear plan to boost prosperity and productivity by focusing on places and people. We are also boosting salaries through the introduction of the National Living Wage, creating more full-time, permanent jobs, and investing in affordable housing. Taken together, this will not just change individual lives, it will help transform our country into a fairer society.

The work of the Social Mobility Commission underlines the importance of focusing our efforts in more disadvantaged areas where we can make the biggest difference. By working to boost attainment and opportunity – both inside and outside the classroom – we want to help all young people fulfil their potential. Our Opportunity Areas programme is developing evidence-based approaches to tackle entrenched underperformance alongside wider investment to improve early numeracy, literacy, and teacher recruitment in areas that need it most, as well as working with businesses locally to raise sights and broaden horizons for young people.

In December 2017, the Department for Education published *'Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential'* which sets out the Department's plan for improving social mobility through education. The plan set out five ambitions which cover the key life stages of people's education. These ambitions are:

- No community left behind.
- Close the 'word gap' in early years.
- Close the attainment gap in school while continuing to raise standards for all.
- High quality post-16 choices for all young people.

- Everyone achieving their potential in rewarding careers.

Our plans build on this government's reforms since 2010, which are transforming opportunities for all children and young people right through their educational journey. This includes 1.9 million more children in good and outstanding schools than in 2010, record numbers of young people in education or training and more disadvantaged pupils going to university.

We are delighted to announce Dame Martina Milburn as our preferred candidate for Chair of the Commission. The recruitment of a candidate with a proven track record of leadership on social mobility and social justice demonstrates our commitment to the future of the Commission and we look forward to working with her to set out an ambitious agenda for action in due course.

This government's mission is to make Britain a country that works for everyone, and to tackle injustices that mean not everyone has access to the same opportunities. Our plans will deliver targeted action where it is needed most, focusing on people and places that have not yet benefitted from the improvement seen elsewhere and by others.

Responses to individual recommendations

Recommendations 1-3:

1. The Commission, as a body driven and informed by data and analysis, is well placed to produce social justice impact assessments for domestic policy. These impact assessments should not only be a means by which negative effects are flagged, but should be used to help government improve policy for the benefit of improving social justice. (Paragraph 9)

2. *We recommend that the Commission should be given specific power to publish social justice impact assessments on both policy and legislative proposals. The Government must ensure that the Commission is sufficiently resourced to be able to fulfil these additional functions.* (Paragraph 10)

3. *We recommend that the Commission be empowered to give advice proactively to Ministers on how to improve social justice in England, in addition to its duty to give advice to Ministers on request.* (Paragraph 14)

We welcome the importance the Committee places on social justice, as we believe that you cannot have social mobility without it. We believe that these two terms, and the groups whom they refer to, are intrinsically linked. Social justice is a term which has come to denote a specific focus on the most deprived in society, making sure they have the opportunities to succeed enjoyed by others and are not held back by their circumstances. Social mobility – making sure that someone's background does not determine their future chances in life – therefore must have social justice at its core.

Given the breadth of the Commission's remit, we think that it is able to advise on a range of issues relevant to both social mobility and social justice. Much of the Commission's previous research touches on social justice, for example, last autumn it published '*The Great Escape? Low pay and progression in the workplace*' about the labour market. The Commission's 2017 State of the Nation report also talks about the critical importance of the transition from school to work. We hope the Commission will continue to work on important issues that affect social justice and the world of work.

Given the Commission's existing remit, we do not believe that it needs to be given specific powers to publish social justice impact assessments or to proactively give advice to Ministers. We believe that departments themselves are best placed to consider the impact of policy and legislative proposals on social justice, as they are the experts on their policy areas. As the Committee will be aware, the public sector Equality Duty already requires public bodies to have due regard to the need to advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not.

Once the new Chair is in place, we are keen to consider how we can best use existing powers to ask the Commission to provide advice to Ministers on specific topics. We are particularly keen to use this power to request advice on issues relating to social justice. Further to this, we would like reassure the Committee that we are committed to sufficiently resourcing the Commission to carry out its functions effectively and we look forward to working with the new Chair to develop an ambitious agenda.

Recommendations 4-5:

4. The Commission's membership should not have been allowed to dwindle to the point that it did. We recommend that the minimum membership of the Commission should be at least seven members in addition to the Chair. (Paragraph 19)

5. We were concerned to hear Mr Milburn's report of the "farcical" failed appointments process for the new Commissioners. The Government must ensure that future appointment processes do not follow the pattern of this process, which was wholly unacceptable. (Paragraph 20)

We are aware that the Commission's membership previously fell to a lower level than it should have. We have now announced that Martina Milburn is our preferred candidate for Chair and we intend to begin the recruitment process for new Commissioners once the new Chair is formally appointed. This will allow the Chair to be involved in the process of recruiting a high quality Board with a range of skills and expertise. We are committed to appointing a sufficient number of high quality Commissioners to enable the Social Mobility Commission to carry out its functions effectively.

Recommendation 6:

6. We recommend that the name of the Commission be changed from the Social Mobility Commission to the Social Justice Commission. (Paragraph 22)

As set out above, we welcome the importance the Committee places on social justice, and believe that this is already an intrinsic part of its role in furthering social mobility. We can assure the Committee that we believe the Commission should be as concerned with helping the most disadvantaged as it is with outcomes for a wider group. We believe that it is appropriate for the Commission's remit to remain broad, enabling the new Chair to direct its work as they see fit, but this remit does include the most deprived part of society. We therefore believe that the name of the Social Mobility Commission should remain, which is in keeping with the Department for Education's social mobility action plan '*Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential*'.

We recognise the importance of social justice as a specific aim and would also like to assure the Committee that a commitment to social justice has been a consideration in the appointment of the new Chair. Working with the new Chair we will also include a commitment to social justice in the person specification for new Commissioners, to ensure that this important issue is fully supported by the new Board.

Recommendations 7-9:

7. An independent body reporting from the outside of Government on the progress made on improving social justice should work in tandem with a body inside Government to coordinate action and implement solutions. There must be clear communication between the two bodies to ensure that the implementation and coordination body is able to act effectively on the Commission's research. (Paragraph 24)

8. Even the best monitoring and reporting on social mobility is of limited value unless the outcomes of the reports and recommendations are acted upon. The combination of a strengthened Commission and a body at the heart of Government to drive forward recommendations would better demonstrate the Government's commitment to social mobility. (Paragraph 28)

9. *We recommend that a Minister in the Cabinet Office be given specific responsibility for leading cross-government work on social mobility. The Minister should have responsibility for a dedicated unit with a remit to tackle social injustice, provide vital coordination across Government and ensure effective implementation of ways to increase social mobility. The body would also be the crucial reporting hub for the Commission to report into Government.* (Paragraph 29)

We believe that education is absolutely fundamental to social mobility, which is why the Social Mobility Commission is sponsored by the Department for Education. Nadhim Zahawi MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families, is currently responsible for social mobility including Opportunity Areas. Furthermore, Damian Hinds MP, Secretary of State for Education, is absolutely committed to social mobility and was previously Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Social Mobility. *'Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential'*, published in December 2017, sets out the Department for Education's plan for improving social mobility through education. We continue to value the wide-ranging work carried out by the Commission. For example, the areas chosen for the £72 million Opportunity Areas programme, which is developing evidence-based approaches to tackle entrenched underperformance, were informed in part by the Commission's 2016 Social Mobility Index.

However, we fully appreciate that social mobility goes beyond education alone, which is why social mobility is a cross-government priority. This is why we are taking action on a range of issues raised by the Commission in its reports, including low pay, home ownership and unpaid internships. Furthermore, to ensure that attention is paid to the Commission's work at the highest level, we will ensure that the new Chair and Commission has increased Ministerial engagement in order to discuss how best government departments can take forward its recommendations.

Conclusion

In responding to the Education Select Committee's report into the future of the Social Mobility Commission, we have been clear that there is a consensus between the government and the Committee on the importance of the role of the Commission, on both social mobility and social justice. We look forward to working with the incoming Chair to recruit a high quality Board, allowing the Commission to continue its work on these important issues. We would like to thank the Select Committee for its careful consideration of these issues, and for its report and recommendations.

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