



# FOSTERING SOCIAL MOBILITY IN THE WORKFORCE

Thriving Places Roundtable Report

January 2025





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## What is social mobility?

A person experiences social mobility when they have different life outcomes from their parents. This could include changes in income level, career path, education, housing and health. Greater upward social mobility benefits everyone.

# FOREWORD

*“Research by McKinsey shows that businesses with higher rates of diversity in their workforce perform better, as attracting top talent from the widest pool improves customer orientation, employee satisfaction and decision making.<sup>1</sup>*

*“Socioeconomic background is often less visible than other diversity characteristics, and the business benefits of social mobility can be more hidden. However, there is increasing evidence that low social mobility comes at a cost to the economy – and to individual companies.<sup>1</sup>*

*“In November 2024, British Land hosted a breakfast roundtable for some of our valued customers and partners at varied stages of fostering social mobility in their workforce. Together, we had an open conversation to share knowledge and gain insights into how we might collectively progress in this area.*

*“In this report, we are pleased to share opportunities, challenges and proactive advice highlighted during our roundtable.”*



Anna Devlet  
Head of Social Sustainability  
British Land

GREENER SPACES

THRIVING PLACES

RESPONSIBLE CHOICES

***“Talent is everywhere,  
opportunity is not. Our job is  
to provide the opportunity.”***

- Roundtable participant



# WHY IS SOCIAL MOBILITY IMPORTANT FOR BUSINESS?

## RECRUITMENT BENEFIT

*"Businesses can benefit from socioeconomic diversity. We need diverse skills and ideas. Also, people want to work for companies whose values align with their own."*

- Roundtable participant

## LICENCE TO OPERATE

*"Social mobility is part of our licence to operate for colleagues, customers and communities. We think regulation is likely in the future."*

- Roundtable participant

## £39bn ECONOMIC GROWTH

Increasing the UK's social mobility, so that it matches the average of Western European countries, could increase GDP by £39bn per year.<sup>2</sup>

## CONTRIBUTING TO A FAIRER SOCIETY

*"Your postcode and parents' occupations should not dictate your future."*

- Roundtable participant



# WHAT ARE THE BIG CHALLENGES?

Fostering social mobility is an integral aspect of diversity and social impact programmes and helps drive commercial success, yet it remains challenging for many businesses.

## Changing views

People may believe that if you work hard, you'll succeed. However, systemic and structural barriers can prevent people from accessing opportunities in education and employment. It may be harder now than at any point in over half a century to move up if you are born in a position of disadvantage.<sup>3</sup>

Young people from less well-off backgrounds who attend university are more likely to move into higher income brackets.<sup>4</sup> However, increased higher education costs act as a significant barrier, risking lost generations.

## Language

The language of social mobility needs changing. Not only can it be unintentionally condescending, but it also often fails to engage and is further challenged by people avoiding/shying away from discussions about class.

Different approaches include focusing on fairness through campaigns and asking questions such as "do you believe which school you attended should determine where you get to?".

**"Who wants to be labelled 'disadvantaged'?"**

- Roundtable participant

## Data

Measuring socioeconomic data is complex, with no single indicator of an individual's socioeconomic background.<sup>1</sup> Differing regulations also mean different questions are needed in UK and other countries. Examples include:

- *What was the main household earner's job when you were aged 14?*
- *What type of school did you attend?*
- *Were you eligible for free school meals?*
- *Did either of your parents attend university and gain a degree?*
- *How many books were there in your house at five years old?*

Some metrics miss those who are most vulnerable, such as people who have spent time in care or whose parents were in prison.

Disclosure rates also tend to be lower than for other diversity metrics, as socioeconomic backgrounds can be hidden, people might not want others to know and there's a lack of trust that data is kept anonymous.

**"Socioeconomic metrics are currently unreliable."**

- Roundtable participant

**Only half**

of UK employees from lower socioeconomic backgrounds feel completely safe to be open about their background.<sup>5</sup>

# WHAT ARE THE BIG CHALLENGES? (CONTINUED)

## Progression

There is currently more focus on recruiting people, than helping people to progress in their careers. While it is a start, it's not enough for people to understand that there are jobs and opportunities. Once they join, it's important to track their progress, reflecting on where the barriers are and taking action.

## Diversity

Socioeconomic diversity is intersectional, as socioeconomic factors combine with gender, ethnicity, sexuality, disability and other diversity factors, which can exacerbate the disadvantages experienced by people in those groups. It is also less visible than some other diversity factors.

Socioeconomic diversity is not currently a characteristic that is legally protected against discrimination in the UK and does not require mandatory reporting. Businesses should not wait until it becomes required, as we will be missing out on talent.

## International

Regulatory and cultural differences make it hard for global companies to develop a consistent message. In countries where there is a strong societal concept of 'fair opportunities for all', there can be a natural defensiveness and view to 'just work hard and you'll get there'. Social mobility remains important, but initiatives may need to be rebadged.

***“Someone doesn’t lose an opportunity by someone else gaining one. Done right, everyone benefits.”***

- Roundtable participant

***“It’s not just entry level, it’s every level.”***

- Roundtable participant

***“It is dangerous to put types of diversity into boxes, seeing them as separate problems to solve.”***

- Roundtable participant





# HOW DO YOU FOSTER SOCIAL MOBILITY?

Here we are pleased to share successful initiatives, potential partners and useful tools highlighted by roundtable participants.

## MAKE LANGUAGE INCLUSIVE

*"Nothing about us, without us. This principle should underpin everything, so people affected are directly involved in shaping plans."*

- Roundtable participant

## REVIEW, REFLECT AND REACT

Reflect on potential barriers. What could be stopping people entering and progressing? And how could this change?

## CO-DESIGN FOR DEEPER INSIGHTS

Engage with people from the communities that you're looking to strengthen and co-design what you do. They will identify things you've not thought of.

## LEARN FROM LEADERS

Network with businesses and learn from sectors where more progress has been made, such as law and accountancy.

# SUCCESSFUL INITIATIVES:

## 1. Inclusive outreach and recruitment

Before students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds apply for opportunities, pair them with colleagues for support writing their applications. This can transform their success rates. Engage with young students so, by the time they come to apply, they're ready.

Shorten the time it takes to apply for internships, apprenticeships and graduate schemes, as this can be a barrier for people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who may be more time poor.

Fund transport and food for outreach. Pay interns.

On graduate and apprentice schemes, don't badge and ringfence 'social mobility' cohorts within your organisation as this can make participants feel different and affect their trajectory.

Targets for early careers intake can be beneficial.

***"We thought we were treating everyone equally because we were asking them the same questions, but some people face extra barriers, so it wasn't equal."***

- Roundtable participant

Only one in five

UK employees from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are promoted every three years - compared to one in four for other employees. <sup>5</sup>

## 2. Thriving in the workplace

- **Employee networks:** Integrate social mobility into existing networks or establish a distinct network to elevate the conversation, which has been dominated by other diversity factors in recent years.
- **Reciprocal mentoring:** Also known as 360° or mutual mentoring, this can bring shared benefits and grow understanding of hidden barriers. It avoids some of the potential pitfalls of reverse mentoring, which requires those who already face barriers to do the heavy lifting.
- **Storytelling:** This helps build understanding. It can be powerful when senior leaders who didn't go to university or grew up in social housing share their stories. Leaders from more privileged backgrounds can also be advocates and share their platforms.
- **Mainstream:** Bring social mobility into mainstream conversations. Hand the baton to broader teams. This helps keep consistency as people at all levels of the business change.
- **Progression:** Business responds to self-advocacy, but people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may be less confident to do this and so secure fewer promotions. How formal are your promotion processes? What training have line managers received?
- **Targets:** Many firms have corporate and personal targets for diversity, equality and inclusion that link to colleagues' reviews and incentives. Do these targets extend to social mobility?



# SUCCESSFUL INITIATIVES:

## 3. Data matters

Capture and disclose socioeconomic diversity, tracking it through recruitment, entry level and onto progression and tenure within your organisation. Take action where this shows gaps and barriers.

Overlay diversity data onto employee engagement surveys to gain new insights. Are colleagues from lower socioeconomic backgrounds more or less engaged than others, and if so, why?

Strictly limit who has access to this data to reduce concerns about anonymity and increase disclosure rates.

## 4. Advocacy

Engage with your clients and suppliers on social mobility. Change can be driven by the actions of large providers. Questions asked at the roundtable, by organisations at different stages of their journey, included:

- Does social mobility feature in your tender requirements and contracts for suppliers?
- Could you offer preferential terms or even financial incentives to clients driving social mobility, similar to banks providing green finance to support environmentally-friendly investment?
- Do you consider social mobility requirements for panels, as many organisations now do for other diversity factors, such as gender?

***“Data is the measure of what you’re doing and can guide you, but it’s not the driver.”***

- Roundtable participant

***“When we asked every supplier to bring a junior colleague to our annual conference, usually only attended by senior contacts, the energy and engagement in the room was incredible.”***

- Roundtable participant



# POTENTIAL RESOURCES

- [Social Mobility Employer Index](#): A useful application process to go through, wherever you are on your journey. Run by the Social Mobility Foundation, it measures your performance and highlights opportunities to improve. You can enter confidentially. Look for your peers and partners in the Top 75 and find out what they have done. The Social Mobility Foundation also runs useful seminars. Take a colleague who you want to engage in your organisation's social mobility journey.
- [The Bridge Group](#): A potential partner to help you understand how socioeconomic background affects access to, and success in, your sector. Recommendations from their research into socioeconomic diversity in real estate, supported by JLL UK Foundation, include expanding careers guidance for young people, reforming recruitment processes, developing clearer and more objective talent definitions, and collating socioeconomic diversity data.<sup>6</sup>
- [Access Accountancy](#) / [PRIME](#): Potential models to give young people a deeper understanding of careers in your sector, including through interactions with professionals and work experience.
- [Social Mobility in the Workplace](#): Created by The Sutton Trust, this employer's guide covers a range of issues, from how to measure the socioeconomic make-up of your workforce, to contextual recruitment and best practice advice on routes into the workplace.



***“The report you get at the end of the Social Mobility Employer Index process is some of the best value consultancy out there.”***

- Roundtable participant

***“Act on findings! I don't want to do research if recommendations aren't acted on.”***

- Roundtable participant



# COLLABORATIVE OPPORTUNITIES

*"We can never underestimate the power of collaboration."*

*"Across our campuses, British Land is in a unique position to connect customers to one another and to local partners, helping customers meet their own targets and attract and retain the best talent. In a rapidly changing external environment, this is more important than ever."*

*"Our dedicated Social Impact Managers, based on each campus, make collaboration easier for our customers. Initiatives already in place include work experience, internships, campus community funds and customer networks, where people share knowledge and experience and identify new opportunities together."*

*"The pandemic, cost of living crisis, and other economic challenges have visibly affected learning hours, job opportunities, and career growth across all industries."*

*"Co-op and Demos report that the UK economy loses £19bn in GDP annually due to a systemic failure to promote social mobility in the workplace.<sup>7</sup>"*

*"We look forward to exploring new ideas, whether that's sharing office space, donating funds, or contributing skills. Together, we can make a continuous change for others to follow and, ideally, improve on."*



Adonica Simmons  
Senior Social Impact Lead  
British Land

We encourage customers who want to make a positive impact locally to contact us, for ready-to-join initiatives, connections with local partners and community funds run by our Social Impact Managers:  
[sustainability@britishland.com](mailto:sustainability@britishland.com)



***"Before today, I wondered 'where do we even start?!' Now I know that there are resources out there."***

- Roundtable participant

***"It's invigorating to meet advocates for social mobility across lots of industries."***

- Roundtable participant



# THANK YOU

A special thanks to all who attended the roundtable discussion, including:

Citypress

Herbert Smith Freehills

JLL

Microsoft

Relation

SMBC Group

TP ICAP



# REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> McKinsey: [Fixing the ladder: How UK businesses benefit from better social mobility](#) (2023)

<sup>2</sup> Sutton Trust: [Social Mobility: The Next Generation - lost potential at age 16](#) (2023)

<sup>3</sup> Institute for Fiscal Studies: [Social mobility continues to fall](#) and [Intergenerational Mobility in the UK](#) (2023)

<sup>4</sup> Sutton Trust: [Universities and Social Mobility: Summary Report](#) (2021)

<sup>5</sup> Accenture: A fair chance to advance: [The power of culture to break socioeconomic barriers in the workplace](#) (2022)

<sup>6</sup> The Bridge Group: [Socio-economic diversity in the real estate sector](#) (2020)

<sup>7</sup> Co-op: [Lack of Social Mobility Costs the UK Economy £19bn a Year](#) (2024)





British Land is a UK commercial property company focused on real estate sectors with the strongest operational fundamentals: London campuses, retail parks, and London urban logistics.

Our purpose is to create and manage Places People Prefer – outstanding places that deliver positive outcomes for all our stakeholders on a long term, sustainable basis. We do this by leveraging our best-in-class platform and proven expertise in development, repositioning and active asset management.

We have both a responsibility and an opportunity to manage our business in an environmentally and socially responsible manner.

Our approach to sustainability is focused on three pillars:  
**Greener Spaces. Thriving Places. Responsible Choices.**

[www.britishland.com/sustainability](http://www.britishland.com/sustainability)