



Social Mobility
Commission

APPG on Social Mobility:

Socio-economic diversity and progression in the workplace

26 October 2021



Introduction

- The SMC, through our Employer programme, works with employers across multiple sectors to create more inclusive and diverse socio-economic workforces – and together we created our first [employer toolkit](#) in February 2020.
- This work highlighted that, for many employers, attracting those from lower socio-economic backgrounds was already a focus – through outreach and early-in-careers hiring
- However, there was a less of an understanding on the experience of these employees once they are in – how do they ‘get on’? There is a need to shift the focus from access to **progression**
- The Civil Service is uniquely placed to provide answers; it is already a national leader on social mobility
- As Commission largely staffed by career civil servants it felt important to do something within our own profession – to give us a platform to share with others
- The action plan created from the research can be utilised by employers in other sectors

What does the evidence tell us about progression within different sectors?

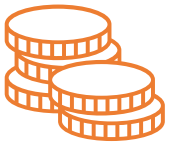
Research within a number of different industries in the past 18 months has shown, that even when people from lower socio-economic backgrounds get into a sector, their career progression within that sector is slower than that of their peers from a higher SEB background.



Bridge group: [Pathways to partnership: challenging the myth of meritocracy](#), 2020

Research undertaken with 10 firms in the Legal Sector showed those from lower socio-economic backgrounds take **a year and a half longer** on average to reach legal partner than their colleagues from higher social groups.

Commission by City of London Corporation and authored by the Bridge Group, [Who gets ahead and how? Socio-economic background and career progression in financial services](#), 2020



A deep dive with 8 employers in the sector, this research found that employees from lower socio-economic backgrounds took **25% longer to progress** through grades in financial services firms. This 'progression gap' cannot be explained by performance. There was no statistical evidence to link performance with socio-economic background.

Both pieces of research led to the launch of an independent taskforce, commissioned by HM Treasury and BEIS, and run by City of London Corporation, to focus on boosting representation at the top in financial and professional services.

Progression (cont/d)

Bridge Group: [Socio-economic diversity in the real estate sector](#), 2020



Research delivered in collaboration with 12 Real estate firms showed that the sector already has a smaller proportion of employees from lower socio-economic backgrounds (27%) than other sectors, and **over half of those in senior positions** come from a higher socio-economic background.

Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre, [Getting in and getting on – Class participation and job quality in the UK Creative Industries](#), 2020



Those from privileged backgrounds are more than twice as likely to land a job in a creative occupation, dominating key creative roles. They are also more likely to experience greater autonomy, have supervisory responsibility and **to progress into managerial positions**.

Social Mobility Commission, [Navigating the labyrinth: Socio-economic background and career progression within the civil service](#), May 2021



Many people from low socio-economic backgrounds who enter the Civil Service **don't go on to progress in the same way** as those from more advantaged backgrounds. Progression to a senior role is like a path into a huge and elaborate maze - challenging for everyone to navigate, but especially hard for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds (SEB).

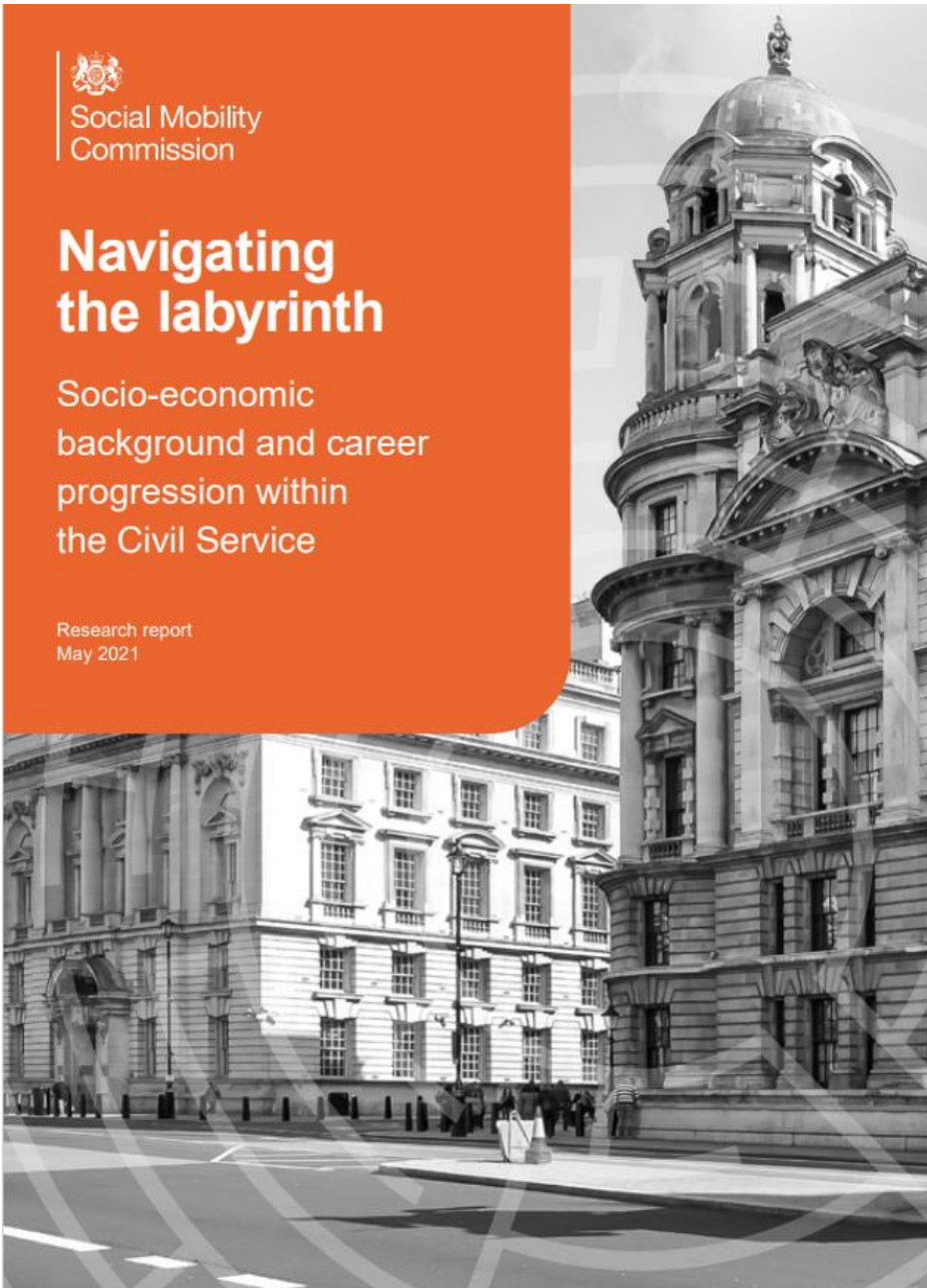


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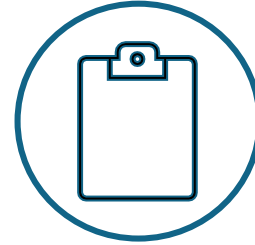
Navigating the labyrinth

Socio-economic
background and career
progression within
the Civil Service

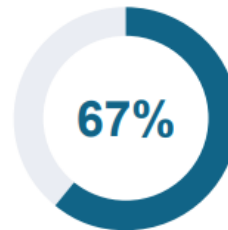
Research report
May 2021



Civil Service Project Methodology



Analysis of the **2019 Civil Service People Survey (CSPS)** using parental occupation as the main measure



of all civil
servants
took part in
the CSPS

300,000+
respondents

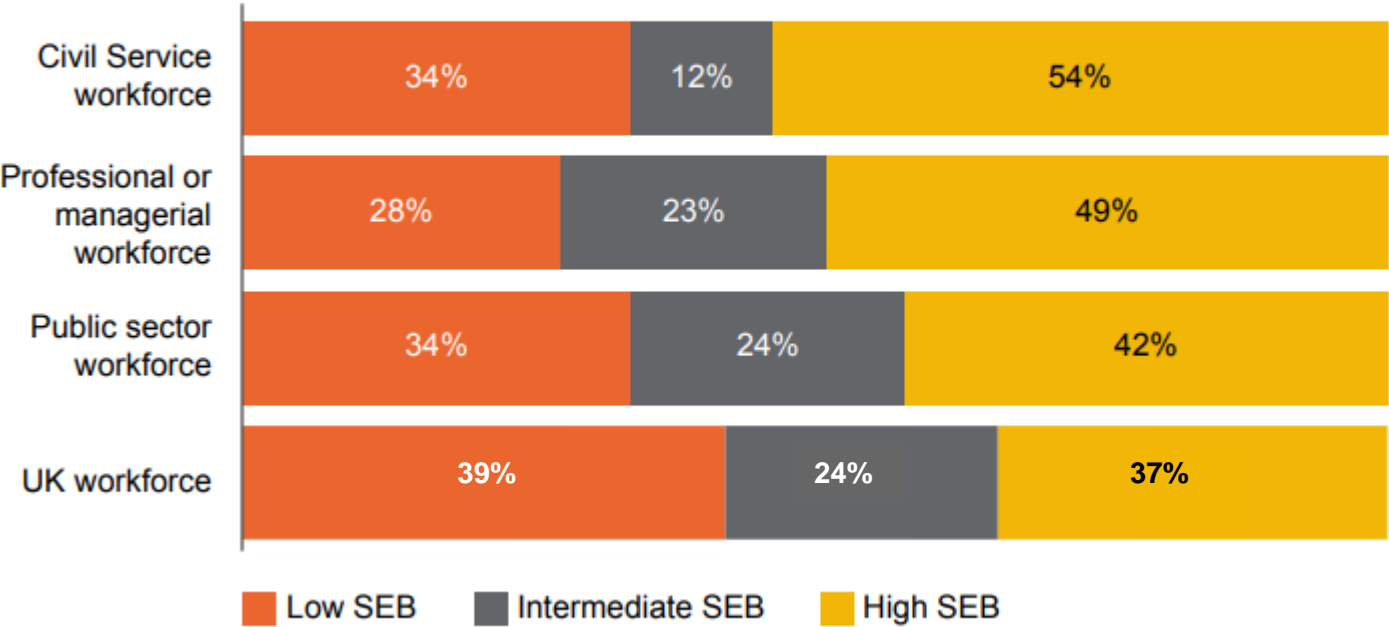
to the internal
Civil Service
survey



In-depth **interviews with 104 staff** at grade 7+ across four departments who had a range of performance on diversity measures and who represented significantly different operating structures (HMT, DfT, HMRC and CO)

People from high socio-economic backgrounds are over-represented in the Civil Service

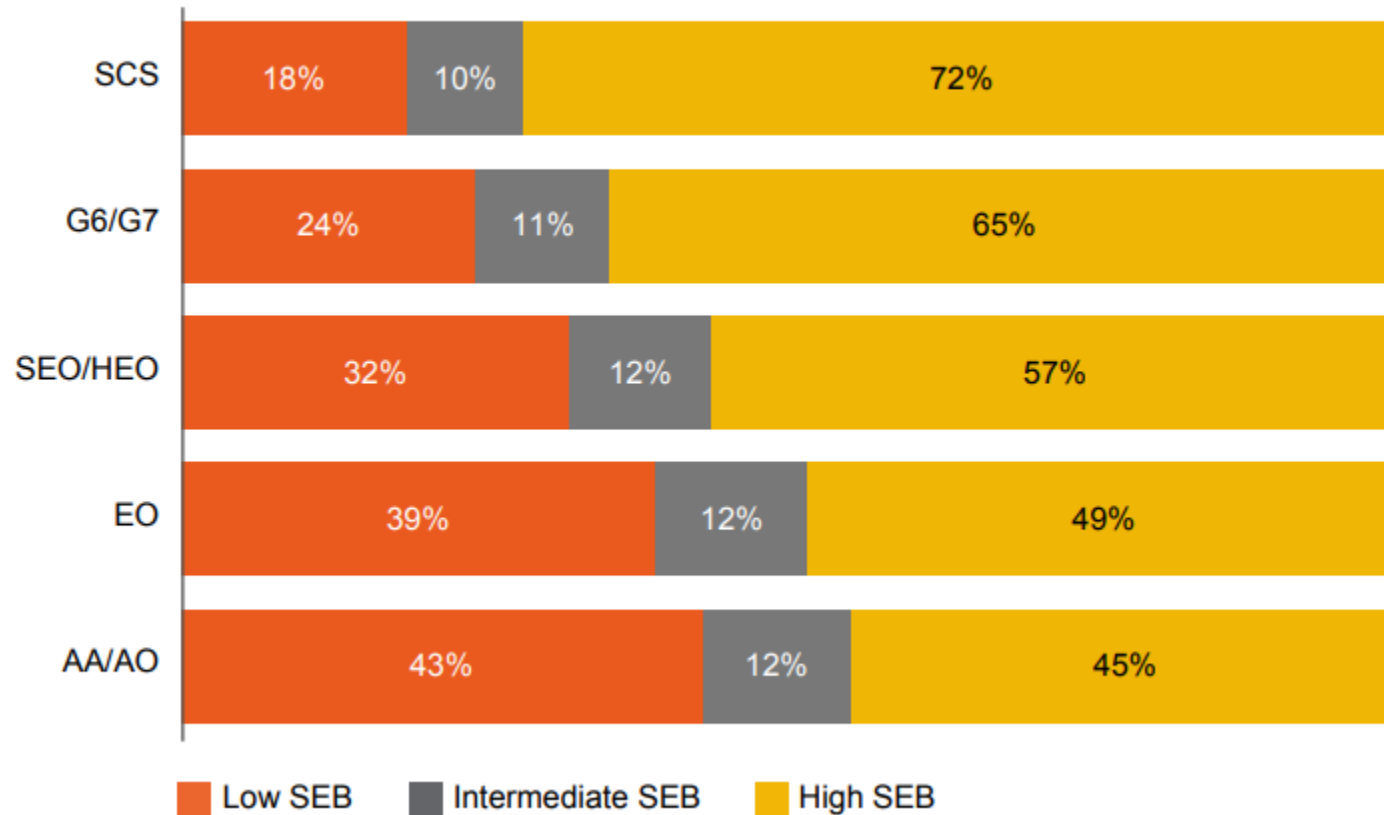
Figure 1 Parental occupation of civil servants, UK workforce, professional/managerial occupations and public sector



The Civil Service is more socio-economically advantaged than the UK workforce

The higher the grade, the less representative it is; the composition of the Senior Civil Service (SCS)

Figure 4 Civil service grades by parental occupation



“So, my sense was from quite early on there was a **secret code** as to how to get on...

(Aaron, Director, high SEB)*

** Names have been changed to preserve anonymity*

** Socio-economic background (SEB)*

“**There is no benefit to being a working class girl;** there absolutely isn’t. Whereas being a bit laddish working class is almost quite a nice thing for middle-class men, and they like, see as down-to-earth or whatever. **But I mean there are no traits that I can think of immediately that I would display as a positive demonstration of being a working class woman.**”

(Rosie, Grade 6, low socio-economic background)

“I guess that disconnect has become more apparent as I’ve become more senior, between how I see the world and how I present myself and my confidence to talk...and a kind of shared language and a shared tone I don’t feel I have... a sense of... **I don’t really fit, my background doesn’t fit...and it just feels like a slightly alien world to me still...it’s not necessarily intended to exclude, but I think part of the fact I haven’t got further is because I just don’t get it.**”

(Lara, Grade 6, low SEB)

“It’s frustrating because I would like to push on [to a SCS role], but the risks are just too high – **why would I disrupt my whole family [by moving to London] just for a promotion?**”

(Shaun, Grade 6, low socio-economic background)



Findings

1. **Accessing informal guides and accelerator roles** (e.g. early posting to a private office, Treasury, Cabinet Office, Minister's private secretary)
2. **Negotiating organisational ambiguity** (e.g. interactions with hiring managers, requests for promotion)
3. **The Whitehall effect** (e.g. increasing visibility and proximity to Ministers by working in London)
4. **Sorting and bottlenecks in operational career tracks** (e.g. more progression opportunity in policy roles)
5. **Navigating dominant behavioural codes** (e.g. studied neutrality, RP accent and speech, highbrow cultural touchpoints)
6. **People from high socio-economic backgrounds downplaying their background** (e.g. managers not accurately reporting their own socio economic status)
7. **Cumulative disadvantage** (e.g. women and ethnic minority civil servants facing multiple barriers)

1. 'Accelerator roles' and organisational guides



'Accelerator' roles

1. Early posting in a private office
2. Experience in Treasury or Cabinet Office
3. Running a bill team
4. Securing a leading role during a national crisis
5. Minister's Private Secretary

2. Exploiting organisational ambiguity



Key interpretative 'moments'

1. Interactions with hiring managers
2. Requests for promotion
3. Threats to leave
4. Embellishing job applications

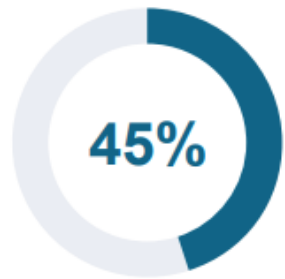
3. The London vortex and the 'Whitehall effect'

- More top-grade posts are in London - proximity to Whitehall is critical for increasing one's '**visibility**' within the CS
- But **access to a London 'career track' is stratified by socio-economic background.**
- Those from low socio-economic backgrounds tend to 'sort' into regional positions because:
 1. They lack family economic resources to migrate to London
 2. They have cultural and familial reasons for wanting to stay where they grew up

Based in London



of SCS



of G6/G7

4. Occupational specialisation – policy versus operational



Low SEBs in
operational roles



High SEBs in
policy roles

- Those from low SEBs often opt or 'sort' into operational career tracks which often have progression ceilings or bottlenecks
- Some join at lower grades where work is operational and therefore progress along an operational track.
- Others join at higher grades but still sort into operational roles as the skillset is seen as more transparent, tangible and meritocratic.
- The policy skillset is seen as vague and dependent on mastering behavioural codes which favour those from advantaged backgrounds

5. Dominant behavioural codes: studied neutrality and the ideal Civil Servant



Studied neutrality

1. Received pronunciation (RP) accent and speech
2. Emotionally detached and understated self-presentation
3. Intellectual orientation to culture and politics that foregrounds the display of in-depth knowledge for its own sake.

Among
interviewees
from more
advantaged
backgrounds
approximately



'misaligned' as
coming from
lower SEBs

6. Downplaying privilege

Among interviewees from more advantaged backgrounds approximately

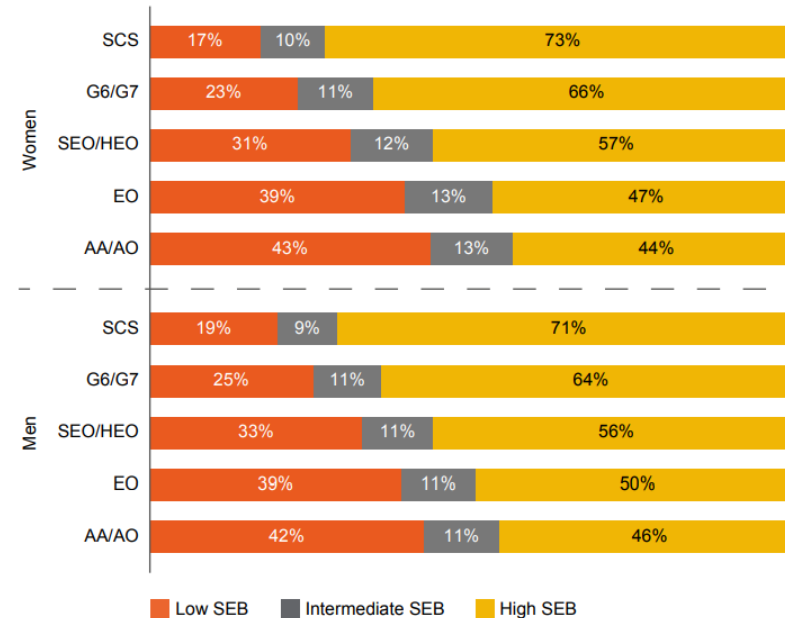


'misaligned' as coming from lower SEBs

- These people locate their 'origin' in extended family histories of upward mobility or working class struggle.
- This blinds them from considering the privileges they have enjoyed
- May also affect impetus for change, as it indicates those in senior grades believe there is more socio-economic diversity than there really is.

7. Cumulative barriers: socio-economic background, gender and ethnicity

Figure 9 Civil Service grade by parental occupation (NS-SEC) for women and men in 2019 Civil Service People Survey



The progression gap is somewhat steeper for women from low socio-economic backgrounds



Our interviews also reveal the importance of a cumulative lens for understanding the specific barriers to progression that Black African/African Caribbean civil servants face.

Suggested workforce action plan

1. Establish a cross-departmental workforce strategy to improve socio-economic diversity in the Civil Service

2. Introduce workforce-wide reporting on socio-economic background

3. Use training and 'learning and development' to drive positive change

4. Use apprenticeships to drive your strategy

5. Increase representation of Senior Civil Servants from low socio-economic backgrounds

6. Equalise access to accelerator roles

7. Formalise the informal

8. Think beyond Whitehall

9. Demystify the policy profession

10. Break the taboo around social class

11. Start a conversation about talent

12. Focus on cumulative barriers to progression for women from low socio-economic and ethnic minority backgrounds

Is there best practice to learn from?

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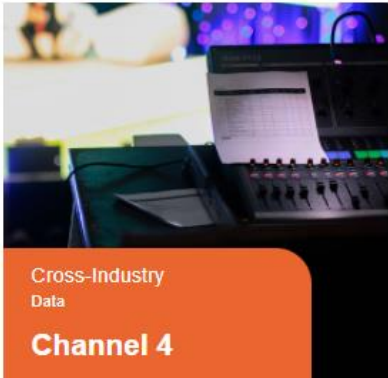
Creative Industries Culture And Leadership
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Creative Industries Progression
Bluecoat




Financial And Professional Services Progression
Capgemini



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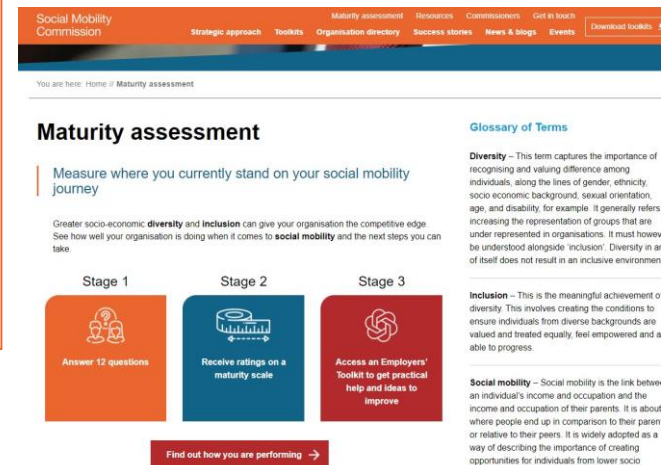
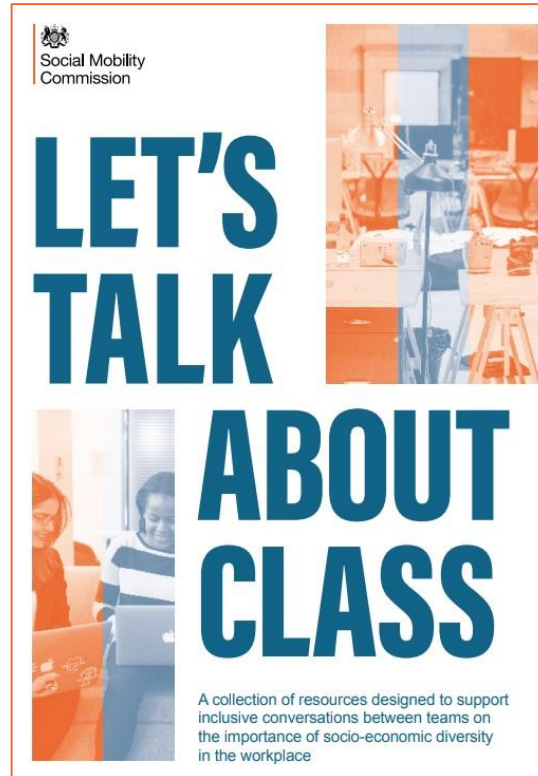


Cross-Industry Hiring
Enterprise

- Our website and employer toolkits house employer 'success stories' from a variety of employers across multiple sectors
- We also regularly host Masterclasses with employers who share their experiences and actions – playbacks can be found [here](#).

Resources to support employers

- click on the image for direct links to the resources



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