

Social mobility and opportunity: What the public thinks

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May 2024



Overview

- Most of the public (83%) thought there is a big class gap in Britain today with 63% saying it is either bigger or the same as 50 years ago.
- A substantial majority said children from richer families enjoy better opportunities in schools (62%), universities (62%), pre-school education (59%) and jobs (54%) rising further in jobs like accountancy, law or medicine (61%).
- 50% of 18-24 year olds said it is harder to move from working class to middle class today and 57% of young people also said it is harder for young people to succeed today than it was for older generations.
- More than half (51%) said better job opportunities, and a third (31%) better schools, are the most important factors for improving the lives of young people.
- 81% thought it the government's role to ensure fair access to educational opportunities and 69% for job opportunities.
- Over half (52%) of the public thought access to pre-school or nursery should be free for everyone, just like school is.
- Over half (53%) of people supported the re-introduction of maintenance grants for university students from low-income households.

Introduction

The British public perceives society as unequal and unfair. People see society as clearly divided in terms of social inequalities, particularly in relation to jobs and education. These are some of the key findings from recent nationwide¹ polling conducted by More in Common for the Sutton Trust exploring people's views on social inequalities in the UK. These findings, introduced in this research brief, align with recent research on social mobility and opportunity in the UK which has at best remained stagnant, and at worst declined, over the last half century.

The most recent research from the Sutton Trust on the current state of social mobility in 2022 found that while relative social class and education mobility had improved slightly, there remained large disparities in the likelihood of people climbing the income ladder, ending up in a higher social class, securing a university degree or being able to buy a home dependent on their background.² The report concluded that in terms of absolute social mobility, a former golden age of upward mobility had been replaced by a modern era of declining opportunities and more limited upward mobility, with increasing intergenerational persistence in home ownership for recent generations. Between 2000 and 2017, the gap in home ownership rates between those who grew up in rented accommodation compared to owner occupied homes doubled.

Recent research from the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) and the Nuffield Foundation supports these findings. The research looked at intergenerational income mobility. That is, 'the extent to which some key characteristics and outcomes of individuals differ from those of their parents' which is also seen as a measure of equality (or lack of it) of opportunities in a society.³ The IFS report found that intergenerational income mobility dropped for the generation born in 1970 compared to those born in the late 1950s and has remained at similar levels for subsequent cohorts.⁴ Other research has shown that the UK is one of the least socially mobile among the 38 OECD countries on the same measure. This means that children of high-earning parents are more likely to become

¹ Polling and focus groups were carried out in England, Scotland and Wales in February and March 2024.

² Eyles, A., Major, L. E., & Machin, S. (2022). Social Mobility—Past, Present and Future: The state of play in social mobility, on the 25th anniversary of the Sutton Trust. The Sutton Trust.
<https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Social-Mobility-%E2%80%93-Past-Present-and-Future-final-updated-references.pdf>

³ OECD. (2006). EQ4. Intergenerational Mobility. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/soc_glance-2006-18en.pdf?expires=1714404069&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=AEF2029A019FEC5FC5DED448515F18D

⁴ Van der Erve, L., Krutikova, S., MacMillan, L., & Sturrock, D. (2023). Intergenerational Mobility in the UK (IFS Deaton Review). Institute for Fiscal Studies and Nuffield Foundation.
<https://ifs.org.uk/inequality/intergenerational-mobility-in-the-uk/>

high earners themselves and is a marker of entrenched social inequality in society. In the UK such advantage associated with high earners is more commonly inherited (around 40%) than in other OECD countries (around 20% in Nordic countries for instance).⁵

The survey shows that the general public clearly sees British society as unfair and divided by class.

The IFS research mentioned above found that male offspring of the most affluent families in the UK were on average 19 percentiles higher in adult earnings than those from the most disadvantaged families, rising to a 27 percentile difference for daughters.⁶ Significantly, this research also found that 71% of the association between children's and parents' incomes can be accounted for by the link between educational and employment opportunities. Children from richer families generally have higher educational attainment, which in turn leads to higher returns (adult income) on their education.

In the run up to a general election and against this backdrop of limited social mobility, the Sutton Trust sought to understand the latest public perceptions on the issues of social mobility, life chances more generally, social inequality, jobs and education. To this end we commissioned More in Common to conduct an extensive survey as well as focus groups to explore attitudes in depth. The findings tell us not only what people thought about the level and nature of social inequality in contemporary British society but also what they thought the government (and others) should be doing about it.

The survey shows that the general public clearly sees British society as unfair and divided by class. However, responses also revealed a strong commitment to equal opportunities for all and a clear sense of where some of the main inequalities lie, particularly in relation to job opportunities, education and housing. There is widespread belief that talent and hard work have a large part to play in people's success in life. However, there is also widespread acceptance of the importance of interventions to even out access to opportunities and it is widely accepted that it is the government's place to ensure equal opportunities for all.

In this research brief we introduce the findings of this survey and what they tell us about the public's views on social mobility and life chances, how these relate

⁵ Causa, O., & Johansson, Å. (2010). Intergenerational Social Mobility in OECD Countries. *ECONOMIC STUDIES*, 2010. <https://www.oecd.org/social/labour/49849281.pdf>.

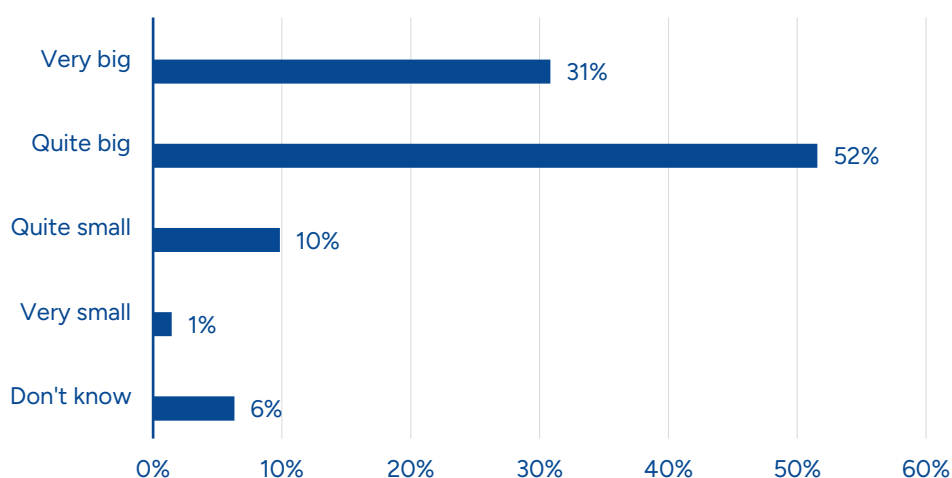
⁶ Partington, R., & correspondent, R. P. E. (2023, September 6). UK social mobility at its worst in over 50 years, report finds. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/sep/07/social-mobility-uk-worst-50-years-report-finds>. Van der Erve, L., Krutikova, S., MacMillan, L., & Sturrock, D. (2023). *Intergenerational Mobility in the UK* (IFS Deaton Review). Institute for Fiscal Studies and Nuffield Foundation. <https://ifs.org.uk/inequality/intergenerational-mobility-in-the-uk/>

to educational opportunities and what, if anything, the government should be doing to address social inequalities.

Contemplating an unequal society

Most of the public thought there is a big class gap in Britain today with children from richer families getting better opportunities than others. 83% of those asked said that the gap between social classes in Britain today is either quite or very big.

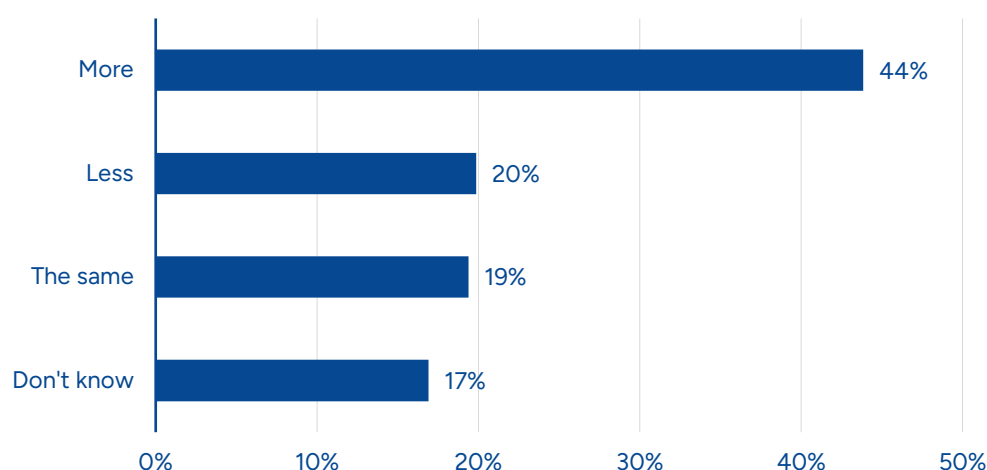
Figure 1: How big or small do you think the gap between different social classes is in Britain today?



A seminal study into social mobility and education in the UK by Bukodi and Goldthorpe in 2018 found that ‘the experience of upward mobility is now becoming less common and that of downward mobility more common... young people face less favourable mobility prospects than did their parents or their grandparents’.⁷ In fact, in line with those findings, in our polling the overall impression was of a society with limited upward mobility, most (61%) considering themselves the same class as that of their parents when they were growing up. At the same time, the view was of a society if anything becoming more polarised with 63% of the public saying the gap between different social classes today is either bigger (44%) or the same (19%) as 50 years ago (see Figure 2).

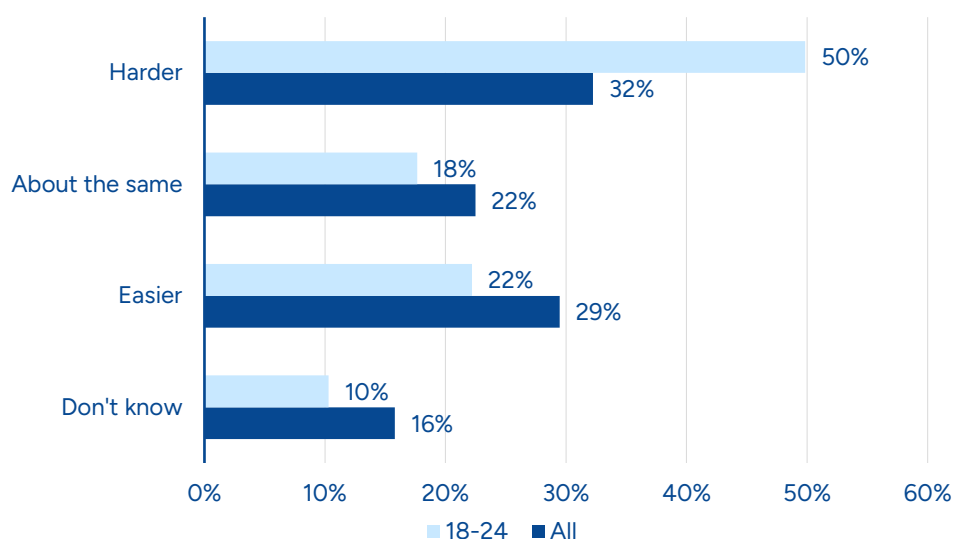
⁷ Bukodi, E., & Goldthorpe, J. H. (Eds.) (2018), page 207. Conclusions. In *Social Mobility and Education in Britain: Research, Politics and Policy* (pp. 207–224). Cambridge University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108567404.012>

Figure 2: Is there more or less of a gap between social classes in Britain today than 50 years ago?



A range of evidence on the so-called “Great Gatsby Curve”, shows that societies with bigger gaps between rich and poor have less mobility.⁸ This is reflected in public perceptions, with less than a third (29%) thinking it easier to move from working class to middle class today than it was 50 years ago with more than half (54%) saying it is either harder (32%) or about the same (22%).

Figure 3: Is it easier or harder for someone to move from working class to middle class today than it was 50 years ago? All respondents and 18-24 year olds



⁸ Corak, M. (2013), 'Income Equality, Equality of Opportunity, and Intergenerational Mobility', Journal of Economic Perspectives, 27 (3), 79–102. <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/jep.27.3.79>.

Younger people were even more pessimistic about moving up the social ladder, with 50% of 18-24 year olds saying it is harder to move from working class to middle class today (see Figure 3). Young people were also less optimistic about succeeding more generally, with 57% (47% in the general population) agreeing that it is harder for young people to succeed today than it was for older generations.

In relation to housing, inequality of opportunity is widely recognised with over half (53%) of the public saying that no matter whether young people are talented and work hard, some have a better chance of buying a home than others. Once again this is a sentiment felt all the more acutely by younger people, with 64% of 18-24 year olds taking this view. In fact, research has shown that there has been a substantial fall in home ownership among young adults since 1997 and increases in property prices relative to incomes have made it harder for young people to put together a deposit for a house purchase.⁹

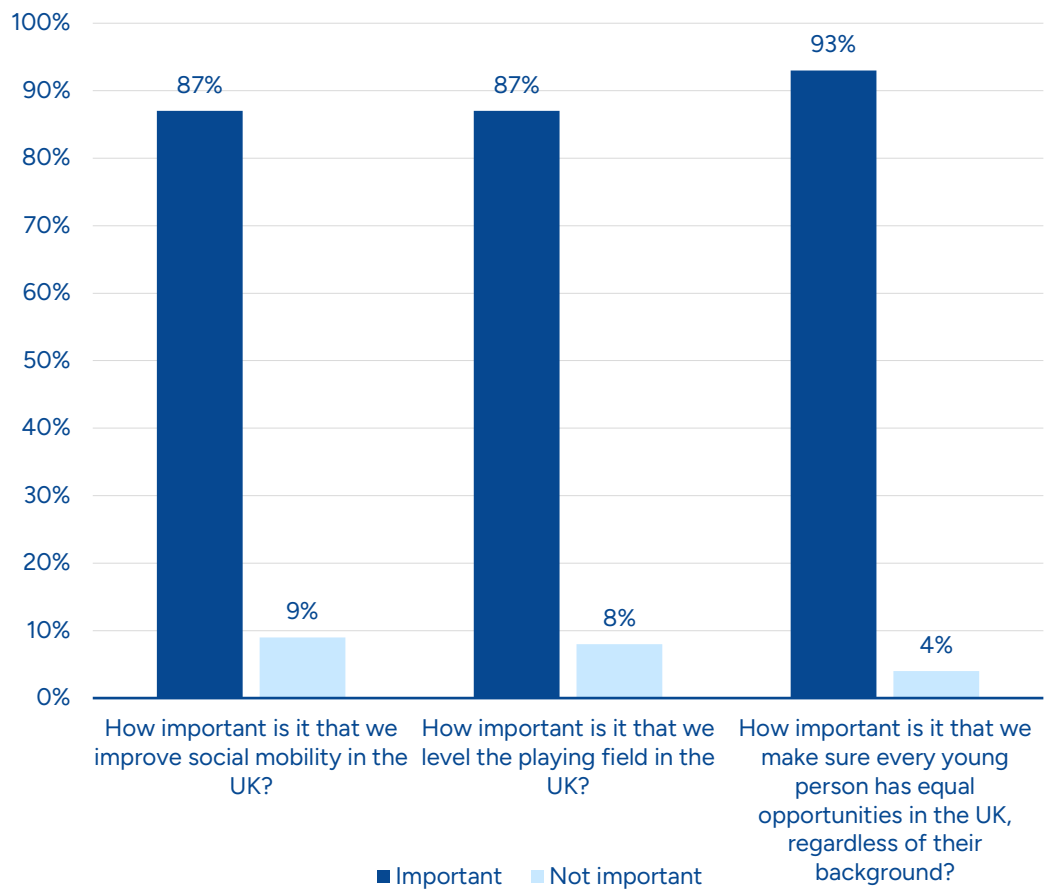
In the survey, 71% of the public agreed that not all young people have the same opportunity to succeed. At the same time, a substantial majority said children from richer families enjoy better chances across a spectrum of educational and job opportunities (62% in schools and universities, 59% in pre-school education and 54% in jobs, rising to 61% in jobs like accountancy, law or medicine).

“If you come from money, you’ve got more of an opportunity to learn.” – Ross, Kent

These figures show the degree to which the British public saw society as unequal as well as the extent to which there is a desire for this to change. Responses to the survey revealed a strong commitment to equal opportunities for all, with 93% saying it is either quite or very important to make sure every young person has equal opportunities in the UK regardless of their background, and 87% saying it is quite or very important to level the playing field. Notably, although there were sometimes different opinions about specific issues and situations, these broad positions on equality in society were held across all sections of the public, regardless of age, ethnicity, gender, social classes, regions and even political views. Out of the 50 social categories (gender, ethnicity, voting behaviour, region etc.) broken down in the survey, 90% or more agreed that it is quite or very important to make sure every young person has equal opportunities in the UK regardless of their background in 45 of those categories and no group agreed less than 85%.

⁹ Brader, C. (2024). *Housing needs of young people*. <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/housing-needs-of-young-people/>

Figure 4: Views on social mobility



Notably, although there were sometimes different opinions about specific issues and situations, these broad positions on equality in society were held across all sections of the public, regardless of age, ethnicity, gender, social classes, regions and even political views.

Note: A split sample approach was used for these questions, with around a third of the sample asked each question.

The public was generally more likely to relate to terms such as equal opportunities or levelling the playing field, but when asked, 87% also said it is important to improve social mobility in the UK.

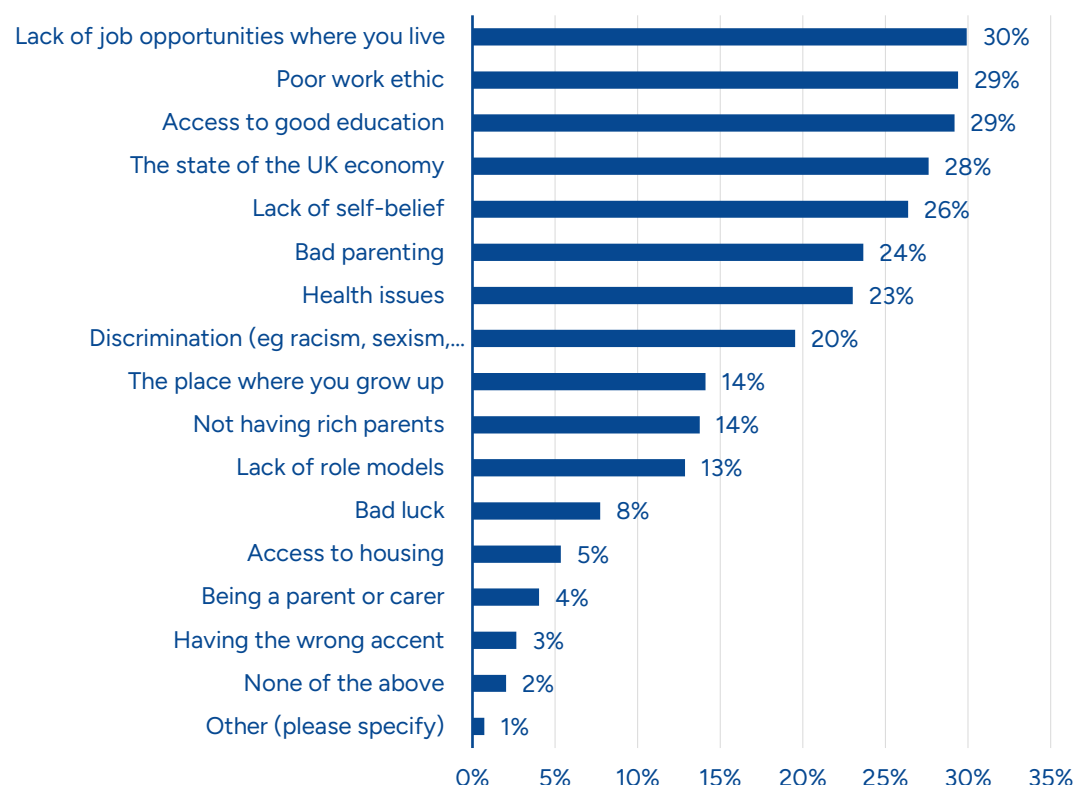
What lies behind Britain’s inequalities?

This polling also gives insights into what people feel lies behind the lack of social equality in the UK and consequently which problems need addressing to make things fairer. Perceived barriers to success are a mix of systemic (such as poor job opportunities in your area, quality of education, the state of the economy and so on) and individual factors (such as poor work ethic, lack of self-belief or poor health).

The main barriers to succeeding in life identified by the public were the lack of opportunities where you live (30%), access to good education (29%), a poor

work ethic (29%), the state of the UK economy (28%) and lack of self-belief (26%). Very few attributed people's success or lack of it to luck.

Figure 5: Which, if any, of the following are the biggest barriers to succeeding in life? (Up to three selected)



Asking about what enables success was also informative. The public, across the board, had strong faith in hard work with 93% saying that it was important in helping you get ahead in life. However, at the same time 78% thought it important to know the right people and 68% to come from a wealthy family, suggesting a widespread belief that your background plays a key part in future success.

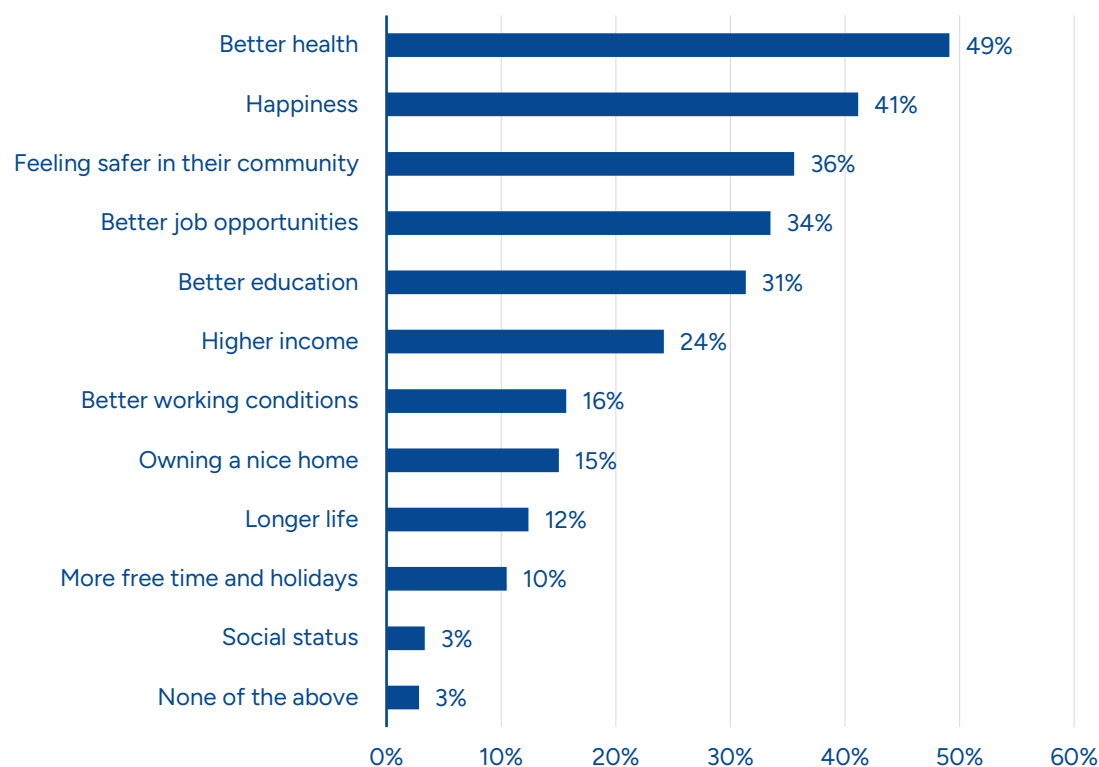
Asked what would most improve the lives of young people in their area, better job opportunities was the most common response at 51%, rising to 58% among 18-24 year olds. A further 34% said most improvement would come with apprenticeship opportunities. The importance of employment opportunities was also confirmed elsewhere in the survey: after health (49%), happiness (41%) and community safety (36%), better job opportunities (34%) were also

“I think really it all comes down to working hard. I went to a standard school and I’ve just really pushed myself into where I got to today.”
– Jess, Kent

considered among the most important factors contributing to a better life for future generations (see Figure 6).

As well as employment, educational opportunities were seen by many as important for getting on in life. After job and apprenticeship opportunities, better schools (31%) were seen as the most important factor for improving the lives of young people (rising to 39% among 18-24 year olds). Although education was not generally seen as the top long-term priority for government compared to improving healthcare or tackling climate change for instance, it was consistently considered an important factor in people's success and wellbeing: 31% said better education would be important for a better life, ahead of higher income, owning a nice home, living longer, social status or more free time and holidays.

Figure 6: Parents will often say they want a better life for their children. In your view, what constitutes a better life?



Are educational and job opportunities fair for all young people?

As the findings above show, educational and job opportunities came out as clear areas of concern for the public, closely associated with a better life, equal opportunities for success and getting ahead. However, the survey showed little faith in the fairness of the education system or the equal distribution of opportunities. Less than two thirds (61%) of the public thought there were good educational opportunities in their area, dropping to just over a half (51%) among parents with a youngest child aged 16 to 18. Even fewer saw access to such opportunities as equal. Asked about access to the best state schools in their area, less than half of the public (44%) said that it is equal for all families and more than a third (37%) said it is unequal. In this respect, while parents of primary school children seemed to see the system as fairer – 50% of parents of a youngest child under 10 said access was equal – this dropped significantly among parents of secondary school children (11-15 year olds in the survey) of whom only 39% said it is equal. This aligns with the findings of recent Sutton Trust research that found that the majority of England's top 500 comprehensives are socially selective.¹⁰

“I think education’s the main one. Smaller class sizes, giving everybody a fair start...It’s the foundation of the child’s life and I think it needs to be fair.”
– Claire, Dudley

With regards to jobs, 52% of the public said that there is a lack of job opportunities for young people growing up in their area. This proportion rose to nearly two thirds among those we might expect to best understand the situation, with 60% of 18-24 year olds and 59% among parents with a youngest child aged 16 to 18 confirming this lack of opportunities in their areas. There were some marked regional differences in views on job opportunities. The areas where people were most likely to say there were plenty of opportunities were Greater London (40%) and the East Midlands (39%), with the most pessimistic outlook in Wales, the South West and Scotland, where only 20%, 21% and 25% respectively said there were plenty of job opportunities for young people.

Who is responsible for tackling social inequalities?

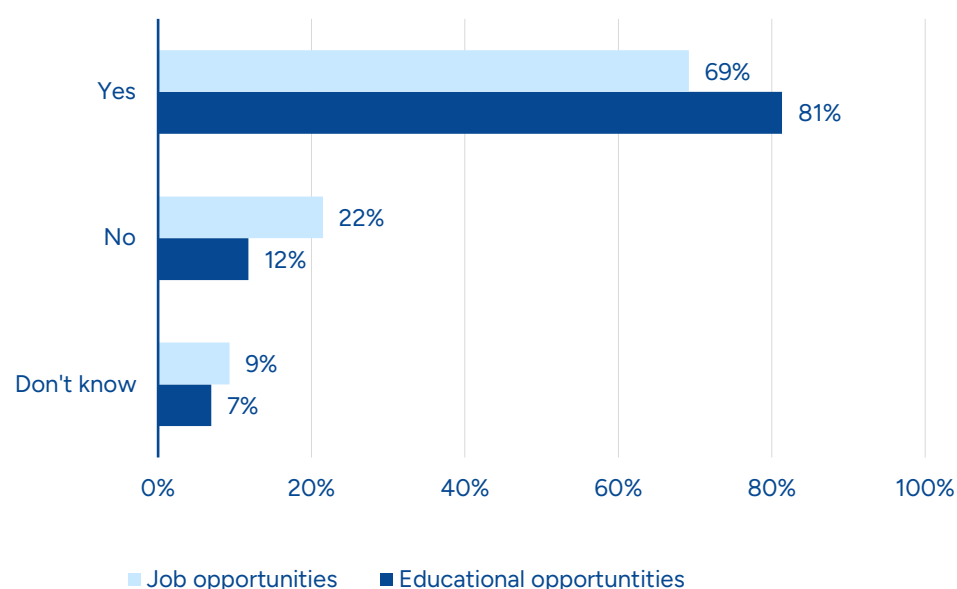
It is clear from the polling that most people believe that hard work (93%) is an important factor in getting ahead in life and 62% said that where you end up in life is mainly determined by talent and hard work. Similarly, just over half (51%) thought that talent and hard work can enable anyone to make something of themselves, regardless of whether they have any kind of head start in life. Interestingly, this view is held most strongly by those at the two extremes of

¹⁰ Latham, K. (2024). *Selective Comprehensives 2024: Summary Report* [Research Brief]. <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Selective-Comprehensives-2024.pdf>

the social spectrum: those self-identifying as upper middle (76%) or upper class (73%) and those in routine, manual and service occupations (72%), though there was less support for this idea along the social spectrum in between.

Nonetheless, despite this faith in talent and hard work, most people also see the government as having key responsibilities in relation to tackling social inequalities. A large majority of the public (81%) thought it the government's role to ensure fair access for all to educational opportunities – a view held consistently across regions and social groups, though slightly fewer (64%) among those self-identifying as upper class. Similarly, 69% thought it is the government's role to ensure fair access for all to job opportunities, a view held particularly strongly among 18-24 year olds (86%).

Figure 7: Is it the government's place to ensure everyone has equal access to job and educational opportunities?



In line with these views, there is also widespread support for government interventions that could level the educational playing field. The Sutton Trust has called for equalising access to early years education¹¹ and just over half (52%) of those surveyed thought access to pre-school or nursery should be free for everyone, just like school is. A further third (31%) felt this provision, though not completely free, should be affordable enough that the majority of children can attend. Only 9% felt that early education is a luxury that not everyone needs to afford.

**“It costs me more to pay for childcare. So there’s no point in doing more hours.”
– Lindsay, Dudley**

¹¹ Sutton Trust. (2024). *Inequality in Early Years Education*. The Sutton Trust.
<https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Inequality-in-early-years-education.pdf>

Those polled were asked which reasons they found most convincing as to why the government should focus on making sure young people have equal opportunities in the educational system. Responses showed once again that ideas of fairness were prominent, with 60% saying it would reduce inequality in the country, 59% agreeing that it would reduce gaps between the haves and have nots in the country and another 67% saying it was simply unfair that some young people have access to better education than others.

However, many people also linked equal educational opportunities to the success of the economy, with 79% agreeing that if everyone has access to good education then society can make the most of everyone's talents, which would in turn help the economy grow. Indeed, Sutton Trust research by Oxera in 2017 found that social mobility is positively related to productivity.¹² The research found that a modest increase in the UK's social mobility (to the average level across western Europe) could be associated with an increase in annual GDP of approximately 2%. The World Economic Forum also concluded in 2020 that there are substantial economic and social returns to be gained from addressing the mix of social mobility factors in society.¹³ Other research in 2022 estimated that bridging the attainment gap between more and less deprived regions in England could bring £14.4bn into the economy.¹⁴ In our survey, meanwhile, other benefits were identified with 66% a convinced that a government focus on equal educational opportunities could make communities safer by reducing crime and social problems, a view particularly evident among young people (79% of 18-24 year olds and 82% of 25-34 year olds).

There is clear support for the idea that the government is coming up short in making access to education more equal for children from richer and poorer families. Most of the public (55%), for instance, felt that the government does not do enough to ensure that, within the same school, richer and poorer children have the same opportunities. This was an opinion even more strongly held among 18-24 year olds (69%). Similarly, 54% of the public said the government does not do enough to ensure children in schools in wealthy and deprived areas have the same opportunities.

Behaviour policies, additional school funding and tutoring were seen as key to making education more equal. The survey asked which policies would be the

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¹² Jenkins, H., English, K., Hristova, O., Blankertz, A., Pham, V. & Wilson, C. (2017) Social Mobility and Economic Success. Oxera & Sutton Trust, https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Oxera-report_WEB_FINAL.pdf

¹³ World Economic Forum. (2020) *The Global Social Mobility Report 2020: Equality, Opportunity and a New Economic Imperative*. https://www3.weforum.org/docs/Global_Social_Mobility_Report.pdf

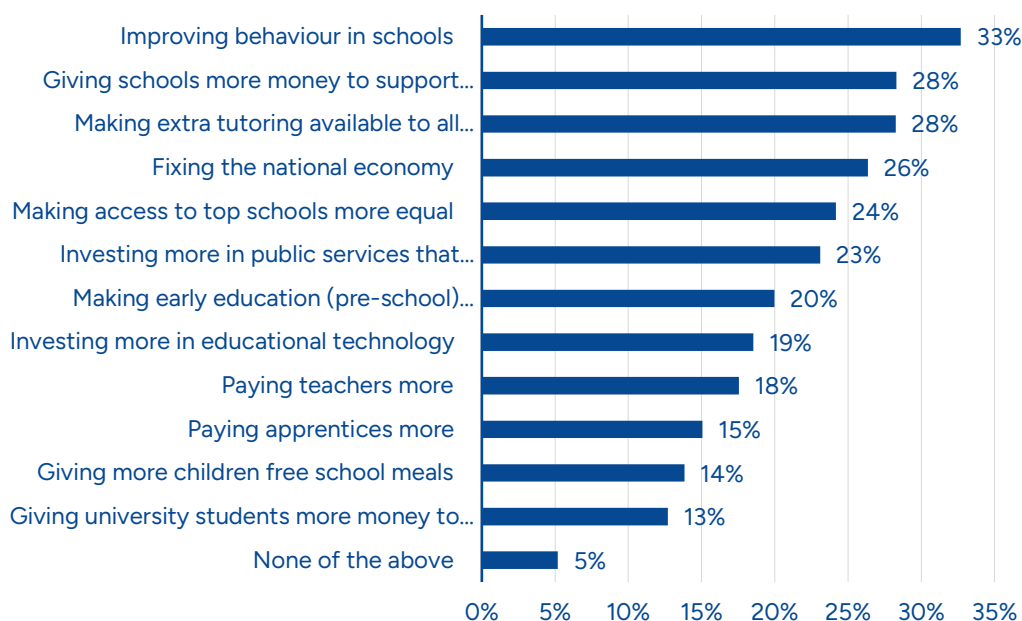
¹⁴ Hochlaf, D., & Mudie, R. (2022). *New horizons: Transforming educational opportunities to support inclusive growth*. <https://www.progressive-policy.net/publications/new-horizons>

most effective should the next government make it a priority to ensure all young people have equal access to education, giving respondents the chance to give multiple answers (see Figure 8).

Policies to improve behaviour received the most support (33%) with giving more money to schools to support poorer children (28%) and making extra tutoring available to all children who need it (28%) not far behind. Less directly, fixing the national economy (26%) was also seen as important in this regard.

In relation to government social mobility interventions at the higher education level, there was general agreement (87%) that government should financially support students from low-income households while at university. Over half of the public agreed with relatively generous support, with 30% saying it should be set at a level that allows poorer students to experience university like other students, and another 25% saying it should be high enough for students not to have to work (so they can focus on their studies).

Figure 8: Suppose the next government made it a priority to make sure all young people have equal access to a good education. Which would be the most effective policies to achieve this?



Just under a third (32%) felt the support given to poorer students should only be for essentials like food and accommodation. What is more, there was significant support for changing the current system of student loans to help more disadvantaged students. Over half (53%) wanted to see the re-introduction of maintenance grants for university students from low-income

households. This aligns with recent Sutton Trust calls for an overhaul of student finance as a priority for the next government.¹⁵

Despite strong support for the principals of fair access and equal opportunities and widespread support for different forms of intervention, the public showed some uncertainty as to whether initiatives aimed at improving social mobility are effective. The survey found the public more likely to think social mobility initiatives lead to fairer, rather than less fair, outcomes. However, there was pessimism about the extent to which change is possible. One in five (21%) of the public said they thought social mobility initiatives do not change outcomes and another 28% said that they don't know, suggesting that there is still some way to go for social mobility advocates and policymakers in convincing the public about whether change is possible and, if so, what does and does not work.

Conclusion

This polling shows clear support for a more equal society that should be fair for everyone and offering equality of opportunity, particularly in relation to jobs and education. This was a view held consistently across the country and among people of diverse backgrounds. The survey points to a British public that understands British society to be strongly marked by class differences and lacking equal opportunities. The majority of people see contemporary society as, at best, the same as 50 years ago, in terms of the size of the gap between social classes and the ease of moving up the class ladder, with many saying that it is now worse. People show a strong commitment to principles of fairness and equal opportunity but do not see these principles in operation in British society in relation to education and job opportunities. It is widely accepted that it is the government's place to make educational and job opportunities available to all and there is widespread support for interventions from nursery through to university levels and into employment. Inevitably there are differences of opinion about how social inequalities might be reduced, but this polling should give policymakers confidence that the British public will generally support measures aimed at making our society fairer and giving equal opportunities in education and jobs to everyone, regardless of their background or wealth.

¹⁵ The Sutton Trust (2024) *General Election Policy Briefing: Reforming student maintenance*.
<https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Reforming-student-maintenance.pdf>

Methodological note

This research was carried out by More in Common on behalf of the Sutton Trust and comprised quantitative research in the form of a survey of 2,075 adults conducted between 23rd and 27th February 2024 across a sample of people in England, Scotland and Wales drawn from a panel of over 2.8 million adults.

Responses were weighted and allocated to be representative of the country's population based on age, gender, race, voting intention, region, and education level.

The quantitative research was backed up with qualitative data collection in the form of two focus groups. The first was conducted on 21st February 2024 in the Dudley area of the West Midlands with 9 participants (plus the moderator) of socioeconomic grade C2DE.

The second focus group was conducted in Kent on 26th March 2024 with 8 participants (plus the moderator).



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