



Educational Opportunities for Children and Young People from Working-class Backgrounds

Debate on 5 March 2020

On 5 March 2020, the House of Lords is due to debate a motion moved by Baroness Morris of Yardley (Labour) that “this House takes note of the educational opportunities available to children and young people from working class backgrounds”.

Summary

Successive [studies](#) and [reports](#) have identified educational attainment as one of the factors that influence an individual’s ability to improve their socio-economic position in life. The educational opportunities available to children and young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds are therefore important to social mobility.

The [Social Mobility Commission](#), which monitors progress towards improving social mobility in the UK and promotes social mobility in England, has [reported](#) on inequalities within the education sector between disadvantaged children and young people and their more advantaged peers. It has reached the following conclusions about key educational stages applicable to young people:

- **Early years:** children from working-class backgrounds still suffer disadvantages compared to their more affluent peers, even from birth.
- **Schools:** disadvantaged pupils start schooling behind their peers in terms of attainment, but good schooling can increase their chances of getting a well-paid job in the future.
- **Further education and apprenticeships:** twice the number of disadvantaged 16 to 18-year-olds are in further education than in school sixth forms, meaning further education institutions are a key tool for improving social mobility.
- **Higher education:** increasing numbers of students from low income families are entering university by age 19, although their better off peers are still much more likely to do so.

Section 1 of the Equality Act 2010 includes a public sector duty to reduce inequalities of outcome resulting from socio-economic inequalities. This duty has not been brought into force in England because governments at Westminster have decided [not to take the provision forward](#). They have instead introduced or continued policies aimed at helping improve educational opportunities for children and young people from lower-income backgrounds. In contrast, the Scottish Government has [brought the duty into force](#) and the Welsh Government has [consulted](#) on doing likewise in 2020.

Thomas Brown | 25 February 2020

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I. Introduction

Educational attainment is one of a number of factors that influence an individual's ability to move from one social class to another.¹ In addition, studies have found that children and young people from working-class backgrounds “tend to obtain substantially lower levels of educational attainment [...] than children from higher social class backgrounds”.² This suggests that children and young people from the lower-income backgrounds are, at least in one respect, on average less socially mobile than their more affluent peers.

As the House of Lords Social Mobility Committee has observed, a person's background can affect how successful they are later in life. For example, the kind of job they can get. The committee found:

In the United Kingdom there is a strong link between a person's background and where they end up. There also appears to be a stronger relationship between parental background and children's future income than in many other countries.³

The committee said low educational attainment and low income, or coming from a poorer background, were two of many factors that may affect social mobility. Other identified factors included:

- Family background, such as parenting skills, parental income and education, parental mental health, and family structure and size.
- Poor social and emotional skills. Character and resilience in particular affect a person's chances of success.
- Gender. Girls outperform boys at GCSE and all other measures at the end of secondary school.
- Ethnicity. The percentage of pupils achieving good GCSE grades varies between different ethnic groups. As do employment outcomes.
- Special educational needs and disability (SEND). Pupils with SEND have a large education attainment gap when compared to those without any identified SEND. For instance, in 2011, around 25% of those reporting a basic activity difficulty had only a lower secondary education, compared with 12.4% of those without difficulty.⁴

The committee also found health and geography to be factors. For example, the committee cited having a low birth weight and living in a deprived neighbourhood as influences that can negatively affect life outcomes.

¹ House of Lords Social Mobility Committee, [Overlooked and Left Behind: Improving the Transition from School to Work for the Majority of Young People](#), 8 April 2016, HL Paper 120 of session 2015–16, pp 18–21.

² For example: Bastian A Betthäuser, Mollie Bourne and Erzsébet Bukodi, ‘[Understanding the Mobility Chances of Children from Working-class Backgrounds in Britain: How Important are Cognitive Ability and Locus of Control?](#)’, *British Journal of Sociology*, 19 January 2020. The term ‘working class’ is defined as “the social stratum, usually of low status, that consists of those who earn wages, especially as manual workers” (Collins Dictionary, ‘[Working Class](#)’, accessed 21 February 2020).

³ House of Lords Social Mobility Committee, [Overlooked and Left Behind: Improving the Transition from School to Work for the Majority of Young People](#), 8 April 2016, HL Paper 120 of session 2015–16, pp 18–19. See also: Social Mobility Commission, ‘[About Us](#)’, accessed 21 February 2020.

⁴ *ibid*, p 20.

2. Statistics on Attainment and Participation

The following statistics provide context on the relationship between relative disadvantage and educational opportunities for those aged 5 to 18+. The Social Mobility Commission highlighted these in a recent report on social mobility in Great Britain, which it compiled using data from multiple sources.

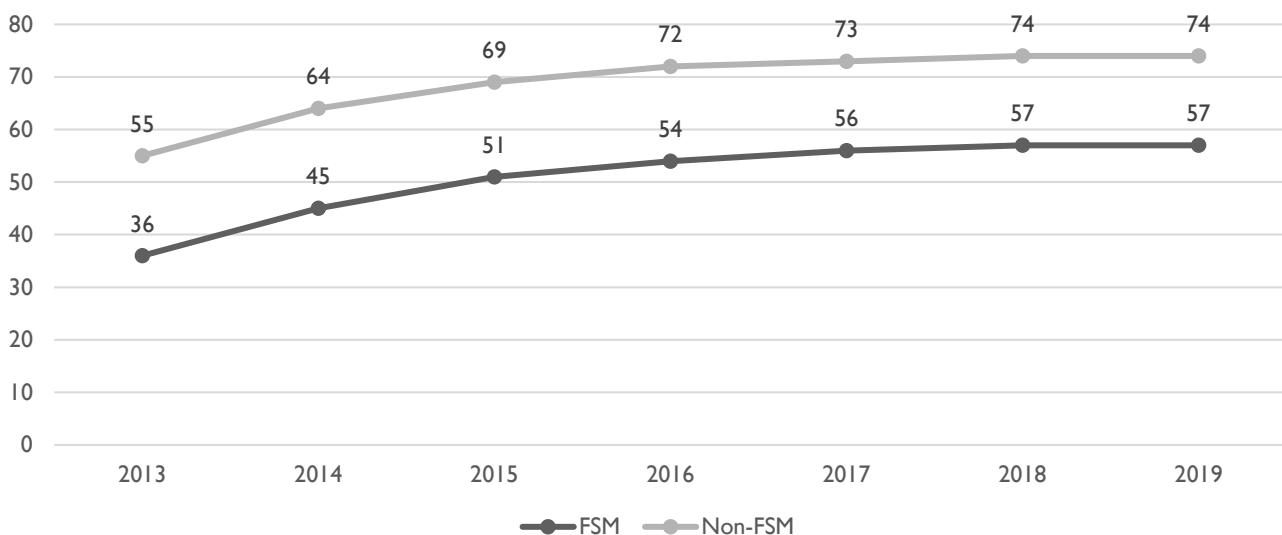
2.1 Early Years (Ages 0 to 5)

The Government and academic researchers use eligibility for free school meals (FSM) as the main measure of disadvantage.⁵

In its most recent *State of the Nation* report, published in April 2019, the Social Mobility Commission found differences in the level of attainment reached by disadvantaged children when compared to their more advantaged peers. According to the report, 43% of children entitled to FSM in 2018 did not reach a good level of development at age 5. This compared with 26% of more advantaged children.⁶ Department for Education figures for England released since the report's publication show that these proportions remained unchanged in 2019.⁷

The commission observed that the disparity in attainment between disadvantaged and advantaged children has been reducing incrementally since 2013. This was from a 19-point difference in 2013 to a 17-point difference in 2018.

Figure 1: Percentage of Children Achieving a Good Level of Development at Age 5⁸



⁵ House of Lords Social Mobility Committee, [Overlooked and Left Behind: Improving the Transition from School to Work for the Majority of Young People](#), 8 April 2016, HL Paper 120 of session 2015–16, p 20.

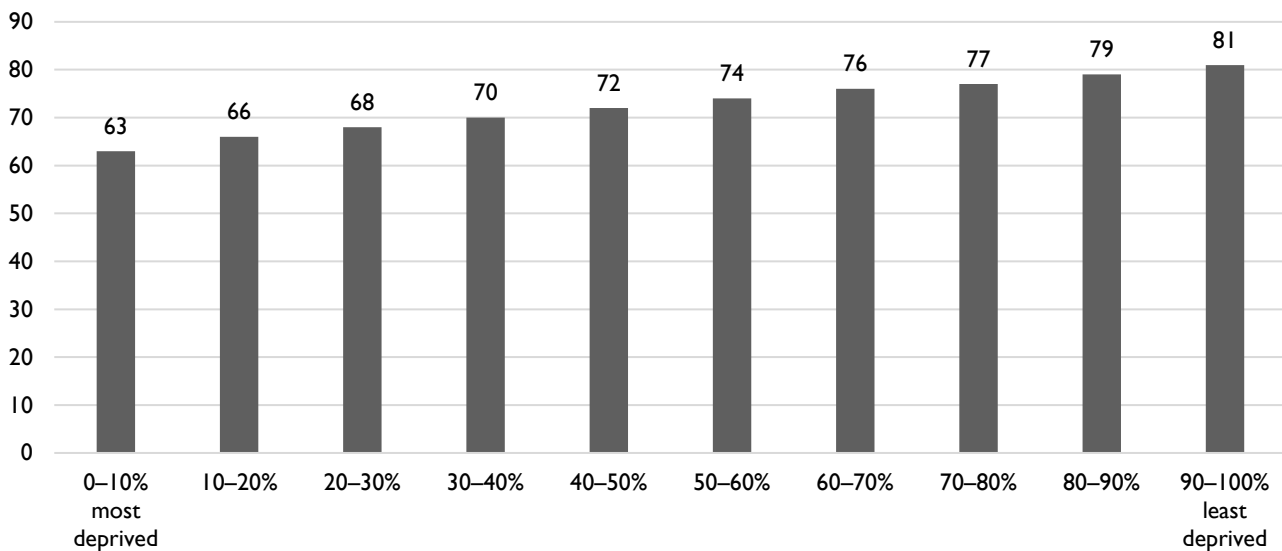
⁶ Social Mobility Commission, [State of the Nation 2018–19: Social Mobility in Great Britain](#), 30 April 2019, pp 21–3.

⁷ Department for Education, [Early Years Foundation Stage Profile Results: 2018 to 2019](#), October 2019 (see [‘EYFSP Pupil Characteristics 2019: Table 1’](#)).

⁸ Social Mobility Commission, [State of the Nation 2018–19: Social Mobility in Great Britain](#), 30 April 2019, p 23; and Department for Education, [Early Years Foundation Stage Profile Results: 2017 to 2018](#), October 2018 (see [‘EYFSP 2018 Additional Tables by Pupil Characteristics: Table 1’](#)).

The report added that the “picture is also stark when analysed by the index of income deprivation affecting children decile index (IDACI)”. It said there was an “almost direct correlation between decile of deprivation by parental income and a child’s level of development at age 5”.⁹

Figure 2: Percentage of Children Achieving a Good Level of Development at Age 5 by Decile of Deprivation¹⁰



2.2 Schools (Ages 5 to 18)

The *State of the Nation* report included the following key findings for school-aged children and young people:

- At year 1, the gap in phonics attainment between children entitled to FSM and their more advantaged peers is 14 percentage points.
- At the end of key stage 1 (by age 7), larger gaps are evident in reading (18 percentage points), writing (20 percentage points) and mathematics (18 percentage points).
- By the end of key stage 2 (by age 11), less than half (46%) of pupils entitled to FSM reach the standards expected for reading, writing and mathematics, compared to 68% of all other pupils.
- Better A level grades are more concentrated among the more advantaged. While 12% of the A level cohort achieving three E grades or better are classified as disadvantaged, this proportion falls to 9% for those achieving three B grades or better.
- Schools with better Ofsted ratings do not tend to have a lower attainment gap. Ofsted inspection outcomes largely correlate with the socio-economic makeup of a cohort.¹¹

⁹ Social Mobility Commission, [State of the Nation 2018–19: Social Mobility in Great Britain](#), 30 April 2019, p 23.

¹⁰ *ibid*, p 24.

¹¹ *ibid*, p 35. See also: Ofsted, [‘About Us’](#), accessed 21 February 2020.

The report elaborated on these figures, commenting:

There are huge disparities in the attainment of children at school, depending on their socio-economic background. Gaps between children entitled to FSM and others persist throughout the school years. Additionally, the gap in attainment in public exams between children who attend independent schools and those who attend state schools is significant.¹²

In terms of secondary education specifically, the report noted wide attainment differences in both core subjects and in overall measures:

At key stage 4 (ages 14–16), the percentage of FSM-eligible pupils achieving a grade 4/C or above in GCSE English and Maths is 40% compared with 68% of all other pupils. When looking at the more comprehensive set of qualifications at key stage 4, which is taken into account using the attainment 8 measure (an average of scores across eight key subjects including maths and English), the gap is just as stark. Those entitled to FSM score 34.4 points, on average. The average for all other pupils is 48.3 points.¹³

Department for Education statistics released in February 2020 give updated figures for 2019. They show that those entitled to FSM:

- Scored 36.7 points using the attainment 8 measure, while other pupils scored 50.3.
- In total, 26.5% of pupils in state-funded schools were defined as disadvantaged at the end of key stage 4, due to having been eligible for FSM while at secondary school.
- In addition, the ‘disadvantage gap index’ widened by 0.4% between 2018 and 2019—the second small increase in a row, though the gap was still 9.1% lower than in 2011.¹⁴

The Social Mobility Commission also found that “Ofsted is more likely to determine that a secondary school requires improvement or is inadequate if it is in a particularly deprived area”.¹⁵ According to Ofsted, 1% of schools in the least deprived areas as at December 2018 were rated inadequate. In contrast, it rated 11% of schools as inadequate in the most deprived areas. Figure 3 shows this data. It also shows that Ofsted rated 38% of schools outstanding in least deprived areas. This compares with 15% in the most deprived areas.

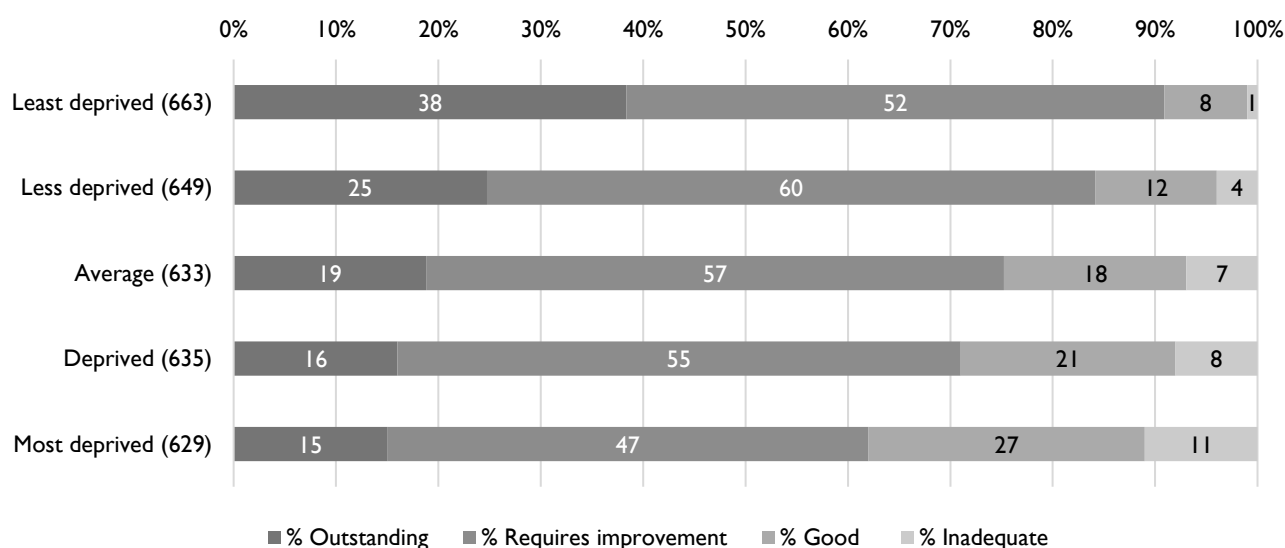
¹² Social Mobility Commission, [State of the Nation 2018–19: Social Mobility in Great Britain](#), 30 April 2019, p 37.

¹³ *ibid*, p 38.

¹⁴ Department for Education, [Key Stage 4 Performance: 2019 \(Revised\)](#), 19 February 2020, pp 1–9.

¹⁵ Social Mobility Commission, [State of the Nation 2018–19: Social Mobility in Great Britain](#), 30 April 2019, p 46.

Figure 3: Most Recent Overall Effectiveness Grades of Secondary Schools, by Level of Deprivation, 31 December 2018¹⁶



2.3 Further Education and Apprenticeships (Ages 16 to 24)

The *State of the Nation* report also included key findings about further education (FE) and apprenticeships. It found:

- Twice the number of disadvantaged 16 to 18-year-olds are in FE compared to school sixth forms, and this segregation within the education system has risen by 1.2% since 2013.
- Disadvantaged students still do worse in improving their scores when they resit level 2 exams compared to their more affluent peers, and the gap between disadvantaged and advantaged students is growing.¹⁷

The report contended that this proved the existence of a “class-based segregation” of the further education system in England. It observed:

At age 16, disadvantaged young people are much more likely to go into FE than their affluent peers. Although there has been a significant focus on improving participation in HE [higher education], there is not as much focus on diversifying the FE sector.

This segregation of post-16 education by background has risen slightly since 2013. In 2016, young people who received FSM, a measure of disadvantage, were 21.2% more likely to attend FE than those not eligible for FSM, up from 20.6% in 2013. This shift is the result of more advantaged students concentrating in school sixth forms.¹⁸

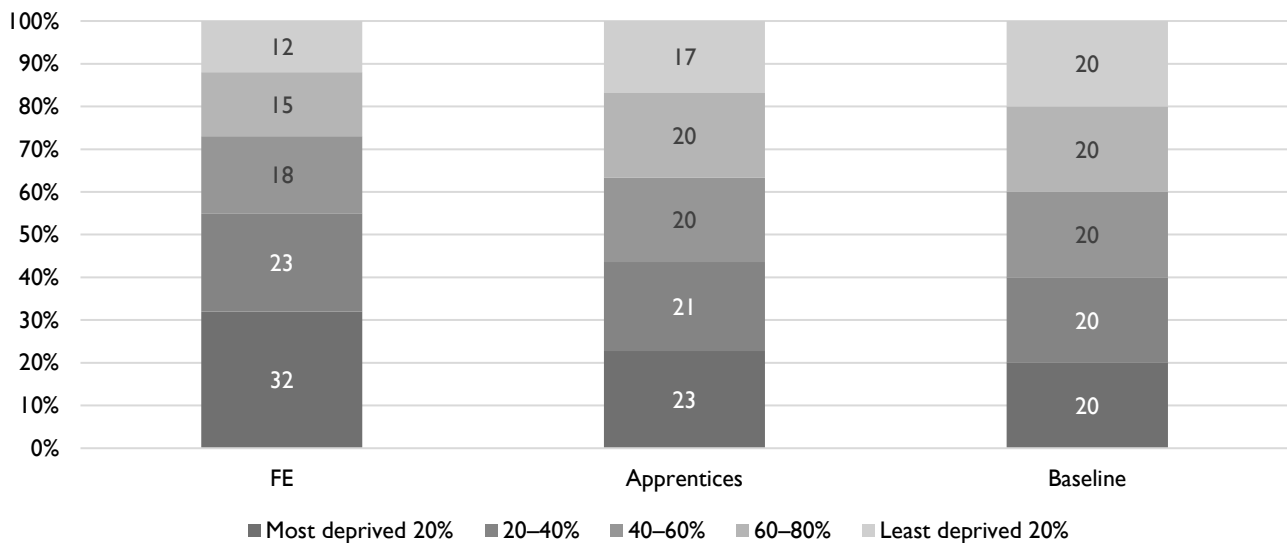
¹⁶ Social Mobility Commission, [State of the Nation 2018–19: Social Mobility in Great Britain](#), 30 April 2019, p 47.

¹⁷ *ibid*, p 59.

¹⁸ *ibid*, p 64.

In addition, the report noted most disadvantaged students were being “clustered” in FE compared to apprenticeships. Figure 4 shows that the Social Mobility Commission classified 32% of FE students as being in the most deprived 20% based on indices of multiple deprivation. This compared with 23% of apprentices. In contrast, it found 12% of FE students were in the least deprived 20%, compared with 17% of apprentices.

Figure 4: Levels of Deprived Students in FE and Apprenticeships in 2017/18 Based on Indices of Multiple Deprivation (%)¹⁹



2.4 Higher Education (Ages 18+)

The *State of the Nation* report included the following key findings for higher education (HE) attendance and attainment:

- Increasing numbers of students from low-income families are entering university by age 19, although they are still much less likely to do so than others (26% do so versus 43% of better-off peers).
- Regional variations persist. In inner London, the gap in HE entry by FSM entitlement status is smallest at only 9%. Comparatively, in the south west it is 23% and in the south east it is 25%.
- Only 5% of disadvantaged young people enter the most selective HE institutions compared to the national average of 12%, and once there, disadvantaged students are more likely to drop out than better-off peers (at 8.8% versus 6.3% overall).
- Graduates from the least well represented areas (POLAR quintile 1) earn about 19% less than those from the most advantaged areas after five years.
- Numbers of disadvantaged part-time students have fallen by 42% since 2012/13.²⁰

¹⁹ Social Mobility Commission, *State of the Nation 2018–19: Social Mobility in Great Britain*, 30 April 2019, pp 65–6.

²⁰ *ibid*, p 85. Data sources in the higher education section of the *State of the Nation* report appear to have different geographic coverage. This includes England only; Great Britain; and the UK as a whole, as applicable.

The Social Mobility Commission found a median earnings gap of 10% between those who were eligible for FSM and their better-off counterparts one and three years after graduation.²¹ This widened to 11% five years after graduation.

3. Government Policy in England

Section 1 of the Equality Act 2010, brought in by the Labour Government under Gordon Brown, includes a public sector duty to reduce inequalities of outcome resulting from socio-economic inequalities.²² However, this duty has not yet been brought into force in England. In November 2010, Theresa May, then Home Secretary, announced that this socio-economic duty would be “scrapped”, because it represented a counterproductive, bureaucratic attempt to impose equality from above.²³ Current government guidance on the act confirms that the Government at Westminster has decided not to progress commencement of the provision in England.²⁴ In contrast, the Scottish Government brought the duty into force in April 2018, under the name of the ‘Fairer Scotland Duty’, and the Welsh Government has consulted on implementing the socio-economic duty in Wales in 2020.²⁵

Instead, successive Westminster governments since 2010 have brought forward policies aimed at addressing the attainment gap between disadvantaged and more advantaged children and young people. For example, the Conservative Government under Theresa May published delivery plans for six ‘opportunity areas’ in October 2016.²⁶ These aimed to help young people in deprived areas through joint working between actors such as schools, local authorities and businesses. The Government published plans for a further six areas in January 2017.²⁷

Following the publication of these plans, the Department for Education published a policy paper entitled *Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential* in December 2017.²⁸ Subtitled *A Plan for Improving Social Mobility Through Education*, this document called for the “levelling up” of opportunity across the country.²⁹ It acknowledged that, “while talent is spread evenly across this country, opportunity is not”, and set out an “overarching ambition” that no community be left behind. The document coupled this ambition with four ‘life stage’ ambitions:

- Close the ‘word gap’ in the early years.
- Close the attainment gap in school while continuing to raise standards for all.
- High quality post-16 education choices for all young people.
- Everyone achieving their full potential in rewarding careers.³⁰

²¹ Social Mobility Commission, [State of the Nation 2018–19: Social Mobility in Great Britain](#), 30 April 2019, p 94.

²² Equality Act 2010, s1(1).

²³ Home Office, [‘Socio-economic Duty to be Scrapped’](#), 17 November 2010.

²⁴ Government Equalities Office and Equality and Human Rights Commission, [‘Equality Act 2010: Guidance’](#), accessed 21 February 2020.

²⁵ See: Scottish Government, [‘Fairer Scotland Duty: Interim Guidance for Public Bodies’](#), 27 March 2018; Equality Act 2010 (Commencement No. 13) (Scotland) Order 2017/403 (Scottish SI); and Welsh Government, [A More Equal Wales—Commencing the Socio-economic Duty](#), 22 November 2019.

²⁶ Department for Education, [‘Social Mobility Package Unveiled by Education Secretary’](#), 4 October 2016.

²⁷ Department for Education, [‘Education Secretary Announces 6 New Opportunity Areas’](#), 18 January 2017.

²⁸ Department for Education, [Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential](#), 14 December 2017, Cm 9541.

²⁹ *ibid*, p 6.

³⁰ *ibid*, p 8.

The plan said that it represented the “first time” a government had set out a “coherent, concerted approach to begin to level up opportunity right across the education system”. It added that it was an “important step in a long-term process to improve social mobility and spread equality of opportunity”.³¹

The Department for Education currently lists helping the “most disadvantaged” as one of its key priorities.³²

3.1 Summary of Selected Government Policies

Some of the main policies relevant to improving the educational attainment of children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in England are listed below.³³

Early Years

- **Early Education Entitlement:** free early education or childcare for qualifying 2, 3 and 4-year-olds (a 15-hour entitlement for the most disadvantaged 2-year olds; a 15-hour entitlement for parents of 3 and 4-year-olds; and a 30-hour entitlement for working parents of 3 and 4-year-olds).³⁴
- **Early Years Foundation Stage:** a statutory framework for children up to the age of 5 that sets out the areas of learning around which educational activities should be based.³⁵
- **Early Years Pupil Premium:** funding for early years settings to improve the education for disadvantaged 3 and 4-year-olds. This is worth up to £302 per year.³⁶

Schools

- **Pupil Premium:** additional funding provided to publicly funded schools in England aimed at raising the attainment of disadvantaged children. In 2019/20, £1,320 was allocated for each primary pupil and £935 was allocated for each secondary pupil deemed eligible for FSM in any of the past six years. A higher amount of £2,300 was allocated for each looked after and previously looked after child. In addition, a service premium of £300 was awarded for each child recorded as having a parent serving in the regular armed forces. In total, the Government allocated £2.41 billion of pupil premium funding in 2019/20.³⁷ From April 2020, the rates are set to rise with inflation.
- **National School Breakfast Programme:** funding for charities to run breakfast clubs. Aimed at supporting disadvantaged children in the most disadvantaged parts of the

³¹ Department for Education, [Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential](#), 14 December 2017, Cm 9541, p 36.

³² Department for Education, [About Us](#), accessed 21 February 2020.

³³ The following sources provide information on example policies in place in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, respectively: Education Scotland National Improvement Hub, [Scottish Attainment Challenge](#), accessed 21 February 2020; Education Wales, [Our National Mission](#), 26 September 2017; and Northern Ireland Department of Education, [Full Service Programmes](#), accessed 21 February 2020.

³⁴ Department for Education, [Early Education and Childcare: Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities](#), June 2018, p 6. See also: Department for Education, [Statistics: Childcare and Early Years](#), accessed 21 February 2020.

³⁵ UK Government website, [Early Years Foundation Stage](#), accessed 21 February 2020.

³⁶ UK Government website, [Get Extra Funding for Your Early Years Provider](#), accessed 11 February 2020.

³⁷ House of Commons Library, [Pupil Premium](#), 3 February 2020.

country, including the Government's twelve 'opportunity areas', clubs provide nutritious food and learning support.³⁸

- **Essential Life Skills Grant:** funding targeted at disadvantaged children and young people in the twelve opportunity areas to encourage participation in regular extra-curricular activities.³⁹

Further Education and Apprenticeships

- **16 to 19 Bursary Fund:** financial support—worth up to £1,200—for students studying at a publicly funded school or college in England (not a university); or on a training course, including unpaid work experience. Available in certain circumstances, including for those receiving income support or universal credit.⁴⁰
- **Disadvantaged Funding:** a core element of 16 to 19 school funding, a block of which supports students from economically deprived areas.⁴¹
- **Traineeship and Apprenticeship Support:** funding and/or advice for those undertaking a traineeship or apprenticeship.⁴²
- **Opportunities Through Apprenticeships:** scheme aimed at boosting access to apprenticeships in disadvantaged areas.⁴³
- **T levels:** set to be introduced from September 2020, T levels follow GCSEs and will be equivalent to three A levels. They aim to improve technical education by replacing thousands of “poor-quality” qualifications, mixing classroom learning and ‘on-the-job’ experience.⁴⁴

Higher Education

- **Uni Connect:** formerly the National Collaborative Outreach Programme, Uni Connect is a scheme that aims to “reduce the gap in higher education participation between the most and least represented groups”. The current phase includes targeted higher education outreach and outreach hubs within 29 local partnerships across England.⁴⁵
- **Access and Participation Plans:** administered by the Office for Students, participation plans “set out how higher education providers will improve equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups to access, succeed in and progress from higher education”.⁴⁶
- **Social Mobility Research:** funding from the Office for Students for an evidence and impact exchange, aimed at promoting equality of opportunity by “providing evidence on the impact of different approaches to widening access and improving outcomes and

³⁸ Department for Education, '[Thousands More School Children Receiving a Nutritious Breakfast](#)', 2 November 2018.

³⁹ Department for Education, '[Essential Life Skills Grant: S31 Grant Determination and Letters](#)', 28 March 2019.

⁴⁰ UK Government website, '[16 to 19 Bursary Fund](#)', accessed 21 February 2020.

⁴¹ Education and Skills Funding Agency, '[16 to 19 Funding: How It Works](#)', accessed 21 February 2020.

⁴² Education and Skills Funding Agency, '[Traineeships](#)' and '[A Guide to Apprenticeships](#)', accessed 21 February 2020.

⁴³ Education and Skills Funding Agency, '["Opportunities Through Apprenticeships" Project is Launched](#)', 21 November 2018.

⁴⁴ Department for Education, '[Introduction of T Levels](#)', 7 October 2019; and '[T Level Action Plan 2019](#)', October 2019.

⁴⁵ Office for Students, '[Uni Connect](#)', accessed 21 February 2020.

⁴⁶ Office for Students, '[Access and Participation Plans](#)', accessed 21 February 2020.

progression for disadvantaged students”.⁴⁷

4. Recent Reports and Recommendations

Several reports published over the course of the past year have made recommendations for improving the educational opportunities available to children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. These include two that have been the subject of debate in the House of Lords.⁴⁸ The key recommendations from both are summarised below.

4.1 Social Mobility Commission

Published in April 2019, the Social Mobility Commission’s *State of the Nation* report made several recommendations. These included:

- **Childcare:** the Government should extend the eligibility of the 30-hour childcare offer by lowering the lower income limit of eligibility to those earning the equivalent of 8 hours per week, as a first step towards making it available to more parents.
- **Pupil Premium:** the Government should consider whether pupil premium funding is effectively targeted at supporting disadvantaged students, and whether differential levels of funding might benefit those with long-term disadvantage.
- **16 to 19 funding:** The Government should increase per student spending in the 16 to 19 education budget by a significant amount within the upcoming spending review.
- **Student Premium:** the Government should introduce a student premium for disadvantaged students aged 16 to 19 that models the pupil premium in schools, with a goal of targeting funding and focus on raising attainment for disadvantaged students.
- **Higher Education funding support:** the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), working closely with the Office for Students (OfS), universities and others, should develop a system which displays all financial support (bursaries, scholarships and ad hoc funds) available to undergraduates alongside their eligibility criteria.
- **Contextualised offers:** universities should only make pre-qualification unconditional offers where it is clearly in the interests of the individual students to do so. In terms of widening access, universities should make more use of contextualised offers.⁴⁹

Theresa May’s Government welcomed the report.⁵⁰ It stated that social mobility was a “top priority across government” and it had taken “great strides to improve it”.⁵¹ In June 2019, the Government announced that it had asked the commission to launch a £2 million research and evidence fund to identify and spread best practice in this area.⁵²

⁴⁷ Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education, ‘[About Us](#)’, accessed 21 February 2020.

⁴⁸ [HL Hansard, 29 January 2020, cols 1478–500.](#)

⁴⁹ Social Mobility Commission, ‘[Class Privilege Remains Entrenched as Social Mobility Stagnates](#)’, 30 April 2019.

⁵⁰ House of Commons, ‘[Written Question: Social Mobility](#)’, 9 May 2019, 249233.

⁵¹ This commitment has been repeated by the current administration: [HC Hansard, 12 February 2020, col 371WH.](#)

⁵² House of Commons, ‘[Written Question: Social Mobility](#)’, 10 June 2019, 259284.

4.2 Sutton Trust

The Sutton Trust is a charity focused on improving social mobility and addressing educational disadvantage.⁵³ In November 2019, ahead of the 2019 general election, it published a *Mobility Manifesto*.⁵⁴ This document set out a series of recommendations. The “top ten” were as follows:

- **Early years:** the Government should review its 30 hours of free childcare policy to ensure that childcare entitlements do not exclude the most disadvantaged families. The emphasis on eligibility should be shifted from high income families to those on lower incomes.
- **School admissions:** state school admissions should ensure a better social mix across the system, with consideration given to ballots and priority for disadvantaged students, particularly to open up high performing comprehensive and grammar schools.
- **Open access:** independent schools should be opened up, on a voluntary basis, to pupils from all backgrounds. Entry to ten leading independent day schools should be democratised through implementation of the Open Access Scheme, where places are allocated based on academic merit alone, not money.
- **Highly able:** the new Government should establish an evidence-led fund to support young people with high academic potential in state schools, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- **Essential life skills:** state schools should be funded and incentivised to develop essential life skills in students both in and out of the classroom, with time allocated for their development, through the curriculum and extracurricular activities.
- **Higher apprenticeships:** there should be a focus on increasing the number of degree and higher-level apprenticeships as an alternative to university, and on ensuring young people from low- and moderate-income backgrounds can access them.
- **Contextual admissions:** contextual admissions should be used by more highly selective universities to open up access to students from less privileged backgrounds. Current use of contextual data should be improved by more transparency and consistency, better quality individual indicators and more ambitious grade reductions.
- **Post-qualification applications:** post-qualification applications to university should be implemented to allow young people to make an informed choice based on their actual rather than predicted grades.
- **Student finance:** maintenance grants for students should be restored to at least pre-2016 levels to provide support for those who need it most and reduce the debt burden of the least well-off.
- **Internships:** the Government should ban unpaid internships, ensuring that after four weeks interns are always paid the minimum wage, or preferably the living wage.⁵⁵

In response to a parliamentary question on the report, the Government said that it “continues to engage with a range of stakeholders in order to understand what children and young people need, so that they can express their talents and make the most of their lives”.

⁵³ Sutton Trust, [‘About Us’](#), accessed 21 February 2020.

⁵⁴ Sutton Trust, [Mobility Manifesto 2019](#), November 2019.

⁵⁵ *ibid*, p 2.

It continued:

For example, the department is working with the Early Intervention Foundation and Local Government Association to deliver a programme of early years social mobility peer reviews, focused on early language outcomes.

We have signed a joint understanding with the Independent Schools Council; through which we are working to increase the number of disadvantaged pupils who benefit from targeted bursaries and other forms of assistance offered voluntarily by independent schools.

We have endorsed a proposal to use the Office for Students' (OfS) review of the admissions system to consider the pros and cons of potential models of post qualification application. The OfS has also encouraged the use of contextual admissions and we support such initiatives.⁵⁶

5. Government Policy in the New Parliament

The 2019 Conservative Party general election manifesto included several “levelling up” ambitions, including in relation to education and skills in England. It said:

Talent and genius are uniformly distributed throughout the country. Opportunity is not. Now is the time to close that gap—not just because it makes such obvious economic sense, but for the sake of simple social justice.⁵⁷

The document added that a new national skills fund worth £3 billion would be set up in the current parliament. It also included a promise of £2 billion to “upgrade the entire further education college estate”.⁵⁸

The Government has repeated its commitment to improving the educational opportunities available to all citizens in recent debates in both Houses.⁵⁹ For example, speaking in a recent debate on social mobility in the House of Lords, Baroness Berridge, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Education, said there were “few more important priorities for any of us and any government than social mobility”.⁶⁰ She had earlier listed policy measures that the Government contended improved the educational opportunities available to disadvantaged children and young people.

During the same debate, Lord Bassam of Brighton, Labour’s spokesperson on further and higher education, said: “Education is one of the most powerful means we have to overcome disadvantage; it is therefore vital that access to the very best education is open to students from less privileged backgrounds”.⁶¹ He added, in relation to HE specifically, that, “in addition to tackling the financial barriers to accessing higher education, we must move towards a system that tackles the structural

⁵⁶ House of Lords, ‘[Written Question: Social Mobility](#)’, 13 February 2020, HL1176.

⁵⁷ Conservative Party, [Conservative Party Manifesto 2019](#), November 2019, p 2.

⁵⁸ *ibid*, p 36. See also: [HC Hansard, 8 January 2020, col 383](#).

⁵⁹ See, for example: [HL Hansard, 29 January 2020, cols 1478–500](#); [HC Hansard, 12 February 2020, cols 312–21WH](#); and [HC Hansard, 12 February 2020, cols 357–74WH](#).

⁶⁰ [HL Hansard, 29 January 2020, col 1500](#).

⁶¹ *ibid*, col 1495.

disadvantage that holds young people back”.

Speaking for the Liberal Democrats, Lord Storey observed that “virtually every Member has mentioned education”.⁶² He highlighted the importance of early years in educational development before adding that poverty was also a key factor in social mobility.

6. Further Reading

The list below includes recent parliamentary debates, briefings, reports, and articles relevant to the subject of educational opportunities and social mobility.

- [Debate on ‘Social Mobility’](#), HL Hansard, 29 January 2020, cols 1478–500
- [Debate on ‘Education and Attainment of White Working-Class Boys’](#), HC Hansard, 12 February 2020, cols 312–21WH
- [Debate on ‘Social Mobility’](#), HC Hansard, 12 February 2020, cols 357–74WH
- House of Lords Library, [Improved Early Years Interventions](#), 13 February 2020
- House of Lords Library, [Social Mobility](#), 22 January 2020
- House of Commons Library, [‘Education’](#), accessed 21 February 2020
- Education Policy Institute and Fair Education Alliance, [Education in England: Annual Report 2019](#), 30 July 2019; and [‘Disadvantage Gap Data’](#), accessed 21 February 2020
- Rosemary Bennett, [‘Ofsted “Punishes Poorest Schoolchildren” by Penalising Extra Year for GCSEs’](#), *Times* (£), 10 January 2020; and *Schools Week*, [‘Leading CEOs: New Ofsted Inspections Favour Middle-class Kids’](#), 10 January 2020
- Social Mobility Commission, [‘Social Mobility Factsheets’](#), 16 August 2016

⁶² [HL Hansard, 29 January 2020, col 1495.](#)