CREATING OPPORTUNITY

Advancing Social Mobility in 2025-26



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Making the Leap.

UK SOCIAL MOBILITY AWARDS

In association with nationalgrid

Celebrating 10 years of the SOMAs

About the research

In this study, we examine what UK employers are doing to advance social mobility in 2025-26. By analysing data from close to 150 entries submitted to the UK Social Mobility Awards in 2026, we examine what employers are doing across three key stages of the social mobility journey: **building the foundations** through data and strategy, **doing the work** through outreach, recruitment, retention and progression activities, and **taking the lead** through advocacy. We also explore what universities are doing to **bridge the gap** between education and employment for young people from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds (LSEBs). By providing in-depth insights into social mobility activities from the classroom to the workplace, the research offers unique evidence and recommendations to inform wider action on social mobility in the UK.

About Making The Leap

Making The Leap is a social mobility charity which was founded in 1993. For over 30 years, Making The Leap has worked with schools, young adults, charities, and employers to advance social mobility and race equity in the UK. In 2017, Making The Leap introduced the UK Social Mobility Awards (SOMOs), a nationwide initiative to recognise and celebrate UK organisations working to improve social mobility.

To learn more about Making The Leap, please visit **www.makingtheleap.org.uk**.

To learn more about the UK Social Mobility Awards, including the 2026 entrants, finalists and winners, please visit **www.somo.uk**.

About the authors

Dr Padmini Iyer is Head of Research and Advocacy at Making The Leap. A mixed-methods social researcher, her work has focused on inequities in employment and education related to gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic background in countries including the UK, Ethiopia, India and Vietnam. Padmini joined Making The Leap in 2021. Before this, she led UK-based research at the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), and worked on international research projects at the University of Cambridge and the University of Oxford. She completed her PhD in Education at the University of Sussex.

Katrina Leary is an independent qualitative social researcher. Her work mainly focuses on welfare, employment and money, with a particular interest in policies affecting low-income families. She specialises in large-scale in-depth interviewing studies on sensitive issues, qualitative analysis, and report writing. Prior to becoming an independent researcher in 2022, Katrina spent 15 years working at the Social Research Institute at Ipsos where she led research studies on welfare, employment, financial decision-making, tax, childcare, and violence against women.

Kya Christensen is the Research and Policy Officer at Making The Leap. Her work focuses on social mobility and youth employment, with the goal of tackling inequality through evidence-based policy and advocacy work. Kya joined Making The Leap in 2024, and before joining the Research Team, she worked directly with young adults as part of the Engagement Team. She completed her undergraduate degree in Political Science at Brunel University of London, and she is currently undertaking an MSc in Social Policy (Research Methods) at University College London.

Recommended citation

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Image credits

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Executive summary



Background

In 2026, the *Young People and Work* report, more commonly known as the Milburn Review, has shone a light on a key barrier to social mobility in the UK: close to one million young people are not in education, employment or training (NEET), and young people from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds (LSEBs) are disproportionately represented in this group.[1,2] There has therefore been a welcome, renewed focus across the public and private sectors to ensure people from LSEBs, and especially those aged 16 to 24, have fair access to work experience, skills development, and good quality employment.

Since 1993, Making The Leap has worked with schools, young adults, and employers to advance social mobility and race equity in the UK. Making The Leap has organised the UK Social Mobility Awards (SOMOs) since 2017, a nationwide initiative to recognise and celebrate UK organisations working to improve social mobility.

Every year, information submitted to the SOMOs provides a rich dataset which offers unique insights into what employers are doing to advance social mobility. In 2026, our sample comprises close to 150 SOMO entries, from organisations that represent 14 sectors and collectively employ close to one million people. The most commonly represented sectors in this year's sample are finance, law, professional services, technology, and government.

In this study, we analyse entries to the 2026 SOMOs to examine **what employers are doing** to advance social mobility, **what helps and hinders** employers' social mobility efforts, **what best practice looks like**, and **examples of positive impact**. By using comparable data collected via the UK Social Mobility Awards since 2022, we are also able to explore trends in employers' activities over time. Please see the Appendix in the full report for more details about our data and research methodology.

Key findings and recommendations

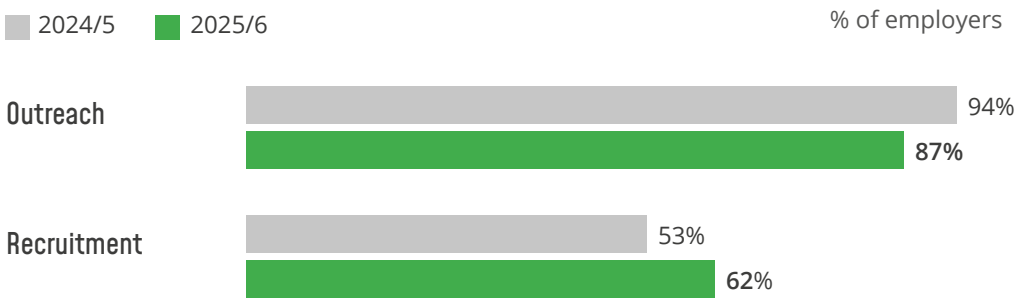
In our full report, *Creating opportunity: Advancing social mobility in 2025-26*, we offer in-depth insights into what employers have been doing over the past year to **build the foundations** for effective social mobility work (through data, strategy and leadership), to **do the work** across the employee journey (through outreach, recruitment, retention, and progression activities), and to **take the lead** through advocacy initiatives promoting awareness and action. We also explore the work done by universities to **bridge the gap** between education and employment, and to improve outcomes for young people from LSEBs.

In the executive summary, we present our three Key Findings from the research and, based on gaps identified in our research, we offer recommendations to promote sustainable, effective action on social mobility in future years.

[1] Department for Work and Pensions (2026) Young People and Work: Interim Report.
[2] Social Mobility Commission (2025) State of the Nation 2025: The evolving story of social mobility in the UK.

Key Finding 1	**In 2026, despite a wider slowdown in UK recruitment, leading employers are doing more to recruit people from less advantaged backgrounds, narrowing the gap between reaching and recruiting them.** ***Why this matters:*** *employers can directly address the UK's youth NEET crisis and expand pathways into work for people from LSEBs.*

Figure 1: Employers' outreach and recruitment activities, 2024/5 to 2025/6



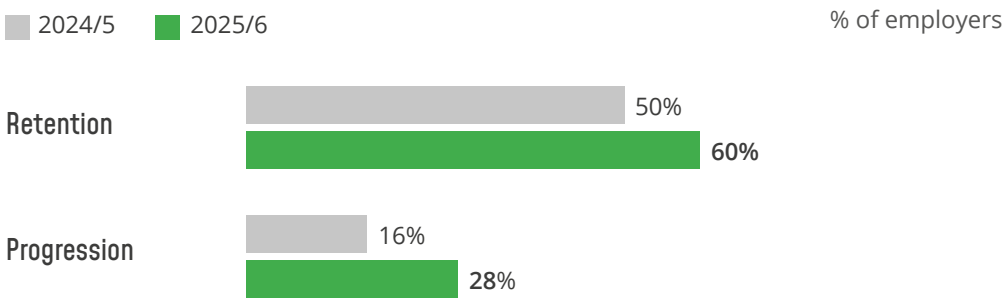
This year, employers are accelerating their efforts to recruit people from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds (LSEBs):

- **62% of employers are actively recruiting people from LSEBs** in 2025/6, representing a 9-point increase compared to 2024/5 (see Figure 1). This increase is largely driven by more employers offering alternative pathways to employment, such as paid internships that lead to jobs, and multi-year programmes from school to employment or apprenticeships. Employers are also offering more targeted employment programmes for groups facing specific socio-economic disadvantages. This includes people who are long-term unemployed, young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), care-experienced people, disabled people, prison leavers, and veterans.
- **The outreach-recruitment gap has narrowed over the past year**. In 2024/5, we found that employers were still in first gear,[3] with almost all focusing on outreach activities that informed and prepared young people for careers (94%) and only half actually recruiting people from LSEBs (53%) – a gap of 41 points. In 2025/6, the outreach-recruitment gap has narrowed to 25 points.
- The narrowing gap is partly driven by **a small decrease in employers' outreach activities** this year, reported by 87% compared to 94% in 2024/5. In particular, fewer employers are offering work experience opportunities compared to last year. However, outreach activities including careers fairs, digital campaigns, skills programmes and mentoring continue to be the most commonly reported types of social mobility activity this year.
- Our findings on outreach and recruitment suggest the employers represented in our sample – a group highly committed to advancing social mobility – are **bucking wider employer trends in the UK**, by increasing rather than decreasing their efforts to recruit people from LSEBs.[4] Although our data does not show whether these employers are increasing recruitment overall, it is clear they are doing more to employ people from less advantaged backgrounds. Since young people from LSEBs are more likely to be economically inactive compared to their more advantaged peers,[5] this is a vital form of positive action to address the UK's NEET crisis and advance social mobility.

[3] Iyer, P. & Leary, K. (2025) Still in first gear? Advancing social mobility in 2024-25.
[4] Office for National Statistics (2026) Vacancies and jobs in the UK.
[5] Department for Work and Pensions (2026) Young People and Work: Interim Report.

Key Finding 2	Employers are doing more to retain and develop employees from LSEBs, and are slowly starting to help people from less advantaged backgrounds to get in and get on. *Why this matters: without retention and progression, recruitment gains will not translate into long-term social mobility or sustainable workforce diversity.*

Figure 2: Employers' retention and progression activities, 2024/5 to 2025/6



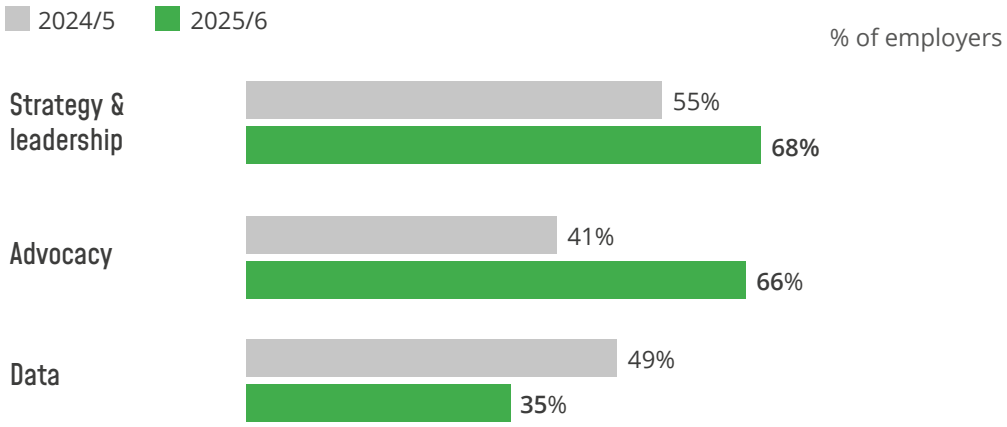
In addition to increased recruitment activities, we also see positive trends in employers' work to retain employees from LSEBs this year:

- **60% of employers are delivering initiatives to retain employees from LSEBs in 2025/6,** an increase of 10 points compared to 2024/5 (**see Figure 2**).
- The most commonly reported retention initiatives are activities to **promote awareness and understanding,** especially by celebrating Social Mobility Day and delivering workshops on topics such as accent bias. Social mobility initiatives to promote **inclusion and belonging** also continue to be popular, with social mobility staff networks still a central part of employers' inclusion activities.
- As we have found since 2022, employers are still **much less likely to offer progression initiatives for employees from LSEBs** compared to all other social mobility activities. However, we do see an increase in employers reporting action on career progression this year – from 16% in 2024/5 to 28% in 2025/6.
- This year, more employers are delivering **targeted training and development initiatives** for employees from LSEBs, along with more positive action to support promotion and offer more transparent promotion structures. Levels of reported action on social mobility progression initiatives in 2026 are close to the highest levels we have reported (31% in 2022/3).[6] We hope this continues to trend upwards in future years, to ensure more equitable career outcomes for employees from LSEBs.

[6] Iyer, P., Leary, K. & Davies, E. (2023) Reaching potential? Advancing social mobility in 2022-23.

Key Finding 3	**Employers are increasingly adopting social mobility strategies, and are stepping up their leadership and advocacy efforts. However, fewer employers report data-led approaches this year.** ***Why this matters:*** *leadership, advocacy and strategy are most effective when informed by evidence, helping employers to understand their workforce, address barriers and evaluate outcomes.*

Figure 3: Employers' strategy & leadership, advocacy and data activities, 2024/5 to 2025/6



- **68% of employers are adopting strategic approaches to social mobility in 2025/6,** an increase of 13 points compared to last year (**see Figure 3**). This increase is driven by greater investment in leadership and governance structures to guide social mobility efforts. Examples of best practice include senior sponsors being given defined responsibility for key elements of social mobility strategy, regular reviews of progress towards social mobility goals, and dedicated social mobility roles.
- **More employers than ever are acting as social mobility advocates this year.** 66% of employers are working to influence wider audiences and to promote social mobility among their peers – an increase of 25 points compared to 2024/5, and far above our previous high of 47% in 2022/3.[7] Employers are more likely to engage in direct policy engagement this year, for example by giving evidence to the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee and the House of Lords Social Mobility Inquiry. There is also greater investment in evidence to drive positive change, with employers in the legal, real estate and professional services sectors all investing in wider social mobility research.
- In contrast to investments in sector-wide research, employers are **much less likely to report data-driven approaches** for their own social mobility work in 2025/6. Just over a third of employers (35%) report collecting and using internal social mobility data this year, a drop of 14 points compared to 2024/5.
- **Leading employers continue to collect socio-economic background (SEB) data** and use this to target social mobility interventions, measure impact, and to report socio-economic pay gaps. Between 2022/3 and 2024/5, we saw a steady increase in employers who reported collecting and using SEB data (from 35% to 49%). The 2024/5 increase was driven by more employers collecting SEB data as part of their outreach activities; conversely, this year's decrease is largely explained by a drop in outreach-related data collection. While this may reflect under-reporting rather than a lack of action, we hope employers will continue to invest in data-driven approaches from 2026/7 onwards, to understand who is represented in their workforce, identify where barriers arise, and assess whether action is making a difference.

[7] Iyer, P., Leary, K. & Davies, E. (2023) Reaching potential? Advancing social mobility in 2022-23.

Recommendation 1 | Invest in recruitment, gain a competitive advantage

We are encouraged to see an increase in recruitment activities within our employer sample this year – this is undoubtedly a positive development. However, these employers are bucking wider UK trends by increasing rather than decreasing their recruitment efforts. We therefore encourage more employers to invest in pathways that lead to permanent employment. By doing so, employers will not only be part of the solution to the UK's youth NEET crisis, but will also gain a competitive advantage by investing in talent that their peers are missing out on.

What can employers do?

- **Offer paid internships or work placements that guarantee interviews or lead directly to permanent roles,** rather than short-term experiences with no progression.
- **Develop multi-year programmes** that connect school outreach, work experience, and apprenticeships into a seamless route into employment.
- **Create targeted recruitment pathways** for groups facing specific socio-economic disadvantages, such as NEET young people, care-experienced individuals, disabled people, or long-term unemployed adults.

Recommendation 2 | Accelerate efforts to provide high-quality jobs

Inclusion and belonging initiatives are continuing to grow, and employers are beginning to invest more in progression. But to make social mobility a reality, employers still need to do much more to provide financial security, job stability and fair career outcomes for employees from LSEBs.

What can employers do?

- **Pay the Real Living Wage as a minimum,** to ensure entry-level roles provide genuine financial security.
- **Offer guaranteed hours alongside flexible working options,** to reduce precarity while supporting work-life balance.
- **Deliver targeted progression initiatives,** such as transparent promotion criteria, sponsorship programmes, or tailored development pathways for employees from LSEBs.

Recommendation 3 | Don't forget the data

Collecting SEB data across the employee journey allows employers to understand representation, identify key barriers for people from LSEBs, develop targeted interventions, and evaluate whether interventions are having a positive impact. SEB data is also essential to measure and reduce socio-economic pay gaps.

What can employers do?

- **Collect SEB data from outreach and recruitment to retention and progression,** using the Social Mobility Commission's employer toolkit as a guide.
- **Use SEB data to calculate socio-economic pay gaps and publish progress annually,** embedding accountability into leadership and governance structures.
- **Apply insights from SEB data to design targeted interventions,** such as revising recruitment processes, adjusting promotion criteria, or investing in tailored development programmes for employees from LSEBs.



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