

## **APPG for T Levels – Social Mobility Roundtable: 19.01.25**

The Chair of the APPG, Dr Sam Rushworth MP, opened the session and introduced the panel.

### **Resham Kotecha, Deputy Chair of the Social Mobility Commission**

- Noted that there are around a million young people who are NEET, alongside a large number of graduates claiming benefits. Evidence from the Social Mobility Commission's latest State of the Nation report shows that individuals from lower working-class backgrounds are likelier to be NEET than those from professional backgrounds. This gap has not narrowed since 2019, highlighting a long-term structural issue.
- Emphasised the importance of vocational pathways, particularly T Levels, in driving opportunity and improving outcomes. The legacy of industrial and geographic disparities was also highlighted, with former mining areas continuing to face challenges.
- Also highlighted positive findings that areas outside London can indeed offer strong opportunities, arguing that policy too often focuses on replicating London models rather than building on local strengths. Internationally, RK noted that the UK compares favourably with France and Japan on social mobility, despite prevailing negative sentiment.
- Referenced labour market opportunities for young people, including an index measuring opportunity at local authority level, and concluded that expanding accessible vocational routes through T Levels, alongside a strong growth-focused policy agenda, is critical.

### **Paul O'Neill, Development Director, Steven Morgan Foundation**

- Highlighted that public awareness of opportunities remains too low and inconsistent across different stakeholders. He stressed the need for more effective awareness-raising, including clearer targeting of specific cohorts and better support for those furthest from the labour market, with consideration of how this should operate across colleges and other education settings.
- Questioned what concrete action is required to capitalise on and rapidly build momentum once awareness is raised. He also drew attention to access barriers, including regional disparities, transport challenges and financial constraints.
- Emphasised the need to ensure that once young people are engaged, pathways such as T Levels lead to good-quality careers. He noted that many young people are not engaging with education infrastructure, making disadvantaged groups hard to reach, and concluded that a single, place-based lens will not address the issue holistically.

### **Anna Trocmé Latter, Head of Impact and Continuous Improvement, Career Ready**

- Emphasised the need to avoid a two-tier education system, noting that there is still work to do to move away from universities being seen as the “gold standard”, particularly as this route is becoming less useful for a growing number of people.

- Added the importance of a place-based approach, with T Levels offering an opportunity to encourage young people to remain in the areas they grew up in, so that progression does not require moving away in order to succeed.
- Noted that for employers with limited experience of working with young people, engaging with them can be a significant adjustment. Industry itself needs support in designing and delivering placements, as this process can be daunting for employers.

**Dr Emily Andrews, Director of Policy, Learning and Work**

- Noted Education Policy Institute research on the 2021/22 cohort, showing that disadvantaged young people are overrepresented on T Levels but also more likely to drop out of T Levels and education overall, which is a concerning trend.
- Highlighted that employers generally respond positively to technical education and often see it as their responsibility to develop the skills they need, creating an opportunity to upskill young people. However, employers also have concerns about whether curriculum is sufficiently specific and up to date.
- Emphasised the need for a place-based, relationship-led approach, with strategic authorities helping to build T Level pathways and talent pipelines, encouraging employers to move away from seeking immediate “perfect” candidates and towards longer-term workforce development.

**Jenni Anderson, CEO, Talent Foundry**

- Highlighted construction as a strong example of how T Levels can be used to build a clear skills pipeline. She noted the importance of engaging with pupils from Year 9 to raise awareness early and develop this pipeline.
- Explained that many students in the area currently travel elsewhere for opportunities, and that earlier engagement with local businesses could help reverse this by securing employer buy-in and involving students sooner.
- Noted that earlier access to work experience increases the likelihood of young people remaining in employment, and suggested that a consortium-style model, with businesses partnered directly with schools, could help create more sustained work opportunities.

**Oby Bamidele, CEO, Uptree**

- Noted that while there is engagement with large corporations, there are currently insufficient incentives for them to support T Levels. She emphasised the need for training for employers to ensure clear and credible pathways for students at the end of placements, as well as helping students understand these pathways.
- Stressed that work experience must be meaningful, and highlighted safeguarding as a recurring concern, particularly for SMEs, which often lack the necessary policies and therefore require additional support.

**Resham Kotecha**

- Highlighted that a lack of post-T Level placement opportunities remains a challenge, stressing the need for stronger partnerships between education providers and industry.
- Noted that employers often seek specific skills immediately, so aligning T Levels with real labour market needs is crucial to ensure students can apply their learning.

- Acknowledged that most T Level students do progress into sustained destinations, but cautioned that success requires more than simply funnelling students into the programmes. They also emphasised that T Levels should not be seen as only for disadvantaged students, but equally suitable and respected for learners from all backgrounds.

**Dr Sam Rushworth MP**

- Noted that, based on discussions with young constituents, demand for T Levels and degree apprenticeships far exceeds supply. He observed that university remains attractive because it guarantees a place and allows students to delay full adult responsibilities for three years.
- In contrast, aspects such as punctuality and employability skills associated with T Levels are less appealing, with many young people preferring the social freedom of university life.

**Joanne Hartley-Metcalfe, Universities T Level Support Manager, UKITSS**

- Emphasised that technicians in high-demand industries are crucial, but the UK faces shortages in key sectors even as universities make redundancies. She suggested using existing funding more flexibly to create placements and apprenticeships, noting that university endorsement of T Levels would boost student confidence.
- While more students are undertaking university placements, financial constraints limit expansion. JHM proposed that T Level students complete a placement at a university, then transition into an apprenticeship, stressing that smarter use of current funding could make this feasible and support the industrial strategy.

**Baroness Garden of Frognal**

- Highlighted the need for a range of stakeholders to be involved in the success of T Levels, and praised the qualifications journey to date.

**Tom Collins MP**

- Highlighted that the country has experienced a longstanding technical decline and, while the government aims to reverse this, there is no clear vision for a technical renaissance. He also warned that designing education solely based on current needs will perpetuate the decline and argued that planning should reflect long-term ambition.
- Noted that the industrial strategy focuses on business growth rather than broader economic growth, and that their constituency has not received engineering provision based on need, but rather on current capacity, reflecting ongoing decline.
- Emphasised that technical innovation is needed everywhere, and allocating resources based on legacy rather than future demand will not drive the turnaround required.

**Paul O'Neill**

- Cautioned that conflating a technical vision with youth unemployment does neither issue justice, warning that trying to force them together risks designing solutions that are unfit for the future in both areas.

**Lord Newby**

- Questioned which minister or civil servant is aware that only hundreds of people are entering certain fields where thousands are needed, and who is actively considering why this gap exists.

**Resham Kotecha**

- Noted that young people are being pushed into “right now” jobs rather than sustainable careers, emphasising that NEETs need long-term opportunities.

**Tom Collins MP**

- Warned that some jobs are perceived as “CV poison,” and that this approach risks discouraging many people from pursuing their ambitions.

**Baroness Garden of Frognal**

- Noted that even casual jobs provide some employability skills, but added that while young people can work these roles, they should also be incentivised to pursue T Levels alongside, applying them in parallel.

**Oby Bamidele, CEO, Uptree**

- Highlighted that starting early to expose young people to work can be transformational. She noted that in minority communities, T Levels are often perceived as suited only for trades rather than professional careers, and that even vocationally inclined students are being pushed toward other routes.
- Added that some minority parents believe university is the only viable path.