



Diversifying Real Estate: Social Mobility

Guidebook commissioned by CPA & WPA NextGen

2026 edition

London Property Alliance

WPA
Westminster Property Association

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This guidebook aims to help individuals and organisations make central London's real estate sector more inclusive and reflective of our capital's diverse communities. It addresses key barriers to social mobility in relation to the recruitment and retention of workers and suggests simple ways for organisations and individuals to implement positive change. It provides best practice examples, signposts to resources and reflects on personal experiences.

The original edition was published in March 2023 as the fifth edition in a series of themed diversity guidebooks commissioned by the Westminster Property Association (WPA) and City Property Association (CPA) NextGen networks, produced by London Property Alliance and supported by NextGen champion Gardiner & Theobald.

Three years on, this guidebook reflects updated data and research as well as new case studies. The original guide was informed by interviews and roundtables with members, co-opted experts and social mobility specialists, along with stakeholders from local government.

We hope that this guidebook will inspire and inform our members at WPA and CPA and the wider property industry, so that together we can make our profession more inclusive, diverse and dynamic.

Find out more at londonpropertyalliance.com

Foreword

Imposter syndrome is a common experience in many careers, often leaving individuals feeling uncertain about how to navigate established networks. For those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, entering sectors like property and the built environment can present additional challenges, especially as progression beyond entry-level roles may appear difficult. These obstacles can be even greater when combined with other protected characteristics such as race, disability or sexual orientation.

As the competition for talent continues, understanding the needs and aspirations of our communities is not just the right thing to do, it is essential for progress. While positive initiatives exist, we must go further: listening to lived experiences and creating environments where everyone feels they belong.

At Westminster City Council, we are committed to ensuring local people benefit from the current demand for innovation and skills to help meet net zero targets. At our Green Futures Career Event, we welcomed 800 participants from three boroughs, including tailored sessions for SEND students. Our Westminster Adult Education Service has launched the **Green Skills Innovation Centre**, which is equipping adults with training in BIM, PV installation and retrofit techniques – skills that will shape the future of the sector.

Westminster City Council is investing in the delivery of 4,000 homes in the city and we work with our partners to focus this investment on our communities – unlocking potential through training, skills and career pathways. This is about ensuring that regeneration is not just about buildings, but about creating opportunities for people.

Yet, the challenge remains: how do we create inclusive career pathways into the property sector? How do we ensure local colleges and training providers connect with the wealth of expertise within WPA members? Apprenticeships, meaningful work experience and exposure to cutting-edge sustainability projects are vital steps. Partnerships between Westminster City Council and WPA members are important to make this vision a reality.

Through our **Anchor Alliance** and **Education, Employment and Skills Board**, we are creating space for collaboration and action. By leveraging social value and aligning skills with future employment trends, we can unlock potential, drive innovation and ensure that the property sector reflects the diversity and talent of our city.



Stella Abani MBE,
Director of Economy & Skills,
Westminster City Council

Understanding the challenge

Class is often overlooked in efforts to improve diversity. It can be more complex and less visible than other demographic indicators, such as gender and race. Socio-economic background is currently not a protected characteristic under the 2010 Equality Act.¹

The UK has one of lowest levels of social mobility (defined as the movement of individuals or groups up or down the socio-economic ladder) in the developed world². Whilst most people would agree that an individual's background shouldn't determine their future, social structures often dictate a person's access to education and job opportunities. Furthermore, social inequalities have been deepened by the cost of living crisis, driven by surging prices for energy, food and housing.³

The problem is particularly acute in the real estate sector with privilege still entrenched in the professional landscape. Research by the Bridge Group⁴, supported by the JLL UK Foundation, shows that 31% of staff at the surveyed property firms attended an independent or selective school. This compares to just 6% of the UK population who were privately educated. The Sutton Trust's Elitist Britain 2025 found that nearly half of professionals in the property industry attended independent schools, with only a quarter coming from comprehensive schools.⁵ This makes the sector more heavily weighted towards privately educated individuals than many other industries. Such over-representation is not simply a question of personal merit but of structural advantage, demonstrating how early access to elite networks and education shapes career trajectories.

Additionally, data shows that young people from higher socio-economic backgrounds earn on average 13% more than peers from working-class backgrounds with the same qualifications.⁶

There are clear intersections between class and other diversity areas. The Bridge Group's 2020 research revealed that men are 21% more likely to be from higher socio-economic backgrounds than women; and White employees are 40% more likely to be from higher socio-economic backgrounds than those who identify as Black.⁴

More recent research from The Bridge Group in 2025 further underscores these disparities, highlighting a “stark lack” of socio-economic diversity, especially at senior levels. 51% of senior roles are held by White men from higher socio-economic backgrounds, whilst only 14% come from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Additionally, it was found that employees from Lower socio-economic backgrounds who are also women and/or from ethnic minority groups, face compounded disadvantages.

Our industry can be perceived as exclusive and nepotistic⁷, with access disproportionately available to young people who already have ties to real estate professions through family, friendships or school connections.

A focus on social mobility is vital for creating a genuinely inclusive and fair workplace, and a property industry that reflects London's diverse communities.

Creating inclusive working environments for people from less advantaged backgrounds has the following benefits:



Hearing new ideas and perspectives, which is especially important when creating buildings and places where socio-economically diverse Londoners will live, work and play



Expanding the talent pool by removing barriers to entry level roles and progression within a business, enabling organisations to attract and retain individuals perhaps otherwise overlooked



Improving other diversity areas, such as gender and race, as socio-economic inclusion supports more equitable access to opportunities and helps address overlapping barriers

Supporting social mobility in the real estate sector

1. Make the business case for socio-economic diversity

- Think of improving diversity as an investment. For example, diverse talent will provide a better understanding of your customer base, or stakeholders, resulting in stronger commercial returns and improved customer service
- Work hard to understand the social-economic status of your workforce: both existing staff and incoming recruits. This can be done through workplace surveys (which need to be handled sensitively, see table on pg. 11 for more information), as well as identifying social mobility gaps during recruitment and exit interviews.

Resource: The Social Mobility Employer Index is an annual benchmarking tool for organisations looking to understand how they are performing on social mobility and where they can improve.

The Social Mobility Foundation assesses the steps being taken by the employer to make sure they are open to talent from all social backgrounds and provides a tailored report offering recommendations on how to widen accessibility.

www.socialmobility.org.uk/index

2. Attract talent

Advertising job opportunities

- Show how careers in property are about people and placemaking.
- Avoid using the term ‘competitive salary’ in job adverts: transparency is key. Clearly set out the pay and hours as people may not know what to expect
- Review recruitment processes and job descriptions e.g. consider shifting from CVs to application forms or consider using ‘blind’ CVs. [This article](#)⁸ from PREACH Inclusion explores the pros and cons of blind CV practices
- Consider stating “we are open to taking people with no experience, or with transferable skills”, if appropriate
- Include your company’s DEI statement in the advert to show your commitment to inclusivity
- Work with recruiters that specialise in supporting underrepresented groups into roles
- Consider offering reasonable travel expenses where candidates, especially those just starting out, are travelling from a distance for the interview. These costs particularly impact those from lower socio-economic backgrounds

Resource: Rare Recruitment is a specialist diversity recruitment company with expertise in graduate recruitment and development. It uses digital tools to provide real time contextual information allowing employers to identify exceptional candidates they might otherwise miss.

www.rarerecruitment.co.uk

Addressing economic barriers

- The cost of academic study may prevent people from using this traditional pathway to property. If your company has the resource, consider degree sponsorship or bursaries for under-represented groups (for example, by supporting students through Pathways to Property – see below)

Resource: Pathways to Property aims to widen access to the real estate profession by raising awareness of and aspirations about the vast range of careers available within the sector.

Led by Reading Real Estate Foundation at Henley Business School, University of Reading, and fully funded by the industry, the project works with students, teachers, career advisors and parents to highlight to those from less advantaged and non-traditional backgrounds the opportunities available within the sector. Activities include an annual Summer School, work experience week, e-mentoring programme, engaging with schools and colleges throughout the UK at careers events and delivering a successful open online course about starting a career in real estate.

[Henley Business School: Pathways to Property](#)

Work experience and training

- Consider offering paid apprenticeships, internships and other placements which create opportunities for a wider pool of talent without traditional qualifications, and people who were born in social mobility ‘coldspots’⁹ (such as coastal areas and industrial towns)
- Try to reduce the recruitment of people already known to the organisation (e.g. a director’s child or a friend’s child), and instead actively seek young people from under-represented backgrounds
- Consider offering internships and work experience places to young people in the regeneration areas you work in

The Social Mobility Foundation campaigns on structural social mobility issues and amplifies the voices of young people from lower socioeconomic benefits.

The Social Mobility Foundation has a series of ongoing advocacy and campaigns:

- **The Class Pay Gap**

<https://www.socialmobility.org.uk/campaign/the-class-pay-gap>

- **End Laptop Poverty**

<https://www.endlaptoppoverty.org>

- **Flexible Futures**

<https://www.socialmobility.org.uk/campaign/flexible-futures>

- **CVS Aren't Working**

<https://www.socialmobility.org.uk/campaign/cvs-arent-working>

Managing work experience days and internships

- Start by asking what people want from their experience, and shape the programme around that
- Consult with a local school or college in designing your programme and make sure the placements offered demonstrate the diversity of the industry e.g. HR, Finance, Law and Property roles
- Shadowing can be an effective experience to understand the reality of a job. A one- or two-day placement can be just as good as longer work experience, so don't be nervous about offering shorter but more intense experiences
- Ensure all interns and those on work experience have a mentor or 'buddy' who is tracking progress, checking in and ensuring they can get the best out of the opportunity. Try to make a buddy match who might identify with some of the challenges the young person is facing
- Connect with organisations that help give support. Speak to youth charities, such as the Young Westminster Foundation, for advice if you don't know where to start

Resource: 2-3 Degrees, in partnership with Young Westminster Foundation, collaborates with local businesses on the Mastering My Future programme to create meaningful career-focused opportunities for young people. This includes workshops and events, mentoring and work experience and training for businesses on how to work with young people.

www.youngwestminster.com/mastering-my-future

Other ways of connecting with diverse talent

- Engage with young people to promote careers in real estate as open to them, and explain the exciting, creative and well-paid opportunities our sector can provide. Make it relevant to the audience, for example using case studies on professionals who had non-traditional pathways into the industry
- Target school-age children with career talks, not just university students who have already chosen property-related courses. Send staff from a diverse range of backgrounds to provide role models for the young people
- Consider how to engage with parents, teachers and careers advisors, as they are major influencers in a child's career choice
- Run mentoring programmes for young people, matching your own staff to individuals within the local community. For example, the Mayor's Fund offer mentoring opportunities for your staff

Resource: Career Ready is a national social mobility charity that works with employers, schools and volunteers towards the goal of every young person having the opportunity to kickstart a rewarding career. The organisation partners with employers to invest in young, diverse people across the UK, transforming lives, boosting social mobility and helping employers tap into undiscovered talent. It provides young people with the mentoring, paid internships, skills masterclasses and workplace visits in order to unlock new skills, discover new career opportunities and achieve their potential.

www.careerready.org.uk/employers

Resource: Land Collective helps explain the diverse range of property careers, and pathways into those careers, to young people from diverse backgrounds. The organisation hosts a programme of free events, employability programmes, an online networking platform; and creates inspiring career stories, research and media engagement to engage with people who wouldn't traditionally consider a career in property.

www.thelandcollective.com

Resource: Making the Leap, a social mobility charity which also runs the SOMO Social Mobility Awards and is one of the few Black-founded and led charities working in social mobility space.

<https://makingtheleap.org.uk>

3. Retain and promote staff

- A key challenge is the underrepresentation of people from lower socio-economic backgrounds in senior positions. It can be helpful to regularly reflect on your company culture to see whether any unwritten norms or practices might unintentionally exclude those from less privileged backgrounds. For example, you might consider whether networking activities built around ‘elitist’ sports or other exclusive interests are creating unintended barriers
- Make the career progression and promotion system as transparent as possible, so that biases (conscious and sub-conscious) of middle managers do not translate into an unfair advantage for people from the same socio-economic or educational background
- Identify allies at senior level who will champion socio-economic diversity. Learn lessons from corporates such as KPMG that have a Social Mobility Employee Network and senior level sponsors / ambassadors for social mobility
- Review mentoring programmes and consider mentors of a similar age or seniority, rather than based on hierarchy
- Consider reverse mentoring programmes so more senior leaders can learn from junior staff from underrepresented backgrounds
- Share the stories of people from within your business who have come from different socioeconomic backgrounds
- Be mindful of intersectionality and class, which can make the crossover into a professional property career doubly difficult – refer to the LPA Diversifying Real Estate: Intersectionality guidebook for more information.

Resource: An excellent and inspiring read is People Like Us: What It Takes to Make it in Modern Britain by Hashi Mohamed (2020, Profile Books). This book explains his social mobility journey from a child refugee, raised on benefits and attending some of the lowest-performing schools in the country to becoming one of the highest rated planning barristers in England. It offers practical tips for employers, as well as young people at the beginning of their own social mobility journey.

Resource: The Westminster Employment Service (WES) promotes economic inclusion by connecting businesses to diverse communities looking for good quality work. WES can help your organisation deliver community recruitment events; reach diverse, skilled communities through its network of partner organisations; and provide a dedicated team of employment coaches and recruitment professionals.

Contact localjobs@westminster.gov.uk or register at <https://www.westminster.gov.uk/jobs-and-volunteering/westminster-employment-service> to see how WES can help your inclusive recruitment ambitions in central London.

Supporting social mobility in the real estate sector

The following table sets out a series of suggestions for how different groups within an organisation can help support social mobility within the real estate sector. These points are practical ideas that each group may wish to consider and are intended to prompt reflection and encourage small but meaningful actions.

At Board level
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consider investing in internships, apprenticeships, and work-experience programmes to help widen access to the sector• Look at ways to build organisational understanding of social mobility and how it affects people entering or progressing in the workforce• Explore reverse mentoring to hear directly from staff with lived experience and use these insights to shape future approaches
At middle management
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consider working with a wider range of recruiters and community networks to attract a more diverse pool of talent• Look for colleagues who may benefit from additional support or training and think about small, practical steps that could help their development• Explore simple ways to make team-level recruitment, progression and day-to-day culture more open and welcoming to people from different backgrounds
At NextGen
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consider engaging with schools or universities by visiting, speaking with students or connecting educators with people in the industry to raise awareness of real estate career paths• Get involved in sector or community networks that focus on social mobility, diversity or early-career support• Ask questions within your organisation about how social mobility is being supported and look for small ways to champion it in your own teams or projects

Case studies

Grosvenor works with ULI (Urban Land Institute) UK as well as local schools where it operates, encouraging its staff to volunteer in these locations and help spread the word about what property is and why it is a great career.

The organisations have been working together for over 10 years on the UrbanPlan programme, including workshops where disadvantaged secondary school students play a vital role in a mock land development proposal. Groups present to a set of judges their planning applications and a winner is selected. The programme has had a significant impact on exposing students to the real estate sector through active engagement, problem solving, and professional expertise.

<https://uk.uli.org/programs/urbanplan>

The Early Careers team at **Macfarlanes** delivers several outreach programmes, including the Macfarlanes Legal Scholarship and Bursary which supports socially mobile students. Through the scholarship programme, three Brunel University law students – known as Macfarlanes training scholars – are supported annually through a fully-funded programme from the first year of their law degree onwards. In 2025, the first cohort completed their Year in Industry, whilst the second cohort began their Year in Industry and the third completed six weeks of work experience at the firm.

The Macfarlanes bursary is a financial support package open to socially mobile undergraduates attending any UK university. In 2024, the accommodation grant supported 25 students on Macfarlanes early career programmes; 27 devices were sent to students via the technology grant; and 19 students were helped by the participation grant, meaning they could attend a Macfarlanes event when otherwise they would have been working to support themselves financially.

Macfarlanes also works to encourage young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds to support their education and career aspirations. As a firm, it has chosen to support the London Borough of Newham which, of the firm's neighbouring boroughs, receives less support from the corporate sector. Macfarlanes partners with a social mobility charity, Inspire, supporting students at local schools to develop their employability skills. This is an annual mentoring programme, where students are paired up with a mentor from Macfarlanes and they work on developing skills like interview prep and CV writing.

By taking part in this programme, mentors provide a valuable experience for the students. In previous years, feedback from the students has shown how the programme has significantly impacted academic development. One of the school governors reflected on how the experience will continue to support the student's future career development and commented on the increase in their confidence.

Gardiner & Theobald (G&T) has been running its NewGen programme for several years, focusing on attracting a diversity of talent to the industry and creating social mobility for individuals who might not otherwise be given an opportunity. Working with charities such as Land Collective, 15 Billion EBP, Inspire, Construction Youth Trust and Career Ready, G&T volunteers give back to the communities they help build by upskilling local adults and young people. Through its 'Careers Carousels' those who need support meet with experienced professionals from all areas of the built environment, practicing skills such as pitching, presenting, developing career goals, networking, CV writing, interview prep and more.

As part of the firm's wider ESG strategy, G&T has also contributed to the London Real Estate Forum's Schools Day for many years. This is a unique opportunity for young professionals to engage and inspire a new cohort of city change makers. The programme helps to bring career opportunities to life through engaging workshops where students imagine their dream workspace with the help of G&T volunteers.

<https://www.gardiner.com/stories/2022/creating-opportunities-for-a-new-generation-at-lref>

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