Performance not privilege

Tackling barriers to senior leadership in UK financial services

Progress Together
October 2025

A public snapshot of our 2025 Data Report ‘Shaping the Growth: Socio-economic Diversity in Financial Services’, in collaboration with the Bridge Group.

www.progresstogether.co.uk
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Progress Together

For the third year running, Progress Together has teamed up with the Bridge Group to create the world's largest dataset on socio-economic diversity in financial services. Our full report - available exclusively to members - offers detailed benchmarking and firm-level insights from over 210,000 employees across the sector.

Public findings provide a socio-economic snapshot for financial services and the wider economy, giving press, policymakers, and stakeholders an accessible overview. But only members gain the full depth of analysis and benchmarking that can drive meaningful change. By joining Progress Together, firms gain access to these insights and participate in the annual data exercise, shaping the evidence base and accelerating sector-wide transformation.

Discover more at www.progresstogether.co.uk and www.thebridgegroup.org.uk.

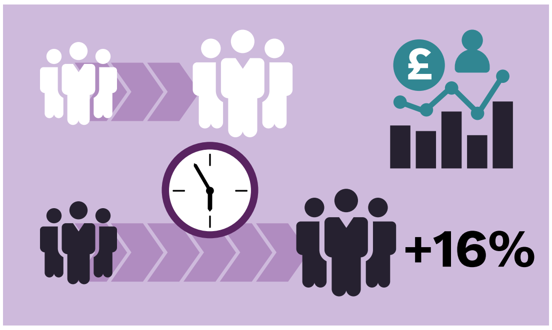
Performance, not privilege:

Tackling barriers to senior leadership in UK financial services

Socio-economic background remains the single strongest predictor of who reaches senior leadership. Without urgent intervention, UK financial services risk reinforcing privilege at the top, leaving individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds, women, and ethnic minority groups excluded from senior leadership. This isn't just unfair – it limits innovation, narrows perspectives in decision-making, weakens regional growth, and ultimately undermines outcomes for consumers. Action is needed to ensure that advancement is driven by performance, not background.

The Data: A wake-up call for financial services

Progress Together's 2025 dataset - the largest of its kind globally - spans over 210,000 employees across 40 firms. The findings are both encouraging and sobering, revealing persistent structural barriers in UK financial services.



- **Rising disclosure**
  - 92% of member firms now collect socio-economic background data, up from 75% two years ago.
  - Among firms submitting data consistently from 2023 to 2025, employee response rates to the social mobility question - "What was the occupation of the main household earner at around age 14?" - rose from 47% to 66%.
- **Progression gaps remain entrenched**
  - **Employees from lower socio-economic backgrounds take 16% longer (nearly two years) to move from middle to senior roles than peers from higher socio-economic backgrounds.**
  - External recruitment is sustaining existing imbalances rather than recalibrating leadership pipelines, while internal promotions are failing to close progression gaps.
- **Representation at the top is slipping**
  - Socio-economic diversity declines sharply with seniority: only 26% of senior leaders come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, compared with 34% at junior levels and 39% across the wider UK workforce.
  - As a result, decision-making at the top is dominated by a narrow group, limiting innovation, regional growth, and the ability to deliver the best outcomes for consumers.

Case study

Walk-throughs and nudges encourage high disclosure at Skipton

With over 80% of employees disclosing their socio-economic background, Skipton Building Society now has one of the highest disclosure rates among the Progress Together membership - but it hasn't always been this way. When Shagufta Sharif joined Skipton as Head of DEI in 2022, there was minimal diversity data. Shagufta saw the ‘blank sheet of paper’ as an opportunity not a cause for concern.

Shagufta discovered via another Progress Together member that their HR system Workday could integrate socio-economic background questions. But the user experience was clunky, and Shagufta was concerned people would lose interest in trying. So, a big declaration campaign was launched to coincide with Skipton’s Inclusion Month - ExCo members held live step-by-step sessions on how to fill in diversity data, guidance documents were shared, a Workday task was sent to all colleagues via email to nudge them to complete it and a Progress Together Non-Executive Director shared their personal story to bring it all to life.

SKIPTON BUILDING SOCIETY Since 1853

The hidden double disadvantage

Socio-economic background rarely exists alone; it intersects with gender, ethnicity, and role type, compounding barriers to progression:

- **Senior leadership remains dominated by individuals from higher socio-economic backgrounds**, with independent-school alumni over-represented.
- **Employees from lower socio-economic and ethnic minority backgrounds remain almost absent at senior levels**. In over half of firms, not a single senior leader was a woman or man from an ethnic minority background who also came from a lower or intermediate socio-economic background.
- Men from higher socio-economic backgrounds are 3.4 times more likely to reach senior positions than women from lower socio-economic backgrounds.
- White employees from higher socio-economic backgrounds are more than twice as likely to hold senior roles as their White peers from lower socio-economic backgrounds (2.3 times among women, 2.4 times among men).

- **56% of Black employees come from higher socio-economic backgrounds**, a figure broadly in line with White employees. However, the share of Black employees from lower socio-economic backgrounds is just 22%, compared with 26% for Asian employees and 27% for those from mixed/other backgrounds.

Regional and sub-sector disparities

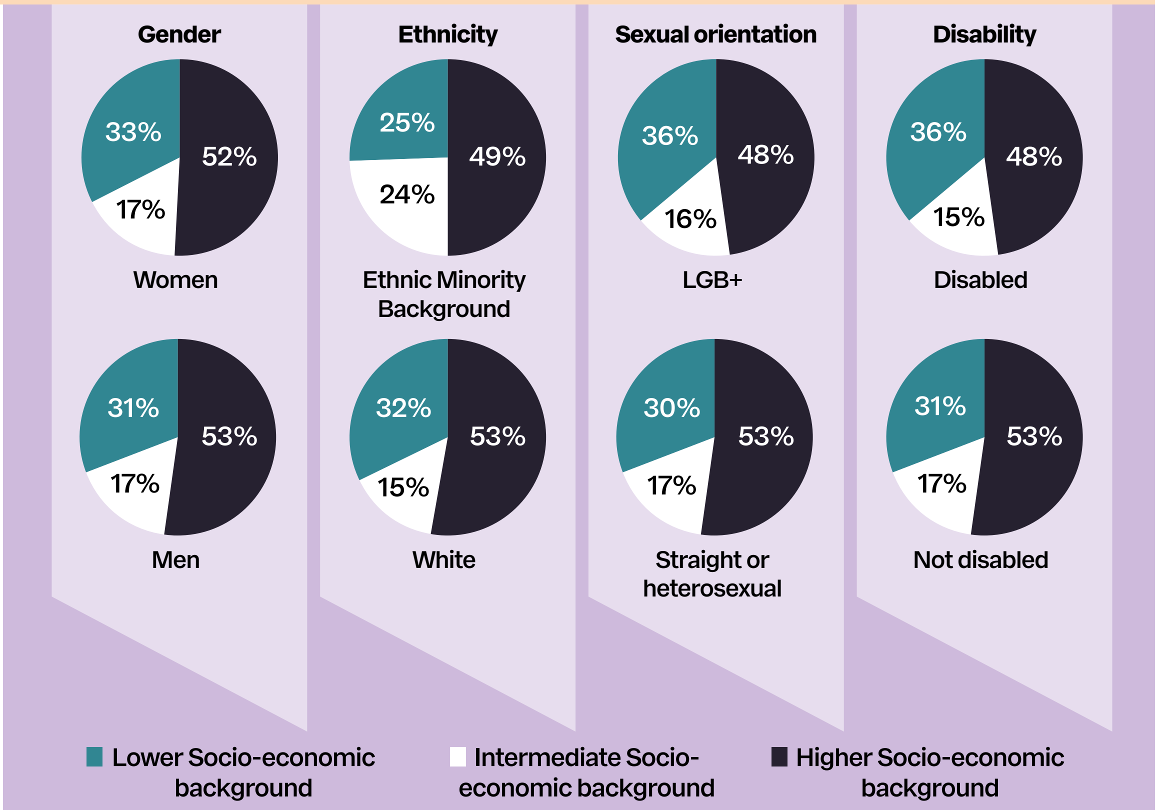
- Just over half of senior roles are based in London, the least socio-economically diverse region, reinforcing barriers for talent outside traditional elite pipelines.
- Asset management and insurance are the least socio-economically diverse sub-sectors, while building societies and retail banking, show relatively stronger representation.
- Outside London, employees from lower socio-economic backgrounds are better represented but still blocked from senior roles.

Why it matters

These trends shape who makes decisions, manages risk, and drives innovation in one of the UK's most influential industries. Without deliberate intervention, the sector risks entrenching privilege, wasting talent, and limiting its ability to respond to skills shortages and economic challenges.

UK financial services cannot afford to waste potential. The government-commissioned 2020 taskforce report *Who Gets Ahead and How?* showed that socio-economic background has no bearing on performance - and it recommended establishing Progress Together to drive lasting change. Performance, not privilege, must define success, and urgent action is needed to build more inclusive and resilient leadership pipelines.

Whole workforce (all levels of seniority) socio-economic diversity by gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and disability



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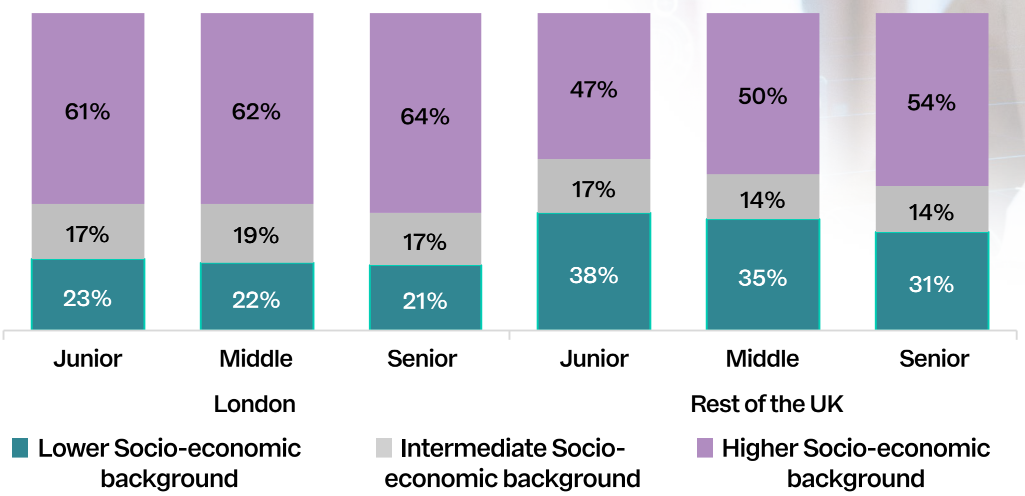
Socio-economic diversity by seniority level and region



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"Financial services is a powerhouse of the UK economy, but its future competitiveness depends on whether we unlock talent from every background. Right now, too much potential is being wasted: that is not just unjust - it is economically self-defeating. We have a once-in-a-decade opportunity to ensure socio-economic inclusion is a central driver of growth. By 2035, some 260,000 highly skilled workers will leave the UK financial services sector through retirement, attrition, or career moves, creating a major talent gap - and a unique chance to rebuild the workforce through upskilling, reskilling, and smarter, fairer recruitment. If we get this right, the sector will be more innovative, resilient, and globally competitive. If we miss it, we risk entrenching old patterns that hold back both people and productivity. Progress Together exists to make sure we seize this moment."

Vincent Keaveny CBE,
Chair of Progress Together
Former Lord Mayor of the City of London (2021/22)

"Progress Together's members are driving the world's largest dataset on class and careers in finance. The evidence is clear: progress is too slow, regional gaps persist, and privilege still dominates the top jobs. Successful, performance-driven firms will be those turning data into action - embedding accountability, evidence-backed interventions, and inclusion as levers for growth. At this critical juncture for the transformation of the sector, the time for accelerating action on socio-economic inclusion is now."

Jenny Baskerville,
Chief Executive,
The Bridge Group

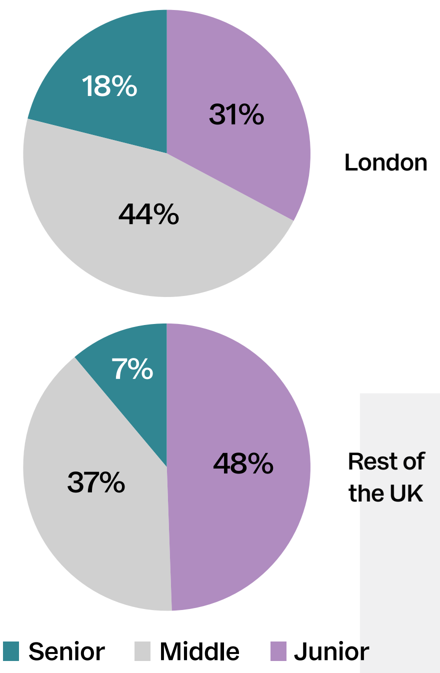
What leading firms are doing:
Balancing slow progress

Despite disclosure rates rising across member firms, the overall picture is one of slow, or even declining, progress. Leading firms are stepping up in five key ways to change that:

Senior-level imbalance

Socio-economic diversity falls sharply as seniority rises: just 26% of senior leaders come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, compared with 34% at junior levels and 39% across the wider UK workforce. This imbalance represents a structural barrier to progression and a missed opportunity for firms and the economy alike. Encouragingly, leading firms are beginning to address this by embedding accountability frameworks and ensuring progress is tracked, reported, and sustained over time.

The proportion of roles by seniority level in London, compared to the rest of the UK



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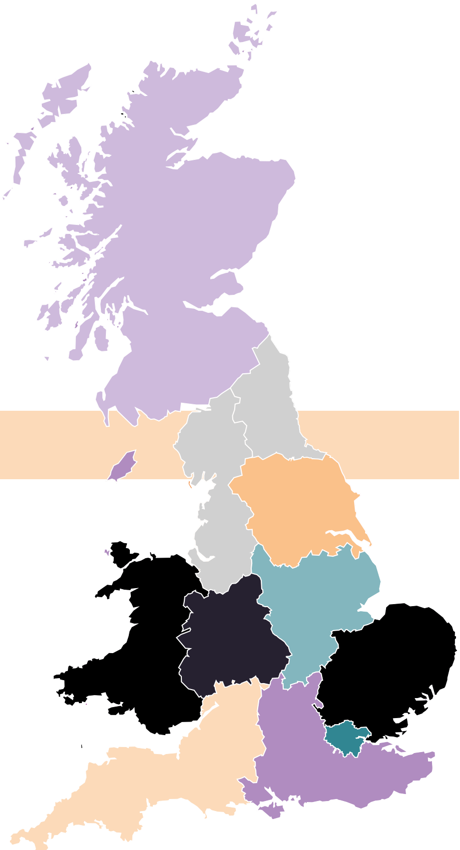
Defining leading firms

Within our membership, a group of eight firms stand out as "leading firms." They performed better than the sector average on at least one of four measures: disclosure rates, socio-economic diversity across the workforce, representation at senior levels, or progression gaps.

What distinguishes them is how they act on the data. These firms are setting targets, holding leaders accountable, briefing recruiters, and investing in mentoring and development for colleagues from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Their progress shows that with leadership and sustained action, measurable change is possible.

The proportion of senior roles by region

18%	London
3%	Yorkshire and the Humber
3%	South East
3%	West Midlands
2%	East of England
2%	South West
2%	Scotland
0%	North West
0%	North East



Regional disparities

Across all levels of seniority, 60% of employees in the capital come from higher socio-economic backgrounds, compared with 40% in the West Midlands.

London, which hosts the largest share of senior roles in financial services, is also the least socio-economically diverse. While 18% of roles in the capital are senior-level, other UK regions have just 0-3%.

Socio-economic diversity in London remains consistently low across all levels of seniority (61% of junior employees, 62% of middle managers, and 64% of senior leaders are from higher socio-economic backgrounds). Outside the capital, however, the diversity gap widens as careers advance, with representation from higher socio-economic backgrounds rising from 47% at junior levels to 54% at senior levels.

Progression bottlenecks

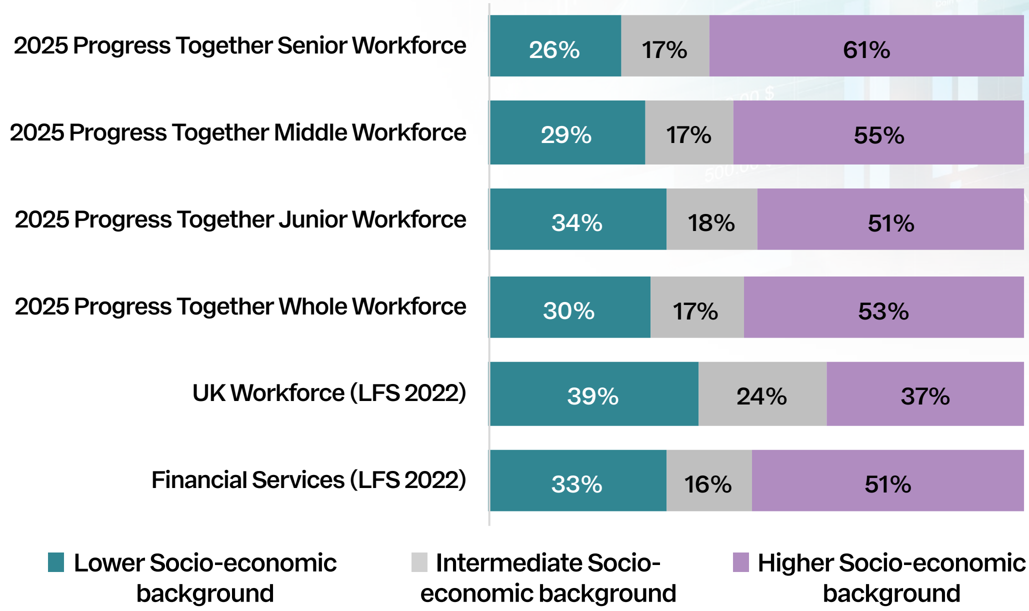
Progression remains the sharpest bottleneck for employees from lower socio-economic backgrounds. On average, it takes them 16% longer – 19 months more – to move from middle to senior roles than peers from more privileged backgrounds. Even at earlier stages, the pattern holds: the gap from junior to middle roles is around 10% (6 months).

Worryingly, this year's data shows that employees from lower socio-economic backgrounds are under-represented among those progressing internally to senior levels. External hiring, which could act as a corrective, has not delivered. Experienced hires largely replicate existing inequalities rather than diversifying leadership pipelines.

Improving socio-economic diversity at senior levels requires attention to both internal progression and experienced external hiring. Among Progress Together member firms, two-thirds of senior leaders are experienced hires, yet this route shows little impact on increasing socio-economic diversity. If unchecked, these progression gaps will continue to lock talent out of senior leadership. But if addressed, they represent one of the sector's clearest opportunities to unlock untapped potential and strengthen the pipeline of future leaders.

The Association of Executive Search and Leadership Consultants (AESC) and Progress Together have launched a new Toolkit for Advancing Socio-Economic Diversity at Senior Levels in UK Financial Services. This resource is designed to support firms in building more representative leadership pipelines by offering evidence-based strategies and actionable steps for HR and talent teams.

Socio-economic diversity by seniority level, with Labour Force Survey (LFS) benchmarks



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Prioritising true inclusivity drives greater socio-economic diversity at TSB

Case study

At TSB, they recognise that experience, rather than just qualifications, brings great benefit to their business and how they deliver for their customers. They set targets that aim to increase internal mobility and take proactive actions to achieve those, such as apprenticeships and skills programmes that help them to grow and retain talent.

TSB have offices and contact centres across the UK so people from all backgrounds can access work there. They also don't have set office days, so colleagues have greater flexibility to stay close to their family network while growing their careers. This could be contributing positively to the greater socio-economic diversity seen within TSB's workforce, and notably its senior workforce, compared to Progress Together members and the retail banking sub-sector.

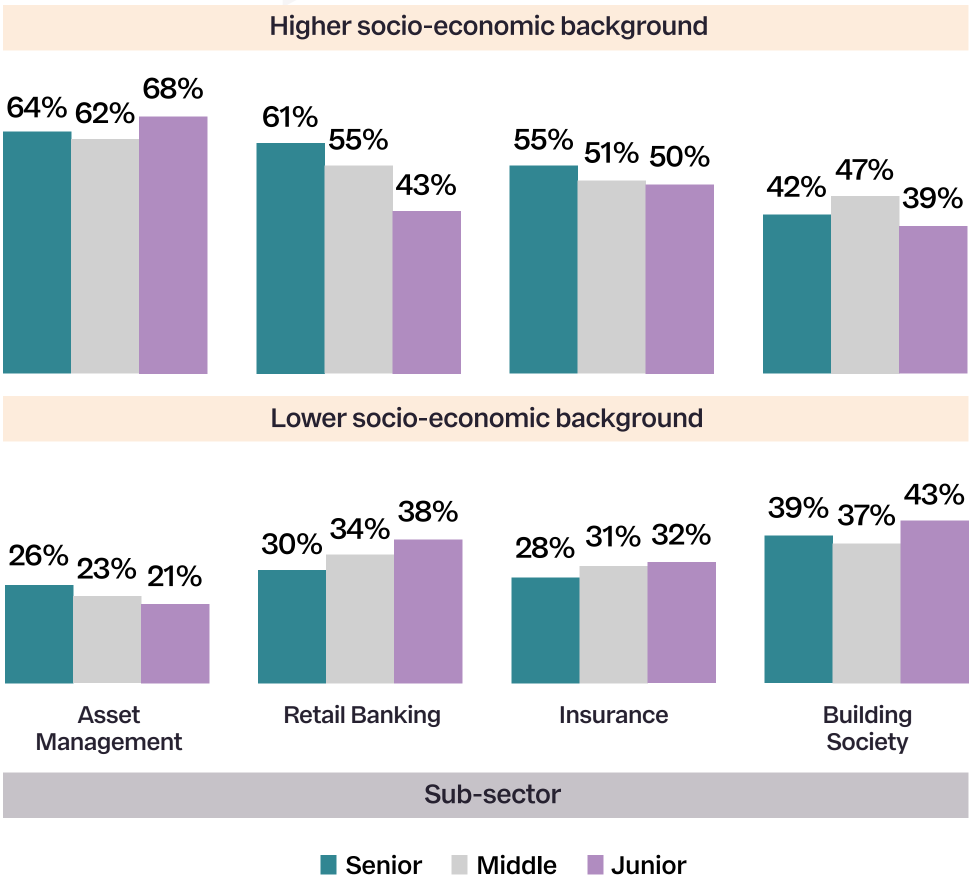
TSB's leaders prioritise accountability and transparency, sharing their personal stories and encouraging others to reach their potential. Their Executive team sponsors their inclusion networks as they work together to deliver collective goals and create a positive impact for their colleagues, customers and wider communities.

Multi-layered barriers

The data reveals a stark "double disadvantage" for women and ethnic minority employees from lower socio-economic backgrounds: in more than half of firms, not a single individual from these groups is represented at senior levels. A closer look at ethnicity highlights the scale of the challenge. The majority of Black employees (56%) come from higher socio-economic backgrounds, similar to White employees. Yet among those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, the share of Black employees drops to just 22%, compared with 26% for Asian employees and 27% for those from Mixed or Other backgrounds. This points to a compounded barrier where race and class intersect, making it significantly harder for certain groups to enter and progress in financial services.

Progressive firms are beginning to overlay socio-economic data with gender, ethnicity, and disability metrics to pinpoint where barriers are greatest and act decisively. Without such intersectional approaches, entire pools of talent risk being overlooked, holding back both inclusion and innovation.

Higher and lower socio-economic background representation by seniority and sub-sector



Mentorship and sponsorship

Mentoring and sponsorship are proving to be decisive levers for change. Among 'leading firms', 63% have implemented targeted mentoring and development programmes - compared with just 37% of all participating firms. This is the biggest gap identified in our member audit survey, underscoring how critical structured support is for progression.

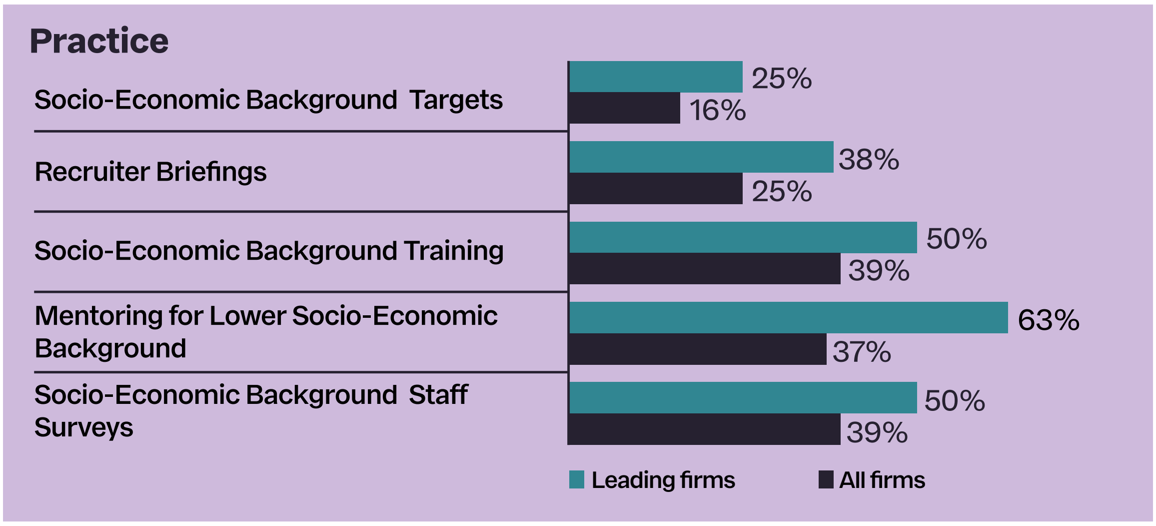
Yet across the wider membership, progress remains limited. Only 1 in 5 firms (20%) have explored how senior sponsorship influences the progression of employees from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Worryingly, a majority - 57% - have taken no action or have no intention to do so.

Without sustained investment in mentoring and sponsorship, firms risk leaving talent on the sidelines. Those that act decisively are not only levelling the playing field but also strengthening their leadership pipelines for the future.

What leading firms do differently

The firms at the forefront of progress are moving beyond data collection to systemic action:

- **Accountability at the top** – 1 in 4 leading firms have set socio-economic diversity targets, compared to just 16% of others. Most firms (62%) have yet to act.
- **Recruitment with intent** – 38% of leaders brief recruiters to factor socio-economic diversity into shortlists and assessments, versus 25% of others. Nearly half of firms (47%) take no action.



- **Mentorship and sponsorship** – The biggest differentiator: 63% of leading firms target mentoring programmes to colleagues from lower socio-economic backgrounds, compared with only 37% of others. Yet fewer than 1 in 5 firms have explored the power of senior sponsorship, leaving a major opportunity untapped.

- Board-level priority – Forward-looking Boards are putting socio-economic inclusion on the agenda, recognising its role in shaping culture, strategy, and long-term competitiveness.

The message is clear: progress requires more than good intentions. It takes leadership, accountability, and bold action at every level.

"Decisions about risk, investment, and innovation in one of the UK's most influential industries are being shaped by too narrow a group of leaders. Without urgent intervention, financial services risk entrenching privilege, wasting talent, and weakening competitiveness at a time of global disruption."
Sophie Hulm, CEO, Progress Together

Inspiring role models: leading the way at Everywhen

Case study

Everywhen, formerly Ardonagh Advisory, represents over 40 diverse UK insurance advisory businesses. The UK workforce and their leadership are geographically split across the UK, contributing to a more socio-economically diverse workforce than the Progress Together membership, as well as the insurance sub-sector. This is particularly pronounced among their senior workforce.

Storytelling, especially by senior leaders, has been hugely powerful and a core part of Everywhen's data collection journey. From platform 'CEO Townhalls', to a montage of over 20 colleagues and ExCo members asking, "I've completed mine, have you completed yours?", included in the mandatory D&I training, Everywhen have led human-centred campaigns to raise awareness and increase engagement in socio-economic diversity.

As Jaime Swindle, CEO of Geo Underwriting, a part of Everywhen, shared with colleagues: "Your past doesn't define your future, so trust in yourself. I spent too much time feeling ashamed of my background and not enough valuing the resilience and motivation it gave me. Those experiences shaped me into someone who could rise above challenges and inspire others."

everywhen

Our recommendations:
Building leadership pipelines where talent, not background, drives success

For employers

- Collect socio-economic background data consistently, especially under-represented sub-sectors
- Track promotion dates, exits and location of each employee (including hybrid/remote work) to aid richer analysis
- Review performance, promotions, and pay by socio-economic background
- Assess work allocation or project distribution for progression barriers
- Gather employee feedback through surveys and focus groups to co-create solutions
- Analyse attrition and exit interviews to understand colleague experiences and belonging

Top effective practices:

- Set measurable goals and report regularly to an accountable leadership
- Engage and brief recruiters on your inclusion goals
- Launch targeted mentoring/sponsorship programmes
- Ensure socio-economic inclusion is a Board priority

For wider stakeholders

Leverage inclusion for growth

- Embed socio-economic factors into national and local growth and skills strategies.
- Include socio-economic diversity explicitly in FCA non-financial misconduct guidance.
- Executive search firms to actively support building diverse pipelines into senior leadership (**Progress Together guide** launched Autumn 2025 with AESC).

From small gains to lasting change

Among Progress Together members reporting consistently over three years, senior-level representation has risen from 25% to 27% – clear evidence that progress is underway.

25% 2023 → **+2%** → **27%** 2025

At the current pace, reaching 39% could take nearly two decades (though our data partner cautions that early fluctuations and already representative firms mean this is only an early indicator). What is certain is that change is possible – and with sustained commitment and collaboration, members can accelerate progress so leadership reflects the society our sector serves. By building on this momentum, members are laying the foundations for a more diverse, inclusive, and resilient financial services industry.

Act now: Break the cycle of privilege in financial services

Financial services must build leadership pipelines where performance, not privilege, determines who succeeds. The path forward is clear: the sector must turn insight into action, designing leadership pathways that are inclusive by design, not by chance. By leveraging its scale, reach, and resources, financial services can unlock hidden talent, drive innovation, and secure lasting competitiveness. The choice is ours - to lead boldly in shaping an industry where performance, not background, defines success.

Supporting social mobility through internal mobility at Coventry Building Society

Case study

44% of Coventry Building Society's roles are filled by existing colleagues, demonstrating their commitment to helping all colleagues grow and thrive within their organisation. They encourage colleagues at all levels to explore their career development through a range of initiatives, including:

- Monthly CV, Interviewing, and Personal Branding Sessions – designed to help colleagues perform at their best during the recruitment process and build confidence when networking
- Inclusive performance conversations – known as reflections. Through this, all colleagues can opt into centrally led talent development initiatives such as mentoring, coaching, and innovative programmes like their Ethnicity Career Development Programme. This year, they've also piloted the Accelerated Progress Programme, a cross-sector initiative designed to support career development for colleagues from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

All these opportunities are promoted via their intranet, making them accessible to all colleagues. They also monitor uptake of key initiatives across underrepresented groups, including those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This could be positively contributing to the greater socio-economic diversity across all seniority levels and helping narrow the progression gap for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Join the movement

Progress Together was launched in 2022 from a Government-commissioned taskforce, supported by our partners - Accenture, A&O Shearman, Aviva, City of London, EY, Fidelity International, Lewis Silkin, Man Group, Nationwide, Paragon, PwC, Santander and Schroders. Today, we represent over one-third of the UK financial services workforce - and we are united by a single mission: by 2030, senior leadership should reflect the socio-economic diversity of the wider workforce, ensuring that talent, not background, drives success.

The need for change is clear. This year's data shows that employees from lower socio-economic backgrounds make up 30% of the workforce, yet only 26% of senior leaders. To close this gap, we need stronger data. Critical sectors - including investment banking, wealth management, private equity, hedge funds, and fintech - are underrepresented, and we are calling on these firms to join the effort. We also need more employees to share their backgrounds: complete data ensures fair benchmarking, helps identify barriers, and unlocks opportunities for everyone, regardless of background.

In 2025, over 40 firms in our network contributed data on more than 210,000 employees, creating the world's largest dataset on socio-economic diversity in financial services. The findings are clear: disclosure is improving, but employees from lower socio-economic backgrounds continue to face slower progression.

The good news is that change is possible. Leading firms are embedding accountability frameworks and investing in mentoring - proving that practical steps can create measurable impact.

Firms that act now will attract top talent, build resilience, strengthen client trust, and contribute to national growth. Those that delay risk being left behind. Progress Together exists to make sure this moment is not wasted.

Social mobility is a commercial imperative at Fidelity International

Case study

60% of Fidelity's UK colleagues have shared social mobility data - up from 40% last year. Fidelity has a vocal social mobility network and have prioritised psychological safety from the outset - carefully explaining why, what and how the data would be used. But the hook? C-suite and senior leaders shared the importance of data for potential clients - and disclosure went up.

A richer dataset now enables Fidelity to measure the impact of their interventions.

This includes their 'service to sales' programme which supports junior call centre colleagues to progress into client-facing sales roles. It is believed that programmes like these could be contributing to the smaller progression gap for lower socio-economic background colleagues. Next up for Fidelity: analysing exit interviews and career mobility milestone surveys by socio-economic background.

Fidelity INTERNATIONAL

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