

Press release: Unpaid internships are damaging to social mobility

An overwhelming majority of the UK public support the introduction of a legal ban on unpaid internships lasting 4 weeks or more.

New polling data released by the Social Mobility Commission, found that 72% of the public back a change in the law – with 42% ‘strongly supporting’ a ban.

The survey also reveals that 80% of people want companies to be required to openly advertise internships and work experience opportunities, rather than organise them informally.

YouGov polling of nearly 5,000 people has been released ahead of the second reading of [Lord Holmes of Richmond’s Private Members’ Bill](#) in the House of Lords on Friday 27 October, which proposes a ban on unpaid work experience or internships lasting more 4 weeks.

The Social Mobility Commission, an independent public body which monitors progress towards improving social mobility, has repeatedly called for a ban in its successive [State of the Nation reports](#) to Parliament.

Many interns fall under the definition of ‘worker’ under the [National Minimum Wage Act 1998](#) and are already legally entitled to be paid the national minimum/living wage. But the law, as it stands, is not being enforced effectively. A lack of clarity means many companies exploit the loophole or are unaware of the legal requirements to pay interns.

A broad consensus of support for a ban has emerged in recent years:

- the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility called for a ban on unpaid internships over 4 weeks after hearing evidence on barriers to social mobility
- in April, the Institute for Public Policy Research published a report which provided new evidence that internships have increased to around 70,000 a year and also recommended a ban after 4 weeks. Many times this number – up to half – are locked out of these opportunities because they are unpaid and/or restricted to networks
- leading businesses and trade bodies support a 4-week limit. The Institute of Student Employers, Arts Council, UK Music, Creative Skillset, The Royal Institute of British Architects, Business in the Community, Employers Network for Equality and Inclusion and Trust for London all oppose long-term unpaid internships
- The Matthew Taylor review into employment practices recently concluded: “It is clear to us that unpaid internships are an abuse of power by employers and extremely damaging to social mobility.”
- A 4-week limit is supported by two-thirds of businesses, with only 1-in-8 opposing the legislation (YouGov 2014)

The Rt Hon Alan Milburn, Chair of the Social Mobility Commission, said:

Unpaid internships are a modern scandal which must end. Internships are the new rung on the career ladder. They have become a route to a good professional job. But access to them tends to depend on who, not what you know and young people from low-income backgrounds are excluded because they are unpaid. They miss out on a great career opportunity and employers miss out from a wider pool of talent. Unpaid internships are damaging for social mobility. It is time to consign them to history.

Lord Holmes of Richmond added:

Unpaid internships leave young people in a catch-22 situation; unable to get a job because they haven't got experience and unable to get experience because they can't afford to work for free. The practice is clearly discriminatory, crushes creativity and competitiveness and holds individuals and our country back. It's time we consigned them to the past, to the novels of Dickens.

Sir Peter Lampl, Chairman of the Sutton Trust and of the Education Endowment Foundation, said:

Unpaid internships are a major obstacle to social mobility. Our research has shown that it costs an intern with no roots in the capital approximately £1,000 a month to live there. Unpaid internships prevent young people from low- and moderate-income backgrounds from getting into some of the most competitive sectors like the media, city and the arts.

It is no surprise that a majority of the public want to see an end to them. We welcome the commission's call to ban unpaid internships that last for more than 4 weeks. There also needs to be greater transparency in recruiting for these positions, so that young people without professional networks are not at a disadvantage.

Ben Lyons, Chair of Intern Aware, added:

The government needs to show that it cares about the next generation, and crack down on long-term unpaid internships which exclude young people who can't afford to work for free for months on end.

1. The Social Mobility Commission is an advisory, non-departmental public

body established under the Life Chances Act 2010 as modified by the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016. It has a duty to assess progress in improving social mobility in the United Kingdom and to promote social mobility in England. It currently consists of 4 commissioners and is supported by a small secretariat.

2. The commission board currently comprises:
 - Alan Milburn (Chair)
 - Baroness Gillian Shephard (Deputy Chair)
 - Paul Gregg, Professor of Economic and Social Policy, University of Bath
 - David Johnston, Chief Executive of the Social Mobility Foundation
3. The functions of the commission include:
 - monitoring progress on improving social mobility
 - providing published advice to ministers on matters relating to social mobility
 - undertaking social mobility advocacy
4. Lord Holmes Private Members' Bill seeks to limit unpaid internships specifically by amending the National Minimum Wage Act 1998 to make provision for the prohibition of unpaid work experience exceeding 4 weeks. The bill was given its first reading on 27 June 2017 and second reading will be on 27 October 2017.

YouGov survey methodology

YouGov surveyed 4,723 UK adults and fieldwork was conducted between 6 to 9 March 2017. The survey was carried out online and figures have been weighted and are representative of UK adults aged 18+. YouGov ensured the survey was made representative based on several criteria:

- age and gender
- political attention
- region
- education level
- general election vote in 2015
- EU referendum vote in 2016

YouGov is a member of the British Polling Council.

Headline YouGov survey results

Would you support or oppose a requirement for companies to openly advertise internships and work experience opportunities, rather than organise them informally?	%
Strongly support	40
Tend to support	40
Total support	80
Tend to oppose	4
Strongly oppose	1
Total oppose	5
Don't know	14

Would you support or oppose a ban on unpaid internships of longer than 4 weeks?		%
Strongly support		42
Tend to support		30
Total support		72
Tend to oppose		8
Strongly oppose		2
Total oppose		10
Don't know		17