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International Longevity Centre UK

Latest news

ILC Friday three

- Rethink, refresh and redo – what if culture is infrastructure?
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Rethink, refresh and redo – what if culture is infrastructure?



I've just returned from Guangzhou after five days on the World Cities Culture Forum Leadership Exchange Programme, alongside colleagues from the Greater London Authority. The trip was supported by Bloomberg Philanthropies and we were there as guests of the Guangzhou Academy of Social Sciences to learn from the city's approach to the silver economy (i.e. the growing market for goods, services and opportunities created by an ageing population). China has designated this longevity dividend a national development priority. Guangzhou is building the ecosystem to match.

In the UK we tend to think of infrastructure as roads, railways, housing, utilities and digital networks. We might add hospitals, schools and public services. Culture usually sits somewhere else entirely – an optional extra.

Across more than 30 presentations and 20 site visits, culture appeared not as a separate policy area but as a tool for delivering economic development, urban regeneration, healthier ageing and stronger communities. Guangzhou's vocabulary is markets, industrial chains and consumer segments, not care and cost. Today, adults aged 50 and over generate more than 40% of household spending in China and are on track to account for almost 60% by 2050. Culture is being positioned as one of the ways to unlock that growing market.

At Yongqing Fang, traditional culture and heritage have been used to breathe new life into a historic neighbourhood. The Intangible Cultural Heritage protection projects, like those we visited in the Liwan district, preserve ancient crafts while creating new income streams for local makers. Across the city, cultural participation is helping connect generations and support local economies.

In the UK we tend to start conversations about ageing with health, care and inequality. Guangzhou starts somewhere different. Older people are described as "silver talent". Retirement is not an end point but the beginning of a "second life" of contribution, creativity and participation. Retired professionals mentoring younger entrepreneurs. Older residents designing their own courses and passing on skills. A choir with more than 1,000 members performing internationally.

On a visit to the Xingfu Wanqing Club – an open university for retirees – we asked how they identified older people's needs, the Director answered, "The needs are not to be found. What older people need is someone to talk to, someone who listens."

Guangzhou's response to ageing is rooted in cultural participation and shared traditions rather than service delivery.

Our final day coincided with the Dragon Boat Festival. Hundreds of families gathered around a tradition that has endured for centuries. There was no intervention, no programme and no policy framework. Yet it delivered something policymakers everywhere are trying to create – a sense of belonging.

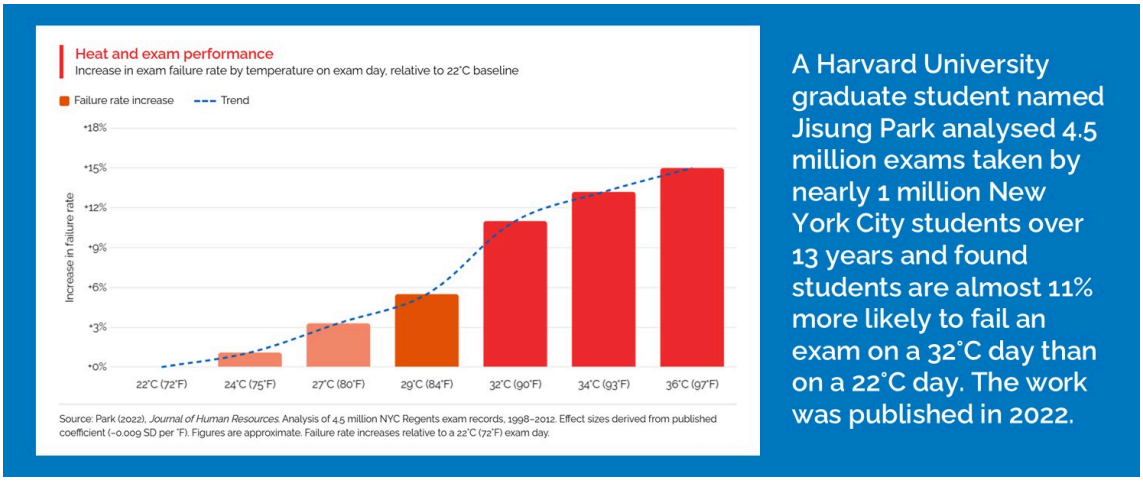
everywhere are trying to create – a sense of belonging.

None of this means Guangzhou has all the answers. Nor does it mean London should abandon its focus on health inequalities, prevention or the social determinants of health. But as populations age, we do need to rethink what we mean by infrastructure. The places, activities and traditions that help people build relationships, maintain purpose and remain connected are every bit as important as the physical assets we more readily recognise.

You can find out more about the trip on my LinkedIn page. You can also download our report, *Making Longevity Work*, which explores ways for the UK to engage with China's ageing economy. The report was supported by the British Embassy in Beijing and can be downloaded using the button below.

READ MORE

Working in the heat – what are the implications?



Many of us in the UK and across Europe this week are experiencing temperatures and humidity levels well above average. Those of us who have braved ILC's central London office have been trying to work through what the Met Office has called a "severe and significant" weather event. Our building traps heat. Laptops overheat. Several of us have decamped to air-conditioned coffee shops or stayed home (many of which are also hot and uncomfortable).

Newspapers are full of pictures of people splashing about in the sea or eating ice cream. But schools are shutting, trains are being cancelled and people's health is suffering. And the irony of London Climate Action Week events reportedly being cancelled because of extreme heat shouldn't be lost on us.

This isn't just good weather. It's not supposed to be this hot in June in England. Nor is it normal to see extreme temperatures affecting so many places at once.

According to joint research by the WHO and the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO), productivity drops by 2–3% for every degree above 20°C. And an umbrella review in 2025 estimated that productivity losses affect 30–60% of workers exposed to heat, with annual global economic losses of approximately $2.1 trillion.

Temperatures above 25°C are linked to increased hospitalisations, driven by the worsening of cardiovascular and respiratory conditions, kidney disease and heat-related illness. Elevated temperatures during heatwaves also worsen air quality, leading to respiratory problems which further increase hospital demand.

The UK Health Alliance highlights that more than 90% of NHS buildings in England are vulnerable to overheating, with some hospital wards recording indoor temperatures above 30°C even when outdoor temperatures were just 22°C. Overheating incidents at NHS sites in England nearly doubled from around 3,000 in 2016–17 to over 5,500 in 2021–22. Staff working in overheated wards face the same heat strain as patients who are already critically ill.

The WHO and WMO's report on workplace heat stress specifically identifies middle-aged and older workers as a priority vulnerable group. Older adults experience age-related changes that reduce their ability to regulate body temperature, and face a higher likelihood of the chronic cardiovascular and respiratory conditions that heat exacerbates. As the UK workforce ages and heatwaves intensify, older workers face compounding exposure with no statutory protection.

What is harder to quantify – and less discussed – is what heat does to the next generation of workers. Sitting an exam on a 32°C day carries around a 10% lower likelihood of passing than on a 22°C day, according to the Climate Change Committee. Most GCSE and A-level papers had finished before the red warning period. However, every GCSE and A-level student was required to keep Wednesday 24 June free as a contingency day – a reserved session used by all exam boards if

June free as a contingency day – a reserved session used by all exam boards if national disruption forces papers to be rescheduled.

A NIHR briefing, published in 2025, found that hot weather reduces attendance and lowers exam scores – hitting students from under-resourced schools and those with weaker prior attainment hardest. A 2024 study of British schools found that very few had air conditioning. The Department for Education's guidance, reissued this week, advised opening then shutting windows and fans – but only below 35°C. Above that, the moving air is hotter than your skin, so fans make things worse.

The current costs of heat exposure to the UK economy are estimated at £260–300 million per year, projected to rise to up to £950 million per year by the 2050s. That figure does not account for what happens to the exam results – and later earnings – of students whose schools had no way to keep cool.

The UK remains one of very few European countries without a statutory maximum working temperature. Trade unions, MPs and the Climate Change Committee have called for heat thresholds, action plans and investment in cooling infrastructure – in hospitals, care homes, schools and our homes. There are calls to reconsider whether sitting high-stakes exams in early summer remains appropriate as heatwaves become more frequent and more severe.

The UK's infrastructure was built for a climate that no longer reliably exists. Closing the blinds and buying a fan is not a strategy.

Heat is often framed as an environmental challenge. It is also an economic challenge, an educational challenge and a healthy ageing challenge. The evidence suggests the costs are already being felt in our workplaces, hospitals, schools and homes. As heatwaves become more frequent and severe, adaptation can no longer be treated as optional.

At ILC, we are interested in exploring what a hotter climate means for productivity, health and longer working lives. If this is an area you are working on – or would be interested in supporting further research into – we'd be delighted to hear from you. You can get in touch via the button below.

GET IN TOUCH HERE

Three blogs – catch up with our latest perspectives



Running the numbers

Published 25 June 2026

David Sinclair, ILC's Chief Executive, explores what parkrun's age data reveals about physical activity, ageing and volunteering – and why one of Britain's most successful healthy ageing initiatives may have emerged almost by accident.

Read David Sinclair's blog published HERE

Guest Blog: Why are women living over a quarter of their lives in poor health?

Published 22 June 2026

We are living longer. But for too many of us – and particularly for women – those extra years are not healthy ones. New analysis from the Government Actuary's Department (GAD) highlights that on average, women now spend around 22 of their 83 years in poor health, compared to 18 out of 79 years for men. In the most deprived areas, that figure rises to over 30 years. Drawing on ONS data showing UK healthy life expectancy has fallen to its lowest level since 2011, Natasha Hill examines the biological, hormonal, socio-economic and research-related factors driving this disparity.

Read Natasha Hill's blog HERE

The UK is an international outlier – losing workers at younger and older ages

Published 15 June 2026

Ben Franklin, ILC's Deputy Chief Executive, examines why the UK stands out among developed economies for going backwards on both youth inactivity and older worker employment since 2019 – and what the international evidence tells us about the scale of the problem.

Read Ben Franklin's blog HERE

The Government Actuary's Department is a member of the ILC's Partners Programme. If you are interested in joining our Partners Programme please contact Patrick Swain for further information. You can find many more blogs via the button below.

MORE BLOGS HERE

The Friday three newsletter, edited by Emily Evans, ILC's Senior Communications and Engagement Manager, is usually sent out fortnightly.

To keep up-to-date with ILC events throughout the year, please continue to check our website on a regular basis. If you are interested in learning more about our Partners Programme, please click here.

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