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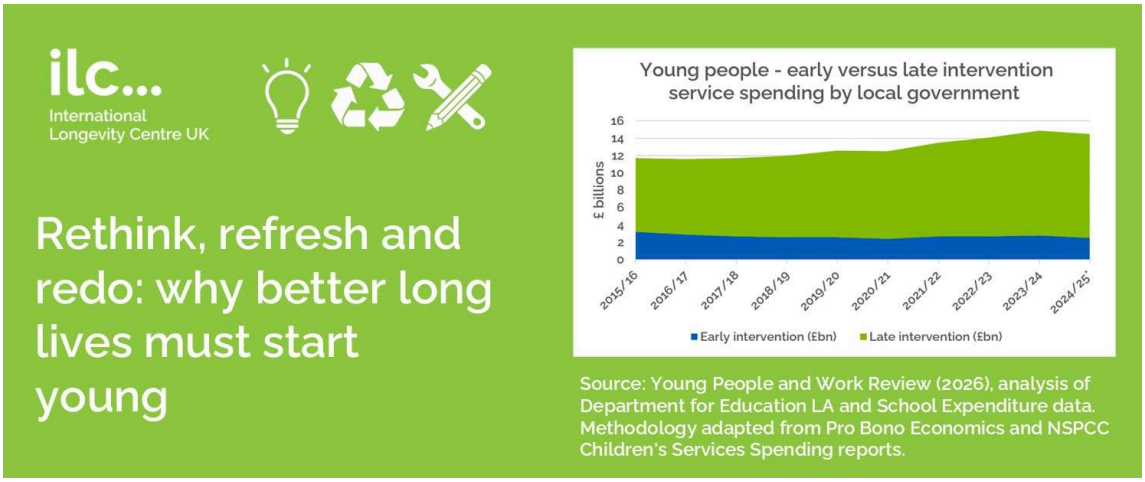
International Longevity Centre UK

Latest news

ILC Friday three

- Rethink, refresh and redo – the cost of not starting early
- The long game matters – but have we forgotten how to play it?
- Long lives and long loves – how should we mark them?

Rethink, refresh and redo – the cost of not starting early



Nearly one million young people are now not in education, employment or training (NEET).

Britain spends much of its time worrying about labour shortages, economic growth and the pressures of an ageing population. And yet so many young people are sitting on the sidelines – many of them the very workers, taxpayers and carers our ageing society will need.

Alan Milburn's interim review brings together the scale of the challenge. Around 60% of young people who are NEET are economically inactive rather than unemployed. Many are struggling with poor health, caring responsibilities or a loss of confidence. Others simply cannot find a way in.

What they are not is lazy. A survey carried out for the review found that 84% of young people who are NEET want a job, education or training. Nearly a third have good GCSEs or equivalent qualifications. More than one in five have Level 3 qualifications. Fifteen per cent have degrees.

This is not a generation opting out. It is a generation struggling to get started. In One hundred not out, ILC argued that longer lives are shaped by the opportunities and experiences we accumulate throughout life. Poor health, low earnings and insecurity in later life do not appear overnight. They build up over decades.

The Milburn review estimates the cumulative annual cost of almost one million young people being NEET at £125 billion – more than the country spends on education each year. But the full human cost is harder to measure. A young person disconnected from work and education is not just losing income but confidence, routine and a sense of purpose.

The report highlights evidence that time spent NEET can leave lasting scars. Young people who spend long periods outside work and education are more likely to experience lower earnings, weaker employment prospects and poorer health throughout their lives. The longer young people remain outside work and education, the greater the losses tend to be.

The same is true of underemployment. Getting a job is not always enough. Insecure work, poor-quality work and limited opportunities to progress can leave people unable to build savings, skills and stability. The effects can accumulate over time in much the same way.

That is why the Milburn report matters for all of us – not just for younger adults

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A society cannot age well if too many people begin adult life disconnected from opportunity. Today's young people will become tomorrow's workers, taxpayers, carers and volunteers. Their success or failure will shape the strength of our economy and public services for decades to come.

The challenge also exposes a deeper problem in how we think about policy. We tend to divide life into compartments. Child poverty sits in one box. Young people's employment prospects in another. Health somewhere else. Ageing becomes a debate about pensions and social care.
Life does not work like that.

The young person struggling to find work today may be the same person experiencing poor health, insecure housing and low earnings twenty years from now. The costs do not disappear. They simply reappear elsewhere.

Alan Milburn is right to describe this as a national challenge. Britain cannot keep treating young people's disconnection and the costs of an ageing population as separate problems. They are the same problem, viewed from different ends of the same life. Long lives are built over decades, which is why failing to help young people get started carries consequences that last a lifetime.

The Young people and work: interim report is an important and deeply serious contribution to the national debate which deserves to be widely read and acted upon. We plan to return to this issue in the months ahead, exploring some of the practical solutions that could help more young people make a successful transition into work. You can download the report via the button below.

READ MORE

The long game matters – but have we forgotten how to play it?



From "The Unbearables" to the "dementia tax", modern debate often reduces complex achievements and challenges to a handful of memorable but negative headlines. Sometimes scrutiny is justified. Too often the label becomes the story. Can we look beyond the noise and stick with a plan long enough to see whether it works?

When the Arsenal players finally lifted the Premier League trophy after 22 years, some sections of the media appeared incapable of simply letting supporters enjoy it. Within hours came the caveats, qualifications and attempts to explain why the achievement was not quite as impressive as it looked.

Football is not unique. We increasingly treat politics in much the same way.

Football managers are expected to rebuild teams immediately. Politicians are expected to solve decades-old problems by the next opinion poll. Both operate under permanent scrutiny and are rarely given time.

Over the last decade Britain has had six Prime Ministers and may yet get a seventh. David Cameron, Theresa May, Boris Johnson, Liz Truss, Rishi Sunak and Sir Keir Starmer have all faced extraordinary circumstances: Brexit, Covid, war in Europe, energy shocks, inflation and a cost-of-living crisis. Yet our political culture often behaves as though leadership can be judged weekly rather than over years.

The football managers who collected silverware in recent seasons were not the ones chasing immediate results.

Pep Guardiola was trusted by Manchester City through difficult periods. Emma Hayes spent more than a decade building Chelsea into the dominant force in English women's football. Mikel Arteta was allowed more than six years in charge before eventually delivering Arsenal's first league title in more than two decades.

Mikel Arteta's early years at The Arsenal were messy and often frustrating. Results were inconsistent. Recruitment was questioned. Yet the football club stuck with him. More importantly, supporters bought into what he was trying to build. Progress was not measured solely by the previous weekend's result. The relationship between manager, players and fans deepened because there was a shared sense of direction. While commentators debated whether Arsenal had the mentality to win the title, fans were chanting, *"We've got Super Mik Arteta, he knows exactly what we need..."*

Pep Guardiola's success also rests on something deeper than tactics and trophies. He has consistently shown respect for the club, its supporters and the city he represents. Reflecting on living and working in Manchester, he spoke not about titles but about the city itself: *"This is a city built from work. From graft. You see it in the colour of the bricks. From people who clocked in early, stayed late… Remember, the Manchester Arena attack, when this city showed the world what strength actually looks like? Not anger. Not fear. Just love. Community. Togetherness. A city united."*

Whether in football or politics, trust is often rooted in something deeper than performance alone. People want to believe their leaders understand them, listen to them and respect what matters to them.

Of course, managing a football club is not the same as running a country. Governments face competing interests, constitutional constraints and events entirely outside their control. Voters are citizens, not supporters.

Last year, Parliament's Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology published a briefing on democratic engagement and trust. It highlighted concerns about declining trust in representative institutions and growing doubts about whether citizens feel listened to, represented or able to influence decision-making.

Politicians bear responsibility for some of that decline. Boris Johnson's government damaged trust through Partygate, reinforcing the perception that one set of rules applied to those in power and another to everyone else. Liz Truss's premiership collapsed in part because she appeared unwilling to listen to warnings from colleagues, officials and markets. Sir Keir Starmer suspended his own backbench MPs who rebelled over welfare reforms and the two-child benefit cap, creating the impression that disagreement was something to be managed rather than listened to.

Voters too often demand long-term solutions while rewarding short-term gestures. Journalists call for leadership while treating every setback as evidence of failure.

Trust is built when people believe institutions are competent, fair and acting in their interests. None of those qualities can be demonstrated overnight. They require consistency. They require relationships. They require respect.

The irony is that while many of us complain about the lack of long-term thinking in politics, we often help create the conditions that make long-term thinking almost impossible.

Football clubs that abandon the plan rarely build anything lasting. Democracies are unlikely to fare much better. For the sake of our politics, we could probably all do with a little more patience, trust and mutual respect.

Where people live shapes how they live – and increasingly how they vote. Our recent analysis of the 2026 local elections explores the link between better lives, place and political change using ILC's UK Better Lives Index. Read the full analysis, supported by the Hallmark Foundation, via the button below.

READ MORE

Long lives and long loves – how should we mark them?



Source: Office for National Statistics, Census 2021 and Census 2001, data for England accessed through Nomis, One hundred not out (ILC 2023)



Yesterday, my parents celebrated their diamond wedding anniversary. This week they received a card from King Charles and Queen Camilla. On their anniversary day they revisited St Paul's Cathedral, where they married because my grandfather's OBE meant his children could do so. Both are traditions eligible couples can still apply for today.

Sixty years of marriage is an extraordinary achievement. It is also a reminder of the role that longevity and luck play in our lives. My parents' marriage has survived periods of separation, challenges and the ordinary ups and downs of six decades together. They have also benefited from relatively good health, financial security and the simple fact that both are still alive and well enough to celebrate.

In 2012, the Office for National Statistics estimated that around 16% of marriages in England and Wales would reach a 60th wedding anniversary. In the United States, data published in 2020 found that only 2% of currently married Americans had already reached a diamond anniversary. My parents are in their mid-eighties. For couples marrying today, the same anniversary may not arrive until their nineties.

Relationships are changing too. In 2023, there were 231,949 marriages and civil partnerships in England and Wales, down 8.6% on the previous year. And ILC's 2023 paper To have and to hold? found that between 2001 and 2021 marriage among people under 50 fell by 22%, while marriage among people over 50 increased.

The introduction of same-sex marriage expanded access to the institution rather than replacing it. In 2023, there were 7,501 same-sex marriages in England and Wales, almost a decade after marriage equality was introduced. More people are also cohabiting, living alone and forming families in different ways.

The ILC's work shows that the quality of our relationships matters more than their legal status. Strong social connections are associated with better health and wellbeing throughout life. As more people remain single, live without children or rely on friendship networks as much as family networks, questions about housing, care, retirement income and social connection become increasingly important.

In the UK should recognition begin earlier? In a society where people marry later than previous generations, is 60 years still the right threshold? If we are recognising commitment rather than simply marriage, should long-term cohabiting couples be included too? Canada, Australia and New Zealand begin official anniversary messages at 50. And Singapore celebrates golden wedding anniversaries with certificates, commemorative gifts and renewal ceremonies.

My parents were thrilled to receive the royal recognition and to return to St Paul's Cathedral to reflect on an incredible 60 years together. But will future generations value a card from the monarch in the same way? Will an honours system that still carries privileges and connections stretching across generations feel as meaningful? Or will they prefer a tree planted in their name, a community celebration, recognition from a local mayor posted on Instagram or something we have not yet imagined?

As we adapt our health, housing, pensions and care systems to longer lives, we may also need to think about how we recognise and celebrate the relationships that help people live those longer lives well.

MORE 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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