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International Longevity Centre UK

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ILC Friday three

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Reversing the lens – a look at good work and health in Denmark



Some of the ILC team visited Copenhagen for a few days this week. At the FIP World Congress of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Science, Arunima Himawan presented to a packed audience on medication adherence and polypharmacy at a panel session on the complex process of deprescribing.

The next evening, we held a fascinating roundtable dinner discussion on healthy ageing and prevention with Danish and EU experts from WHO Europe, the European Environment Agency and Denmark's National Institute of Public Health and the Committee for Health Education. Despite Denmark ranking first on our Healthy Ageing and Prevention Index for environmental performance, it was clear from experts in the room that greater attention to the link between health and the environment is needed. A dominant issue was the work span metric – and the tension it highlights between paid work as a driver of economic growth and the limited recognition in international metrics of the value of other purposeful activity such as education, unpaid care and volunteering.

While the ILC is already a great place to work, there is always room for improvement, and our head of operations, Lyndsey Gorely, was keen to find out how Danish employers manage to ensure a positive work-life balance. She compared experiences with Line Maria Eckermann, project manager for health at Novo Nordisk, and caught up with Pernille Taarup, head of HR and Management at The Danish Chamber of Commerce and Meg Parker, head of operations at the B2B marketing company SparkForce.

Denmark's approach rests on something deceptively simple: trust. Employers and employees expect to work together on health and wellbeing, and the legal framework backs that up. In Denmark, the psychosocial work environment is treated much like any other safety issue. Employers are required to plan and organise work so its impact is safe and healthy – including workload and time pressure, and there is a clear focus on work-life balance. In the UK, many organisations still worry that getting involved feels intrusive. Perhaps that is why in 2024 only around 55% of people in a typical UK workplace reported a high state of wellbeing at work.

Novo Nordisk offered a concrete example of what this can look like in practice. The company tracks employee feedback through its annual Evolve survey and has set a target to reduce reports of work-related physical pain by 5% year on year. Alongside ergonomics, its public materials describe support for mental health and open conversations about pressure at work. None of this reads as a perk – it is framed as part of how work is designed and led. Line highlighted the importance of encouraging activity during the working day, noting that whilst this may mean an employee could end up working fewer hours that week, their productivity is improved.

Culture and routines play a part too. Danish workplaces often work to a 37-hour week with clear boundaries around time off. This makes it easier to build healthy habits into the day and to balance work with caring – a priority for people at every age.

In UK workplaces, we might want to reflect on whether:

- People feel it is legitimate to talk about workload and pressure – and if managers have the support to adjust the work, not just signpost help.
- We're tracking the outcomes that could really matter, such as incidents of work-related stress or musculoskeletal pain and recovery time.
- Our everyday defaults make healthy choices easy – from protected breaks and free time to chances to move at work.

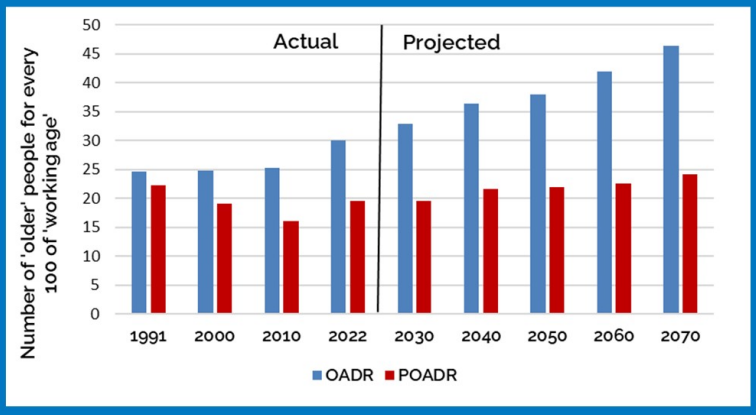
While larger employers arguably have the resource to prioritise staff wellbeing too many in the UK and in other European countries reportedly don't. Across the EU, only four in ten larger establishments have an action plan on stress, and just over half have procedures on bullying or harassment. Even where risks are recognised, many employers say it is still hard to talk openly about them, which stalls action.

For charities, there is a practical governance angle. The Charity Commission is clear that funds must be spent in the best interests of the charity. When it comes to staff bonding events, HMRC's annual function exemption allows spending up to £150 per person in a tax year – provided the event is annual and open to all staff – without creating a taxable benefit.

The lesson from Denmark is more about long established culture and permission but good strategies can foster these. When employers and employees trust each other to design healthier work – and when managers are empowered to act on the basics – wellbeing improves. In her August 2024 article, Yvonne Sonsino, now an ILC Trustee, set out some strategies and practices that can help corporations create an inclusive and supportive environment for employees of all ages. Read more via the button below.

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What happens now – the fiscal squeeze vs the longevity opportunity



Redefining old age as the last 15 years of life alters how we see the ageing 'problem' – prospective old age dependency ratio (POADR) vs old age dependency ratio (OADR)

In our latest blogs – published today – Ben Franklin, ILC's Deputy Chief Executive, sets out two sides of the same coin. First, the scale of the immediate fiscal constraints the government faces. Second, the economic prize if we choose to keep people healthier, working and spending for longer.

The UK's room for fiscal manoeuvre is vanishingly small. Public debt sits at roughly 95% of GDP and has ratcheted up since the financial crisis and the pandemic. Debt interest is forecast at £111bn in 2025–26, about 3.7% of GDP – more than three times what we spend on adult social care. The deficit at the end of 2024 was 5.7% of GDP, significantly above the advanced-economy average. Against that backdrop, even modest spending uplifts risk breaching fiscal rules. Recent analysis also points to a prospective £41.2bn deficit by the Autumn Budget without policy change, while long-run shifts from defined benefit to defined contribution pensions could reduce domestic demand for gilts and push up borrowing costs further. All of which means higher taxes, deeper cuts, or rising debt – none attractive, all difficult.

Ben's argument is not to surrender to paralysis but to deliver smarter. Devolution offers the chance to shape services locally, the industrial strategy can crowd in private capital, and neighbourhood health services give prevention a practical home.

The ask for the next year is unglamorous but essential: focus on delivery – especially of a preventative state – to build credibility for tougher choices ahead.

We too often treat 'old' as everyone over 65. Ben suggests a better lens: think of 'old' as the last 15 years of life. Viewed this way, the 'propective' old-age dependency ratio largely flattens over coming decades. It directs pension and health resources to where they are needed most while recognising that many people can and will work well into their 60s and 70s when supported to do so. This is not utopian – several countries already operate closer to this reality than the UK.

First, work. Countries like Sweden, Estonia and the Netherlands achieve employment rates above 75% for 55–64-year-olds. The UK sits at 66%. If we matched Sweden for this single age group, GDP could be over 2% higher – around £78bn. The biggest barrier is health: long-term sickness has driven up inactivity since the pandemic, with the steepest rise among 50–64-year-olds. The UK's Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) has previously shown that better health could shift GDP by as much as ±2.5% by 2070. Investing to prevent ill-health and redesigning jobs to work around existing conditions – and care responsibilities – is both humane and growth-positive.

Second, spending. Older people already drive the majority of UK consumption. On pre-pandemic trends, spending by over-50s was projected to rise from £319bn in 2018 to £550bn by 2040, lifting their share of total consumption from 54% to 63%. Yet spending often falls as a share of income at older ages, with many 80-year-olds saving significant sums each year rather than consuming or investing productively. Smarter financial products, better advice and confidence-building design can help people use resources in ways that support wellbeing and demand.

The UK faces a hard fiscal slog – but there is a path through. Deliver prevention locally, help more people stay healthy and in good work for longer, and design markets that make it easier for older people to spend well. Do those things and we ease the squeeze while unlocking one of the biggest economic opportunities of our time. You can read both blogs via the button below.

READ MORE

Events update - a workshop and two report launches



What: In-person workshop - Alcohol and healthy ageing in the UK
When: Monday 20 October 2025, 10.00am – 2.00pm (BST)
Where: Drinkaware, 35 Chiswell Street, London EC1Y

We are looking for people with knowledge of this area to join Drinkaware and the ILC for an in-person expert stakeholder workshop as part of our ongoing project exploring the relationship between alcohol and healthy ageing in the UK.

During this workshop, you will have the opportunity to share your insights and inform the ideas that will go into our report, due to be published in January 2026.

If you're interested and able to join us on the day, please contact Patrick Swain here. More details about the project can be found here.

What: In-person launch event: APPLE-TREE dementia prevention project
When: Tuesday 21 October 2025, 10.30am – 12.00pm (BST)
Where: House of Lords, London, SW1A

The six-year APPLE-TREE study, led by Queen Mary University of London, explores how to support people with memory concerns to make lifestyle changes that reduce their risk of developing dementia.

At this event, kindly hosted by The Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick, the APPLE-TREE team will present the findings from this study. A panel of experts will also discuss the importance of dementia prevention in the UK today.

As places at this in person event are limited, please register here if you're interested in attending.

What: In-person launch event: Immunisation and healthy ageing
When: Thursday 6 November, 12.00pm – 2.00pm (CET)
Where: European Parliament, Brussels

Join us at the European Parliament for an in-person event on Immunisation and Healthy Ageing and launch of ILC's upcoming report, as part of the Supporting our systems project. We are delighted that the event will be hosted by MEP András Kulja and MEP Vytenis Andriukaitis.

Other speakers include:

- Paolo Bonanni, co-Chair of AIB and Professor at University of Florence
- Edgar Franke – Former State Secretary for Health in the Bundestag
- Ece Özçelik, Health Policy Analyst, OECD
- Walter Ricciardi – ex-head of Istituto Superiore di Sanità (Italy), Chair of Mission Board on Vaccination in Europe and Professor at Catholic University Rome
- Carlos Martin Saborido, Head of Spanish HTA Agency

The event will be moderated by TV news journalist and medical correspondent, Sue Saville. If you are able to attend in-person in Brussels then please register here.

You can find out more about ILC Events via the button below.

MORE HERE

The Friday three newsletter, edited by Emily Evans, usually goes out fortnightly

To keep up-to-date with ILC events throughout the year, please continue to check our website on a regular basis.

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