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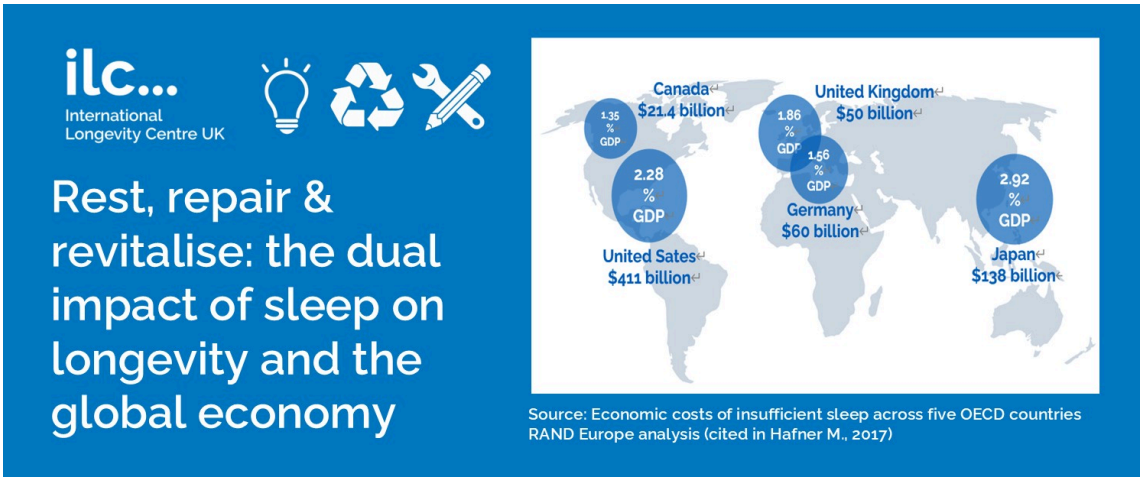
International Longevity Centre UK

Latest news

ILC Friday three

- Rest, repair and revitalise - sleep, longevity and the global economy
- More than bins - the role of local government in our lives
- Sir David Attenborough - an extraordinarily well-lived life

Rest, repair & revitalise – sleep, longevity and the global economy



Sleep is often treated as a personal lifestyle choice, but it is actually a systemic, population-level crisis.

Good quality sleep is a fundamental pillar of healthy ageing, yet it remains one of the most overlooked factors in public health and workplace policy. In the UK alone, 16% of adults get less than six hours of sleep a night, effectively losing an entire night's worth of rest every week.

This chronic deficit carries profound consequences, as the lack of high-quality sleep significantly raises the risk of cardiovascular disease, cognitive decline, depression, and metabolic syndromes like type 2 diabetes. High-quality sleep is also a vital tool for maintaining the functional capacity of immune cells as the body ages.

Furthermore, contrary to popular belief, healthy older adults are actually less prone to daytime sleepiness than younger demographics. Ultimately, excessive sleepiness or unexpectedly long sleep durations in later life are often early clinical warning signs of underlying health deterioration or cognitive decline, as Prof Derk-Jan Dijk, Professor of Sleep and Physiology, Director, Surrey Sleep Research Centre, pointed out.

Sleep deprivation is also shaped by structural factors that go well beyond individual behaviour. The working environment plays a significant role, and this is perhaps nowhere more visible than in the experience of night shift workers. Night work forces the body to operate against its natural circadian rhythm, the internal clock that governs alertness, digestion, hormone release, and cellular repair. The result is sleep that is shorter, more fragmented, and less restorative per hour than sleep taken at night. Over the years and decades, this deficit compounds. Night shift workers face elevated risks of cardiovascular disease and diabetes, as Ben Lumley, Co-Head of Programme, Night Club, said.

This is a structural workplace issue. HR departments need to treat sleep as a professional health priority, not a private lifestyle choice. Historically, corporate culture has glorified sleep deprivation as a sign of dedication – a “badge of honour”. As Yvonne Sonsino, previously Trustee at the International Longevity Centre UK, notes, if senior leaders reward constant availability, wellbeing programmes will not succeed. When leaders model boundaries and prioritise recovery, employees are more likely to do the same.

Alongside shift work, alcohol is another significant and often misunderstood factor. While alcohol reduces the time it takes to fall asleep, it functions purely as a short-term sedative rather than a restorative aid, according to Jessi Kullar, Senior Public Affairs and Stakeholder Engagement Manager, Drinkaware. It specifically blocks Rapid Eye Movement (REM) sleep, which is essential for memory consolidation, mood regulation, and complex cognitive function. As the night progresses, continued consumption disrupts the broader sleep-wake cycle, leading to significantly exacerbated sleep fragmentation during the second half of the night.

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This creates a self-reinforcing vicious cycle: disrupted sleep prompts the use of alcohol for relaxation, which in turn causes further sleep fragmentation.

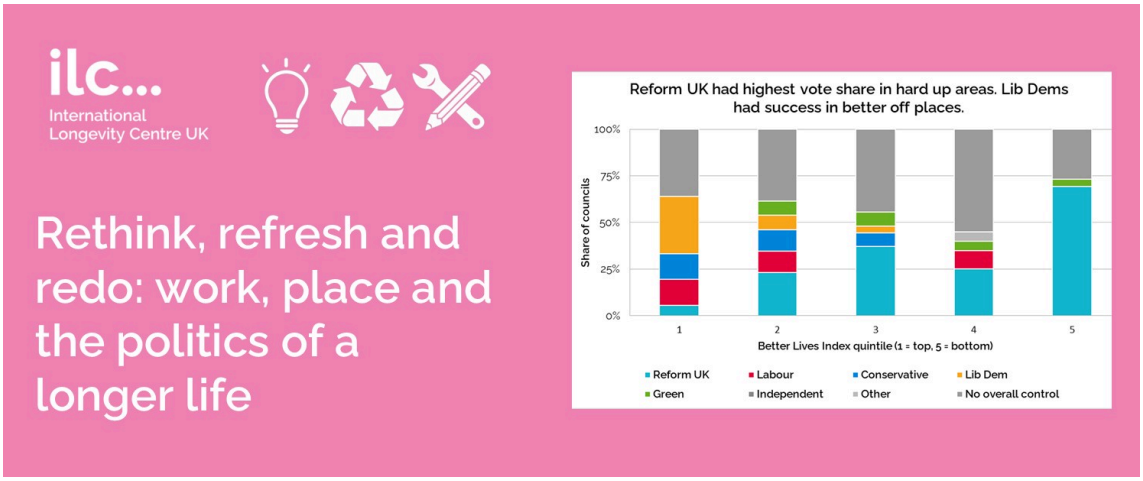
The economic case reinforces this urgency. In the UK, sleep deprivation costs an estimated £50 billion a year through lost productivity, accidents and healthcare costs. Across OECD countries, the impact runs to hundreds of billions in lost GDP. These losses reflect reduced workforce participation, lower productivity and impaired long-term cognitive development. Addressing sleep deprivation is therefore not just a health issue, but a matter of economic growth.

To explore the evidence further, check out ILC's newest report, Sweet Dreams: The importance of good sleep for healthy ageing. Based on our webinar with ILC Partner University of Surrey Centre of Excellence of Ageing, the report written by Akane Li, our excellent Policy Intern, looks at the physiology of sleep, the structural drivers of deprivation, and key recommendations for the future. You can read the full report via the button below or catch up on the webinar here and related blog post here.

If you're interested in joining ILC's Partners Programme please contact Patrick Swain here.

READ MORE

More than bins - the role of local government in our lives



In addition to the key contests for the devolved parliaments in Scotland and Wales, across England yesterday millions of us cast our votes in local elections. At the time of writing few results were in. But whatever the final politcal landscape, local democracy is being shaped – and in some ways distorted – by age.

Councils are increasingly serving older and more complex populations. The people most likely to vote in local elections are disproportionately older. And many councillors making decisions are themselves well into their fifties and sixties. The combination of these factors raises a serious question about whether democratic institutions are structurally equipped to plan for an ageing future.

Older voters turn out. In the 2024 General Election, modelled estimates from the British Election Study put turnout among people aged 65 and over at approximately 85%, compared with around 65% among 18–24-year-olds – a gap of roughly 20 percentage points. While demographic data for local elections is harder to come by, lower turnouts mean these are disproportionately shaped by older, more settled and more affluent voters, while younger adults, renters and more transient populations are less likely to be registered to vote.

On 7 May 2026, voters in England elected more than 5,000 councillors. In London, all 32 boroughs held elections, with more than 1,800 seats contested. Many of the people standing for – and winning – those seats are older. In 2022, the average age of councillors in England was 59. Around 37% were aged 65 and over. Fewer than 5% were under 35. Around 36% were women and 92% described their ethnic background as white.

Scotland and Wales have already extended voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds, and the UK Government plans to do the same across all UK elections before the next General Election. While this may help build lifelong voting habits, turnout still tends to rise with age, meaning the electorate remains older than the population overall.

ONS latest mid-year population estimates for England and Wales show that almost one in five of the population is aged 65 and over, while nearly two in five are aged 50 and over. But those averages hide local differences. Manchester's median age is just over 30, driven by its large student population while in North Norfolk the median age is around 56.

Councils must respond to rising demand for care and support while at the same time creating places that help people stay healthy, connected and independent for longer. Social care sits at the heart of this. According to NHS England and DHSC data, councils spent around £12 billion on long-term support for older people in 2024/25, and the latest NHS England Adult Social Care activity data shows that around 30,000 more people received publicly funded long-term care than in the previous year.

However, social care is too often framed politically as a cost rather than an

However, social care is too often framed politically as a cost rather than an investment. Care England argued in its recent report, The Power of Care, that investment in social care should be understood as an opportunity for long-term economic return, not a drain on public finances. They estimate that for every £1 million invested in adult social care, between £5 million and £7 million of wider economic benefits could be realised through increased employment, improved health and reduced pressure on public services.

Without adequate funding local authority finances are under severe strain. Many councils are drawing on reserves to meet rising social care costs, even as the tax base in areas of highest need is often weakest. As ILC and the Institute and Faculty of Actuaries have argued, responsibility for funding social care should shift significantly towards central government – reducing postcode inequalities and easing the pressure on councils. We are also working with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation to examine social care funding models in Japan, Germany and Australia.

Yet social care seldom features meaningfully in election campaigns. On the doorstep candidates talk about potholes and bin collections and votes are cast for or against national personalities. Adult social care – which accounts for the majority of council spending in many authorities – rarely surfaces as a campaign issue.

The King's Fund has described social care reform as trapped in a political Catch-22. Politicians fear the backlash that followed earlier attempts at reform – most vividly the "dementia tax" row during the 2017 General Election – and so avoid the subject, even as the system visibly deteriorates. The result is that social care has become politically toxic despite widespread recognition of its importance to our lives.

Councils also shape housing, transport, public spaces, libraries and local health services – all of which affect how well people age in practice. The question is whether councils can be given the tools and resources to move from managing crises to planning properly for longer lives.

READ MORE

Sir David Attenborough - an extraordinarily well-lived life

Everything is set for us to win this future. We have a plan. We know what to do. There is a path to sustainability. It is a path that could lead to a better future for all life on Earth. We must let our politicians and business leaders know that we understand this, that this vision for the future is not just something we need, it is something, above all, that we want.
Sir David Attenborough
A Life on Our Planet (2020)



Mural by Harriet Wood aka "Hazardone" for Bristol's Upfest (photo: Olivia King May 2026)

Today, Sir David Attenborough turns 100. To become a centenarian, you have historically needed to be female, live in the right part of the country, have a good income, eat the right things, not drink much, not smoke, and stay physically active – a combination of genetics, environment, healthy living, and wealth. Sir David, it is fair to say, has done rather well on most of those counts.

According to the ONS, there were 16,600 centenarians in the UK in 2024 – double the 8,300 recorded in 2004 – but still only around one in every 4,200 people. Reaching 100 has historically been far more common among women. In 2024, there were 13,600 female centenarians compared with 3,100 men. However, the number of male centenarians has trebled since 2004, while the number of female centenarians has almost doubled. In the past, surviving cancer or heart disease to 100 was rare. Now it is not – meaning some are living longer but in poorer health than their predecessors.

Sir David grew up surrounded by learning. His father was Principal of University College Leicester, and the family lived on campus. He has two children and grandchildren, and was married for 47 years until his wife Jane's death in 1997. And it's clear from all the tributes this week he's made many good friends. ILC's research shows clear links between social connection and reduced risk of depression, dementia and cardiovascular disease, and that over half a million more people in the UK are experiencing chronic loneliness than before the pandemic. Being connected not only keeps us healthy – it helps us withstand the shocks of life.

Then there is purpose. David Attenborough has a job he loves and has never stopped working. Research consistently links optimism and meaning to longer life. One US study of over 150,000 women aged 50–79 found the most optimistic lived an average of 4.4 years longer than the least optimistic. A man who has spent a century finding the natural world astonishing is, almost by definition, an optimist.

Like so many people, David Attenborough was a big influence on my life. My grandmother's ambition was that his son – whom of course I have never met – would be a very suitable match. Because of his passion for everything from ancient Galápagos giant tortoises to day-old Mayflies, I chose to do a zoology degree at Bristol, as close as possible to the BBC Natural History Unit. I have always admired his extraordinary curiosity, his storytelling, and his incredible gift for communication – and saw it reflected back in the warmth of the multi-generational crowd at Glastonbury in 2019. He is not simply a national treasure – he is a global one. When Attenborough joined Instagram at 93, he reached one million followers faster than any account in the platform's history. His Netflix and BBC series draw hundreds of millions of viewers across globe.

But his remarkable life is not a blueprint. The ILC's UK Better Lives Index shows that where you are born can change your life by almost a decade – children born in Richmond upon Thames can expect to live nine years longer than those born in Blackpool. The latest ONS data shows healthy life expectancy in the UK is now at its

Blackpool. The latest ONS data shows healthy life expectancy in the UK is now at its lowest since the time series records began in 2011–13. Average female healthy life expectancy stands at just 50.1 years in Merthyr Tydfil, compared to 70.3 years in Richmond upon Thames – a difference of more than two decades. (Coincidentally, David Attenborough's wife, Jane Oriel, was from Merthyr Tydfil.)

As John Burn-Murdoch recently argued in the Financial Times, healthy life expectancy is a crude blend of objective mortality data and subjective self-reported health. The true picture is more complex. Even so, healthy life expectancy data does illustrate the enormous differences between places. Better data – and more honest use of it – does matter for policy. It is more likely to persuade those responsible for the purse strings to make serious, targeted investment in prevention and the social determinants of health – housing, income, place. Without that, the gap between a life like Sir David's and the one far too many people actually get will remain as wide as ever.

I wrote this piece at the suggestion of my brilliant colleague, Arunima Himawan – another big fan of Sir David Attenborough. Arun has spent seven years at the ILC, leading our global health programme and strategy, and steering our prevention work. Today is her last day, as she moves on to an exciting new role at University College London. We will miss her enormously, and wish her every success.

You can explore more of ILC's work on healthy ageing and prevention via the button below.

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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The Foundry
17 Oval Way
London, SE11 5RR
United Kingdom
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