Building our future: How Grimsby is finding new hope

With Emily Bolton and Jason Stockwood

UCL Policy Lab

Creating space for the future

Welcome back to the **UCL Policy Lab**

The future can feel out of reach when the present feels so precarious.

In our politics today, we're buffeted by events - electoral and economic - leaving us grasping around for quick fixes. And this persistent focus on dealing with the now can leave us with no time to do the hard work of imagining a better future.

What's more, a failure to think about the future leaves us with sticking plaster policies that aren't fit for the ambitions of communities across the UK. In this edition of the UCL Policy Lab magazine, we've spoken to experts and organisers who urge us in their different ways to make space for the future.

In Grimsby, Our Future, led by Emily Bolton, is working in collaboration with Jason Stockwood, chairman and co-owner of Grimsby Town FC on a project with the future at its core, helping a community get out from under past policy failures.

With Christian Dustmann and Alan Renwick, we talk to two world-leading academics urging us to raise our ambitions when it comes to innovative new ideas and analysis. In our interview with Rachel Wolf, we find someone who recognises the need for a broad analysis to tackle the pressing issues of tomorrow, be it the future of the NHS or education reform.

Creating space to imagine and build a better future is central to the job of a university. The privileged position the community and country at large grants universities provides us with the space to convene debates and shape ideas.

The Lab is central to this mission here at UCL, and we hope you'll join us in upcoming events and conversations as we continue to make space to imagine a better future.

Marc Stears
Director
UCL Policy Lab

To find out more about our work and events programme, sign up for our newsletter.
We are also very keen to hear from you, about ideas and collaborations.

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Tackling *inequality* in the everyday

When UCL and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation first discussed the idea of collaborating on a major new joint project to work out how we might tackle the most profound inequalities of our time, the challenge seemed both exciting and daunting.

Now six months on, and just three months from the launch of the Ordinary Hope project, the project is expanding and reaching out to organisations, institutions, and communities right across the country.

Yasmin Ibison, Senior Policy Advisor, and project lead from Joseph Rowntree Foundation, has been joined by the latest member of the UCL Policy Lab team, Alisha Iyer. Along with developing Ordinary Hope, Alisha will be driving the work to help foster a broader collaborative ecosystem for change.

Having previously worked in a community and place-based organisation that seeks to dismantle the systemic barriers preventing Black communities from thriving - Yasmin is aware of the competing demands placed on individuals and social change organisations: "Oftentimes grassroots organisations and community groups don't have the kind of direct line into power or funding those longstanding institutions have," she says.

So often driven by a desire for a better future for their communities and a love for place, these organisations are not always able to work with, and influence, national and political institutions. But their work is groundbreaking and critical to so many people's everyday lives across the UK.

The Ordinary Hope project seeks to support and understand how those working in differing sectors can work together through their differences and bridge the fragmented nature of change. This includes recognising the dynamism that comes from bringing political institutions into contact with community based movements for change.

For Yasmin, this is also about inviting people in and creating space for different types of organisations to play their part in shaping the discussion: "What I find so exciting about the project is the prospect for genuine collaboration and understanding across different organisations and backgrounds," she says. "Having worked for small and big organisations, we often talk about collaboration but don't always properly practice it."

This belief that change -- be it reform to public service, poverty or meeting our net zero targets -- will only happen if we can find new ways to collaborate and feels more relevant than ever.

As we move towards the general election, people increasingly want to see change and reform, but this will not be delivered in Westminster or Whitehall alone and nor should it be. However, the many networks and organisations already doing great work are hampered by systems that stifle collaboration.

Ensuring this network for change is fighting fit is critical to how the UK can overcome its challenges. And as Yasmin points out it is something that isn't always easy or prioritised: "I think so often we focus on a single policy or idea that can solve an issue," she says.

"In many ways, JRF and UCL are all about trying to find solutions. But just as important a role is trying to work out the tools we need to build something better."

In that sense, Ordinary Hope is tapping into a challenge which has become clear for the UK. The country is awash with smart ideas, many of which the project aims to highlight and connect to everyday lives, but these ideas lack the tools to make them happen.

This work is tough but exciting. It allows us to work together and across differences to bring about lasting change. And the Ordinary Hope project is inviting others to get involved: "Everyone I speak to, I talk about the project – it really is an open invitation to get involved," said Yasmin.

"It's about bringing together our talents, ideas and views. And recognising where we agree we should be making progress. I guess it's all about breaking down the barrier".

To find out more and to get involved email a.iyer@ucl.ac.uk

How can we fix our democracy?

We talk constitutions, citizens assemblies and public expectations with **Alan Renwick**

It's no secret that voters are frustrated by politics. In recent years a deep disconnection with our democratic institutions and structures has led to political earthquakes that continue to shake the foundations of Westminster.

From Scottish Independence to power-sharing in Northern Ireland, the UK's relationship with the European Union to lack of trust in politicians, Britain remains a democracy under challenge.

But these challenges have also given birth to ambitious new thinking on renewing our democracy, our shared institutions and improving decision-making.

Alan Renwick is no stranger to these challenges. As one of the leading experts on the British constitution, he has brought new perspectives on how we breathe life into British democracy. And, most importantly, rebuild our faith in it.

In his recent inaugural lecture at UCL, he set out his own, very personal answer to the question 'How can we fix our democracy?'

When I sat down with him in Bloomsbury, he was keen to make clear that, although most people do not obsess over constitutional process and procedure, that does not mean they are not passionate about how politics is designed and organised.

"People do care about the health of our democracy. Above all, they care about honesty in politics," he insists.

Although this may feel a perennial problem for politics the world over, he argues that two things have changed. One is that public expectations have shifted. We no longer see ourselves as passive bystanders, but as active and constant participants, through new technology and new ways of organising.

"If you go back and read a newspaper from the 1950s, the public just aren't there," he says. "The public would elect their representatives, and their representatives would get on with it. The idea that there might be a dialogue going on between elections just wasn't even considered."

Today, Renwick says, that distance between politics and the people has been removed. We have 24-hour news coverage and 24 hours of opinions being asked for and shared in the media and online, giving the public the sense they should be able to shape, or at least have a say, in events.

"But our politics simply is not designed to allow this kind of ongoing participation, so shifting public expectations are not being met." And that, says Renwick, "is feeding further disillusionment."

Meanwhile, politicians increasingly find themselves stuck between the need to cut through in a noisy debate and the demand for practical solutions. That is fuelling the second change: the discourse of politics in getting coarser and more superficial – which only turns people off even more. "And so you get this kind of negative spiral in the discourse around people feeling disaffected and disillusioned."

It is not just the public who feel frustrated. As Renwick puts it: "Politicians feel they have to perform and talk to the gallery to an ever-greater degree, which gets in the way of delivering workable policies."

But if our politics feels stuck, trapped between the policy challenges and the political discourse, how can we break free?

Renwick has been leading work to explore new models of deliberative democracy – a way of working that enables members of the public to play an active role in democracy that complements the role of elected representatives and helps encourage more constructive policy dialogue.

"We know that, in themselves, processes like citizens' assemblies work really well for having a thoughtful, considered policy discussion among the full range of the public and coming up with solutions that make sense," he says. "The challenge we're now working on – and beginning to solve – is how to integrate such processes into the wider system of representative democracy. We can fix our democracy only if citizens' assemblies, elected institutions, the media, and the wider public are all playing their different parts effectively."

But how do universities as institutions for ideas and learning figure in Renwick's ideas for democratic renewal?

"There's not enough careful consideration of what the evidence shows or how we can evaluate different perspectives and come to an overall view," he says. "Universities ought to be great places for doing that kind of work and encouraging more thoughtful discourse about issues."

This is what Renwick works towards today, both in the UCL Constitution Unit and as an active collaborator with the UCL Policy Lab. He is helping to work through new ways to overcome the shared challenges we face.

This belief in ideas and collaboration sits at the heart of what Alan Renwick does but also who he is. At the start of his recent lecture, Renwick spoke about growing up in Wick, on the very northerly edge of Scotland, and of those who inspired him to start to think about politics.

He mentioned his teachers, his parents and the political figures who shaped that part of Scotland. All, in their own way, seeking to build on what's already good and pass on something better.

Those names and faces from his past are still reflected in his work today and the passion that drives him: "If you believe in the importance of a well-functioning democracy, then you have to work out how to nudge that system in a healthy direction."

From deliberative democracy to improving standards in public life, he is carrying on that long tradition. His ideas and energy could be key for all of us who care about politics and improving our society.

Hope comes ashore in Grimsby

Our Future and Grimsby Town Football Club have partnered to help bring a town together and build a shared vision for the future. James Baggaley traveled to the seaside town to speak with Emily Bolton, Our Future CEO and Jason Stockwood, Grimsby Town's Chair and co-owner, about what a more hopeful shared future might look like and what Grimsby can teach the rest of us

It can feel like the default mode of British politics in recent years is division and despair. The debate is stuck in a doom loop, a cycle of intractable problems and faltering systems.

This is why speaking to the two people leading Our Future's transformative work in Grimsby, Emily Bolton and Jason Stockwood, is such a joy. It is a chance to break away from the doom-scrolling and charts of crisis, to glimpse and imagine a country alive with possibility.

Emily is passionate about the need to break out of the negativity and build something for the future: "The project is about building a better future. And so, for example, if we look at housing, we are working to support building the houses of the future in a model of the future.

"So, everything is about building the future. And that doesn't mean that today's issues don't need to be fixed, but it does mean we can try to break out of that cycle."

Grimsby is a special place. This part of North Lincolnshire is flat, and the skies go on forever, where the Humber Wash meets the fens and the North Sea beyond. The town, so long the home to the English fishing fleet, has been hit hard by changes to the industry and a shift in economic fortunes.
Our Future, an organisation established by Emily following years of founding a range of initiatives that have driven long term change in the UK and US. She's now working to support communities like Grimsby to be at the forefront of the transition to a green economy.

It is exactly the kind of initiative that UCL Policy Lab's Ordinary Hope project wants to learn from, as we seek new ideas about how to tackle the entrenched disadvantages that blight so many communities in the UK today.

Key to the early success of Our Future has been working in direct partnership with the local football club, Grimsby Town, drawing on its enormous power as a civic institution trusted by many.

It is a role about which Jason Stockwood, a local Grimsby lad, hugely successful business leader and now owner of the club, was passionate about. He understood the unique role the club could play in bringing the community together.

"Football seems to express the whole range and scope of human experience," he says. "Football clubs cut across politics and culture. Of course, there are lots of things wrong with football, but there is something about people coming together for something we care about collectively, in a sense of solidarity and community."

Wherever you look at the moment, you can see football providing the country with a space for national reflection. Playwright and UCL Policy Lab Hon Professor James Graham's most recent play Dear England uses national men's team manager, Gareth Southgate, to tell a new story of the country, questioning its past, present and future.

Graham makes us realise that storytelling and bringing people together at an emotional level has far too often been considered secondary to the 'serious' work of technical policymaking. It is a theme which appears over and again in UCL Policy Lab Director, Marc Stears' work too, including as the centrepiece of his recent book, Out of the Ordinary.

Grimsby and Our Future offers another rebuke to the outdated model of policymaker that Stears' work critcises. Bolton and Stockwood show us that Westminster does not always know best, not because those working in Westminster do not care, but because people all over the country want to play their own part in reshaping the future.

In this way, the experience of Our Future also offers a way out of the division of the present. It reminds us that when you bring people together - be it community groups, national politicians, or local government – they often agree on far more than you might imagine. Making progress, is all about break down the old barriers that stop us from working together.

"People feel like policies are done to them," says Stockwood. "You know, there's no sense of, like, let's have a conversation about what the town needs."

This does not necessarily mean that the direction of national policy is unimportant, but that we need that alongside local community voice and involvement.

"Brilliant people exist up and down our country. It's possible to create this collective change, and I genuinely believe it can happen in more places than Grimsby."

Emily Bolton

"I think you need both. I think you do need a large-scale centralised government industrial strategy. But that alone doesn't feel connected to what a community wants, then the probability of its success is significantly diminished because people don't buy into it. And it's so obvious to me, and I'm careful not to talk about top-down and bottom-up, it's more about one coherent story rather than hierarchical thinking," Jason says.

Grimsby's story is a prime example of the post-industrial decline faced in towns and cities around the world. The loss of the fishing industry led to regional economic decline, widespread unemployment and a loss of cultural confidence too.

This has led to a fundamental change in the way of life in the town as the identity and one of the backbones of community connection disappeared. The region still faces the interlinked challenges of intergenerational poverty, high unemployment, and widespread distrust in institutions. Five wards in NE Linconshire are in the top 10% in the country's Index of Multiple Deprivation, with two in the top 1% in England.

But a sense of purpose and hope has come with the project, a purpose grounded not in abstract slogans but in the everyday work of renewal.

"None of these communities have come here overnight. And so changing this isn't the work of a, 15-year budget, a 15-month budget period or even a five-year parliament. It is the work of at least a decade if not decades. We must be creative about how we can sit outside government spending cycles to deliver long-term change." Emily says.

Walking around Grimsby and meeting people involved with the project and you quickly see how it has infused many with this optimism and sense of possibility. But you have to remind yourself of size of the task ahead. As Bolton says, this isn't a two or even five-year project; it has taken decades to get here and it'll take decades to rebuild. But you do not doubt the community is up for it. Emily Bolton and Jason Stockwood are just two of the committed players on the team.

Stockwood does not shy away from the challenges, but is clear about the joy of collaborating on this kind of shared vision: "Working with Emily in the friendship we have in the partnership and wisdom that she has that I'm learning from... [and] the depth of the relationships to a place I love dearly, reconnecting with my town, with my tribe, with my people, my friends, my family, and a lot of new people as well. It's been so rewarding for me."

For Bolton, the work has played a pivotal role in her recovery from long COVID: "I certainly think that this work on a personal level has been critical to my recovery," she said, and this recovery has gone hand in hand with rediscovering hope for the community and the country beyond.

"Whilst there are awesome people in Grimsby that we work with that I love dearly, I don't believe that this is unique," she said. "Brilliant people exist up and down our country. It's possible to create this collective change, and I genuinely believe it can happen in more places than Grimsby."

I leave my chat with Emily and Jason with a sense of place on the move, engaged and emboldened to create a better future. And there are lessons for the UK on mobilising institutions, communities and ideas to build something better.

The next day as we walk around the town and stroll along the seafront talking to people about the project, I am taken back to my visits here as a kid. Growing up in the East Midlands, I'd come to this part of the coast for weekends away. It was a magical place that felt like an escape.

Being here now, far from the grind of political point-scoring, you cannot help but have a similar feeling.

There's something special brewing on this edge of England, where the sky meets the sea, and the possibility of something new comes ashore.

Space to Dream

Football isn't for everyone, and yet the feelings it generates, the moments it creates and the bonds it builds matter enormously. Like any sport, football does not exist outside the harsh realities of our times. As Grimsby Town chairman, Jason Stockwood, said when we spoke to him, football is a product of the world in which it operates.

As anyone who has seen James Graham's play, Dear England, would have been reminded, so many of us are brought together in the ups and downs, the triumphs and disasters, the power of collective effort – perhaps even of service to one another. In those 90 plus minutes, we get to some core part of what it is to be human and maybe we dare to dream that something better is possible.

These feelings go beyond World Cups and league championships, because football clubs - professional and amateur - play an almost unique role within communities. They are institutions where differences can at times be put aside. The terraces and pitches provide an escape from the competing complexities of a changing world—a space where we can come together and even work to tackle the challenges we face.

At a time when politics can feel divisive and difficult and when easy answers are lacking, recognising the spaces where we come together is vital. It's why this edition of our Citizen Portraits series focuses on the beautiful game: on those who play it, but also on those who are mobilising it for good.

The portraits by Jorn Tomter, taken in Hackney, East London and Grimsby, show two communities that have experienced so much change and challenge. Yet in both, we find leaders who have used the power of football to imagine a better future for their communities.

Bobby Kassanager used football to turn his life around. It was the thing that gave him purpose and joy, and now he is helping young people avoid the pitfalls and dangerous paths taken by too many of their peers. He is providing a space where they can forget their worries or stresses, providing a civic duty which is paid to us all.

And our cover story in this edition features Jason Stockwood and Emily Bolton. As we hear in the piece, Jason is passionate about the role football clubs can play in bringing people together as institutions which retain the respect of the community.

In recent years football has felt more central to political debates. As so many of our institutions have faltered, the national game has become a haven for shared experiences and perhaps a place where we can understand one another.

In this round of Citizen Portraits we hope to capture some of that shared space.

Bobby Kasanga community leader, author and founder of Hackney Wick FC


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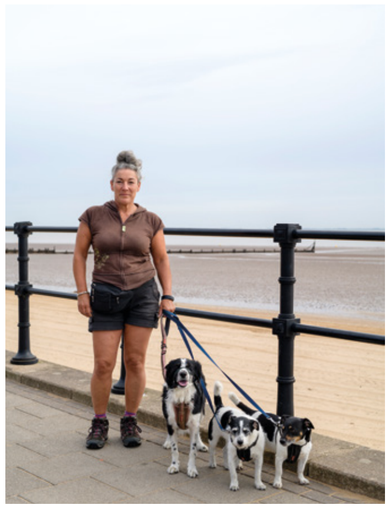


savers


Freshney Place
CALVIN
next


INTER MILANO

A view over Mabley Green,
home to Hackney FC

Securing public support for smart policy with Rachel Wolf

Understanding how ideas go from the abstract to the practical is a key feature of Rachel Wolf’s career, balancing the need for smart solutions with the very real constraints placed on policy by public opinion

This balancing act is a difficult one, but it’s one Wolf and her co-founding partner, James Frayne, aimed to bind into Public First’s DNA.

“Both James and I had worked in government,” she says. “Him on the kind of comms opinion research side, and I did policy, and I think we both felt in different ways that we weren’t necessarily getting from the outside what we needed.”

Driven by a desire to do work that could be both effective and practical, they set up Public First to bridge the competing demands of governing by making use of the lessons they had learnt from their time in politics.

Wolf’s career has taken her from the Conservative Research Department in opposition under David Cameron to advising on education policy at Number 10 and, most recently, helping to write the 2019 Conservative manifesto.

All of these roles have meant balancing what worked with what was popular– and as a devote of good ideas and good policy, Wolf acknowledges that this didn’t always come easy. Still, she is clear about the need for policy to recognise the importance of understanding public opinion.

“I think there are a lot of people who think it is somehow ‘dirtying’ policy to reflect public opinion, but I think they need to recognise it’s reality,” she said. “You are in a democracy, and that’s one of the consequences of a democracy.”

Speaking to Wolf, you get the sense of someone who understands the often-cautious and other-worldly nature of policy research and academia. In many ways, researchers are her people, but, perhaps because of this, she knows the traps they can fall into.

Most of all, she recognises the risk that good ideas will go unused because of a lack of understanding of how the political world works. This is why she is so passionate about working with academia and helping to bring good ideas from theory to delivery.

“The barrier for university research is usually that the language and the care of expression required for a research paper is wholly impossible for most people in politics and policy to conceive,” she says.

Her most recent work on reform of the National Health Service was done in collaboration with Sam Freedman for the Institute For Government, once again working with academic partners, placing cutting edge research knowledge alongside highly charged current debate and practical political insights.

“With the NHS report, we are trying to address a pressing and current problem,” she explains. “Namely, why, after even more funding for the NHS have outcomes continued to fall? And to answer that question, we needed a deep academic knowledge base informed by long-term studies alongside a more agile responsive understanding of current political challenges.

And that again takes us back to her essential balancing act.

“I’ve always had a good record of finding interesting people in universities willing to adapt how they work to respond to pressing questions. And I think it’s essential that researchers remain open to this dynamic way of working.”

The report, The NHS Productivity Puzzle, sets out a series of recommendations for tackling the problems in the NHS, including removing the bureaucratic blockages that might stop capital investment that could pay for additional beds and new systems to help bring down waiting lists.

Wolf also points to its recommendations to allow hospital management to operate more autonomously, a theme which chimes with many of the recent research ideas of UCL’s academics in public service reform.

“Working with academic colleagues, we could see from all of the management literature - including quite a lot of work on the health service - that generally, when you increase the number of managers, both clinician and non-clinician, you get better outcomes.” But doing that means not just hiring, but also empowering managers.

And yet this does not seem to be happening in the current NHS. Wolf points back to the last Labour government: “In my view, a return in some ways to something more like that Blairite system of autonomous hospitals with a very simple target framework could improve activity.”

Having been in party politics, Wolf does not shy away from borrowing and building on other parties’ ideas. Instead, she thinks it is central to how you secure change in the long term. “There’s a difference between cross-party consensus in the sense of bringing together people from different parties and coming up with a solution that everyone implements. That’s implausible,” she says. “But I think there are quite a few cases of public policy where parties have built upon each other.”

This understanding of the machinery of change is key to Wolf’s works and provides a lesson in how we can all make change. Fundamentally, she recognises the need to be truly open to hearing from a range of voices and skill sets.

It is why her advice to researchers and academics - that they must remain open to responding in ways which do not come naturally - rings true. Wolf’s work and impact is testament to this very idea.

Crossing borders with Christian Dustmann

We speak to the renowned economist **Christian Dustmann** about the events and experience that have shaped his life and work. And how as Founding Director of the Centre for Research and Analysis of Migration (CReAM) he's helping build better policy.

Crossing borders is something Christian Dustmann was doing long before he became an academic. The Professor of Economics and Director of UCL's Centre for Research and Analysis of Migration (CReAM) looks at a range of issues from labour, migration, and integration.

I meet him in his office, relaxed and casual, a world away from most people's stereotype of a successful academic. And, indeed, he speaks openly about his lack of early interest in becoming a scholar.

"I grew up in what you would call in this country a working-class area. All my friends were mechanics, carpenters, or plumbers—people who did apprenticeship training. Even going to university never really crossed my mind, let alone becoming an academic."

Growing up as he did in a divided Germany, Dustmann saw first-hand the everyday experiences borders and economic divides had on the lives of ordinary people. I put it to him that this experience of everyday problems might have led him to have a better understanding of how theoretical ideas interact with human realities.

"Possibly. Most labour economists never really worked these kinds of jobs."

His trademark leather jacket is slumped over his office chair. This too has a backstory. In those early years, his ambition was to afford a motorcycle and drive across Europe. When he graduated from high school, all he had in his head was to buy a motorcycle. But that meant having to find a job or an occupation, leading him to his first experience of crossing borders.

During his military service, Dustmann learned to drive trucks. And as a young man that meant his choice of occupation seemed obvious – truck driver.

"I was driving trucks internationally. From Germany to Italy to Greece, to Spain to France. All these European countries. I loved that. In the beginning, it was pure adventure."

This sense of possibility and the new excites Dustmann to this day. The interchange of ideas across intellectual borders and experience. His recent work is noted for its willingness to answer the pressing questions posed by policymakers in society – questions that do not respect the boundaries of academic disciplines. It has been the hallmark of his success.

Dustmann and the Centre CReAM he directs have been helping inform our understanding of migration for over twenty years. This work is enabled by a huge capacity for data gathering and analysis, which has allowed him and his colleagues to look at other questions. A recent paper looked at the impacts of crime on young people. Identifying how early intervention with vulnerable individuals can greatly affect the risk of criminality later in life.

Much of this work centres around questions that Dustmann has been posing all his life. How can we make smarter decisions? How can research work in collaboration with communities and governments to make society a better place? But for Dustmann, it also means ensuring we defend and strengthen the shared bonds that underpin our societies.

I put it to him that growing up in Germany in the '70s and '80s under the shadow of past suffering and present division must have given him a precious understanding of the fragility of an open society.

"I was born not even two decades after the end of the Second World War. For me, the horrors of that war and the crimes my country committed were always something which tortured me. And I always wanted to find answers for how that could happen. And during those years that seemed so alien and so far away."

With the rise of nationalism across Europe and the spectre of populism once again looming over democracy, Dustmann believes academia and universities have a vital role to play in strengthening the foundations of our democracy. But for Dustmann, it is not a momentary thought; it goes to the core of what being a university is about—bringing people and ideas together to understand our world and perhaps leave it in a better shape.

He may have been born under the shadow of that history, but he also came of age at a time of possibility and hope. A fact that does not escape him—the moment when out of division and darkness came hope and light.

"When I was just growing up, I had a total assumption that the separation of Germany was something which would go on forever." Then came the collapse of the GDR and the fall of the wall.

"As we watched on TV, the wall coming down that night, it was a very emotional moment. And the period afterward was a period of excitement and expectation."

As Dustmann speaks, I cannot help but think that he embodies so much of that hope for a better world. A world that may be under threat and yet is one worth fighting for.

For Dustmann, that means doing as he always has, finding possibility and hope in ideas. Working to understand the world around us and working with those who want to help improve it.

Speaking to him today, far from the small West German town where it all began, I am reminded that Dustmann has seen the best and worst politics can offer. And you get the feeling that makes him even more driven to work for what is best.

"This sense of possibility and the new excites Dustmann to this day. The interchange of ideas across intellectual borders and experience. His recent work is noted for its willingness to answer the pressing questions posed by policymakers in society –questions that do not respect the boundaries of academic disciplines. It has been the hallmark of his success."

How can we ensure economics is designing tools that answer the challenges facing communities today? We speak with a prominent UCL economist and a leading policy researcher from Citizen's Advice.

Forging new tools for economic decision making

The tools used by researchers, governments, and central banks to measure how economies are performing can often feel far removed from people's everyday lives. Designed by a handful of experts, they can feel like they have little relevance to ordinary conversations about the cost of living, yet the ways in which they operate have a significant impact on the lives of us all.

No acronym has come to define this better than the Consumer Price Index (CPI), introduced by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in the 1990s to provide a more accurate and internationally-comparable measure of inflation. The CPI focuses on measuring changes in the cost of a basket of goods and services, which changes each year as some items are added and others are removed.

Today, the UK CPI remains a vital economic indicator, influencing policy decisions, wage negotiations, and assessing the nation's economic well-being. Yet Morgan Wild, Head of Policy at Citizens Advice, and Parama Chaudhury a Professor (Teaching) at the department of Economics, UCL, are worried that the way in which the UK measures inflation has a direct and often unfair impact on some of the poorest households.

"A small number of statisticians have been making the case that for years that, we have underestimated inflation for poorer people. You wouldn't notice the error in any given year. But over time, those mistakes add up," Wild said.

Although it is well-known that inflation has an oversized impact on the poorest households, the idea that the very tool we use to calculate inflation disadvantages them as well can have enormous implications for policy design.

This is partly due to the changing nature of the problem CPI seeks to tackle. Today, it is mostly designed as a tool for central banks to shape monetary policy but it is widely employed to calculate the rates at which benefits are paid and other key policy decisions are shaped.

Wild argues that this is key to understanding why CPI is not working and says it speaks to a broader challenge – how can we ensure the tools economists use match people's economic reality?

Researchers at UCL regularly grapple with precisely these kinds of questions. They are not just questioning how we understand economics, but how we teach it.

"Traditionally, undergraduate economics has been taught in a very abstract kind of way, partly because it's easier to teach complex ideas in those kinds of ways," Chaudhury said. "But this risks equipping us with tools that remain abstract to the real concerns people face."

The Curriculum Open-Access Resources in Economics Project (CORE Econ), established by UCL's Wendy Carlin, along with others, has sought to break down these barriers for over a decade.

It directly relates to the kinds of new approach to economics called for by civil society campaigners and researchers like Wild. Both seek to shake up our assumptions when it comes to how we solve knotty economic problems—honing tools to improve policymaking.

For Wild, it is not about rejecting the established economics tools that we have, but adding to them. Returning to inflation, he said: "We know the central banks require a reliable and effective measure for setting rates. But that does not prohibit you from using other tools when measuring inflation for designing welfare policies."

Without this effort, some of the most vulnerable in our society might be paying the price, but Chaudhury and Wild are optimistic about their ability to shift the debate, with the efforts of researchers both within academia and outside working together to create the most effective tools for economic decision-making.

That is what drives Wild's efforts to bring economic experts into dialogue with those fighting poverty on the front line, with Chaudhury saying: "I think within academia and especially within economics, there is a risk we miss issues due to the lack of diversity in the field itself."

This is reflected further in her work as Pro-Vice Provost Education (Student Academic Experience) to ensure students from a wide range of backgrounds are getting the most from UCL while also bringing their experiences and perspectives to the kinds of questions raised by Wild.

Economics is inevitably a complex and technical subject that often deploys a well-established set of well-evidenced approaches. But as both Wild and Chaudhury make clear, that does not mean that economic thinking never needs to evolve and to make sure it responds to the acute challenges faced by people in societies today requires collaboration across disciplines, institutions and experience.

The new tools that come from that kind of melding of minds and experience could have a profound effect on communities in the UK and around the world.

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Our Themes

Challenging Inequalities
and Protecting Rights

Promoting Democracy and Peace

Ensuring Sustainable Development

Rethinking Economic Policy
and Decision-Making

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