



UCL

Why politics has gone so wrong – and how we can fix it. **Alastair Campbell** launches this year's Policy and Practice series

**UCL
Policy Lab**



The respect agenda: how Britain can get its future back

New ideas, reaching new audiences and inspiring real policy change.

That's what the UCL Policy Lab is all about. And it follows from a long and proud tradition at University College London, where, for almost two centuries, respectful, transformative debate has helped change the country – and the world – for good.

And that term respectful is important.

At UCL we often speak of the need to “disagree well”: learning from each other despite our different perspectives, connecting with each other despite our different backgrounds.

And respect is at the heart of that.

As new research from the UCL Policy Lab and More in Common for our Ordinary Hope project shows, respect is a quality that truly matters to millions of the British people too.

But they also feel it is a value that has been overlooked for too long.

Our research shows that voters are frustrated by institutions and leaders that fail to recognise the contribution of those on the front line, low pay or in blue-collar work. This frustration is not born out of a rejection of aspiration, far from it. It is built from a sense that those in power fail to respect the hard thought efforts of ordinary people, and their battle for a better life for themselves and their families.

In this special issue of the UCL Policy Lab Magazine, we interrogate this idea in full.

In the accompanying essay to this magazine, I make the case for a policymaking that focuses on respect for ordinary people and their lives. The respect agenda can help rebuild trust with voters and begin to address the pressing challenges facing the country.

In the other articles too, we speak with some amazing individuals, organisations and communities showing what a policymaking grounded in respect for others might look like.

We also take UCL researchers into the heart of that work, demonstrating that through collaboration, understanding and disagreeing well, we can make lasting change.

Whether it is recognising the contribution of carers to the economy, renewing our democracy so those newest to the country can shape the communities they love or ensuring that parents aren't left to worry if their child will go hungry at school, we find new ideas and new practices working side by side for change.

That's what policymaking grounded in respect can look like. And we hope it inspires you as much as it does us.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Marc Stears".

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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Economics



Political Science

Finding hope in new places

When Alisha Iyer arrived at the UCL Policy Lab to help lead its new project in partnership with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, she soon discovered a new way of thinking about policy.

“I loved my experience in the Civil Service, having worked with some incredible people who were genuinely motivated to make things better for the public. What I’ve really appreciated about coming to the Lab, though, is the way we are able to look beyond day-to-day demands of policy implementation or crises, and bring people together to genuinely collaborate across experience and expertise - including party differences.

This approach is embodied in the Ordinary Hope project, which has brought together leaders from academia, philanthropy, politics, think tanks, campaigning, and business, keen to shake up how we bring about change. This approach to thinking about organising structures as much as policy solutions is helping pave a new way of making change and, perhaps, a new way of doing politics that is grounded in ordinary people’s lives.

This approach is built around recognition and respect for all voices. As Marc Stears said in his essay “The Respect Agenda,” many feel “as if our voices are simply not heard... even when our issues are considered, those in authority too often determine policy for us, not with us; and then seem surprised when they miss the mark.”

By better respecting and recognizing the voice of all, Iyer thinks we can begin to make progress on overcoming the broken model of decision-making.

“I think that’s where it’s so easy to go wrong in policymaking. Coming from different sectors and experiences, people can approach an issue with little trust in, and respect for, another’s knowledge, expertise. Too often, this can lead to deference, where

people learn to ‘speak the language’ of those in ‘power,’ or disconnect, where decisions are made in silo - or on a whim - ‘for’ others, and very little changes or is improved.”

Yet, as we know, there are incredible organisations and coalitions out there that do show how true collaboration can bring about ordinary change through ideas, stories, and leadership. This is where Iyer sees the ‘hope’ element of the project.

Iyer believes we need to engage more openly with organisations seeking to drive change. “From a policy team or a central strategy unit in a Whitehall department, you can feel so removed from how a policy is ‘felt’ by people even though you’re so close to the Minister’s decision-making. There are various reasons for this, and of course, efforts to improve it, but I think a much deeper system change is necessary, in how ideas and knowledge are shared across the system throughout the policy cycle.”

The people rallying behind the ideas of Ordinary Hope serve as a reminder of the energy people have to “do something” and support, listen to, and amplify the voices and actions of those who really are making day-to-day life better for everyone in spite of the bleak political and economic conditions in the way

The respect agenda: new report shows voters prioritise respect

A new report from the UCL Policy Lab and More in Common sets out how we can reset our politics and rebuild faith in our institutions by prioritising respect for ordinary people.

Authored by Marc Stears, Director of the UCL Policy Lab, and Luke Tryl, Director of More in Common, ‘The Respect Agenda’ finds that too often, ordinary people feel their concerns are overlooked. What’s more, they are frustrated by how those in power seem indifferent to workers’ views—particularly those without degrees.

As Professor Marc Stears, Director of UCL Policy Lab, puts it, the issues have been building for some time and are a barrier to tackling the challenges facing the country.

“For too many years, we have talked about ‘left-behind communities’ and the need to ‘level up.’ Now we discover millions of people across the country feel that they are not given the respect they deserve, by their politicians or many of their key institutions. It is time for this to change and for leaders of all kinds to work together to build a future that respects the potential contribution of us all.”

The research also shows the electoral possibilities of focusing on respect. As Luke Tryl, Director of More in Common, sets out, voters are clear about the importance of respect even if politics isn’t.

“As the countdown to next year’s General Election begins in earnest, voters are clear about what they most want to see and hear from politicians – an agenda of respect.”

A central finding of the report is identifying who the public feels is respected by those in power, and who isn’t.

“The public think that for too long those in power have offered respect based on the size of someone’s bank balance or the number of letters after their name rather than on how they contribute to our country and their local communities,” says Luke Tryl.

The UCL Policy Lab has worked with research colleagues and community partners on a project called ‘Ordinary Hope,’ funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, to explore the implications of this respect agenda. It will shortly



be releasing a special edition of the UCL Policy Lab magazine featuring voices from economics and political science exploring how Britain’s institutions could better meet people’s appetite for a new agenda for respect.

Professor Lindsey Macmillan, an Ordinary Hope project member and Director of the Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities at IOE, believes that the project creates a real opportunity for collaboration.

“At a time when we face so many challenges, the Ordinary Hope project seeks to shift the narrative, to collectively energise people from all walks of life towards a future that we can all play a part in designing.”



Use the QR code to read the full report



But what can I do?

With Alastair Campbell

As conference season kicks off and ahead of his appearance at the first UCL Political Science Policy in Practice seminar of 2023 James Baggaley speaks to Alastair Campbell about campaigning, change and inspiring a new generation.

There is an indisputable star quality to Alastair Campbell. After an extraordinarily high profile - and controversial - career at the very top of politics, the former Labour spin doctor is now one of the most celebrated political podcasters in the world. And someone who can sell out the Albert Hall in a matter of hours with people who want to listen to him talk about politics.

As such, it was a surprise, as I settle down in his living room to chat, to hear that Campbell now argues that something more than an election campaign is required to change the world for good. For all his vociferous partisanship, which remains undimmed by the years, he insists that the country cannot be turned around with an election win by itself.

“I hope Labour win the next election; you won’t be surprised to hear me say that. But politics needs more than just a change of government. Politics is stuck, and people are angry. It needs to open up and improve how we hold leaders accountable.”

Our conversation takes place just days before a critical party conference season for Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer. Both will be looking to rally their troops and set out their political visions ahead of the next election. Campbell has been there in the cockpit – working with Tony Blair to return Labour to Power after 18 years in opposition.

What advice would Campbell give to those following the election campaign today? In his new book *But what can I do: why politics has gone so wrong and how you can change it*, Campbell attempts to set out the recipe for success.

Written as a guide for a new generation of leaders and campaigners, who he thinks could help turn politics around, it’s part campaign tool, part inspirational guide and part support manual. After all, Campbell knows all too well how bruising politics can be.

“It started out as a letter to the next generation. But it turned into something very different. Speaking to young people, I soon realised it could be a guide based on what I’ve learnt and what they can do.”

Its three-part structure is a formula for successful campaigning. His audience? Well, the book tour has felt as much like a campaign as a sales drive. Campbell is in a fight to prove that, for all its faults, politics can make a difference in an age of apathy and anger.

“It probably is a bit of a campaign” he says, reflecting on the many conversations he’s had with young people up and down the country. The conversation will continue when Campbell comes to speak at UCL in the first event in this years



“With any major change, there will always be a political component. But I think it is incredible what change you can bring about if you get involved on the ground”.

Department of Political Science, Policy in Practice series.

And what about the country’s issues and challenges in overcoming them? Here again, Campbell emphasises that there is more to change than we might expect.

“Just the other day, I was doing a debate with Gary Neville for Debate Mate” the charity that pairs working class young people with adults to help them gain confidence in debating. “I was arguing that politics was the best route to changing the world.”

It was Neville’s job to argue the opposite. And Campbell was taken by what the former Manchester United star said.

“Gary’s argument was fascinating. He argued that much of the change and improvements in Manchester have been made despite politics and not because of it”. Neville stressed that this wasn’t a criticism of the Mayor of Greater Manchester Andy Burnham. His powers remain limited, and much of this work predates the creation of the mayoralty but has more to do with the passion and brilliance of local campaigners, businesses, and communities.

This new approach of embracing different experiences and expertise from outside politics and Whitehall feels a long way from top-down targets.

“I do think to a certain extent the model where you stand up and say ‘vote for me, and I’ll give you the perfect job, the perfect life, the perfect school and the perfect hospital’ won’t work today”.

Campbell makes clear in speaking to me now that this isn’t 1997, and politicians should avoid grand visions. And perhaps instead, a politics that levels with people is needed.

“I think, a politics that recognises that the country is in a real mess. And that is honest that we won’t be able to fix everything all at once. It’s going to take time and hard work. A politics that says we support what teachers do; we value what

nurses do, we know we can’t get anything done without front-line workers, and we can’t keep the country safe without the police and military”.

This valuing of those who serve goes beyond the public sector. To those working to bring about change in communities and those outside politics. In the book, Campbell talks about people like Alex Smith, founder of Cares UK.

Inspired by what he saw as a crisis of loneliness across the UK, Alex set up Cares UK to ‘help people find connection and community in a disconnected age.’ Alex sits alongside countless other inspiring examples in the book—stories of ordinary people who have done extraordinary things.

“With any major change, there will always be a political component. But I think it is incredible what change you can bring about if you get involved on the ground”.

As we come to the end of our chat. I ask Campbell whether he agrees with his erstwhile Clinton-era counterpart and political strategist, James Carville, that campaigning is a sacred mix of labour and love.

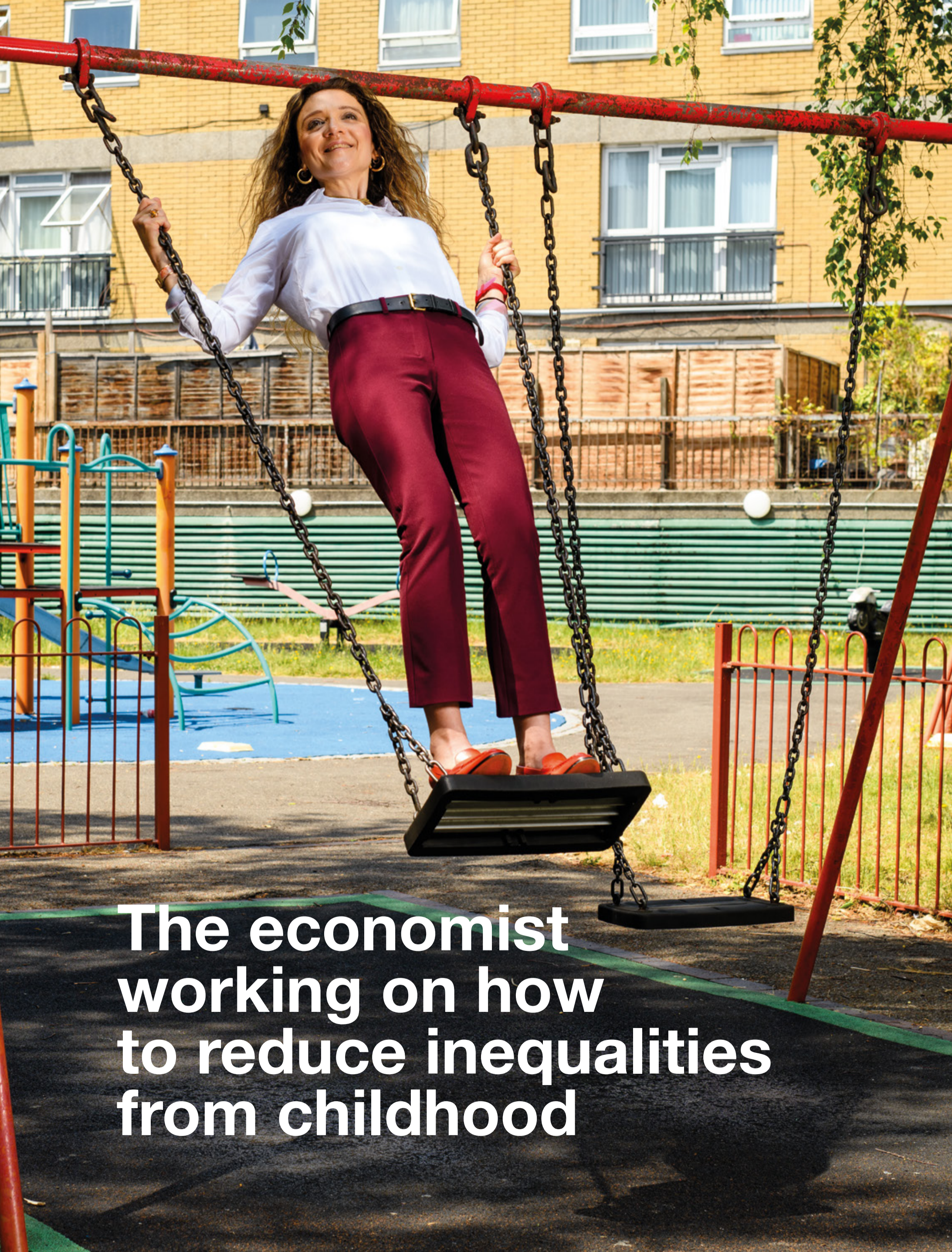
“I love James, but I just don’t see it like that”. He says, reflecting on the election victories with Labour.

“I’ll resent, to the day I die, that on those three election wins I didn’t enjoy them. I was already thinking of the next thing.”

And perhaps that’s the true lesson of the book for politicians and those wanting to work alongside them. As the great philosopher of politics, Max Weber, once told us: victory is never absolute - our efforts will be added to and supported by many others and they will, in turn, be unpicked by a generation yet to come.

In the end, that’s what it is all about. As Campbell puts it, “we do what we can do” and we hope others do the same.

Alastair Campbell joins the Department of Political Science to launch its Policy and Practice seminar series this October



**The economist
working on how
to reduce inequalities
from childhood**

It's all very well knowing that inequalities start in childhood, but what should society do about it? That question is at the heart of economist Gabriella Conti's career.

Thinking back to her childhood in Naples, Gabriella Conti remembers walking into class at the start of a new school year and finding that the desks had changed position. The year before there was one desk for each child, but now the teacher had pushed them together to make a horseshoe shape. "On my side of the table, our parents were doctors, lawyers, dentists," she remembers. "And on the other side were the children of an electrician, a grocer, a street cleaner. I don't know why."

As the year went on, she noticed that the children on the other side of the classroom were ill more often, tended to get lower marks, and were more likely to come to school without having done their homework. "Sometimes I would ask them: 'why didn't you do it?' And they would say, 'I didn't have anyone who would help me,' or 'I didn't have time; I had to help at home,'" she remembers. "This stays with you. And I thought: maybe when I grow up I can help to understand why this is happening."

Today, that is what she does. As a professor of Economics at UCL, a Research Fellow at numerous other institutions, and an associate editor at two health economics journals, she studies how inequalities start in the home and how society can reduce them. Her research focuses on the economics of health, human development, and biology. It has sharpened our understanding of the causes and consequences of inequalities in health, and the effects, costs and benefits of policies to reduce them. She's particularly interested in how conditions in early life affect wellbeing over a person's life. "I'm a huge believer that if you want to make people more equal you have to start early," she says. "Changing things later is really hard."

One of her recent papers, for example, showed that combining services for children at one location - such as health services, parenting support programmes, childcare and early education - means children are much less likely to need go to hospital a few years down the line. Studying Labour's Sure Start centres, she found that one extra centre per thousand children prevented around 2,900 hospitalisations a year when a child was five years old. For 11- to 15-year-olds, each extra centre prevented more than 13,150 hospitalisations.

Another recent paper strengthened the evidence that a home visiting programme during pregnancy and early childhood improves interactions between mothers and girls. If you are looking for policy options to improve children's health and life chances, this is exactly the kind of evidence you need.



Using Unconventional Data

She enjoys using approaches and datasets that some economists would find unconventional. One of her papers looked at how parents' beliefs connected with how they parented during the pandemic as a way to understand how to design policy better. Conti surveyed parents' decisions during lockdown about whether to take their children to nursery despite the infection risks, play with them, or take them to play at friends' houses. She also looked at diaries of how parents actually used their time, and compared parental time use with parents' beliefs, which she elicited via an online survey. To explore the determinants of beliefs, she collected information on parents' main concerns via an open-ended question and analysed their responses using natural language processing techniques. This analysis revealed a correlation between perceiving lower returns on investment and expressing negative sentiment. The paper strengthened the evidence that parents' perceptions of infection risk varied with education levels. But it also added a twist: so did their perceptions of how important it was to give children time to play. The paper reminds us that parents' beliefs affect their choices, so any policy that wants to encourage take-up of childcare should tailor how they provide information, depending on whom it is targeting. Another paper used foetal ultrasound scans to show that inequalities emerge already in the womb, and to measure the factors determining birth weight, helping to clarify how it should be used as evidence for babies' health, and providing a rationale for prenatal interventions.

She attributes an interest in using these kind of datasets to the influence of her mother, a biologist. "When I was a child, she was always buying books for kids with cartoons about the human body, biology, cells, how babies are born, how we reproduce. So ever since I knew how the body worked, I became really interested in why one body ends up working better than another," she says.

Using Economics to Understand the Patterns of the Everyday

Her undergraduate degree was law, but it contained modules on economics. She found in those modules something the law couldn't offer: a powerful framework by which to understand the everyday circumstances hidden behind inequalities. "People sometimes ask me why you use economics to study these things," she says, "and the answer is that it provides very robust tools to analyse and interpret data, which you can use to inform policy to improve lives and make the world a bit better," she says.

"A natural way of thinking about child development is that a child's health and other dimensions of human capital depend partly on biology and partly on what parents do." But that approach is limited, she argues. An economic model, on the other hand, makes it easier to think about these factors in a much more structured way, partly because it offers a framework to think also about the constraints people face. "Of course, we don't have unlimited resources, we can't do everything we want, and this is probably more true for parents," she says. "That allows you to think about why some parents spend more time than others helping their children, giving them nutritious food, breastfeeding, taking them to the doctor if they're unwell, reading or talking to them. You can start thinking: 'is it the money? Maybe they have a budget constraint. Maybe they don't have time. OK, there's a time constraint. Maybe they actually don't know. So there's an information constraint. That framework can give you a better understanding of what's going on,'" she says, "which gives you a better way to think about how to improve things." A financial constraint might be lifted with credit relief, subsidies, tax free childcare, or perhaps vouchers for nutritious food; a time constraint by maternity leave or parental leave; a knowledge constraint with information, and so on. "Without this framework, I would find it much harder to think about these problems," she says.

Access to Data

One of her biggest disappointments in British politics of recent years is that so much of the data that is the lifeblood of this kind of work is not routinely collected in a harmonised fashion at a local level. She gives the example of the data on the early years workforce. After all, a health intervention for children at national level can only be as effective as the workforce that provides it. That makes it important to understand who is providing health visits and other interventions that make a difference to children, how qualified that workforce is, its size and professional make up, and so on. But both budget cuts and the decentralisation of many public health responsibilities have made this information very hard and time-consuming to collect (e.g. via Freedom-of-Information Requests) and to study.

If a policymaker was looking for something relatively cheap and politically uncontested to do that was likely to help improving life chances for millions of children who will be born in the coming decades, they could start by making sure this data on the early years workforce (starting from health visitors) is collected at local level, and linked with data on children's outcomes. That would enable economists like Conti, driven by a desire to understand how to reduce inequalities from childhood, to get on with their work.



Work to expand free school meals has seen success in embracing difference and recognising the power of coalition building.

The campaigners calling for an end to hunger in primary schools

Early in her career, Mari Burton found herself teaching in a school near where she grew up. “The school was in a very deprived area,” she remembers. “Kids were at risk of getting involved in lots of nasty crime. It really felt like if we could just throw a little bit of money at this, it would solve so many things,” she recalls.

But then she moved to a school in a more affluent area. “And then I realised how naive I was,” she recalls. “There are actually loads of issues going on here as well. The difference was that not everybody could see them. When you’ve got a bit of money, you can cover up a lot that’s going on that’s not right for kids.”

One was the inequality between the kids from homes with a lot of money and those from homes without, that raises challenges from the classroom to the canteen that many teachers know all too well. “It was quite hard to tread that balance between making sure you’re giving kids the things they need without embarrassing them,” Burton says. “I remember this particular girl who would get in trouble for nicking chips from the canteen. She was obviously stealing because there was no food at home.” Burton found herself trying to figure out how to offer practical help without causing embarrassment. Techniques such as ‘there was this three-for-two offer on breakfast bars so I’ve accidentally got more than I can eat, so could you give me a hand and take some?’ “But kids aren’t stupid,” she says. “They know what you’re doing.” The challenge, as she saw it, was not just about resources. It’s also about dignity and respect.

Burton brought this sensitivity to the dignity of others to her subsequent roles in her union. She explains that the lockdowns during the pandemic focused minds on the practicalities of what children need to learn. “We did a lot of campaigning on expanding free school meals into the holidays,” she says. The campaign took on questions such as: is the right food available in schools? How, under lockdown conditions, can we make it easier for parents to get to school to pick up the food and get back home?”

All this raised public awareness of the fact that on any given day, many children around the country rely on schools for food. More children go hungry during the day than receive free school meals. More than two million children - 23.8% of state school pupils - are eligible for free meals in England. “The free school meal issue through the pandemic allowed us to start saying: ‘well, what do you think happens when schools are open as normal? What do you think happens during the holidays? There are kids who just go without.’” says Burton.

Those working on the front line are particularly well-placed to see the problem. “Some of the teachers see kids who turn up after the holidays visibly underweight because they’ve gone six weeks without meals at school,” she says. The public conversation about food and education the pandemic created made people more receptive to the idea of expanding eligibility for free school meals.

Right now, eligibility for free school meals is complicated. Across England, outside London, all pupils in Reception, Year 1, and Year 2 are eligible. But after that, the obligation stops. In practice, that means that many children get into the queue for school meals for three years. “But when they get in the same queue at the start of their third year, they’re told: ‘sorry, you’re not allowed to do that anymore.’” For children, the change is naturally jarring. Beyond that, children are eligible if they or their parents receive certain benefits. A few local authorities offer support; most do not. The result is a patchwork of provision.

The National Education Union (NEU) joins others in campaigning for a much simpler rule: free school meals for every child in primary school. This would cost £1 billion per year. But our colleagues at the Institute of Fiscal Studies calculate that the benefits could be immense. Free school meals of this sort could save families about £230 a year per child, rising to about £440 in London. Many families will buy more or healthier food with the savings. If you are looking for a policy that improves attainment in school, particularly for children from less affluent backgrounds, giving children free nutritious school meals is probably the closest thing there is.

In a pilot programme conducted in Newham and Durham from 2009 to 2011, universal entitlement to school meals led to children making two months’ more progress, on average, than similar pupils in comparison areas. Plenty of other studies have similar results. There is even evidence from Sweden that children who eat a healthy meal at school grow into healthier adults.

This is backed by research from the UCL Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities. Jake Anders, Deputy Director at the centre is clear the pandemic placed a spotlight on the many challenges facing households.

“More than half of households who reported that their children went hungry during the pandemic were not eligible for free school meals during that time, and neither were over a third of those using food banks. Moreover, young people in families who reported using food banks during the pandemic received almost half a grade per subject lower GCSE grades than peer with similar prior attainment and household finances. That so many are food insecure but would not be considered eligible for free school meals under current rules suggests that the eligibility criteria are in need of urgent review. No young people should be going hungry, especially if this has the potential for serious long-term impacts.”

However, despite the compelling evidence, the campaign by the NEU for free school meals risked conflicting with other advocacy groups pushing for different eligibility changes, such as extending free school meals to all children from families receiving Universal Credit or similar benefits. “Some of our coalition partners expressed concerns that this proposal exceeded the scope of our current policy,” Burton recalls. These differences had the potential to fragment the coalition.



and diminish the strength of the campaign.

But by focusing on their shared objective – expanding provision of school meals and the sense of respect that comes with it – the coalition found it easier to work together.

Burton says that her approach is not to lose sight of the fact that campaigns with different policy asks are ultimately pushing in the same direction.

“I think you sometimes have to play a bit of a longer game. If we can win on getting free school meals for all children in primary schools, it will be much easier to then say: ‘well, what about all the kids on Universal Credit in secondary schools?’” she says.

This acceptance of difference is supported by others who study theories of community organising. Thinkers like Amanda Tattersall, who has led work to develop new ways of organising in Australia, learning from successful coalition practice around the world.

“We have found that the most powerful coalitions not only enable people to negotiate across different interests or identities, they find ways to respect and embrace different theories of change. Why make people choose between mobilising or organising, or between prefiguring a great school lunch program or lobbying for public policy? It is possible for coalitions to be a space where multiple strategies can bloom in support of an agreed common purpose.”

The kind of approach is paying off. In 2020, Scotland pledged to extend Free School Meals for every child in primary education. In 2022, Wales said they would do the same. Sadiq Khan has now delivered the same in London for this academic year.

This kind of policy work, where difference is expected and embraced could be key for how we build movements for social change. Recognising that although our politics and perspective may differ the broad objective can be shared.

The National Education Union’s No Child Left Behind Campaign is at
<https://nochildleftbehind.org.uk>

Amanda Tattersall has written *Power in Coalition* (2010), and *People Power in Cities* (forthcoming, with Kurt Iveson) and is visiting the UCL Policy Lab and partners Citizens UK in October.

The beating heart of our communities

In this edition of Citizen Portraits, we travelled to the East Midlands and East London to capture the small business owners and workers who play host to the beating heart of the places we call home.

Boarded-up shops and empty high streets have become the backdrop to so many communities. It has fostered a feeling of loss, not just of economic activity but also of the social connection that is the beating heart of a place.

What it truly gave voice to was the ambitious inventiveness of Britain's small enterprises. The chaotic and joyful expression of a thousand ideas cooked up over a thousand kitchen tables. Alive in every small town and each big city.

Many of those we met spoke of their future ambitions, successes, and sense of comradeship with their fellow shopkeepers and workers. They spoke of new ideas for reimagining our town and city centres.

across the UK are developing new and inventive ways to redesign our high streets.

Yet there is another story, one of reliance and innovation—one that is as old as the high street itself. When Napoleon said Britain was a nation of shopkeepers, it was meant as an insult, a nod to what he saw as the parochial nature of the country he sought to conquer.

Britain's high streets today continue to play home to so much innovation. A shift to online shopping and rising costs have placed a real burden on the workers and entrepreneurs that make our high streets what they are.

And there is hope. Across the country, people are working together to rethink how we reimagine our high streets for a new age, as Josh Wrestling from Power to Change says in his essay for the UCL Policy Lab website. Communities

From delivering services to expanding music venues and leisure facilities, communities are coming together and collaborating to energise the high street.

After all – it isn't just effort and enterprise that we see in the faces of our shopkeepers. It is pride in serving the communities they call home, in good times and bad.









The political technologists building the future of campaigning

UCL Policy Lab meets the founders of the Campaign Lab, a community of technologists and campaigners thinking about how community and political campaigns could look in the future.

Heading into the Campaign Lab for the first time you will probably expect to meet a group of tech evangelists. The kind of people who can tell you how to analyse your campaign's results with some extraordinarily clever combination of open source software but who have never had to manage grumpy or stressed out volunteers who need every email printed out or help resetting their passwords. If so, you couldn't be more wrong.

Hannah O'Rourke and Ed Saperia are on a mission to provide some clear thinking about how and when technology can help community and political campaigning, and when it gets in the way.

The pair set up the Campaign Lab, now one of the most celebrated resources for campaigners of all kinds in the UK, to provide a space for campaigners to identify common challenges and work out how to solve them.

"We started out running monthly hackathons," O'Rourke says. They invited data scientists, activists, campaign organisers and political researchers to come together and do whatever they wanted.

"We started off being very non-directional," she says. The events were a success, and generated

a community of people keen to share skills and approaches and learn from each other.

In response to a demand from volunteers for a little more help and direction, they started running 'campaign confession' events.

"We got campaigners to talk through their problems with technology. We looked at these questions and asked: is there a tech solution to these challenges, or actually is there another solution? Because sometimes people jump straight to tech, when the best solution might be something like a really well-written guide or a smoother workflow." They now run monthly hack days and biweekly hack nights in which community members continue their projects.

The question at the heart of the Campaign Lab's work is: what does it mean, exactly, for democratic campaigners to make the most of technology? They also look at all manner of related questions. With artificial intelligence developing so fast, what new kinds of campaigns are possible this week that weren't last week and what does that mean for our democracy? How should campaigners think about which of their challenges are best solved with technology at all? And how should they avoid the kind of AI-powered disasters that could discredit

not just their campaign, but also our public life more generally?

Their initiative is grounded in a wider argument. In their analysis, two big waves of change have made these questions more urgent than ever. The first concerns the bonds that connect us. "There's been a collapse in the traditional political coalitions that held strong through most of the twentieth century, particularly post Brexit," she says. She also points to the shift from a core political divide based on economic divisions to one based on cultural divisions. The result, she argues, is an unstable politics with a greater need to think about different ways to campaign.

The second is technological. "The way people discuss politics has changed," O'Rourke says. Beyond hashtags and the traditional social media platforms, she points to the amount of local organising happening online, particularly on Facebook. "For political parties, posting a video in a Facebook group can be like making a speech to tens of thousands of people in one go," she says.

Jack Blumenau, Associate Professor in Political Science and Quantitative Research Methods at UCL, echoes the point that technology can be used



for ever more granular messaging and targeted polling “One of the most profound changes in modern political polling is the ability of campaigns and parties to experimentally test the effectiveness of different messages,” he says. “Thanks to low-cost online polling samples, and innovations in statistical models for assessing the persuasiveness of different messages on different subpopulations, campaigners can develop bespoke messages for different audiences. Similarly, new polling methods in recent years have helped to dramatically improve our understanding of public opinion, particularly when it comes to understanding how political opinions vary across different types of voters or voters in different places. To the extent that politicians are receptive to that information, these methods also have the potential to strengthen representation and accountability in politics.”

O’Rourke and Saperia’s is a hopeful analysis, nonetheless. Where others might see widespread disillusionment with politics, O’Rourke and Saperia see a country in which people have moved on to different forms of engagement and are just waiting for politics to catch up. They argue that people do still care about politics, they just want to see what it can do for them, and want it to be communicated in a modern way.

O’Rourke says that the two most successful campaigns she’s been involved in were both outside of traditional campaigning. One involved gathering workers from a sector with no formal labour organisation into one WhatsApp group so that whenever one of them gets a new work contract, they can check it together. They also set up an anonymous shared spreadsheet to record what people are being paid and compare it, giving them information that makes it easier to ask for higher wages.

Another arose during the pandemic, when examination boards used an algorithm to standardise estimated exam results, leading to some state school students’ results being downgraded and university places denied. “I went from a not great state school to Oxford University,” she says, “and I realised that if I’d been subjected to this algorithm I probably wouldn’t have got my offer.” With a friend in a similar situation, O’Rourke started #honourtheoffer, wrote an open letter to all Oxford colleges calling on them to honour the offers they had made to the students affected, and found a Cambridge alumnus to organise a similar letter to Cambridge. They gathered about 8000 signatures and created a league table of which colleges were honouring their offers, awarding them medals. “We managed to get pretty much all the colleges to honour the offers either this year or the next. We did that in about a week.”

She argues that people often think of campaigning as a big undertaking, but when you understand how platforms work, people can do anything. “The more you can show people that they have agency, suddenly it’s empowering. People see how they can build power together.”

The founders of the Campaign Lab are, however, mindful of the dangers that come with artificial intelligence. At one of their recent events, somebody made the point eloquently by hacking together a powerful misinformation tool. Type in any given political opinion, and it would find relevant YouTube videos and leave automated comments in English supporting it. Tools like this are the next information challenge around elections, and the Campaign Lab sees itself as playing a role in helping civic society stay aware of the challenges.

Ultimately, O’Rourke and Saperia think that technology will be central to repairing the relationship between the Labour Party and communities. “Showing up in online spaces and talking about what you’re doing is a really important part of rebuilding that trust. People are starting to understand that,” O’Rourke says. “It’s a big challenge. I hope that the next generation of MPs are up for it.”

Making our democracy work: the campaigners seeking to extend voting rights in England



About a million people in England and Northern Ireland are locked out of democratic participation. We meet those working to let them in.

There are about one million people in England and Northern Ireland who live, work, participate in communities, but would be turned away from polling stations if they tried to vote. This is not a punishment or a mistake. The reason is their immigration status.

Residents in England and Northern Ireland born outside the EU, Ireland, or the Commonwealth have never had the vote, even if they are here permanently. After Brexit, the number of resident migrants without the vote increased when the Parliament Act barred some EU citizens in the UK from voting in local elections as they had been able to do previously.

But the campaign to win back those rights has begun. Alex Bulat and Lara Parizotto do not just want to win back some voting rights for resident EU citizens; they also want to extend it to non-EU residents too. We met on a sunny morning at Policy Lab's HQ in UCL to talk about their campaign's journey so far, their plans for the future and what they think their work has to say about our democracy.

Alex Bulat moved to the UK aged eighteen. "Lots of people leave countries like Romania, like I did, in the hope of a better future," she says. She got involved in the campaign for democratic reform when, years later, she applied for permanent residence. Checking her email one lunch break, she found an email from the Home Office rejecting her application because she didn't have sufficient evidence for something called Comprehensive Sickness Insurance. "I thought: 'if I'm having such a difficult time - someone who could speak English well and is doing a PhD - how about so many other people from my community who don't have the same privileges in terms of language and information? So I became really active.'"

She started touring universities to talk about this issue, which is how she met Lara Parizotto, then an undergraduate. "I was sitting in the audience for Alex's talk about the comprehensive sickness insurance requirement thinking 'I'm going to get kicked out of the country,' she remembers. They decided to work together. "There was that spark of finding community," Parizotto remembers. "You might not have the immediate answers, but you need to figure it out." Figuring it out turned into volunteering, which turned into campaigning. "I'm from Brazil," says Parizotto, "And a lot of people like me have never had the right to vote in the UK."

The Elections Bill of April 2021 took away local election voting rights from some EU citizens in England and Northern Ireland. Scotland and Wales chose differently, so all residents of any nationality living there can still vote in local and devolved elections. After May 2024, EU citizens' right to vote and stand in local elections will depend on when they moved here and where they are from.

"At that point, we thought: well, now that people are going to actively lose their right to vote, we can build a campaign around that. Why not go forward and not only say 'don't take away voting rights', but let's extend the right to vote." Working alongside other campaigning groups such as the 'the3million' and 'POMOC,' a Polish migrants' group, they founded the Migrant Democracy Project in 2022 to fill the gap in the participation and representation of migrants in the UK.

"It felt exhausting trying to get other people to listen to us," Parizotto recalled. "During the Committee stage of the Elections Bill, I was sending amendment suggestions to the political parties calling for extending the right to vote to every resident. They would send back their version, amended to support just those voting rights for EU citizens. I wanted to say: no! Great that you want to do that, but we're talking about all migrants."

To date, they have persuaded six local authorities to pass motions supporting this extension of the right to vote, including the London Assembly. They have also persuaded the Labour, Liberal Democrat, and Green parties to pass supportive amendments at various key policy fora. "If the next government is a Labour government, we can say 'you supported this in the past, we hope you will continue supporting it now,'" says Parizotto.

Changing voting rights for residents could go some way to ensuring that people living here in Britain feel truly respected by our democratic system.

And these changes are also good for communities as a whole. As Dr Gloria Gennaro, from UCL Political Science points out.

"Research on a few cases where immigrants are granted the right to vote in local elections -in countries like Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland- has shown that granting voting rights can boost integration."

As Bulat and Parizotto's campaign gathered momentum, they realised that improving migrant representation should not just be about campaigning for the right to vote, it also had to be about persuading communities to use it.

This requires a different approach. The reasons young migrants often turn away from political participation are varied and subtle. First off, the system is complex, and it's often hard to know what your voting rights are. "It depends on which country you're from, and which part of the UK you live in," explains Bulat. "It's not as if you get a nice welcome pack and a leaflet. I originally had no idea you had to register to vote until a random person in a pub told me about it." Second, people often don't see themselves represented in politics or feel that a vote might make any difference.

Most insidious of all, Bulat and Parizotto fear that there is often a feeling in communities about what a 'good immigrant' should do: keep their head down, not participate too much, and certainly not complain. "When my application for residency was in progress," Bulat recalls, "many friends from Romania messaged me telling me to stop criticising the government on Twitter, to stop campaigning. 'What if the government sees and rejects your application?' they would say. The Hostile Environment policy exacerbated this, leading many in migrant communities to expect contact with any public body to be hostile.

Their organisation works to give people confidence that, on the contrary, activism is itself a potent form of integration. "After all, you're complaining, like any other resident would do," Bulat says.

They do this first by asking people what they care about as a core part of their campaign. For one Brazilian they met, it was a nearby road they thought was too dangerous to cross. They encouraged her to contact her councillor about it, whose reply promising a zebra crossing offered a first taste of successful democratic participation. They also offer tours of Parliament where they introduce disenfranchised migrants to sympathetic MPs so the migrants can start to feel welcome at the centre of the UK's democracy and ask MPs directly to support the campaign for the vote.

"We also have a huge symbolic ballot box we take to our events," says Parizotto. "We tell people they can write to their representatives, put their messages in the box, and we will send it on their behalf. These small democratic acts show them there are people out there who will help them, and that regardless of their nationality, they can be heard."



The Migrant Democracy Project
is at <https://www.migrantdemos.org.uk/>

The Migrant Democracy Project offers candidate training for UK residents born outside the UK. If you qualify and are interested in standing for elected office, including as a local councillor, contact: info@migrantdemos.org.uk

The caring economy

Following the launch of the UCL Policy Lab and More in Common report *The Respect Agenda*, looking at how we can reset our politics and rebuild faith in our institutions by prioritising respect for ordinary people, James Baggaley speaks to those on the front line about how politics can better respect their contribution.

Towards the end, there were times when my dad would hold his hand. My grandfather was strong. He'd worked physical jobs his entire life. He'd lugged boxes, machinery, and produce. Into the back of vans, onto trailers, and off conveyor belts.

Yet in those final months, he was thin, robbed of the great weight that had carried so much. In our beginnings and our endings, life becomes mostly a physical activity. As infants, we are held, rocked and cradled. We're bathed and cared for. And in the end, we are once again returned to the caring hands of others.

I have written many articles for the Policy Lab magazine. Working with our amazing researchers and a broad policy community, they touch on a whole range of policy areas. And the Lab's role in connecting the real human struggles facing individuals and communities with the understanding and ideas of those whom we convene in conversation.

Yet when I think of care – of the value it brings and the respect it deserves I don't think of complex reports or technical policy solutions. I think of those who cared for my grandparents: my parents, my aunts, my uncles, my family, and the carers who may as well have been family.

All of them, in their own way, went above and beyond to provide two people dignity and love in their final years. Our family's story is not unique or unusual. The patchworking of paid and unpaid care is woven into communities across the UK. As we live longer, we will encounter its many loving but fraying threads.

It all forms a part of what we call the caring economy.

This 'economy' depends on deep and developed care networks between families, carers, paid care and community support. It is a genuine example of what UCL researchers like Dan Honig and Marc Stears have called a "relational" model of public service delivery – one which runs on collaboration and understanding between formal and informal networks.



“Don't get me wrong I could quit and stack shelves for more than I earn being a care worker. But every day I know what I do matters.”

Maureen, care worker

John Perryman from Carers UK has been working alongside colleagues to help map the hidden army of carers who sustain a big part of the caring economy. And it's clear about the contribution unpaid care makes to the nation.

“Unpaid care work has huge economic value. It contributes billions to the economy and ensures we can sustain vital public services such as the NHS” says John.

As John makes clear, if the millions of unpaid carers quit out of exhaustion or economic cost to themselves, the problems we see in our health service would seem minor to the tsunami of patients seeking alternative care. The NHS would be forced to take the burden.

Yet, of course, it's not just unpaid care that makes up the caring economy. Adult social care workers comprise over 1.52 million employees, more than the NHS workforce. It is gendered, with women making up the bulk of the workforce. This workforce operates in every constituency in every nation of the UK.

What is most striking about those working in the caring economy is just how disrespected they feel by a system which does not fully recognise their contribution.

As I speak to Maureen, just one of the many care workers who made sure our family was able to manage providing care for two people we loved so dearly put it, they value the work they do, but it can feel like the system and politics doesn't.

“We don't even get guaranteed hours. Not properly, I won't know if I'm working Christmas day until weeks before. They don't seem to respect that we might have lives to live, plans to make or people to see.”

Like so many care workers you speak to - Maureen wouldn't do any other job. She's proud of the care she provides and what it brings to those she looks after.

“Don't get me wrong I could quit and stack shelves for more than I earn being a care worker. But every day I know what I do matters.”

And this sense that care work is not respected goes for unpaid carers too. As John Perryman points out:

“Our research shows that 600 people a day are having to leave work because of their caring responsibilities and a lack of support from both the social care system and their employers.”

John Perryman from Carers UK



“The first thing that carers continually raise with us is how little recognised and valued they feel.”

Changes in the care sector could only partially account for the contribution of care workers and carers. But it could go some way to tackling, what UCL Policy Lab Director Marc calls “The crisis of respect”.

Elsewhere in this edition of the magazine, Marc Stears makes the case that politics still needs to respect those it seeks to serve.

“The first thing to do is turn our crisis of respect around, starting, most simply, with people feeling that they are being acknowledged and taken seriously. Seen. Heard. Valued. Considered as partners in finding solutions, not just beneficiaries awaiting the support of those with their hands on the wheel.”

To recognise and value the caring economy is to make visible what is seemingly invisible to politics and policy. For example, when politics talks of economic value and sustained growth, thoughts turn to high-vis jackets and assembly lines.

And while these jobs will play a critical role in a nation’s drive for living standards and productivity, they will never capture the entirety of a nation’s economic story. Whatever the UK or any major developed nation does with its economy, a significant chunk of the population will continue to work within the caring economy.

As Xiaowei Xu, Senior Economist at the IFS and UCL doctoral student in economics, points out, if the UK is to build a productive and growing economy, alongside driving innovation and investment, it must work to improve the lives of those working in sectors such as care.

“Social care is an enormous part of our economy. Over 800,000 people work as carers in the UK today – 1 in 40 of all workers, or 1 in 15 women without a university degree. Care work has been one of the fastest growing occupations over the past 30 years, and it will only continue to grow in importance as the population ages. Improving pay and conditions is going to be vital to boosting living standards, especially for less advantaged groups, as well as to addressing the recruitment and retention problems the sector faces.”

“The first thing to do is turn our crisis of respect around, starting, most simply, with people feeling that they are being acknowledged and taken seriously. Seen. Heard. Valued. Considered as partners in finding solutions, not just beneficiaries awaiting the support of those with their hands on the wheel.”

The economic case for a focus on the caring economy extends to those providing unpaid care. Work by Carers UK has demonstrated that many carers are dropping out of the labour market due to an inability to balance caring duties with their job.

“Our research shows that 600 people a day are having to leave work because of their caring responsibilities and a lack of support from both the social care system and their employers. Many don’t have the flexibility they need to juggle their care and full-time employment, which leads to negative outcomes for themselves, the employers they work for, and the wider economy”.

The economic case was so strong that the Carer’s Leave Bill (now the Carer’s Leave Act 2023), which sought to bring in some leave for carers, gained cross-party support. These changes may seem every day or insignificant to the global challenges we face – yet they provide us with a starting point in our politics, where we can begin to value, respect and support the caring economy.

Today if we are to build a more robust, resilient economy and society, we could start by building on the thoughtful and collaborative work of the caring economy. And make visible what is seemingly hidden.

“When you’re just a small organisation, sometimes people in power don’t pay attention, because there are louder voices,”

Finding a common good in our divided society

By Marc Stears

Everywhere people gather - places of worship, at the school gate, on the shop floor - there are places for people to build connection with each other and begin to hold the powerful to account. UCL Policy Lab Director, Marc Stears, talks with the community organisers showing people how.

I was first introduced to Citizens UK by a student of mine.

About a decade ago, I was taking my undergraduates through the standard introduction to political theory course, at Oxford University, when one of them reacted particularly strongly to what had previously been a fairly conventional discussion of the relationship between community spirit and democracy.

The student’s name was Stefan Baskerville and he had been doing some work outside his studies with The East London Citizens Organisation (TELCO), which was the founding chapter of what was to become one of the largest community organising networks in the world, now known as Citizens UK.

Stefan told me, in the unnervingly strong but polite manner that anyone who has ever met him will recognise, that I was thinking about it all wrong.

His experience with TELCO, had shown him that the spirit of community and democratic politics are connected, he said, but not in the way that the textbooks standardly suggest.

Both community and democracy have to be built, block by block, through a slow, difficult and often contentious process that has to be led not by well-meaning politicians at the top but by people in their everyday settings themselves.

The practice of community organising starts with building relationships. Organisers have hundreds of one to one meetings with people in their own neighbourhoods, building connections of trust, understanding what makes people tick and getting a sense of what change they believe is required.

It can often then lead to more structured listening sessions, bringing local people together across the differences that divide them, so that they can begin to discover collectively what they have in common and what action they want to take.

Through this work, local groups - parents at schools, patients at hospitals, students and lecturers at universities, congregants and priests at churches - form alliances, identify who has the power locally to do something about the issues they have identified, and begin to build a plan to pressure them for change.

It is a deliberate process, but one that has led to the most astonishing of political changes, from the call for a living wage that moved from the streets of East London to the Mayor’s Office, to a campaign to stop children from being detained in the immigration system, which was won at the start of David Cameron’s period in office but is under threat again now.

Researchers from across UCL now work with Citizens UK on a host of issues dear to our hearts too. One area of particular importance is mental health. Recently, researcher Fran Zannatta, department head Peter Fonagy and UCL Partners Chief Strategy Officer, Jenny Shand, sat down with community organisers to learn about their work.

During the lockdowns, Citizens in south London organised listening sessions by gathering people online and asking ‘what’s putting pressure on you and people you care about?’ then listening closely to their answers. One issue people brought up again and again was loneliness, isolation, and anxiety. This was exacerbated by the system for signing up for mental health treatment.

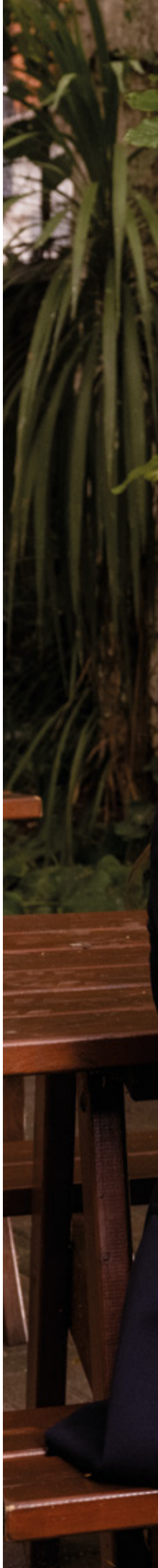
Typically, once you sign up, you get a message confirming that you’re on the waiting list for treatment. But without much information about what you can expect or when, the wait itself can make anxiety worse. Miata Noah, a teacher, was part of the Citizens team who decided to pressure the local NHS Trust in south London to fund an online platform to show people how long they would have to wait and give them a mechanism to escalate the request if the issue got worse.

Another theme to emerge was low pay. During the pandemic, many found their work hours cut or didn’t qualify for furlough. Citizens coordinated a coalition of local parent and student groups to put this on the agenda of the local NHS Mental Health Trust.

“We told them that if you want to do preventative work on mental health you have to tackle low pay,” explains James Blatchley-Asfa, Assistant Director at Citizens. In November 2022, at a specially convened assembly of 500 people, the chairs and CEOs of the local mental health trust agreed to formally recognise low pay as a mental health issue and start to address it.

This year UCL Policy Lab is also working with Citizens UK in Liverpool, where Citizens are starting a chapter for the first time.

Lesley Penton, Partnerships Director at The Regenda Group, a housing and regeneration coalition, was surprised to find that a neurosurgeon from a leading neurology and neurosurgery centre in the city was keen to join the coalition. But it makes sense; community organising starts by building a strong alliance, and each new coalition





**Paulina Tamborrel, Stefan Baskerville,
James Blatchley-Asfa, Froi Legaspi**

member, from charities to neurosurgery centres, strengthens the coalition's voice in the city.

"When you're just a small organisation, sometimes people in power don't pay attention, because there are louder voices," explains Sara Lawton, founder of Thrive, a safe space where support workers help care leavers plan their futures. "By forming an alliance with civic institutions where we can come together on common issues, we have more power." In Liverpool the coalition includes churches, a mosque, schools, a university, the Salvation Army, and community groups like Thrive.

"We really wanted to change the system," Lawton says, "to empower those young people to have a seat at the table, which they don't currently have. So we can train these young people as community leaders and empower them to have a voice. So that they can eventually get to the point where they can ask in the right way, and campaign for the change they need to see in that system."

It is an inspiring tale and one that reminds us all what democracy is all about.

A More Human Government: How We Can Transform Public Services





Before her visit to one of the Policy Lab’s special collaborative conversation sessions, we spoke to Tara McGuinness, head of domestic policy in the Biden-Harris transition team, about why a new, more human model of public service reform can help transform people’s lives.

If there is one thing that becomes clear from my conversation with Tara McGuinness, it is that the business of government needs to be more firmly connected with people—the humans seeking help, support, or essential services from the state. This may seem obvious but senior officials tell us again and again that it is often far from the case.

“I can speak from personal experience working to turn around Healthcare.gov for President Obama that when a public service project fails, it’s often because you did not consider the human interaction with the service,” McGuinness says.

McGuinness first found prominence as one of the key people brought in to turn around Obamacare. The federal health insurance system in the United States faced a tumultuous launch, plagued by technical glitches and a poor user experience. In response, McGuinness helped the government mobilise a dedicated team of experts. They worked relentlessly to identify and fix issues, streamline the website but most importantly, make it function for those trying to use it.

This meant speaking with users and understanding their individual needs. And it meant a culture change in Washington too: always circling back to see how to design a service and system that met the public’s needs rather than worked for those at the centre. Harnessing technology to enable effective human interaction, as opposed to allowing design to be driven by tools.

Reflecting on all of this years later, McGuinness recalls the stress of mending a system in this way in the heat of political battle. The political threat the potential failure of the Obamacare system posed to President Obama was clear, but it also had a broader impact, eroding public trust in the government’s ability to do good at all.

“That period when Health.gov failed was the single lowest moment for US public trust in government,” she reminds us.

McGuinness now sees the turnaround as a broader turning point in policy design. It led to the development of new working practices, improved communication, and the adoption of what we now call user-centric design. Through transparency, collaboration, and rigorous testing, McGuinness helped transform HealthCare.gov into a functional, user-friendly platform by December 2013, enabling millions to access affordable healthcare coverage, and restored faith in what was possible.

This change required being open and honest about both the failings of the status quo and what would be required to fix it. McGuinness believes this is not always a natural impulse in politics, even amongst reformers.

“It’s very counterintuitive when you’re in a government role to express the broken, because you own it. But often, that’s what’s required.”

McGuinness believes these lessons hold true in the UK as well.

“You see this with the NHS waiting list, which has plagued governments for decades. I was looking back at the original Tony Blair platform—and there it was: ‘Cut NHS waiting lists.’ This isn’t a new problem. But today, what I think is needed is for the government to be open and honest, to respect voters’ intelligence about what will be required. To say we are here, and this is how we’re going to explore the problem. We will come back to you with the solution in a more honest timeline.”

Counterintuitive though this might be, McGuinness believes it is now possible. She thinks we live in an era in which voters have grown tired of lofty but ultimately empty promises and instead yearn for openness, collaboration and clarity.

The need to collaborate is at the heart of how McGuinness approaches her job. She speaks powerfully and warmly about the teams she works with and the diverse expertise and experiences they bring to the table. She recognises, too, the need to draw strength from a wider network of communities, social enterprises and private sector organisations.

“If you look at the way we make policy, it is immensely siloed”, she tells me. “And this is just not how people live. When the President asked me to help improve outcomes for the people of Detroit, we convened and ensured everyone was around the table.”

This includes those outside the policy space. McGuinness points out that the success of President Biden’s most powerful initiatives has been as much due to the continual involvement of community organisers, activists, and those with real-world experience as it has been to the role of experts in policy research and delivery.

It is this approach that McGuinness has taken to her new role outside the White House, helping set up the New Practice Lab based at the New America Foundation.

“Our aim is to take the first step forward in building a team that is part policy thinking and part delivery, grounded in the audacious goal of helping millions of families. We’re committed to assisting 3 million families living in poverty with at least one child in their households. But doing this in constant conversation with the people we are designing for.”

This sense of mission and collaboration is what drives the audacious hope that emanates from McGuinness. As she says, “We live in extraordinary times, and we’re called on to meet this moment.”

It’s one of the reasons McGuinness came to visit the UCL Policy Lab, where researchers collaborate with practitioners and where hosting and facilitating conversations of people of diverse backgrounds is often more important than making sure you get the final word in any debate.

“It resonates with me what you’re doing here at UCL”, McGuinness says. “And I hope in collaboration, we, too, can begin to change how think tanks operate.”

That’s the first step towards a greater culture change that could change the country.

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Building a United Kingdom

Working alongside the UCL Policy Lab at events for this year's party conference season, Emily Bolton from Our Story shares her experience on delivering shared change in Grimsby

As with so many parts of the world, we are a nation under strain, and we need to work together to reweave the fabric of our country.

For our part this reweaving is happening in Grimsby. In the summer edition of the UCL Policy Lab Magazine, Jason Stockwood, co-owner and chair of Grimsby Town Football Club (GTFC), and I shared the work we are doing with Our Future to harness the power of the 145-year-old football club to build a new future today.

Our Future creates a platform for all of us to contribute to building a brighter future in this country - rooted in our hometowns. Since we started our work we've begun to recognise some clear patterns..

Most clearly of all, people are already doing amazing work. There are great leaders across Grimsby already building a brighter future, whether it is James Elliot, the canoe river cleaner, who has led a drive to clean the Freshney Chalk Stream or the community of the East Marsh who created East Marsh United to transform their neighbourhood and create a beautiful place where everyone can thrive. People are not waiting for permission but are getting on with building the future their hometowns need today.

There are also many others who want to participate and support them. We have been struck by the desire from people across this country to get involved with the work of Our Future. We created a Grimsby diaspora network, Home Wins, which brings together people who love their hometown and want to support practical change. The network has helped in many ways, ranging from pro-bono legal advice, policy expertise, mentoring, new networks or funding. There is a wide pool of people who really want to get involved and support positive, hopeful change in this country.

Lastly, there is a magic and joy to the common endeavour that can truly inspire. While there have often been great people doing this work, generally they have been working in isolation, feeling like a lone voice of hope. Our Future brings these people together as citizens not representatives of sectors. There is now a coalition of over 300 people from all walks of life who are bound together by a shared love of home, a desire to be part of something bigger and a belief in the greatness of Grimsby. The football club has become more than a meeting place of people watching the game - it is now a place where people come together to find common cause, make connections, find collaborators, imagine and believe in the possible. There is a joy and alchemy to this.

The story of Grimsby, and places like it, has for too long been one of loss. Yet this does not reflect the reality of the change underway and the potential that exists in places like Grimsby.

There are people up and down our country reweaving the fabric of our nation - imagining and building a better future, a better United Kingdom. They often live in funding deserts and despite that are creating magic - imagine what they could achieve if they had the trust, resources, backing and respect needed to build a future where we all thrive?