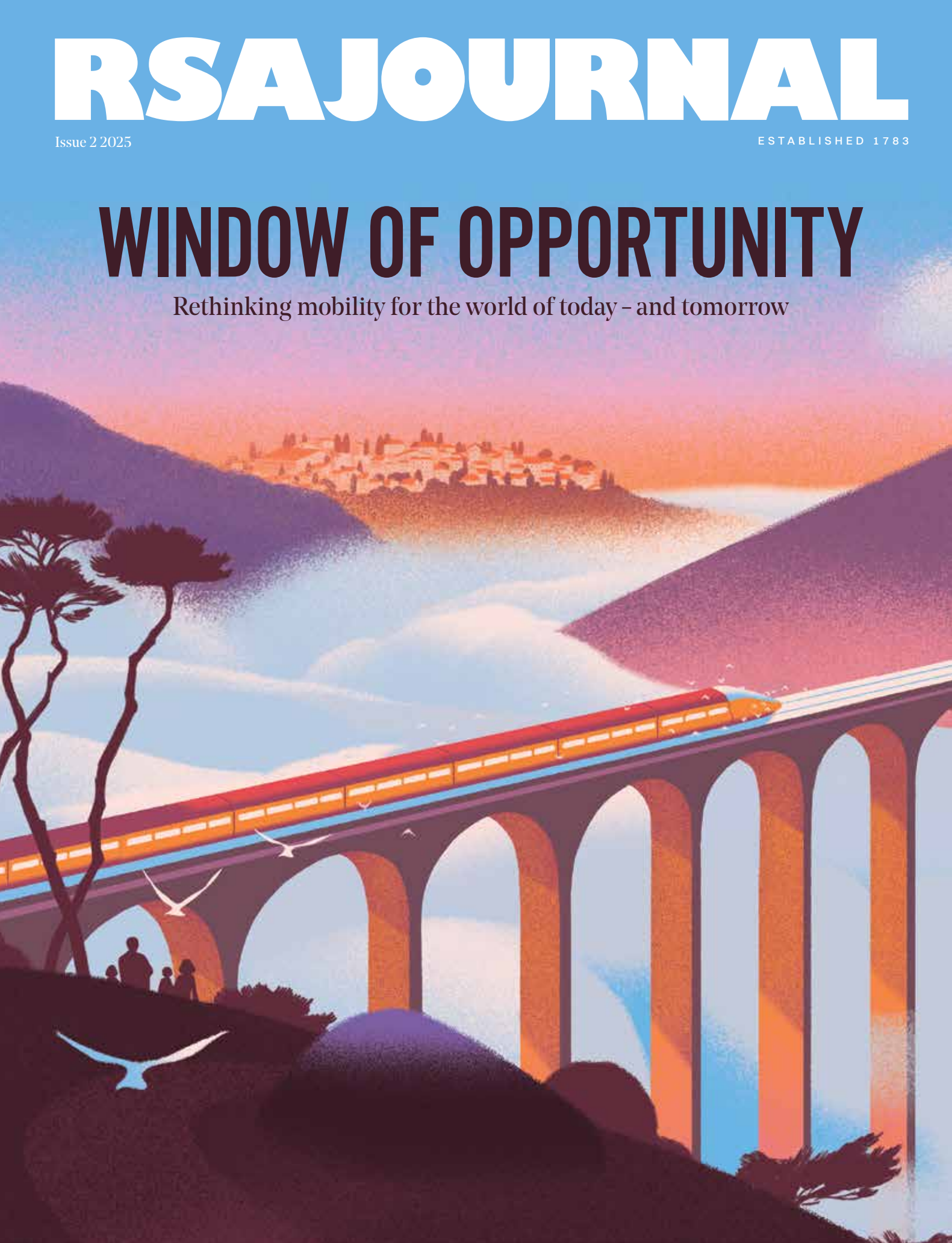
RSA JOURNAL

Issue 2 2025

ESTABLISHED 1783

WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

Rethinking mobility for the world of today – and tomorrow



RSA Journal — Issue 2 2025

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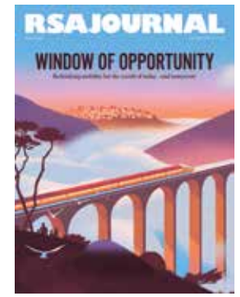

Mobility/Opportunity
Cover artwork by **Sébastien Plassard**. An illustrator and graphic designer inspired by classical mid-century designs, Plassard creates illustrations with a modern, whimsical twist. This edition's cover image showcases the ambitious past and potential future of the railways in a style that pays homage to the 'golden age' of rail travel (for more of Plassard's work, go to p.28).

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RSAJOURNAL

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Starting in 1783, the RSA published *Transactions of the Society*, which became *The Journal of the Society of Arts* in 1852 ('Royal' was added to the title in 1908). The publication assumed its current name, *RSA Journal*, in 1987.

COMMENT

Andy Haldane

And it's goodnight from him

This is my last hurrah for *RSA Journal* after almost four years as chief executive. During that time, as part of its wider transformation, the RSA has made a series of bold changes to the substance and presentation of the *Journal*. It is for others to judge their success. But feedback from Fellows – and our growing mantlepiece of gongs – suggests we have got something right. As for many Fellows, the *Journal* is one of the RSA's most valued assets, this progress has been important and welcome.

It is fitting that my final *Journal* should be tackling the issue of social mobility. This has been the common denominator of everything I have done throughout my more than three decades of working life, spanning the public, private and civil society sectors. For me, the very definition of a good society is one where everyone has the opportunity of, and hope for, improvement – the promise and the optimism that comes from generational progress.

Yet, for too many people today across too many countries, old but especially young, opportunity has not knocked, hope has not sprung eternal, optimism has not flourished. Social mobility has stalled, and for some has been in retreat for half a century. For the first time in over 200 years, some children no longer expect to live a better life than their parents, nor even a longer one. We are living in an age of diminished expectations.

This is a tragedy. A loss of hope for the future erodes our ability to undertake the repair we know is needed to our economies, societies and environments. Without hope of improvement, why would anyone bother investing in that future? In other words, diminished expectations risk becoming self-fulfilling if they become entrenched. Our lives then become hostage not so much to fortune but fear of misfortune.

"For me, the very definition of a good society is one where everyone has the opportunity of, and hope for, improvement"

Reversing these expectations will require a shift in the key systems that shape societies. This *Journal* explores a number of those in detail. Justine Greening discusses the ways social mobility could be placed centre-stage in how government operates. Gareth Dennis discusses how transport systems, and Holly Bruce how planning systems, might be reimagined. Through the same lens, JJ Keith explores immigration, Marnie Freeman social connections and Will Snell the need to bridge generational horizons.

One of the great virtues of the RSA is that it provides a neutral place for important debates to occur. It is a place where reasonable people can disagree, and do so agreeably. Disagreeing agreeably risks becoming a lost art in a world of bombastic, divisive social media. As throughout its history, reasoned debate is something the RSA will continue to champion, including in the *Journal* where our lead article debates the future of education, a foundational issue for social mobility.

The RSA has taken on a diverse set of challenges over the course of its 270-year history – economic, social, environmental. There is no greater challenge today than lifting lives that have stalled, helping usher in a world of elevated rather than diminished expectations. As in the past, I have no doubt the RSA will rise to these challenges. As well as offering my thanks for their friendship and support, let me end by wishing the RSA, its staff, Fellows and partners godspeed in doing so. ■

Andy Haldane is Chief Executive Officer at the RSA.

RSA NEXTGEN

Social entrepreneur and content creator **Adarsh Ramchurn** in the spotlight

What did you want to be as a child and what are you now?
As a child, I wanted to be a footballer but, by the time I was a teenager, I wanted to be an entrepreneur – which is what I'm doing now. In 2024, I founded Ethnically to amplify diverse and often underrepresented voices across every industry in society, with the goal of helping to increase representation in the workforce.

What is one thing the world needs to know about you?
I'm also a content creator! My girlfriend, Nav, and I have our own couples social media page, which we launched in April 2024 after we both lost our jobs. We create couples content that's fun, relatable, Gen Z, quirky and, above all, loving.

What's your idea of happiness?
Spending as much time doing the things you love, with the people you love, as you can. I'm at my happiest when life is unpredictable, exciting and a good level of busy!

What's your idea of misery?
Misery is not being fulfilled in what you're doing. Early last year, I was in a job and environment that was unfulfilling, toxic, draining and frustrating, and I felt my mental health deteriorating. It impacted all areas of my life, and I felt stuck. So, when I was removed from the job, as awful as it felt at the time, it was a massive weight lifted off my shoulders.

What are you most passionate about and why?
I'm most passionate about making a difference to ethnic communities. So many ethnic minorities are underrepresented, misrepresented or don't have access to the opportunities needed for them to prosper and accelerate in their careers and lives. And I'm passionate about allowing everyone to tell their story, which is why I founded Ethnically – to bring this combination of representation and storytelling to life.

If you couldn't be yourself, who would you be?
I genuinely love the person I am, the life I live and who I am becoming... but, if I had to pick, it would probably be Mo Salah, my favourite footballer. He's a king at Liverpool, lives his life so humbly, and his story to glory is hugely inspirational.

Why did you become a Fellow of the RSA?
I became a Fellow on the back of completing my degree apprenticeship at the RSA in 2023. Working at the RSA for four years while also studying was an incredible experience. I learnt so much, met some incredible people, and it's provided the platform for me and my career. I owe the RSA so much for their time, dedication and support of me – and I'm a firm believer in giving back.

As a Fellow, I feel I can give back to others, support others who may be at a disadvantage, and help create positive change in the world. Even if that's impacting just one person with my story, my work or my power, it's worth it! ■

Scan the QR code to listen to the Ethnically podcast

Photo: Courtesy of Adarsh Ramchurn

NEW FELLOWS

Alexander Kohnstamm

Alexander Kohnstamm is Executive Director of Fair Wear Foundation, a multi-stakeholder NGO that focuses on the working conditions of garment workers. Alexander started his career working for Sony and Mitsubishi, having studied Japanese Language and Economics at Leiden University in the Netherlands. In 2005, he co-founded the Children's Peace Prize – an award given annually to a child who has made a significant contribution to children's rights. Alexander previously worked as Executive Director of Partos, a Dutch company which brings together development NGOs, and he has worked extensively on the economics of healthcare in Africa.

Lisa Lang

Lisa Lang is General Director of the Open Connector Foundation, which partners with NetZeroCities and the UN to advance textile waste management, digitalisation and local manufacturing. Formerly Director of EU Affairs and Policy at the European Institute for Innovation and Technology on Climate, Lisa also chairs the Cultural and Creative Industries Taskforce for the UN Climate Change Global Innovation Hub and is on the advisory board for the Munich Fashion Award and Fashion Innovation Centre. Lisa was named one of *Forbes Europe*'s Top 50 Women in Tech (2018) and one of *Vogue Business*'s Sustainable Thought Leaders (2023).

Melanie Smuts

Melanie Smuts is Director of Fellowships for the African Leadership Academy, which supports school founders on the African continent in developing their school models, building sustainable organisations and guiding their teams to more effective management. Melanie is also part of the One World Network of Schools team, a global education non-profit. Here, she leads on initiatives in the African and Asian continents, with a focus on new-school start-ups and personalised learning. Melanie also founded, and is on the board of, Streetlight Schools – a non-profit which built a new primary and high school in Johannesburg.

Johanna Mizgala

Johanna Mizgala is the Chief Curator of the House of Commons Collection in Canada. She is a passionate curator, arts educator and freelance art critic, and has lectured and published extensively on museology, architecture and contemporary art. Johanna has curated exhibitions for various Canadian art spaces, including: the National Gallery of Canada; Library and Archives Canada; Le Musée National Des Beaux-arts Du Québec; the Confederation Art Centre; the New Brunswick Museum; and the Remai Modern, as well as London's National Portrait Gallery. Prior to her current role, she was also the Director of Exhibitions at Library and Archives Canada.

Tim Barker

Tim Barker has been Dean of Guernsey since 2015, leading the Church of England's work in Guernsey and on the two smaller islands of Alderney and Sark; he previously served as Archdeacon of Lincoln. Tim chairs the directors of Elizabeth College, Guernsey's oldest school, as well as Guernsey's Social Investment Fund – a partnership between government, churches and the wider third sector (including charities and social enterprises). The fund distributes grants of more than £1m annually, to a variety of charitable sector organisations. Tim is also a member of the Church Commissioners' Bishoprics and Cathedrals Committee.

Brian Hole

Brian Hole is the CEO of the academic open access publisher Ubiquity Press. In 2008, Brian founded Ubiquity Press to empower researchers to share their work openly, fostering greater collaboration. It publishes research journals ranging from the humanities to social sciences, technology and medicine, and now supports over 80 university presses around the world, including significant support for areas such as South Asia and Latin America. Brian holds a PhD from University College London and has a background in archaeology; he is now based in Greece.

Hannah Abraham

Hannah Abraham is a journalist and Public Relations Consultant – most recently working for the music company BMG. She is also an Honorary Reporter for Korea.net. Previously, Hannah was Positive Action Fellow at *The Guardian* and Newsroom Fellow at *Business Insider*. With a focus on entertainment and culture, Hannah has written for both these titles as well as for *Deadline, NME* and *Variety*. Hannah is passionate about spotlighting talent from underrepresented backgrounds, from the world of K-pop and the Bollywood scene, to actor Ambika Mod from the Netflix series *One Day*. Hannah studied digital journalism at Goldsmiths, University of London.

David Leng

David Leng is a Policy Advisor for Education for the Scottish Government and leads on the Scottish Attainment Challenge, a programme for schools and local authorities to promote equity and tackle the poverty related to the attainment gap. David worked in a variety of roles across the education system – from secondary school teacher to a secondary school leader, local authority officer and head of schools in Aberdeen – before becoming Director of Education, Children and Young People for Stirling and Clackmannanshire councils in 2013. David is passionate about helping children and young people develop and achieve their best possible outcomes, no matter their background or circumstances.

Sophie Hussey

Sophie Hussey is the Development Consultant for book charity the Women's Prize Trust, which promotes women's writing by awarding prizes for fiction and non-fiction. As a fundraiser, Sophie has focused on supporting emerging artists in creative careers, working at the Royal Court Theatre and Bush Theatre, the conservatoires Royal College of Music and Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, as well as the Courtauld Institute of Art and the Architectural Association School of Architecture. In 2024, she completed her MA in Philanthropic Studies at the Centre for Philanthropy, University of Kent.

Hildreth England

Hildreth England is a Digital Ethicist at IKEA, where she focuses on inclusive technology design. A designer, researcher and curator whose work spans communications, public health, food systems and environmental justice, before joining IKEA she was the curator and director of The Conference, an annual gathering in Malmö. In 2018, Hildreth founded PlusMinus – a co-design and ethical technology research initiative – at the MIT Media Lab. Her design collaborators have included Toyota, Barilla, Pentagram, the Emerson Collective, New America and the City of Austin. Hildreth's design work has been exhibited at the Triennale di Milano, the Jardin des métiers d'art et du design and the Cooper Hewitt triennial.

EDUCATION

Back to the drawing board

In a conversation convened by the RSA, two keen observers of the English education system debate the ideas that separate them – and the most urgent priorities for change

Words:
Andrew Jack

Illustration:
Lana Hughes

Mural artist:
Benjamin Asante Amponsah

Fiona Millar's adult engagement with schools began as a mother raising children in London, then as a governor, political adviser to government and journalist. Leora Cruddas grew up in South Africa, became a special needs teacher in London and worked in education policy in local government before joining the Association of School and College Leaders and now the Confederation of School Trusts.

Certainly, Millar and Cruddas have arrived at their experience of the English education system from very different backgrounds. While both agree the system is under enormous stress, they diverge on the value of academy trusts and how the country's schools are structured, the role of Ofsted inspections and how much teachers have the power to improve the system without significant fresh government reforms.

A mountain of worries

Asked for her long-term vision, Millar calls for the creation of "an inclusive, comprehensive education system in which all children thrive". Cruddas similarly highlights excellence, inclusion and equity as "the building blocks of a truly great schooling system".

Both suggest the greatest current challenge is chronic underinvestment in education, as well as the financial squeeze on social services with which they interact. The result has been to place ever greater burdens on schools as the fallback of last resort, notably since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020.

"We're in one of the most difficult environments in living memory," says Cruddas. "The headroom the government thought it had in the autumn budget has rapidly declined, and is still declining. We've seen rising costs across the board, as well as rising levels of child poverty. School leaders are more worried now than I think I've ever seen them about state funding."

Millar adds: "The problem is that local authority services are no longer there: speech and language therapy, mental health services. Schools are being made responsible for absolutely everything: washing children's clothes, feeding them, going into their homes to make sure they had enough [devices] to do the work they had during Covid. School leaders are being asked to solve all the problems of society without any extra resources."

She points to the high proportion of children living in poverty, suffering from food insecurity and inadequate shelter. "They're coming into our schools in the morning tired, cold, hungry. That's not a brilliant way to learn. It's not a brilliant way to experience childhood. And this is in the world's sixth largest economy. I don't think that's acceptable." ▶

Above right:
Fiona Millar

Below right:
Leora Cruddas

“It’s a particularly strange feature of our system that we don’t celebrate state schools and state teachers”

A common concern for both is falling school attendance as young people disengage with education, often linked to the absence of any sense of belonging; and a similar crisis in the recruitment and retention of teachers.

Changing habits

Millar sees “incremental improvement” overall in schools in recent years but cautions: “What I find interesting is how many of the same issues we are still tackling, we’ve tried to tackle for the last 30 years, and not completely successfully. Fundamentally, we have ended up with a very hierarchical school system, which was the aim when it was founded 150 years ago. You have to ask yourself whether that’s really appropriate for the modern world we’re living in.”

She suggests that the best education systems around the world are characterised by teachers who are well paid and highly regarded. These countries “focus relentlessly on the quality of the teaching and invest in their teachers”, prioritising efforts to ensure teachers have enough time to prepare their work and to benefit from professional development.

Cruddas is a little more positive on the current state of education. “From the point of view of somebody who wasn’t born in England, I think we have a really good school system that I feel proud to be a part of,” she says. “If you are looking from outside, you see something that’s quite desirable, although I would say we are not yet a great system because it doesn’t work for everyone. It will be a great system when it works more consistently for all our children.”

She stresses there is a danger in being too obsessed with comparisons with other countries. “I think context matters enormously. I don’t think you can just import practice from other systems. It’s a particularly strange feature of our system that we don’t celebrate state schools and state teachers, and our wonderful support staff.”

However, Cruddas agrees that “the untapped potential of professional development is the next frontier of school improvement. There is no real improvement that is sustainable without improving the quality of teaching, and the only way is evidence-informed professional development.”

Social engineering

On the underlying reasons for the current inequities in education, Millar points to structural factors: a system based on a division between fee-paying and state-funded education, and between maintained schools and academies. While she sees no political likelihood of the abolition of private schools, she believes much more could be done to make admissions policies for state schools fairer.

That means abolishing entrance exams like the 11-plus which still operate for entry into grammar schools; and scrapping the power of schools more broadly to select who they admit. “There are so many ways within the state comprehensive system that schools can pick and choose the children they want to teach, which means you leave the children from more disadvantaged backgrounds corralled into particular schools where all the evidence shows they’re less likely to do well than in schools with a balanced intake,” she says. Millar suggests an overhaul to trigger “social engineering for the benefit of the children at the bottom of the pack” rather than those at the top.

Cruddas adds a nuance: “Governments of all colours have conflated social mobility and social justice. I think that those are different terms, and we should be more precise in our language. Social mobility is lifting up the few. Social justice is lifting up all. I think we want an education system by design that lifts up all children.”

She argues for the African concept of ‘ubuntu’: the idea of community which reflects the idea that ‘I do the best for my child, but I also want to do the best for all the children in my community’. In that context, she stresses the idea of ‘human flourishing’ and welcomes current discussions about reforms to inspection that would emphasise inclusion.

Tunnel vision

For Millar, the Ofsted system had a greater value two decades ago when there were serious concerns including around safeguarding and quality, but says that today it has become “way too powerful”. She argues: “You’ve got schools that spend their lives permanently preparing for Ofsted, which is a very narrow vision of education.”

She seeks an overhaul in favour of “a more generous vision of what makes a good and successful school and takes the pressure off teachers”. The current pressure for positive assessments puts excessive pressure on both educators and students, helping explain their disengagement. She suggests schools should be penalised in inspection reports if their students are not representative of their local communities.

By contrast, Cruddas argues that “both peer review and inspection are necessary. Peer review is an improvement tool. Inspection is a legal duty to report on the quality of our state schools to Parliament and to parents. But I agree we have extended the role of Ofsted in such a way that it [dominates the thinking] of leaders, and that that can’t be right. We need Ofsted back in its box.”

Millar argues for greater convergence between academies and maintained schools, suggesting that there is no meaningful difference in performance between the two systems. She says the former Conservative Education Secretary Michael (now Lord) Gove’s push for ‘academisation’ of all schools was a distraction from improving the quality of leadership, teaching and governance. “We’ve ended up with a mishmash of different systems all sitting alongside each other, and it’s incredibly inefficient and it doesn’t really work.”

One related topic where she seeks reform is around accountability. While maintained schools report to local authorities, concerns linked to academies are in theory handled directly by the secretary of state for education – which she sees as impractical. She advocates instead for the same system for both: along the lines of former ▶



Chalk mural installation Hughes created the concept for the chalk drawing and collaborated with mural artist Amponsah, who travelled to Shaftesbury Park Primary School in Battersea, London for the install. The mural was created using chalk on a blackboard – two mediums that emphasise the endless creativity and capacity of children to learn and – under the right conditions – to thrive.




“We’ve ended up with a mishmash of different systems all sitting alongside each other, and it’s incredibly inefficient and it doesn’t really work”

Labour Education Secretary David (now Lord) Blunkett’s proposal in 2014 for local school boards to oversee both maintained schools and academies.

Scan the QR code to learn more about the *Financial Times* free schools programme

Maintaining trust

Another distinction between the two concerns academies’ freedom from the national curriculum, which maintained schools must follow and which Millar sees as an unfair playing field. More broadly, she argues for scrapping exams at 16 years old, and introducing a baccalaureate-style system in the final years of school to encompass practical and vocational qualifications as well as academic performance.

Millar calls for fresh focus on sports, music, art, project work and civic engagement which could motivate more students by reflecting their interests and preparing them better for life beyond school. “I think you need a much more personalised experience,” she says. “There is not one single story, and you need to be able to meet the needs of all their children. That would make school a more enjoyable experience, and I think the teachers would be under less pressure too.”

Cruddas defends the academy system. “I do think that there is something very powerful about a group of schools working together in deep and purposeful collaboration in a single legal entity,” she says. “If we are to build the resilience of the state school system in England, particularly in this fiscal environment, we have a better chance of creating resilience if we organise schools into groups with a single, strong, strategic governance structure.”

But she also sees a case for reform to narrow the differences with the maintained sector in flexibility and autonomy, and welcomes proposals for reform. Referring to the Confederation of School Trusts, she says: “Our formal position is that some of those freedoms should actually be applied to all schools in England.”

“The concept of academies being somehow set in opposition to the maintained school system is really unhelpful,” she adds. “It’s one of those terrible binary oppositions in English education, where we end up shouting at each other across some very unhelpful divide rather than having a sensible conversation about what we think an end state would look like. I agree with Fiona that it’s probably not helpful to have lots of different systems sitting side by side, so we do need to understand what we are building towards.”

Powering change

Cruddas welcomes the need for reflection on the curriculum and wider policy reforms, but argues there is already scope for positive change untapped within schools. “I think we are the leaders we’ve been waiting for. Why don’t we just embrace a sense of leadership agency and make the changes that we know will make the difference to our children, to our families, to our communities? I think we need to break the compliance mindset and work with other civic leaders for that wider common good while we wait for government to catch up.”

Millar, by contrast, questions the degree of empowerment of educators in the current environment: “I just don’t think it’s very realistic, given the pressures on school leaders at the moment to deliver. At a recent headteacher conference at which I spoke, all the heads wanted to talk about was complaints from parents and the difference in the way the parents relate to school. It goes back to the marketisation of education: that you’re a consumer, you’re entitled to something, and if you don’t get what you want, you can go in and complain about it.”

She says: “I’m not sure that at the moment a lot of heads do feel they have the time to lead that wider system change, especially if you’re a school that’s struggling to get out of a poor Ofsted grade. That is a bad place to be, and that pressure on you is going to be intense.”

On that, at least, Cruddas agrees, placing emphasis on the need to shift cultural norms and encourage greater belonging in schools. “This isn’t just about pupils or students. It’s also about parents and communities.” ■

With thanks to James Cousins, FRSA, Chair of Governors at Shaftesbury Park Primary School, and to Bunmi Richards, Headteacher, for collaborating with RSA Journal in the creation of the mural.

Share on Circle

Where do you think the UK education system is headed? To share your thoughts visit the Innovative Education Network on Circle.

Andrew Jack is the *Financial Times* Global Education Editor and oversees its free schools programme.

Lana Hughes is a mural artist and designer from East London and her works can be seen in situ around the city.

Benjamin Asante Amponsah is the artist behind Brebmassarts. His work blends bold colours, abstract forms and cubist influences to explore themes of identity, culture and connection. He also mentors young artists and shares his practice through exhibitions and community projects.

RSARCHIVE

Stones, songs and secrets

From a laundry list on limestone to Lear's vibrant parrots, the RSA's role in the birth of lithography is a tale of invention, intrigue and the elusive Madame Gleissner

Words: Richard Hale

Over the centuries, the RSA has been involved in a myriad of innovative enterprises featuring a correspondingly flamboyant cast of characters. One in particular concerns the invention of the lithographic printing press, a series of beautiful ornithological illustrations by a beloved poet of nonsense verse and a celebrated novelist's reformation of the patent process.

There are medals, there is intrigue, there is the ideal proportion of lampblack to tallow required for perfect printer's ink. And, ghosting through this narrative like a figure in a dream, there is the elusive Madame Gleissner, who "strained everything to be very elegant".

In 1796 Munich, playwright Alois Senefelder was seeking an affordable way to print his latest work by engraving on local limestone when, for want of paper, he scribbled his mother's laundry list on a slab in wax crayon. By treating this with acid, which the wax resisted, he created a relief impression that eliminated the need for physical inscription.

Realising his method's potential to print music, Senefelder hurried to the house of his friend, composer Franz Gleissner. Franz was not at home, but Madame Gleissner was – and showed great enthusiasm: "The entire behaviour of the woman was so open and artless that I dismissed my first thought 'I might be cheated out of my invention'."

The publication of Gleissner's *Twelve Songs* proved an immediate success. With the Gleissners, Senefelder relocated to Offenbach to pursue their enterprise in collaboration with established publisher Johann Anton André. This incurred the disdain of Senefelder's mother (author of the laundry list), as he refused her instruction to share any profits with his brothers. She set them up with a press of their own. This made Madame Gleissner "intensely angry".

Photos: RSA Archive

Patents were sought across Europe, with the complex English system obliging Senefelder to visit London himself where, in 1801, he lodged with André's brother, Philip. But 'lodging' became virtual house-arrest as, anxious that his secrets might be stolen, Senefelder was never allowed out. Eventually, his captor relented, the patent was secured, and the mysteries of lithography were revealed. Recognising its revolutionary potential for mass communication, the then Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce supported its development through two of the Society's most dependable mechanisms: premiums and medals.

Madame Gleissner, meanwhile, was dispatched to Austria. Here she "entertained great hopes about living in splendid Vienna and having means enough to enjoy its brilliant life". Alas, she "knew nothing of economy" and, when debt pressed, she "appeared at her host's table with signs of tears that aroused his sympathy". He, too, became an investor.

Following a visit by Anglo-German entrepreneur Rudolph Ackermann, in 1818 Senefelder published his *Complete Course of Lithography*, which Ackermann translated the following year. Madame Gleissner flits through its pages, which combine tales of extraordinary adventure with the chemical complexities of lithography. The Society awarded Senefelder its gold medal and, in gratitude, he presented it with one of his own prized presses. Hullmandel explored further and, in 1824, produced his own handbook *The Art of Drawing on Stone*, which inspired a self-taught teenaged artist – Edward Lear.

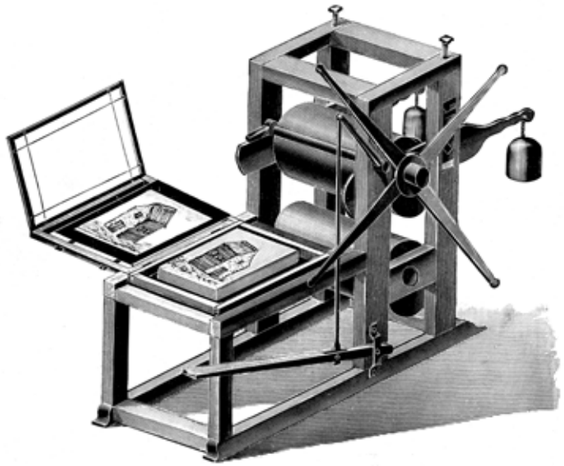
Photo: INTERFOTO / Alamy Stock Photo

Left:
***Blue and Yellow Macaw* by Edward Lear**

Right:
Senefelder's stone printing press from the 19th century

Below:
***Red and Yellow Macaw* from Lear's first book, *Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae, or Parrots*, 1832**

Scan the QR code to learn more about the invention of lithography



"The English patent system remained unreformed until the redoubtable Henry Cole mobilised the Society towards its improvement"

At just 18, Lear conceived an audacious plan to sell by subscription a comprehensive series of prints dedicated to one family of birds: *Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae, or Parrots*. Now known for his landscapes and the endearing sketches that accompany his verse, Lear was originally a meticulous painter of wildlife, who drew live creatures rather than the stuffed specimens favoured by his peers, lending his pictures a uniquely vibrant intimacy. By drawing directly on to stone in Hullmandel's studio, he also made deft use of its natural grain to depict his subjects' plumage with a rare grace and elegance. His prints were then hand-coloured and perfected with discerning dabs of egg-white.

While the collection was a commercial disaster whose completion Lear was unable to fund, the 42 prints he did produce were recognised as an artistic and technical triumph. The Society rewarded Hullmandel with its silver medal, while Lear reciprocated with a bound volume of his plates, which remains in our collection today.

Senefelder's experiments continued until his death in 1834. The English patent system remained unreformed until the redoubtable Henry Cole mobilised the Society towards its improvement. Itemising its 35 labyrinthine stages, he enlisted Charles Dickens to satirise its nonsense through his periodical, *Household Words*. In 1852, the Patent Law Amendment Act was passed. The cost of a patent dropped from £380 to £25.

Cole was overjoyed. Madame Gleissner was unavailable for comment. ■

Richard Hale is the RSA's Internal Communications Manager.

THE SPACES BETWEEN US

What happens when cities are built for some but not all? A feminist town-planning movement in Glasgow is challenging urban inequality and building a landscape where everyone can belong

Words:
Holly Bruce

Illustrations:
Sam Pierpoint

Covid-19 lockdown. I'd exhausted my efforts baking rowies (Scottish delicacy, look them up) and couldn't bear to do another Zoom quiz, so I turned to reading. A book club subscription introduced me to Leslie Kern's *Feminist City* – cue lightbulb moment. I was beginning to understand that cities weren't ever built with me in mind – they were built by men, for men – and the additional hoops that women and non-binary people had to jump through were simply not there for everyone. I realised I had to do something.

Not a walk in the park

Starting in 2021, I worked with the Young Women's Movement (which promotes young women and girls' leadership and rights) on a feminist town-planning research project, building a campaign that explored the interactions between young women and non-binary people from Glasgow, and their public transport system and local greenspaces. The feedback received was abundantly clear – the city was not working for us.

Fast forward to 2022, when I advocated for a feminist town-planning policy to be included in the Scottish Green Party manifesto and won election to Glasgow City Council. The policy passed a few months later, catapulting me into the world of town planning, one that I've embraced ever since. What we ultimately created was a radical policy that embedded a feminist approach into Glasgow's new City Development Plan – the main policy document that the council uses to assess all planning applications. And just like that, Glasgow became known as the UK's first feminist city.

A place for all of us

Feminist town-planning is rooted in the idea that women, and those of marginalised genders, have a fundamental right to the city. Whether walking or biking, using public transport, accessing basic health or public services, it's become apparent, through a growing body of research and lived experience, that women can't afford these spaces, can't access them, do not feel safe in them, or that they are simply not fit for purpose.

Gender-budgeting, gender-mainstreaming and gender pay gaps are the subjects of familiar policy discussions, but little has been said about gendered geography. Although these conversations overlap, our gendered relationship with the built environment has only recently been given the spotlight.

In *Feminist City*, Kern writes, "A geographical perspective on gender offers a way of understanding how sexism functions on the ground. Male power and privilege are upheld by keeping women's movement limited and access to spaces constrained." This demonstrates why feminist urbanism is crucial and why we need to apply a gendered lens to all aspects of planning, public realm design, policy development and budgets. It's everyone's job to challenge patriarchal strategies and to embed systems-change thinking into their organisations so that we can start to imagine our cities as places where women can thrive. And that is what this policy aims to do.

A commitment to equality

Political spaces have long been overwhelmingly occupied by cis-gender white men – in politics, planning, architecture and construction – and this is precisely why the new policy is so important. It makes gender equality non-negotiable. Embedding gendered lens thinking into a city development plan instils it into a legal framework. It ensures that decision makers, regardless of gender, must consciously analyse each application to determine whether it will enhance or undermine gender equality, pushing the city to consider whether decisions will support or hinder women's mobility.

The policy intention is now being adopted more widely. Edinburgh City Council has committed to it and ▶

"Feminist town-planning is rooted in the idea that women, and those of marginalised genders, have a fundamental right to the city"

the Chief Planner for the Scottish Government wants to see the policy being rolled out nationally (with a local lens applied). Town planning and architecture firms are reviewing practices, holding training sessions and discussing this concept more widely within their sectors.

But the reception hasn't always been positive. Elected members, academics and architects have rolled their eyes or made remarks about 'woke' policies. But being feminist isn't about taking rights away from one gender and giving them to another. It's a commitment to equality, and an ethos that anyone, of any gender, can practise. We know and have seen from the wealth of research that gendered lens thinking benefits absolutely everyone. Women's mobility is good for our communities, our economies and the health of our planet.

Choice of words

The use of the word feminism within the policy was intentional, crucial in fact. It's an emotive and empowering term that gets people talking. Would this policy have captured the hearts and minds of so many industries, or people, if I'd used a word such as inclusive or equal? I don't think so. This is the word that had to be used, but what the policy is doing is far greater; it fights for a fairer, more equitable existence for everyone. Not just women. Intersectionality must be at the heart of this approach, and it will always be inclusive of trans and non-binary folks.

Paving the way

There isn't one blueprint of what a feminist community should look like; each has unique populations and circumstances and should be treated accordingly. For example, learnings can be taken, but not transplanted wholesale, from Vienna and Barcelona, Europe's leading feminist planning cities. Consultation is hugely important. We want to see change on the ground, but it's also important to understand that feminist town-planning is a process, not an end result.

In Glasgow, to steer the mammoth amount of work to be done, we created a Feminist Urbanism Political Oversight Group, consisting of councillors and council officers. It spans many departments – parks, planning, transport, Violence Against Women and Girls services – in a bid to mainstream gendered lens thinking. Alongside the new City Development plan, the Group will be commissioning a gender strategy and will support the preparation of a toolkit for officers and design guides for developers to ensure a consistent approach across the city. During budget negotiations, I was also able to secure capital – £1m over two years – to fund projects on the ground.

Tangible outcomes

People often want to hear about specific projects to help understand the concept of feminist town-planning practically. Playparks built for girls, pedestrianisation, better lighting – these are examples that pique interest – and nothing captures people's attention more than the topic of public toilets! Access to toilets is about social inclusion, but I've seen within my council how this issue is often trivialised, undervalued and overlooked, even though public toilets are truly the missing link to healthier, more equitable cities. In 2023, I put forward a policy on toilets which saw record engagement, and I'm pleased to say that Glasgow has now produced its first ever public toilet strategy.

Separately, trials of lighting in parks have been commissioned in Glasgow, one in Queen's Park – in my own community. I've been part of discussions to ensure that lighting works for both people and nature. It's important we get that balance right, and care has been taken to include solar lighting as well as specific travel routes through the park. I also must mention the harrowing history associated with Queen's Park, specifically, as local woman Moira Jones was brutally murdered there. Her story puts this into sharp focus, as it shows the terrifying unintended impact of what dark, no-go zones in cities can mean.

Women's safety should never be presented solely as an issue of further protection by the police, nor should women feel shame or guilt for walking through a park at night. This is a tried and tired way of thinking. Reactivating spaces and having 'eyes on the street' has been shown as the best form of surveillance.

We are a movement

We are now seeing a movement of feminist thinking within urban planning in the UK. We know that more inclusive infrastructure alone will not solve issues around women's mobility and violence against women and girls. But what it does do is create opportunity and choice. It gives autonomy. Repairing places enables social change, the social change of opportunity. And that really is the lifeblood of a feminist city. ■

Left and below:
Sam Pierpoint assembling her paper model of Glasgow's city centre, in the shape of the female symbol

Above:
View of the River Clyde and landmarks, Glasgow, Scotland, UK

Holly Bruce is a Scottish Green Councillor, Vice-Chair of the Environment and Liveable Neighbourhoods Committee and Chair of the Glasgow Violence Against Women and Girls partnership.

Sam Pierpoint is a paper artist who specialises in creating handcrafted paper sculptures from sustainable materials, with a passion for projects that link with nature and wellbeing.

Photos: Sam Pierpoint, Mike Foyle, Mario Guti / iStock

“You need a policy agenda that is pro-social mobility... to connect more people up to more opportunities, have more success and lift a whole country”

Former Education Secretary **Justine Greening** talks with the RSA’s **Andy Haldane** about the erosion of opportunity across Britain, the crucial role of businesses in driving social mobility and growth – and their shared experience of ‘Yorkshire grit’

Photos: Lydia Goldblatt

Andy Haldane: There’s so much I need to talk to you about, but I wondered whether we might start at the very beginning. A bit about your background.

Greening: My journey starts in Rotherham in the 1980s in a really ordinary working-class family. Nobody in my family was involved in politics – yet it was a really political environment to grow up in. We had the miners’ strike, the steel strike. My dad worked in the steel industry and was on strike for a bit – because everybody was. He lost his job at the end of it all. ▶

This was almost the first wave of what would be known as globalisation. I couldn't believe that my dad was doing something every day that other people didn't care about or value. I just saw this huge talent that he had, wasted in front of my eyes. This made me promise myself that I would do what I could to never have that happen to me.

What happened with my father stuck with me as a sense of absolute helplessness and frustration. I was never able to shake it off. So, I've almost spent a lifetime trying to fix that basic problem.

Haldane: Your personal story is so close to mine. I grew up slightly north from where you did, in West Yorkshire – 1980s deglobalised and deindustrialised Britain. That's why I got into economics.

Greening: You saw that in your own family.

Haldane: Luckily my dad didn't lose his job, but lots of my friends' dads did. Looking back on that swathe of deindustrialisation that we saw across large parts of the UK, do you think that was just the inevitable tide of history? That globalisation was coming and these were the casualties? Or should we have done things differently to provide more safety for people like your dad?

Greening: First of all, the change was almost certainly happening. You have to make the numbers add up – the big error was not confronting the challenges when they didn't. I was always resentful, as a child, of the adults who had found it all too hard to face reality. If they'd done that, then maybe only half the people would have lost their jobs rather than everyone – had the steel industry specialised earlier.

So, there was a bit of me that blamed management for bad strategy. I guess I blame the unions for not being prepared to realise that they needed to work to save some of the roles through accepting change. The government clearly could see that change was going to happen. The issue was too little support and strategy around transition.

My dad ended up filling up vending machines because it was the first job that he could get that would pay money. But in other parts of the country, there was ultimately more of a strategic economic shift into new sectors. That's the lesson. You have to stay competitive, but economic shifts are going to continue to happen. We're in the midst of one right now with tech and AI, for example, and there's another one around talent. But you succeed by embracing them, harnessing them and dealing with the downsides.

In the 1980s we should have thought much more carefully about social mobility, the systemic piece around what happens in communities when everyone loses their jobs.

Haldane: What's amazing is, 40 years on, we are having discussions on steel and the future of it in this country. In some ways, much of what Donald Trump is now doing in the US is motivated by the plight of people like your dad.

Greening: Workers from working-class backgrounds and, to some extent, white working-class backgrounds, left behind. But these are all communities where the link between effort and reward feels like it's completely broken. Even if you see growth happening in the economy, it's growth that's benefiting other people, not you.

I grew up in an age where there wasn't social media – but I had a sense that there were people getting a better start than me. I bought into this message that I heard from Margaret Thatcher that there was effort and reward. If I worked hard, I would be able to get places. I totally bought into that and thought, yeah, that's exactly what I am willing to do. But today, how would I have felt? I would have felt a lot angrier.

That's what is at the root of so many of our social and economic challenges. This link between effort and reward has become degraded over time. Until we put it back together, this won't be a country that is as inclined to feel aspirational.

Haldane: I can't think of a model of growth that isn't about unlocking individual opportunity. When you talk about this severed link between effort and opportunity – it's another way of saying the engine of growth has failed individually, at the community level, and, ultimately, at the nation state level.

Greening: When you look at Britain's constant struggle to boost productivity, the tide against us has become harder as this link has been progressively broken. It's been additionally challenging for us because we're in a service economy – and because economic success in the 21st century is more inextricably bound up in human capital than perhaps it was 50 years ago.

All the evidence suggests that this is a systemic problem, and therefore the way it works is that advantage accumulates over time and disadvantage accumulates over time. None of this happens overnight. What you are seeing is a very slow, multi-generational playing out of that. If you think of a ladder to climb – I climbed up, you climbed up – but the middle rungs are starting to drop out for people – they're more likely to fall down than to move up.

Haldane: I'd like to know a bit about the secrets of your own success climbing the ladder from that working-class background to the highest offices of state. Then, from that vantage point, why are there so few Justines around?

"... disadvantage accumulates over time. None of this happens overnight"

Greening: Looking back on it now, I was just incredibly single-minded. My dad used to take me swimming and I used to plough up and down the lanes. I learnt over time that I was better at keeping going than most people, that keeping going was one way that I could win. So there was a sheer bloody-mindedness, a lot of drive, a ton of hard work and some lucky breaks occasionally that went in my favour. It was just keeping going and never thinking about the destination too much.

The secret of success for me was realising that the journey was my advantage. That it was everything I'd learnt on the way that made me, me. That, actually, I was a better minister for all of these different experiences – growing up in Rotherham, going to Southampton University, going off to Switzerland for a couple of years to work, coming back to London to work, being in industry, being in different companies – then becoming part of a local Conservative Association, where you're flung in with people who are 60, 70, 80. I was in my 30s!

That was where some of my confidence came from, and I shook off any impostor syndrome and thought, 'No, I know I've earned the right to be here.' That's a really precious thing.

Haldane: Having had a ringside seat on all matters education for a long time, is our current education system part of the solution or part of the problem?

Greening: Well, it's both. The thing about kids is, they do grow up. So we are making a decision about their futures. The decision is, are they going to grow up able to contribute, make the most of their potential, have a sense of their place in this world, have a lifelong love of learning that they can take into adulthood, or not? For too long we've fudged that. There's been a complacency at times in government that – somehow these gaps, well, they're just going to happen, aren't they?

I think that's false. We were using the phrase 'levelling up', as you know, when I was at the Department for Education. It was in my foreword to the DfE's Social Mobility Action Plan of 2017. I said the problem with Britain is that talent is spread evenly, but opportunity is not. That was an important phrase for two reasons. One, it was the articulation of two halves of a social mobility strategy. Talent is spread evenly, but not developed consistently, in our education system. Businesses are the opportunity creators, the opportunity holders, and therefore they have to be part of driving equality of opportunity too. ▶

Recommended reading

"Ryan Holiday's *The Obstacle is the Way* is a brilliant guide for navigating those more difficult times in life and getting positive outcomes from them. In essence, it's the journey that builds you – so understand it and learn from it." Justine Greening

But the second reason it mattered, being absolutely frank, is you either believe that or you don't. There are too many people in government for whom it was a wonderful bit of rhetoric, but who, deep down, don't really believe that talent is spread evenly – but I do. I've lived it. You've lived it. It's just the truth. But if you believe it's the truth, then it has to be a design principle for government. That surely starts with education.

Haldane: You mentioned before about nurturing that love of learning. But we also know that there's a great many young people leaving our education system. Isn't this a diagnostic on a system not working for too many young people in the poorest parts of the country?

Greening: If there's a purpose of education, it's above all to give people the skills, knowledge, advice and insights to connect up to opportunity. But we haven't tailored the education system to what we need in the 21st century. It's a rear-view mirror on a version of Britain that doesn't exist any more.

If you're looking at what you need to go forward, it's less around stuffing your brain with facts – I can find those on Google now. That's not what intelligence is any more. Now it's about: Can you really synthesise? Can you see connections? Can you problem-solve? What's the creativity that you bring? Are you able to see those crossovers?

We have to teach people in the education system to develop their critical thinking and ability to use the human intelligence they have. It's crazy that the Treasury in the last government announced a £900m investment in AI – this is artificial intelligence that scored on the nation's balance sheet as an asset. Yet, had we put the same amount into HI, human intelligence, then that would have just been a cost.

Haldane: Over the last few years you've been working on the bridge from learning into earning, and the role business might play in nurturing social mobility and growing those communities. Can you say a bit about the work you've done and the importance of business as a conduit for social improvement?

Greening: Unless business is strategically part of driving social mobility and equality of opportunity, it simply won't happen. In the work that I do with businesses now, the most important category is action. I want them to think strategically about how opportunities change lives. How they can build talent pipelines into some of those communities, into some of those people that are more locked out from opportunity. Not just because it's good for those

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communities, but all the evidence is it's good for business too.

I think the companies themselves being able to do it better means they're more likely to succeed and win. Who would you prefer to work for, a business that's really diverse in its talent, got all sorts of ideas coming into it – that knows how to progress that talent, and that's got leadership that understands this – or a business that doesn't?

Haldane: You mentioned that sometimes our systems need a jolt to change themselves. The world economy has just had a jolt, courtesy of Donald Trump. Could that have an energising effect among businesses and politicians, to make those brave choices about shifting systems in all the ways you've described?

Greening: It depends whether the penny finally drops that our problems are home-grown. The pressures on our political systems are from

"... we could become a version of Britain with equality of opportunity"

what's happening inside our countries. The biggest issue is that people have just stopped believing that their prospects are ever going to get any better. They're understandably turning to ever more dramatic solutions to try to see if there's an answer out there.

The good news is that we could become a version of Britain with equality of opportunity, or we could get a lot closer to that. Businesses are really up for being part of this challenge. We can do this, and we need to, because we're a very socially stratified country. We've got one of the biggest problems in weak social mobility.

If we could redefine ourselves, then that would be a huge gift for the wider world – to be a country with some of the most ingrained challenges around social mobility that was able to confront them, to find the solutions for them. For me, that would surely be something we could be proud of as future generations look back on it.

Haldane: Hard to think of a better endowment. I'm going to take you back to where we started. I spent a day in Rotherham last year with local leaders and businesses, talking about a place that's not just been laid low economically, but has had its social problems as well. Nonetheless, I came away from that with a sense of optimism. The spirit was willing.

Greening: The Yorkshire grit.

Haldane: The Yorkshire grit. There was a sense of purpose, there was a sense of leadership, both governmental and civil society and business. I wonder whether you shared that sense of optimism?

Greening: I do. When I first started in Cabinet banging on about social mobility, to some extent it almost felt like it was my pet project. I came up with the phrase 'levelling up' because I wanted to refresh social mobility. I felt probably we just needed a new name for it that would get some attention. Labour have got their 'breaking down barriers' mission, quite rightly. Different words, but the same aspiration and purpose.

Crucially, we've moved from a discussion around whether or not equality of opportunity should happen in Britain, to how to do it. That's a huge strategic shift. When I look at what's happening in other countries, we're further ahead on that debate.

We recognise it's the debate that we're in. The challenge now, for all of us – and that includes the political system – is working together to do it and being really systematic about the solutions that we know work and understanding how you can find them, spread them, learn from them and then deliver them in a tailored way but at scale. In the same way that you have a policy agenda that enables companies to get further, faster on investing in climate, you need a policy agenda that is pro-social mobility to enable that wider ecosystem to connect more people up to more opportunities, have more success and, in doing so, lift a whole country. ■

Justine Greening is a former MP and Secretary of State for Education, International Development and Transport, Minister for Women/Equalities and Founder of the Purpose Coalition.

Andy Haldane is Chief Executive Officer at the RSA.

Lydia Goldblatt is an award-winning photographer based in London. Her work creatively fuses the approaches of both documentary and constructed technology.

Changing tracks

Two hundred years after the birth of the railway, the aftermath of the 1960s' Beeching cuts are still being unpicked – but it's not too late to harness the power of the rail to restore mobility, reconnect communities and reshape our future

Words:
Gareth Dennis

Illustrations:
Sébastien Plassard

This year, Railway 200 celebrates 200 years since the opening of the Stockton and Darlington Railway (S&DR) in the north-east of England. The historical significance of that particular moment in the development of railways to one side – the S&DR is neither the first of anything or the last of anything – it provides a welcome opportunity to evaluate what our railways have done, what they are for and how we can best harness them for good.

Railway realities

The earliest examples of railways we would recognise today emerged in Central Europe in the 14th century. Migration of Protestant mining engineers during the Reformation brought this technology to the UK, in places like Cumbria in the late 1500s. By the 1700s, high quality and easily mined coal gave Britain the edge in producing iron for the rails themselves, and in the 1810s the use of steam locomotives emerged as a practical way to greatly increase the haulage capacity of the system. The first modern railway began operation in 1830 – the Liverpool and Manchester Railway harnessed all of the technological developments of the preceding centuries and combined them with operational innovation and the capital freed by the demise of the transatlantic slave trade – at which point there was an explosion in the growth of the railway network, globally.

In the UK, this was led by hundreds of chaotic private enterprises, with many railway proposals essentially being elaborate frauds. This meant that the network lacked any real coherence, with duplication and doglegs being commonplace. Huge tracts of it were barely profitable, if at all. By the 1920s the railway network had already begun to retreat, a trend accelerated by the Second World War and nationalisation. Britain's rail map required pruning. ▶

From 1955 onwards, the nationalised railway industry invested massively in modernisation – including replacing and remodelling track, new centralised signalling, electrification and new fleets of trains – without an immediate improvement in its balance sheet, and government patience quickly ran thin. Unlike the embryonic motorway building programme, which was being delivered regionally by the then hugely powerful local authorities, railway modernisation was centrally administered with a need to satisfy the patience of the Treasury.

Industry reform followed in 1962, and the newly formed British Railways Board needed a Chair. Enter one of the great villains of contemporary British folklore: Dr Richard Beeching.

Beeching's 1963 report, *The Reshaping of British Railways*, is possibly the most infamous white paper in British history, being remembered unfondly by many for swinging an uncompromising axe at the railway, intending to reduce network mileage by around a third and to close more than half of stations. Modernisation was already reducing railway mileage and simplifying railway operations, but *Reshaping* refocused these efforts, grasping the nettle of network and service 'rationalisation' far more assertively, listing what services would be lost, what stations would close and precisely how much smaller the railway would be.

As a result, then and today, it is understood as the 'weapon that destroyed Britain's innocence', dragging us into the modern age where gently puffing branch lines were a thing of the past and the future was the motorway.

But our memory of this document is shaped by the story told about it rather than the actual impact it had. Beeching conjures up images of rolling soft countryside and stone cottage stations shuttered up mainly because it is the residents in these areas that had the time and wealth to paint that picture. Whether through the poetry of John Betjeman or the public campaigns in the Scottish Borders, the enduring memory of the 'Beeching Axe' is rural.

"Where the *Reshaping* report failed most deeply was in its inability to consider the long-term effects of its proposals on the fabric of a rapidly changing society"

But the greatest negative impact of the government's railway cuts – Beeching put his name to them, but successive governments enacted the closures – was not in lightly populated rural areas.

In-between places

Where the *Reshaping* report failed most deeply was in its inability to consider the long-term effects of its proposals on the fabric of a rapidly changing society – one that would suburbanise dramatically from the 1960s up to the present day. Beeching hand-waved away the need for a deeper assessment of social benefit, determining that different measures of value based on such factors would have had a limited impact on his proposals. This was a severe oversight.

Much of the UK is a moderately populated hinterland including the villages and towns clustered around and between cities. A significant proportion of Brits live in these areas, which today are often post-industrial, poorly serviced and difficult, if not impossible, to access by public transport. And it is these areas that were most heavily impacted by the changes to the railway map.

Closing intermediate stations in favour of non-stopping long-distance trains, reducing or removing station capacity in city centres and closing local railway lines altogether – in all, these perfectly conspired to deny a rail service to a significant proportion of the population. Buses were intended to take up the slack, but the melange of private operators meant there was no coordination of services with what was left of the train timetable, and, in turn, those services were also reduced. People were pushed into their cars, locking up a greater proportion of their income into fixed costs. Car dependence then led to greater fragmentation of these areas as roads were widened and bypassed, deepening the sense of isolation of communities already suffering from sparse public services.

Much consideration is put to the death of the high street, but we can see how greater car usage justified (for contemporary policymakers) the rise of out-of-town retail and commercial developments, pulling jobs and housing demand out of areas still usefully served by bus or rail, in turn driving greater car usage, expanded road networks and reduced urban footfall as this doom loop drove even larger shifts to car-oriented development.

In turn, the lack of community identity, lack of public services, lack of meaningful jobs and general feeling of abandonment and isolation drove resentment politics that surged through the 2000s to today. Compounded with the unending rise in the cost of goods, energy and services, these areas have become politically volatile – and it can all be traced back to a decision about railways, albeit set into a wider set of policies ignoring the needs of the in-between places.

Further closure

In March 1967, Minister of Transport Barbara Castle began a process establishing a funding framework for railways which provided a necessary social good, acknowledging at last that an operating profit in a narrow commercial sense was an impossibility for Britain's postwar railway system.

Beeching was long gone by this point. Railway closures continued into the 1980s, but the last year of significant contraction was 1970. British Rail had still not managed to find its way into overall profitability by then and so, by that narrow metric, reshaping had failed just as modernisation did.

The creation of the National Bus Company in 1969 had brought some level of coordination to bus services. However, the overall decline in bus services was not arrested, and there was no integration with rail provision. Then, less than two decades later, bus services were deregulated, obliterating a key component in Beeching's justification for ceasing rail operations on many lines. Bus services continue to be cut to this day, with public transport provision in large parts of rural and semi-urban Britain being essentially non-existent.

Despite the long-lasting negative impacts of the *Reshaping* report on the fabric of British society, history judged Beeching's dismissal of social benefit as a factor on the scale of railway closures as correct, as Castle's social railway concept did not change ▶

RSA Spark: Railway 200 and beyond

Imagine a future where all our railways are designed to be good for the planet, to be built to last and to help people get skills and jobs, all while making sense for our wallets. As we approach the 200th anniversary of the first passenger service in 1825, we must consider how railways better meet the changing needs of future mobility.

This year, the RSA is proud to partner with Network Rail and Railway 200 on an RSA Spark brief to respond to this very opportunity. RSA Spark builds on the foundations of 100 years of the Student Design Awards for even greater impact. We welcome students 18+ from across the globe to grow and apply their agency, skills and creativity to real-world briefs that do good for people, places and the planet.

We are receiving and reviewing hundreds of creative submissions from students, and are excited to be exhibiting the most outstanding ideas at the RSA Spark Showcase in September 2025 at RSA House and on the RSA website. Sign up for updates or get in touch to partner on new briefs that we will be launching in September: rsaspark@rsa.org.uk

To learn more, scan the QR code or visit www.thersa.org/design-for-life-our-mission/capabilities-for-life/rsa-spark/

"The choice is before us: abandon the in-between places for another two generations or change tracks"

the post-reshaping map very much at all. Cuts continued for a further decade.

Today, our contracted railway network is still trying to unpick the aftermath of Beeching. It is a jack of all trades and a master of none, with mixed traffic lines resulting in an intensively but inefficiently used system that prioritises long-distance passenger trains over local or suburban ones. High Speed 2 (aka HS2), originally intended to provide new high speed lines linking Manchester and Leeds in the north with Birmingham and London in the south, would have unleashed the full potential of our railway by taking the express trains – the ones that only stop in major stations – on to their own tracks. This would have freed up significant space on the existing railway for many more stopping trains, reversing the impact of Beeching by enabling more trains at more local stations, as well as creating capacity for more feeder lines to be opened to the in-between places that have suffered so much.

But this story of that enormous opportunity was not told, replaced in part by empty tales of economic rebalancing and faster trains. And that made it easy for government to throw the project on the skip when it wanted to tell a different story about Britain's future.

Beeching rerun

By 2023 the UK had abandoned delivering HS2 in even close to the shape it was originally intended. The consequences of that decision – one that the current government have dug in on rather than reversing – will be as long-lasting as those Beeching had his name pinned to exactly 70 years previously. Nearly two years on from that decision, and in a year of celebration of all that railways have given the world, the choice is before us: abandon the in-between places for another two generations or change tracks and unlock opportunity for millions, reversing real and perceived social injustices and setting the UK on a far healthier political course, where we can all be reminded what role the state can play in improving our lives.

The opportunity remains within our grasp. There is no material reason not to reinstate HS2 as planned – the land remains in public ownership and the economy is crying out for major capital investment. The social cohesion that has been eroded so severely over the last few decades can and must be stitched back together, and railways may be the most effective way of – quite literally – pulling us closer together again. Meanwhile, where rail investment has survived austerity cuts, we see enormous public demand for rail services in the in-between places, demand that is far beyond central government's ability to predict: the Northumberland line snaking northwards from Newcastle is only partially complete with several stations still under construction. Yet its ridership has exceeded predicted levels by over five times.

Build it and they will come

In 2025, the railways' purpose can be no more important: alleviate terminal political malaise and unlock sustainable growth. We don't need new technology. We don't need new models of funding. We don't need to wait. The railway gives us the tools to fix the future, today. ■

Scan the QR code to watch Dennis' YouTube channel, #Railnatter

Gareth Dennis is an award-winning railway engineer and writer. He hosts the weekly #Railnatter show and is the author of *How the Railways Will Fix the Future.*

Sébastien Plassard's classically inspired illustrations tackle modern concepts using imagery and linework reminiscent of mid-century drawings and prints.

PHOTO ESSAY

OPEN BRITAIN

Photographer JJ Keith has been roaming the UK, capturing the laughter, sadness, hope and opportunity that are an integral part of its makeup

Words: JJ Keith

Photo: Michael Donald

Open Britain: Portrait of a Diverse Nation celebrates migration – and is part of an ongoing endeavour to demonstrate the value and power of inclusivity. It is about the give and take of migration, how it mutually enriches the lives of immigrants and the communities and society in which they make new homes. Each intimate picture, story and conversation portrays a small portion of the successes, hardships and adventures that are woven into the UK's social fabric.

I was driven to tell the stories of first-generation immigrants by the experience of my own father, Heinz Leopold Klapp. Born in 1919 in Vienna, Austria, Heinz grew up an only child. As war approached, a London-based uncle suggested Heinz and his mother, Anna, come to England. The gravity of the situation was not clear at that stage – Anna chose to stay in Vienna.

Heinz travelled to Zagreb, working his way up through Italy before claiming refugee status in Switzerland. He was eventually taken to the Orkney Islands to join the British army and given new papers and a new name: Heinz Leopold Klapp became Henry Lancelot Keith.

Anna was deported from Vienna to Riga, where she was murdered in the Shoah. Heinz's father, Gustave, who had been trading paper with China, was murdered in Shanghai.

In postwar London, Heinz started again with nothing – organising parties and events before creating a fashion mini store on the King's Road, a small hotel in Hampstead and two restaurants in the West End. Seeing the soaring price of real estate, he turned his hand to property.

My father died in 1988, having had a full and happy life, despite the unfathomably hard early years. What he achieved under such adverse conditions has always filled me with pride. This project is dedicated to him.

Name: Osman
Country: Egypt

I took this shot of Osman in his arch. After a brief chat, I realised his story was even more powerful than the photo – and so the first instalment of *Open Britain* was created.

Osman was born in Osman Village near Cairo, the eldest of five. His father was a fruit farmer, and Osman used that knowledge to build a thriving import-export business with 250 employees. In 2013, a UK company placed a $450,000 order – half up front, half on delivery – but never paid the second half. Osman took on debt to avoid layoffs. In 2014, he sold his car and came to the UK to sue the company. Legal costs drained him, and he ended up homeless.

Charities including Streetlink, St Mungo's and No Second Night Out helped. Meanwhile, back in Egypt, moneylenders threatened his family. Osman considered suicide but reached out to Westminster's mental health team.

One day, he noticed London's juice scene was lacking. With help from the charity Tern and a £5,300 loan, he opened a juice stall. Today, Osman runs multiple shops and a restaurant.

The UK company went bankrupt. That money is gone. But Osman still donates 5% of profits to homeless charities. Now under Human Rights status, he hopes to gain citizenship – and never forgets his family in Egypt.

Name: Viveth Hardy
Country: Jamaica

Viveth Hardy is known as "the station lady that sings". Born and raised in St Mary's, Jamaica, she worked in a snack factory and raised four boys before moving to the UK in 2002 with her youngest, then just 18 months old.

Viveth brings joy to commuters on London's overground with her spontaneous bursts of song. "It's not about wanting to sing," she says. "It's spiritual. I wake up with a song in my head. I just sing. I'm like a boom-box." Whether on the platform, in the street or at home, her voice is always ready.

Her early days in the UK were tough. Unable to juggle work and childcare, she sent her youngest son back to Jamaica to be cared for by his older brothers. One is now a barber in Philadelphia; the others remain in Jamaica, where she sends money home to help offset the rising cost of living.

Why did she move here? "It's a mystery!" she laughs – and Viveth laughs a lot – but behind the cheer is strength. Life hasn't been easy, but she meets it with grace, grit and music. "I don't have any shame in my game," she says. And she means it.

Name: Michiko Mitsuishi Dodd
Country: Japan

Michiko Mitsuishi Dodd, 101, was born in the seaside town of Kobe, Japan. One of four siblings, she lost her father at 12, shortly after her sister "eloped with an idiot", breaking his heart.

In 1947, Michiko met her husband Jeremy at a party on an RAF base – she was working as an interpreter, he as a hospital staff member. "He looked very miserable, and I felt sorry for him," she says. They had four children, but Jeremy returned to England, leaving Michiko to raise the children alone in postwar Japan, where single mothers were shunned. Her father-in-law arranged for them to join Jeremy in the UK, where they married.

After spells in the US and Japan, the couple returned to England and later divorced. Michiko used money from her father-in-law to buy a disused railway carriage on the south coast, haggling the price down from £3,000 to £2,750. She transformed it into a home using self-taught DIY skills.

She's lived there for 60 years and is now cared for by her daughter, Rachel. Though nearly deaf, Michiko's spirit remains fierce – she continued to drive until recently, when police impounded her car. She refused to get out – Michiko was furious.

Name: Zubeid Namigul
Country: Pakistan

Zubeid Namigul was born in Peshawar, Pakistan in 2000. His parents fled Afghanistan during the Soviet war and moved to the UK when Zubeid was seven. Today, he is an associate pathology practitioner at Charing Cross Hospital.

He graduated in biomedical sciences in 2022 and now works in cellular pathology, preparing tissue samples for diagnostic analysis. Coming from a traditional Muslim background, Zubeid was given the option of an arranged marriage. He met his future wife on Zoom, and over three years, they got to know each other remotely.

In 2021, Zubeid travelled to Afghanistan to meet and marry her in person. He planned to stay three months to sort her UK visa, but just 18 days in, on her birthday, the Taliban regained control. The couple were evacuated on a military plane in the chaos that followed.

Resettling in the UK has been challenging for Zubeid's wife, adjusting to a new culture after such a traumatic uprooting. But the birth of their daughter, now nine months old, has brought them joy and focus.

Zubeid's story reflects both resilience and quiet determination – a life shaped by global conflict, love across borders and the grounding presence of family.

Name: Dimitri Stefanov
Country: Bulgaria

Dimitri Stefanov's chandelier shop on London's King's Road is more than a showroom – it's a beacon. Born in Bulgaria, Dimitri didn't attend school much. At 14, he moved with his parents to Greece and worked in polytunnels (a type of greenhouse), a time he remembers fondly.

In 2009, he moved to the UK to join a friend who dealt in antique lighting. Though inexperienced, Dimitri quickly embraced the work, helping clean, restore and run the shop. His talent was spotted five years later by renowned chandelier maker Philip Turner, who mentored him in the art of restoration and creation.

In 2010, Dimitri salvaged old iron frames and was inspired by raw rock crystals tucked away in a friend's drawer. He crafted a chandelier that sold in three days. A pair of swan chandeliers followed – also snapped up immediately.

Encouraged by Philip, Dimitri began making his own designs and now ranks among the world's top rock crystal chandelier specialists. His clients include celebrities, royalty, Claridge's, Annabel's and even the Gaudí Museum in Barcelona.

Dimitri is Philip's legacy in the antique world, and creating chandeliers is his passion. Still, he smiles when recalling the quiet simplicity of life in the polytunnels.

Name: Sinead Stone (née Doherty)
Country: Ireland

Sinead Stone (née Doherty) is recently married, and still adjusting to her new name. She hails from Donegal, on Ireland's rugged northwest coast. Sinead grew up with her younger brother Eugene, a fisherman father and a carer mother – grateful for what she calls a "free" and joyful childhood.

The first in her family to attend university, Sinead studied children's and general nursing at Trinity College, Dublin. With no student loans in Ireland, she credits her hardworking parents for making it possible. Though creatively inclined, she chose nursing for its stability and family connection.

Initially drawn to palliative care, she found it too emotionally taxing and turned to paediatrics. In 2015, she was recruited to Great Ormond Street Hospital and later specialised as a paediatric allergy nurse. Though she misses the satisfaction of "making children better and sending them home", she enjoys the intensity of allergy testing and long-term care.

Sinead loves London – its energy, acceptance, and the freedom to develop her personal style. Once overwhelmed by its individuality, she now celebrates being "unapologetically yourself".

She channels her creativity into making flower crowns from discarded or found blooms. Breathing life into forgotten flowers, like nurturing young patients, sparks joy in her.

Name: Jama Elmi
Country: Somalia

Jama Elmi moved to the UK from Somalia at age eight, fleeing the civil war with his family. His father, a former ambassador to the UK, secured their resettlement. Adjusting to life in London was tough until Jama, aged nine, wore pink trousers and a Hawaiian shirt to school. Then, "all the kids came flocking".

In 2018, riding the Central Line, Jama looked around and saw only grey and black. Frustrated, he went shopping and reignited his love for bold fashion. Today, he owns nearly 90 colourful suit combinations.

Jama works as a mental health support worker. He wore his rainbow suit to the job interview and residents loved it. One by one they walked in, complimenting his look – some even hugged him. "The boss lady" hired him on the spot.

His suits now serve a therapeutic purpose. Residents pick colours for him to wear and, when one resident stopped speaking, Jama arrived in an intentionally clashing outfit – sparking laughter and conversation again.

Outside work, Jama's flamboyant style spreads joy. He's stopped daily for photos and smiles, and was even named "London's Best Dressed Man". At home, he cares for his elderly mother, who only asks, "How much is this all costing you?".

Name: Elizabeth Akalawu
Country: Nigeria

Elizabeth Akalawu was born in Imo State, southeast Nigeria, to yam-farming parents. A gifted student, she trained in general nursing and midwifery, taught by Irish nurses to European standards. She came to the UK intending to stay two years – 60 years later, she's still here.

It wasn't easy at first. Homesick and underestimated, Elizabeth was told to retrain, despite her qualifications. "They laughed at me," she recalls. She resisted, but ultimately agreed to repeat one year to meet cultural expectations.

Elizabeth had always wanted to care for people, and nursing was a natural path. In the 1980s, working as a school nurse in Brent, she noticed Black parents often avoided parents' evenings – fearing discrimination. She began visiting families at home, encouraging them to attend. The initiative worked so well that school nurses across Brent followed suit, creating a shift in parent-school engagement.

Over 54 years, Elizabeth balanced motherhood and a nursing career. Though she once aspired to teach midwifery, raising four children and navigating systemic barriers limited her options. Still, she's proud of her impact – especially her home-visit campaign.

Elizabeth says life is easier now for her children and grandchildren. But her decades of service to the NHS speak volumes about her legacy.

Name: Neda Southgate
Country: Iraq

Neda Southgate (née Al Atar) was born in southern Iraq in 1963. One of 14 children, her father was a textile merchant. She was studying social sciences at Basrah University when Saddam Hussein began mass deportation of Shia Muslims, Neda's family among them.

The family's Iranian heritage meant their wealth and property were confiscated by the regime. Neda's mother had no Iranian heritage and serious health issues, so was permitted to stay in Iraq, but was forced to leave their family home. Neda never saw her mother again.

After brief imprisonment, Neda escaped through the desert to Iran, joining relatives already in exile. After three years, they fled Ayatollah Khomeini's regime to Syria. One of Neda's brothers was gravely ill and was aided to the UK by the Red Cross; he, in turn, helped additional family members join him there as refugees.

In the UK, Neda first worked in architecture, then pivoted to fashion, studying at Central St Martins. After having two children, she opened a nursery, which she later closed due to illness. A period of reflection led her to humanitarian work – first at the Martlets Hospice, then with the Alzheimer's Society.

Today, she runs her own business, Alzheimer's with Compassion, and it is when she spoke about working with people with Alzheimer's and dementia that she sat up and really came alive.

Name: Florent Charly Romain Bidois
Country: France

Florent Charly Romain Bidois was born in 1986, "just like Lady Gaga". Raised near Rennes, France, by working-class parents who were both cleaners, he always felt different. "I am a Breton through and through, a sailor, a traveller – an adventurer. I am Indiana Jones. Rennes was too small, and France too judgemental."

He came to London in 2011 for a pattern-cutting internship and immediately felt at home. Drawn by his love for the English language, he discovered a city where he could fully express himself. He now works in fashion retail and thrives in London's vibrant, inclusive energy.

In 2022, Florent was contestant #12 at the 50th anniversary of Alternative Miss World. He didn't win, but "won the heart of the people". Each month, he leads the "Colour Walk" in Old Spitalfields Market – a celebration of creativity and self-expression through fashion.

Florent identifies as male but defies gender norms through style. He doesn't tuck, pad or wear wigs. "I wear men's shirts and bow ties, women's dresses, heels and makeup. I become a creature – neither male nor female – an embodiment of my personality."

Often mistaken for a drag queen, he insists he'll only claim that title once he takes the stage – his next goal in this UK-enabled journey. ■

JJ Keith continues to look for first generation immigrants who have settled in the UK and are contributing or have contributed to the country culturally, socially, economically or who simply have a story to tell.

To view more of *Open Britain* or volunteer to take part, visit www.jjkeith.com or scan the QR code

EXPO 2025

UK Pavilion shines at Expo 2025 Osaka

Photo: Provided by the Department for Business and Trade

The RSA kicks off a global event series in London spotlighting UK–Japan ties

Words: Vicky Kington

On 28 April we launched the first in a series of four global events celebrating the UK Pavilion at Expo 2025, the World Expo taking place in Osaka until October.

RSA Chair Sir Loyd Grossman opened the packed event at RSA House (also broadcast online), followed by an introductory speech from Kyoichiro Kawakami, Economic Minister at the Japan Embassy, and a panel discussion on the importance of the creative industries.

The minister said the distinctive pavilion – which showcases the UK as a place of opportunity and collaboration – had already become a "beacon for visitors from Japan and across the globe". He added: "The UK holds a special place in the hearts of many Japanese people. People in Japan widely regard British products for their quality and excellence. It is my sincere hope that today's event is an opportunity for continuing the collaboration between our two countries in the arts and creative industries."

Speaking ahead of the event, Gareth Thomas, Minister for Services, Small Business and Exports, said that Expo 2025 provided a "golden opportunity" to showcase the UK's creative, digital and technology sectors. "This partnership with the RSA is an opportunity to deepen the already close relationship between the UK and Japan and show how our Plan for Change will support British businesses and sectors that will be proudly displayed at the UK Pavilion."

Fellows are encouraged to attend the remaining three co-hosted events – which will each involve a live link-up with Osaka – to hear fresh ideas emerging from the frontline of social innovation, equality, science and technology.

We are delighted to invite Japanese Fellows to join us for free at the UK Pavillion in Osaka. Fellows will receive complimentary admission on the days we are hosting our events. Bring a friend who is not yet an RSA Fellow and we can provide an exclusive discount for them to become a Fellow in Japan. For more information email: Jessica.robson@rsa.org.uk

5 August
Gender equity and justice: accelerating the pace of change
Hear from today's disruptors, influencers and innovators pressing for the rights of women and girls in the UK and internationally – and for a future where everyone has the ability to achieve their full potential.

15 September
The future of sustainability: regeneration rising
As we face the challenges of climate change, inequality and environmental degradation, to simply sustain is not enough. At this event, we will discuss what it means to strive for a regenerative world.

6 October
SDGs and beyond: UK climate leadership on the global stage
With the 2030 deadline for the Sustainable Development Goals fast approaching, the UK has made ambitious commitments to accelerate a just transition to net zero. Join this event to hear from global public thinkers and policymakers driving progress on climate action. ■

Above:
The UK Pavilion, which is inspired by children's toy building blocks

Scan the QR code to book your attendance at the next co-hosted World Expo event

Vicky Kington is the RSA's Director of Content and Communications.

MIXING MATTERS

New research by Neighbourly Lab provides deeper insight into the importance of diverse networks in fuelling upward mobility

Words: Marnie Freeman

Have you ever looked at the people in your life and thought about when you first connected? Perhaps they are classmates from school, friends from university, colleagues with whom you're still in touch? Maybe you know your neighbours, or have friends from a local sports activity or from helping out at a local community event. These networks of personal and group-based relationships really matter.

We know that social connections play a vital role in combatting the deepening crises of social isolation, political polarisation and economic inequality. Social connections also drive our levels of social capital – as explored in Issue 1 of *RSA Journal* this year, the ongoing work that is being carried out by Professor Raj Chetty and Opportunity Insights concluded that children from disadvantaged backgrounds in the US tend to achieve higher incomes in adulthood when they grow up in communities that foster more friendships between high- and low-income individuals.

Facebook friends: UK vs US

Neighbourly Lab is a non-profit research and innovation organisation with the mission to create stronger, more connected communities.

Inspired by the above-cited US data, and working in partnership with the RSA, BIT, Meta, Stripe Partners and researchers from Stanford and Opportunity Insights, we sought to explore whether similar patterns hold in the UK.

By looking at measures of social connection based on Facebook data for approximately 20 million UK residents (about 58% of the population aged 25–64) we estimated each person's income, social connections and the impacts of friendships between people from different income groups. The UK study also included in-depth, place-based research led by Neighbourly Lab. We explored the experiences of people living in different parts of the UK, giving us a textured understanding of their social connections or lack thereof, and how this looked 'in real life'.

Neighbourhood watch

The data revealed that the US research also holds true in the UK – communities with higher rates of friendship between low- and high-income individuals have higher rates of upward mobility. Low-income children who grow up in the top 10% of the most economically connected local authorities in England earn 38% more a year on average (£5,100) as adults relative to low-income children in the bottom 10% of local authorities. We sought to understand why that was, what conditions were in place and how social capital was experienced by a diverse set of residents.

To do so, we travelled to 15 locations across England – focusing on two neighbourhoods in each: Ealing in London, North Yorkshire, Birmingham and Southampton – to explore what was happening in areas of high or low connection. These pairs of neighbourhoods either had an abundance or deficit of social capital. The residents' experiences were illuminating and, in some instances, promising, giving us examples of place-based settings where cross-economic friendships form.

Making place-based change

The research team identified the key settings that are conducive for making these place-based changes: sports, exercise and hobby groups, and the workplace. This supports the data from Facebook which tells us that most friendships form locally and in schools, while sports and hobby groups promote cross-class friendship among their members.

We also learnt that sports and hobby groups need to be accessible, affordable, close to home, designed to accommodate different needs and offer a welcoming environment for newcomers. Specificity is key to expanding who these settings reach; they are most successful when people are provided with a clear and purposeful hook to bring them together under a shared understanding of what their involvement entails. Multi-use spaces and other ways to support communities are valuable in nurturing cross-economic friendships.

Workplace settings also invite different conditions for successful mixing, particularly when there is an organisational culture that wants to invest in its place, as well as its people, fostering a culture of equality throughout the organisation. Cross-economic friendships in the workplace are also supported by people living nearby, opportunities for socialising in local places together and participating in organised sports and activities.

Rising to the mobility challenge

We now have a job to do: to figure out what works to foster social capital and, in particular, how this can support people experiencing disadvantage. There is some cause for optimism, reasons to believe that we can design and develop interventions that build people's social capital and strengthen their social connections across lines of difference to support their economic mobility, and improve economic outcomes for a broader range of people in our communities.

The research team's ambition is that decision makers draw on the insights to increase cross-economic friendships for people through these settings, so that more low-income children and families can benefit from higher rates of upward mobility. This will be a challenge, one including multiple actors in different roles. It will invite collaboration, vision, participatory design and changes to policies.

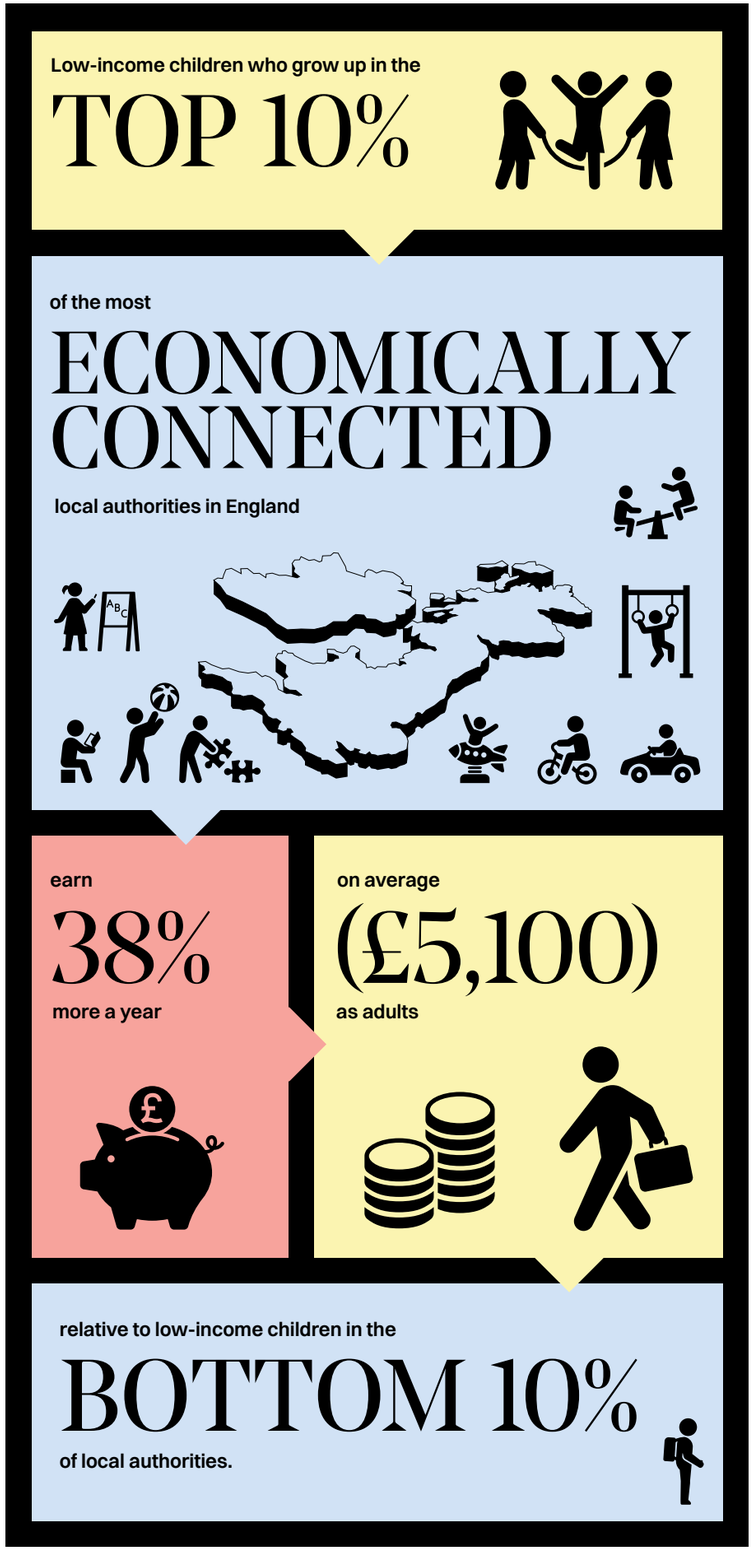
It is difficult, but not impossible. It is important. ■

This research was funded by the Nuffield Foundation. The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. Contributions from Meta are self-funded.

Marnie Freeman, FRSA, is Co-Founder and Director at Neighbourly Lab.

Dive deeper

Scan the QR code (or contact marnie@neighbourlylab.com) to learn more about the research. Neighbourly Lab is continuing to gather instances of settings that encourage mixing across lines of economic difference.



SOCIOLOGY

Myths of merit

When it comes to social mobility, we may be looking ahead – but are we hitting the mark?

Words: Will Snell

"You can make it if you try," said Barack Obama. But as American political philosopher Michael Sandel has observed, one problem with this meritocratic narrative is that people actually believe it, despite all evidence to the contrary. Those who have already 'made it' have a particular interest in believing it, because they can then justify their material success in terms of merit, talent and hard work. It also allows them to feel less guilty about people who have not done so well, because if they had the chance to succeed, yet still failed, surely that is their own doing?

Broadening horizons

The social mobility narrative is often used by politicians to paper over the cracks. They use it to justify a manifestly unequal society, claiming inequalities are somehow fair because they owe more to individual differences than to the broader structural forces – forces that propel some people forward while holding others back.

By speaking about merit and social mobility in the same breath, without acknowledging the influence of structural factors, politicians have gaslit the public and sown the seeds of a populist revolt. Unequal opportunities have bled into unequal economic outcomes, which in turn have fed a grinding sense of unfairness, an inequality of status and respect (in which people with less money are seen as somehow deserving of their situation) and an inequality of influence over politics.

Our overly individualistic way of thinking about the world doesn't help. As polling by the Fairness Foundation in 2023 showed, we tend to underestimate the role of luck (in the broader sense) in life. Not just falling under a bus or winning the lottery, but being born into great wealth or grinding poverty. Luck in terms of circumstances beyond our control.

Social mobility can be a useful concept but, like luck, is best thought of in broader terms. A narrow conception of social mobility that focuses on 'rags to riches' stories, and opening up access to elite universities and careers, doesn't work. We need to think about providing everyone with opportunities, not just a small number of exceptionally talented people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Compensating for barriers to opportunity is futile when, thanks to high levels of inequality, those barriers grow too high. Trying to do so forces these institutions to contort in ways that open them up to criticism from the right – hence the pushback against Diversity, Equity and Inclusion that is blowing in from the US.

Deep opportunity

Instead, we can think about social mobility in broader terms of opportunity for everyone (what we call deep opportunity), not just the most brilliant among us, and which doesn't require people to move across the country to realise their potential. Opportunity that rebuilds our tattered social contract so that everyone can enjoy a decent quality of life.

> **"Social mobility can be a useful concept but... is best thought of in broader terms"**

Realising this more ambitious objective requires dramatic reductions in socioeconomic inequality. As we showed in our Wealth Gap Risk Register, the absolute wealth gap between the richest and poorest in Britain increased by 50% between 2011 and 2019; this is damaging our economy, our society, our democracy and our environment, and is a fundamental barrier to opportunity as well as to economic growth. Reversing these negative feedback loops will require us to redistribute wealth, to distribute it more broadly at source, and to reduce the impacts of wealth inequality on people's life chances and outcomes.

Unfortunately, we are unlikely to see our political leaders taking the tough decisions needed without tackling the broken incentives that litter our political system, not least its chronic short-termism. The UK now has five overarching 'missions' to orientate policymaking across government and to look 10 years into the future. This is good, but 10 years is not far enough, especially in the context of the climate crisis. We need to be looking 50 years ahead, or more.

A new contract

Paradoxically, the more we talk about social mobility, with its implied promise of a better future, the more we are distracted from genuinely thinking and acting in the long term, and in the interests of future generations. It is beyond time for our political leaders to build a new intergenerational social contract.

Our recent report, Mission to the Future, examines why long-termism in politics is necessary for taking action on inequality (and for making significant, wide-ranging progress), what lies in its way and how to overcome these barriers. When it comes to solutions, we can look at the Welsh government's Wellbeing of Future Generations Act for inspiration, and the United Nations' Declaration on Future Generations. Setting up a Parliamentary Committee for Future Generations and integrating intergenerational assessments into legislative review, as recommended by the House of Commons Liaison Committee, would be a good first step.

We can all play a part in bringing about these changes. I ask you to echo these calls for a politics that genuinely grapples with long-term challenges. I also invite you to join us in challenging the pervasive and corrosive myth that we live in a meritocracy, by publicly acknowledging the role that luck has played in each of our lives, for better or for worse. ■

Photos: VD Photography / Unsplash, Isaac Quesada / Unsplash

Will Snell, FRSA, is Chief Executive of the Fairness Foundation. He founded Tax Justice UK in 2017, after working in government and international development.

Almost home

A powerful exhibit produced by Koestler Arts and curated entirely by incarcerated women reveals how creativity and second chances can transform lives

"Art saved my life."

Although I studied fine art, it was only when I came to work for prison arts charity Koestler Arts that I heard this statement regularly.

The power of the arts to improve our wellbeing, ability to learn, relationships and confidence is now well known; many of us are lucky enough to have experienced it ourselves. To imagine yourself differently – as a maker, writer, musician – and to focus on your positive traits – rather than past negative labels – can be the first step in rehabilitation.

Since 1962, Koestler Arts has been inspiring thousands of adults and children each year who are either in custody, on community sentences or on probation, to participate in the arts.

Koestler Arts also produces public exhibitions, events, publications and digital content, enabling the public to experience the hope, talent and potential in the criminal justice system. When it comes to staying crime-free after release from prison, communities play a pivotal role in helping individuals, offering second chances with employment, activities and housing.

From February to May this year, visitors to the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead encountered unique artwork emerging from prisons, secure hospitals and probation settings across the northeast of England.

Above left: ***Suitcase*****, HM Prison Northumberland, sculpture, 2024**

Above right: ***From Now On Love Time Out*****, HM Prison Northumberland, matchstick model, 2024**

Scan the QR code to experience the exhibition and to learn more about upcoming Koestler Arts events, exhibitions and publications

Unusually for shows in this major gallery, the exhibition's curators were six women serving sentences in the nearby HM Prison Low Newton. The women were supported in leading the project, selecting 70 pieces of fine art, music and writing from over 300 regional submissions.

The exhibition was named *Almost Home*, a meaningful title for those who have experienced imprisonment. The curators recognised that, for some people in prison, it could mean looking forward to release, but for others, it could refer to worries about isolation, housing, safety or money. One curator even pointed out that some people would say prison has become 'almost home', as they acclimatised to its structures and routines.

The pieces the group selected for exhibition reflected these differences and themes: a suitcase created from recycled leathers; ice lolly sticks and matches; and a matchstick clock for a mantlepiece, among others.

The exhibition serves as an excellent example of why we open the powerful, often privileged, role of curator to those with lived experience of imprisonment – this allows new connections and stories to emerge. These six women have produced not just a beautiful show, but one that tells individual stories, influences audiences and celebrates the power of the arts to change lives. ■

Fiona Curran, FRSA, is Chief Executive of Koestler Arts.

We would like to thank our corporate and strategic partners for their support across the RSA's work

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Fellowship

Photos: Photos of speakers at the Brighton Fellows Festival courtesy of RSA

FELLOWSHIP

Fourth Fellows Festival shows the power of connection

Fellows Festival 2025 proved to be the biggest, boldest and best yet, with gatherings taking place across the UK and in the US, Canada, Japan and Oceania.

Now in its fourth year, the Fellows Festival is the highlight of the RSA's event calendar. Twelve festival events took place – from 15 to 21 May – with Fellows meeting in person or online to hear from inspiring speakers, to collaborate and to co-create.

RSA Chief Executive Andy Haldane said that the festival's geographical range made the overall theme – the power of connection – particularly appropriate. "We started life as a coffee house – a place for bringing together people from different backgrounds, disciplines and professions to make good things happen. More than 270 years on, and that is still what we are doing."

The seven UK festival events examined different aspects of the power of connection. Here is a summary of what happened.

Bath: Southwest Fellows explored connection through an intergenerational exchange considering the question: what does the future ask of us? Participants enjoyed a reflective wander and a writing workshop, while producing a creative manifesto. Speakers included writer and poet Louisa Adjoa Parker, Founder of ROCsalt network Michael Hammer and House of Imagination Director Wayne Lindsay.

Birmingham: The Birmingham festival included contributions from David Leech and Mike Wistow – co-Founders of Wood for the Trees, who shared how they are connecting people with nature to inspire fresh thinking. Big Brum demonstrated the power of theatre to engage marginalised communities, while Kaleem Hussain brought together civic leaders to consider how we create more peaceful communities through local action.

Brighton: A key focus for Fellows at the Brighton festival was exploring regional prosperity through the lens of the RSA's Prosperous Places work, drawing on expertise across a range of sectors. Speakers included Tom Stratton, RSA Chief of Staff, Jacob Taylor, Deputy Leader of Brighton and Hove Council, Cara Courage, Culture, Communities and Place Consultant, and Lloyd Gofton, Director of the Sussex Dolphin Project.

Cardiff: Welsh Fellows explored the power of connection through poetry, prose and policy writing. Participants also considered body language, hearing loss, neurodiversity, the power of silence and being with nature. Speakers included poet Kate North, theatre director Iwan Brioc, author and poet Guinevere Clark, and Chair of the National Infrastructure Commission for Wales David Clubb.

Edinburgh: The power of connection could not have been stronger at the Fellows Festival in Edinburgh. Delegates heard from Professor Linda Bauld about health and policy in Scotland, author Sue Palmer on the importance of love and play in childhood and from the Playful Green Planet stewards about the work they are doing in Dundee.

London: The RSA's flagship festival event took place across RSA House, involving sessions in the Great Room and Durham Street Auditorium, plus an extensive fringe arts programme. Speakers included Baroness Armstrong, Chair of the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods, Patrick Hurley, MP for Stockport and Baroness Fox, Founder of the Academy of Ideas.

Manchester: The Manchester festival took place at Home Manchester, an arts centre, cinema and theatre complex. A wide range of speakers covered connection from the perspective of theatre, singing, dancing and the different 'masks' we wear for work and home. ■

Scan the QR code to watch sessions from the London festival at RSA House

An exhibition of *RSA Journal* covers can currently be viewed at RSA House. Highlights include copies of the covers of some of the earliest editions of the *Journal*. But the exhibition also showcases more recent *Journal* cover designs, such as the Astrid award-winning illustration of famous Fellows for the 270th anniversary issue. The exhibition, which was unveiled at the Fellows Festival, will have a semi-permanent presence – and will be updated over time.

CIRCLE

Join the discussion at Circle Live

We're excited to introduce Circle Live Events – a new way to bring communities together in real time, wherever they are. Built to foster deeper connection, learning and engagement, Circle Live Events allow Fellows to host dynamic, interactive experiences directly within the Circle platform.

Leading the way is the Responsible AI Network (RAIN), whose Circle Live Discussion Group and Book Club is already up and running and meeting on a monthly basis. Each session focuses on a book, research paper, report or news article suggested by network members.

Sessions are hosted by Tania Duarte, co-leader of RAIN, and you don't need to be an AI expert to join. Each RAIN Circle Live event aims to provide a space for learning, understanding different perspectives, and building community around a shared interest in ethical and responsible technology.

For topics beyond AI, monthly Circle Live events are being developed as 'Coffee House Drop-ins' – an informal online gathering inspired by the original RSA coffee house conversations. The sessions are a space for curious minds to connect, share and spark ideas.

Finally, plans are also under way for a *Journal* version of Circle Live. 'RSA *Journal* Conversations' will be a quarterly online gathering where Fellows from around the world come together to reflect on, unpick and explore a thought-provoking article from the latest *Journal*.

Head to Circle for more information on all Circle Live events. ■

Jess Robson is RSA Global Community Manager

Photo: stellalevi / iStock, Laura Aziz

AWARDS

More award wins for the *Journal*

The *Journal* has continued its winning streak of successes, by triumphing in the Astrid Awards, which recognise outstanding achievement in corporate design.

In total, the RSA and its publishing partner, Wardour, won four awards across Astrid's video and magazine cover categories: Grand Award and Gold Award for the *Journal*'s 'Can democracy survive AI' video (Issue 2 2024); Bronze Award for its Courageous Governance cover (Issue 2 2024); and Honours for its cover celebrating the RSA's 270th anniversary (Issue 1 2024).

Vicky Kington, RSA Director of Content and Communications, described the award successes as "another fantastic accolade" for the *Journal*.

"We are delighted that the design of the *Journal*'s videos and covers has been recognised in this way. It is a demonstration of the effort and inspiration that goes into the *Journal* – both in print and in its increasingly innovative digital output."

Over the past two years, the *Journal* has won in 12 categories at major global award programmes. It is also shortlisted in the 2025 Corporate Content Awards and Internal Communication and Engagement Awards – with both ceremonies taking place as this edition of the *Journal* was going to press. ■

RSA JOURNAL

Survey shows support for the *Journal*

The latest Reader Survey has shown strong support for the *Journal*, with 88% of respondents describing it as an important part of their Fellowship.

For the 2024/25 survey, 12% considered the *Journal* an 'extremely important' component of their Fellowship, 31% said it was 'very important', 34% of 'average importance' and 12% 'slightly important'.

Fellows agreed that the *Journal* is accessible, includes high-quality design and content, introduces new ideas and new writers, updates readers on the RSA's work and inspires involvement with the RSA.

The survey also confirmed that Fellows want to be able to read the *Journal* both in print and online. Forty-two per cent of respondents said their preference was for both formats, while 34% selected 'print only' and 20% 'digital only'.

However, the survey also showed that 48% of respondents have never accessed a *Journal* article online. We are aiming to significantly reduce this percentage and, in response to the feedback, will be launching a brand new digital title in July. In answer to open questions in the survey, Fellows praised the *Journal*'s high-profile interviews, suggesting that the recent redesign of the print publication had made the content more engaging and accessible.

We want to thank all those Fellows that took the time to complete the survey. This month we launch the new Journal website, visit today to enjoy a brand-new Journal experience: www.rsa.org.uk ■

How important is the *Journal* as part of your felllowship?

Extremely important	12%
Very important	31%
Of average importance	34%
Slightly important	12%
Not at all important	12%

MENTORING

Mentoring scheme extended

The age range for those taking part in the RSA's Fellowship Mentoring Programme has been extended to include those aged up to 35 years old in response to Fellow demand and feedback, and also to increase the impact of the programme.

Introduced in October 2024, the Mentoring Programme allows mentees to gain one-on-one guidance from an experienced Fellow, while mentors help shape future leaders and contribute to an intergenerational exchange of ideas. It has proved a very popular initiative with more than 150 Fellows volunteering to become mentors.

Previously, the focus has been on supporting mentees aged 18–25, but now mentorship can be accessed by young professionals aged 26–35.

Those Fellows already registered as mentors should consider updating their profiles to add 'young professionals' to their choice of mentorship. Meanwhile, Fellows aged 26–35 who would like to register as mentees should do so as soon as possible so they can be matched with a mentor and begin their mentoring journey. ■

NETWORKS

Network relaunched to address international development challenges

The RSA's International Development Network has relaunched after a long period of dormancy. At a time of major global disruption and a critical turning point for international development, the network has been revived so that those working in the field can come together to discuss the pressing challenges we face.

Three relaunch events have already taken place, with more than 150 Fellows, policy leaders and practitioners joining from across continents to explore what is at stake and what must come next. A strong message emerged: the current aid model is no longer fit for purpose.

But this moment also presents a generational opportunity to rethink global cooperation, which is where Fellows can contribute. The three network leads – Oz Hassan, Alan Harding and Ian Thomas – are now gathering ideas for the next phase of events from September 2025.

According to Hassan: "The RSA's Coffee House tradition offers an ideal forum for probing, transdisciplinary exchanges – connecting insights and innovations from across the Fellowship."

Current ideas being considered are an event highlighting women-led grassroots projects, a session exploring the role and perspectives of development agencies in Asia-Pacific, and an end-of-year celebration. ■

Those on Circle can scan the QR code to join the International Development Network

FELLOWSHIP CONNECT

Explore opportunities to connect online:

- @thersaorg
- @theRSAorg
- @thersaorg
- Fellows' LinkedIn group linkedin.com groups/3391

Email the Fellowship Services team at fellowship@rsa.org.uk or call +44 (0)207 451 6939

CIRCLE OF FELLOWSHIP

Join Circle today and get your conversation started:
To activate your Circle account, log in through My RSA via the RSA website. Your global community awaits.

To get started, scan the QR code or visit *thersa.org/fellowship/community-platform*

FREE CO-WORKING SPACES AVAILABLE

There are 12 co-working locations available across the UK where non-London-based Fellows can work for free – and we regularly add new venues.

For the latest information, please scan the QR code

Photo: Hilch / iStock

It can be harder to stand up for yourself than for everyone else

Words:
Isaac Harvey

What does it mean to have a voice? Not in the way of speaking or creating content, but in how I show up for myself when it really matters. Especially when dealing with local authorities and trying to secure basic support. I've started to see just how different it can be to use your voice for others versus using it for yourself.

I've always understood advocacy – I've done it for years. But self-advocacy is different. Speaking out for the wider disability community feels easier than speaking out for myself and my own disabilities. When I advocate for others, I share stories, raise awareness and so much more. But when I have to advocate for myself, it means talking about everything that I can't do in my own life. And that can become challenging.

To access everything that I am entitled to means having to say things that make me uncomfortable. I've had to share my vulnerabilities, again and again, with people who often don't listen. Or be punished for showcasing what I can do. I have a platform that allows me to be seen and heard, but so many don't. Or, if they do, it doesn't carry the weight it should.

Voice is not just about speaking. It can also be written. It can be shown through creativity or quiet determination. I've used it in blogs, videos and public speaking engagements – moments where I've tried to turn difficult experiences into something that might help someone else feel less alone. And even though those moments are meaningful, they don't take away how hard it is to keep fighting for your own rights.

There's also this strange disconnect between being seen as 'inspirational' in public and being questioned behind closed doors about whether I really need help. My voice has helped me achieve high accolades, including receiving an MBE. Yet in the same breath, I still can't secure the basics. A lack of communication from systems meant to help suggests that they're not using their voices appropriately.

So yes, I've used my voice to advocate. To self-advocate. To raise awareness. To create change. But I've also used it to survive. When we advocate effectively, we create pathways of opportunity, mobility not just for ourselves, but for communities who have long been limited by silence and systemic barriers.

Maybe that's what voice is really about. Not just being heard but being believed. Not just having something to say, but seeing actionable steps being put in place.

And maybe the real question is: if even the loudest voices are dismissed, what happens to the ones that are barely heard? ■

Isaac Harvey MBE is a disability advocate, creator and speaker who uses his voice to challenge systems, share lived experiences and amplify the voices of others who too often go unheard.

voice

WELCOME TO MUSE AT RSA HOUSE

Muse at RSA House is a new bar designed for Fellows and friends to enjoy delicious cocktails in our historic London home. Launched in November 2024, Muse is London's newest cocktail oasis.

In line with the RSA's regenerative charitable mission, our dedicated team of bartenders focus on traceability and sustainability, breaking down the provenance of each drink, from cocktail ingredients to wines and spirits, through to our selection of delicious British ciders.

Monday-Friday, 4PM - 11PM. Walk-ins welcome, reservations recommended.

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