

Designing Work for Britain's Longevity Society: From Invisible Costs to Competitive Advantage

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A False Choice

On 8 April 2018, I faced the choice no daughter should ever have to make: my career or my father's care. He was living with dementia, and the system made it clear: you could show up at work, or you could show up for him. But not both.

This is not just my story. It is the story of millions across Britain. We have built workplaces as if care did not exist. And yet the economy already runs on care. We simply refuse to see it.

How We Got Here: The History of Work Without Care

Every era has redesigned work—but always for productivity, rarely for care.

The Industrial Revolution gave us factories: rigid schedules, repetitive tasks, humans as extensions of machines. Productivity soared, but family and community were pushed outside the gates.

The post-war welfare state rebuilt Britain with new ideals: dignity, equality, transparency. Offices reflected this: narrow buildings where everyone had access to daylight, cellular layouts that embodied fairness. But that design assumed women were at home providing unpaid care.

In the **1970s the “combi-office”** in Scandinavia balanced private rooms with communal areas, mirroring societies striving for openness. Yet “the worker” was still imagined as care-free.

The **1980s–1990s open-plan** pushed by IT and Taylorism flattened offices into efficiency machines. Flexibility grew, but the individual became smaller, more fragmented.

The **2020s hybrid era** blurred home and work, accelerated by the pandemic. Remote work offered flexibility, but also new strains: cognitive overload, disconnection, fragmentation. The rise of the **four-day week** began to disrupt rhythms—but schools, nurseries and elder-care systems remain on five-day schedules.

And now, **artificial intelligence**. It will transform industries. But let's be clear: AI can read scans, but it cannot comfort patients. It can process payroll, but it cannot hug a child or guide an elder through dementia. Every redesign of work has pursued efficiency. None has redesigned it for care. That is the failure Britain must now correct.

The Scale of the Challenge

The numbers are stark:

In Britain, around **5.4 million people (about 8% of the UK population)** were providing informal care in 2023/24. [House of Commons Library+1](#)

According to the Census 2021, across **England and Wales, 9.0% of usual residents aged 5 years or over provided unpaid care**—down from 11.4% in 2011—but there was a shift toward higher hours of caring. [Office for National Statistics+1](#)

Carers UK reports that **nearly 3 million** of those in employment who are carers work part-time, compared with 29% of non-carers; and that many have given up work to care. [Carers UK](#)

The adult social care workforce in England alone reached **1.705 million filled posts** in 2023/24, an increase of about 70,000 from the previous year—but with **around 131,000 vacant posts**. [Skills for Care+2Care England+2](#)

These figures show care is not marginal. It is structural infrastructure of Britain's economy—yet remains invisible in national accounts and many corporate strategies.

The hidden costs are enormous: for example, costs of informal care in England in 2019 were **estimated at £54.2 billion**, three times larger than formal long-term care expenditure. [PubMed](#)

The Invisible Care Penalty

Economists call it the “**ageing parent penalty**”.

Britain follows a mixed-market model of care — a blend of family reliance, private provision, and limited state support. Informal carers, mostly women, continue to shoulder the majority of responsibility, contributing an estimated **£162 billion** of unpaid care each year — almost equivalent to total NHS spending.

Over four-fifths of formal adult social care is delivered by private or voluntary providers under local authority contracts. This model offers flexibility but also fragments access, creating stark regional inequalities and financial strain for families.

The challenge now is to redesign this hybrid system — one that sustains both equality and productivity, and recognises care as economic infrastructure rather than a private burden.

The Myth of the Standard Worker

Despite this evidence, most workplaces still operate as if life happens elsewhere.

But reality looks like this:

- Parents juggling multi-week school holidays with full-time jobs.
- Adult children using “sick leave” to manage dementia care.
- Middle-aged workers—the “sandwich generation”—supporting both children and parents during their most productive career years.

Leaders who ignore this are not protecting productivity. They are **exporting costs** — onto families, women, and public budgets.

Why This Matters for Democracy

Demography is not just economics. It is politics.

When citizens feel abandoned between impossible work and impossible duties, **trust in institutions collapses**.

Inter-generational solidarity frays.

Extremist voices gain ground by exploiting this frustration.

The **inter-generational contract**—the foundation of a stable society—cannot survive if we continue to ignore the care crisis at the heart of work.

Britain's Partial Response

Britain has taken vital steps, but much remains to be done.

The **Employment Relations (Flexible Working) Act 2023** introduced improved rights to request flexible working from day one of employment, a positive move.

The **Carer's Leave Act 2023** created a statutory right to up to five days of unpaid leave for carers—an important recognition of the hidden workforce.

Yet implementation remains uneven: the adult social care vacancy rate remains high, and informal carer support is patchy across regions.

For example, of **660,460 people receiving long-term** local authority provided or organised adult social care in England as at 31 March 2024, **483,255 were supported in the community**, with 387,420 aged 65 or over. [GOV.UK+1](#)

Unless acceleration occurs, Britain may risk leaving millions of workers unsupported and many employers unprepared.

From Cost to Competitiveness

The economic case is overwhelming.

Employers offering supportive care-benefits programmes—such as onsite childcare, elder-care help or flexible time—report stronger retention and productivity gains.

At the macro level: every pound not invested in care is a pound lost in productivity. For instance, adults providing unpaid care are more likely to work part-time or leave employment—38% of carers in employment work part-time, compared with 29% of non-carers. [Carers UK](#)

Care is not charity. **Care is hard infrastructure** for Britain's competitiveness.

Organisations that invest in care-integrated workplaces are effectively investing in human capital and longevity economy advantage.

The Porto Dome Vision and Mission

Imagine a world where business-organised inter-generational day-care services have become the norm.

In this world:

- Parents—especially women—are freed from the impossible double burden of full-time work and caring.
- Older adults are less lonely, supported with dignity, and enjoy meaningful time with children.
- Children learn and play with elders, developing empathy, respect, and resilience.
- Companies benefit from a stable, skilled and satisfied workforce.
- Public health systems save by reducing sick leave and delaying costly institutional care.
- Day-care providers evolve into inter-generational hubs, developing pedagogical models that enrich all ages

This is not a dream. It is a design choice.

Inter-generational contact is one of the three proven strategies to combat ageism—alongside policy reform and education. ageing-better.org.uk+1

By embedding inter-generational practice into workplaces, Britain can directly tackle loneliness, ageism, and workforce shortages in one integrated model.

Provocations: Where This Could Land in Britain

Let's provoke a little. Where could care-integrated workplaces land today?

- **Public institutions:** Government is among Britain's largest employers—with many under-utilised buildings in prime locations. What if ministries, regional offices and public agencies integrated childcare, elder-care, and shared inter-generational clubs?
- **Hospitals:** By 2030 the NHS England workforce faces severe strain. [NHS England Digital+1](#) What if hospitals became care hubs for staff as well as patients?

Why inter-generational?

Because loneliness is killing us. One in four older adults in Britain reports feeling lonely most of the time. Young people, too, face record isolation post-pandemic. Shared spaces across generations are a proven antidote. [OUP Academic+1](#)

The Porto Dome Moonshot

This is the vision of Porto Dome:

1. Start with childcare.
2. Add elder-care.
3. Connect them through inter-generational clubs.
4. Embed it into the workplace.

Not utopia. Architecture meeting policy.

Care, work and dignity co-located.

It is a model for Britain's next competitive edge.

Policy Levers for Britain

To make this systemic, Britain must:

1. Incentivise Care-Integrated Workplaces

Use public investment and tax reliefs to co-finance pilots. Offer ESG-recognition and business tax credits for employers who retrofit spaces or provide on-site care.

2. Close the Data Gap

Mandate the Office for National Statistics and DWP (Department for Work and Pensions) to track care-related workforce losses as standard labour indicators. Care-related absenteeism is still hidden inside "sickness".

3. Accelerate Support for Informal Carers

Monitor not just eligibility but take-up of carer's leave, respite care and community services. Ensure provision extends to rural and industrial regions—not just metropolitan hubs.

4. Reimagine Long-Term Care

Move from institutionalisation to community-based inter-generational models. Scale pilots across local authorities and embed them in national social investment policy.

5. Make Care a Pillar of Industrial Strategy

Place care alongside digitalisation, net-zero and skills as a core pillar of Britain's competitiveness. Care is economic infrastructure, not just a social policy after-thought.

A Call to Lead

Britain has the talent, creativity and purpose to lead this transformation.

The question is whether we will watch others build the future of care-integrated work — or choose to lead it.

Could Britain be the first to run this pilot worldwide, in a time when change is not just needed, but demanded?

Conclusion: Designing for Dignity

Britain is running out of imagination. We can cling to the myth of the “standard worker” and watch solidarity and competitiveness erode.

Or we can face the truth: care is not a cost. It is the backbone of the future economy.

If we fail, demographic winter will shrink our workforce, deepen inequality and weaken our democracy. If we succeed, Britain can lead the world in pioneering competitiveness built on dignity.

The question is not whether we can afford to integrate care into work.

The question is whether we can afford not to.

About the Autor

Marisa Toldo is an architect and visionary founder of [Porto Dome](#), pioneering workplace models that unite care, community, and meaningful work.

A moment with her father, living with dementia, smiling back at a child on a swing reshaped her vision of design — revealing how deeply environments connect generations.

With more than 25 years leading projects across Europe and Latin America, her mission is simple yet radical: to make elder care as normal as childcare at work — and to help build an intergenerational economy where careers and care thrive together.

Connect with Marisa on [LinkedIn](#) or via her [website](#).

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