

SOFT DRINKS TAX HELPED TO PREVENT 5,000 NEW CASES OF OBESITY IN ENGLAND
see page 6



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OVER A YEAR SINCE FLEEING UKRAINE REFUGEES EXPLAIN HOW LIFE HAS CHANGED
see page 10

**SURVIVORS OF POLICE DOMESTIC
ABUSE SPEAK OUT FOLLOWING
CARRICK REVELATIONS**

see page 4



IN THIS ISSUE

4-5 Survivors of domestic abuse by police speak out following Carrick revelations

6-7 'Sugary drinks tax' resulted in a drop in child obesity levels, research reveals

8 Welfare reforms fuelling rise in evictions

9 Taliban LGBT+ violence escalates



30 Padel tennis builds momentum in London

31 Champion crowned at world's fastest ball game

32-35 The rise of women's rackets in a minority sport dominated by men



10-13 "A new reality": How Ukrainian lives have changed since Russia's invasion

14 Most Britons don't think there's gender equality in the UK workplace

15 The Kingston hub helping tackle climate change

16-17 Employees are more productive at home than a usual office, data reveals

18-19 Young Londoners are being encouraged to join construction apprenticeships to build the future



36-39 AFC Wimbledon top points-dropped chart confirming another dismal league season

40 Fixture congestion chaos in the CCL

41 From PE teacher to PL academy coach

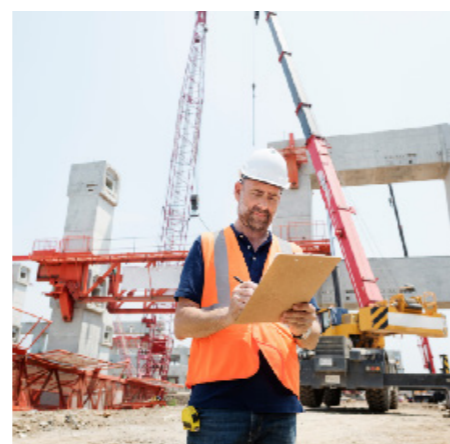
42-43 AFC Wimbledon Women miss out on promotion despite successful season

20-23 London's Korean fashion wave

24 Side hustle takes on fashion week

25 Young boy to star in new Peter Pan

26-29 Fast fashion v pre-loved: The fashion industry's impact on our environment



Survivors of domestic abuse by police speak out following Carrick revelations

by Oliver Murphy

When Sarah's ex kicked her to the ground in a fit of rage after years of physical and psychological abuse, she knew she had to escape.

Having met at work, it was when her then-partner joined the police that she noticed the scale and severity of her abuse begin to worsen.

In one particularly vicious attack, Sarah's abuser sunk his teeth so far into her neck it left a permanent scar on a body already covered in bruises.

"I had to start taking anti-anxiety medication because he was just always in my head. If something happened it was my fault that he hit me, and eventually I started having panic attacks," she told SWL.

"I was always too scared to voice the abuse myself because when prior attacks had happened he told me that nobody would believe me, that I was crazy and that I'd lost the plot.

"I fell into a downward spiral and had to take a lot of time off work as I didn't know what was real anymore. I didn't know who to talk to because I feared they wouldn't

believe me.

Although she had photographic evidence, the 34-year-old, whose name has been changed to protect her identity, couldn't bring herself to report her

abuser, and it was only by a friend coming forward that an investigation was eventually launched.

She said: "He knew all the loopholes because of his position,

and I remember one of the first police officers I dealt with telling me domestic abuse is difficult to prove.

"So from the moment go, it was almost as if there was no point in trying to prove what he had done to me as it was clear even the police were going to struggle to protect me."

Sarah is just one of a number of women to describe severe cases of domestic abuse and instances of police officer partners using their professional knowledge to intimidate them from coming forward.

Freedom of Information figures obtained from the UK's 41 police forces reveal close to 1,100 allegations of domestic abuse have been levelled against serving police officers in the last five years.

Just last month, the Home Secretary, Suella Braverman, warned more cases involving corrupt police officers may emerge following the shocking revelations of David Carrick's horrific crimes.

Carrick, a former armed officer in the Parliamentary and Diplomatic Protection Command was revealed as one of the country's most prolific serial rapists admitting more than 48 rapes against 12 women over

an 18-year period.

However, this is not the first case to raise questions over how officers accused of misconduct are investigated, with the murder of Sarah Everard highlighting serious failings within the Met to sufficiently probe allegations.

Acknowledging significant public concern following the investigation into Everard's death, a review conducted by Baroness Casey revealed the protection of women had been "thrown out of the window by the Metropolitan Police.

Last year, a joint inquiry comprising the College of Policing and Independent Office for Police Conduct criticised police forces for their responses to domestic abuse claims against serving officers.

In a 135-page report, the watchdog revealed not all forces were treating cases of police perpetrated domestic



POWER AND CONTROL: Rebecca Goshawk warns police officers can use their position to silence victims. Credit: Solace Women's Aid

abuse with the "gravity they deserve" with just 9% of allegations resulting in criminal charges.

In response, the Centre for Women's Justice published a 12-point plan focusing specifically on what must change to tackle domestic abuse perpetrated by police officers and restore trust in policing.



FALLING SHORT: The Metropolitan Police is one of a number of forces found to have not taken allegations of domestic abuse seriously. Credit: Met Police

or personal histories of women, which they may then use to abuse, control or silence their victim. They can also convince survivors that they won't be believed or that they will stop them getting help."

Despite being questioned by officers and handing over photographic evidence of her injuries, the case against Sarah's perpetrator was closed with no further action.

Thankfully, the single mum was eventually able to separate from her ex who continues to serve as a police officer, but this hasn't stopped him from ramping up his abuse.

She said: "I couldn't believe that they were taking him more seriously, despite the evi-

dence I had. Once they declared no further action, he then put in a counter claim that I was an abuser which they took more seriously.

"Even now, he continues to harass me. After two years of separation from him, I entered a new relationship and soon started receiving intimidating, hand-written letters from him even though I'd moved house.

"If I see a police car drive past I'm always on edge, but whenever I ring the police, I feel like they're telling me I'm crazy, so I've come to accept that reporting incidents to the police isn't going to get me anywhere.

Nikki Scordi, Chief Executive of the char-

ity, Advance, said: "If you're a police officer, you're an individual who has power and control as part of the authority of your job description.

"Survivors tell us again and again that all they want is to be safe and for the abuse to stop, but if they see, in the context of police perpetrated domestic abuse, that the person abusing them is allowed to continue in their role, they'll lose trust in the criminal justice system.

"We need to see the introduction of an external mechanism to ensure there is oversight when officers are investigated and there should be a central review of how domestic abuse is reported."



CORRUPT: Home Secretary Suella Braverman warned cases similar to the horrific crimes perpetrated by David Carrick may emerge. Credit: Simon Dawson

DAVID CARRICK

- 2001: Carrick joins the Met despite being a suspect of burglary against a former partner
- 2002: Carrick accused of assault against a former partner. Investigation closed without arrest
- 2003: Carrick rapes first known victim and imprisons her in his home (reported later)
- 2004-09: Carrick admits to sex attacks against five women during this period
- 2009: Carrick promoted to parliamentary and diplomatic protection unit
- 2015: Carrick commits another rape (reported later)
- 2017: Carrick rapes another woman and imprisons her in his home (reported later)
- 2019: Carrick accused of assaulting a woman. Ruled no case to answer
- 2021: A woman reports rape to Hertfordshire Police. Arrested and placed on restricted duties

Source: Centre for Women's Justice

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES: Carrick was not investigated or subjected to fresh vetting despite a rape allegation in 2021

'Sugary drinks tax' resulted in a drop in child obesity levels, research reveals

by Honor Cockcroft

The implementation of the soft drinks industry levy, known as the 'sugary drinks tax', resulted in a drop in the level of child obesity in England, research reveals.

Research led by University of Cambridge's Medical Research Council's (MRC) Epidemiology Unit concluded that the levy may have prevented over 5,000 cases of obesity among older primary school children.

Announced in the 2016 budget following pressure from campaigners including chef Jamie Oliver, the levy was designed by former Chancellor George Osborne to incentivise drinks man-

ufacturers to reduce their sugar content.

Nina Rogers, 43, the study's first author said: "What we found was that barely two years after the sugar tax was implemented in April 2018, there was a reduction in the levels of obesity overall in the population and specifically in girls in year six."

"We know from our research that people's sugar consumption has gone down as a result of the levy and it has health benefits beyond that of tackling obesity."

The study tracked changes in the obesity levels of one million children in state-maintained English primary schools in reception and year six from before and after the sugar

tax came into effect.

It found that there was an 8% relative reduction in obesity in girls aged 10-11, the equivalent of preventing 5,234 cases of obesity per year.

There was also a 9% relative reduction in the levels of obesity of children from the most deprived areas.

The levy had no consistent effect on the obesity level in reception age children, who drink more fruit and milk-based drinks than soft drinks, and year six boys, who may be more targeted by, and susceptible to, marketing campaigns.

Rogers said: "There has been an improvement in obesity but I don't think we will continue to see an increase in better health



SUGARY DRINKS TAX: Research has revealed how the soft drinks industry levy has helped reduce levels of child obesity in the UK since its implementation in April 2018

unless they include more drinks in the levy.

"There is more that can be done that is not necessarily focused on drinks, maybe they should be looking at other types of foods and drinks."

"The levy is not just a silver bullet, there is lots more to address."

A Government spokesperson from HM Treasury said: "The Government keeps all taxes under review and will continue to monitor the impact of the Soft Drinks Industry Levy in line with public health objectives, such as tackling obesity."

According to the

UK Research and Innovation public body, young people in the UK consume 40g more sugar than the recommended 30g amount, a large proportion of which comes from sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs).

This leads to one third of children leaving primary school being overweight or obese, which later transcends to two-thirds of adults living above a healthy weight, based on Gov.UK figures.

Obesity is linked to serious health problems including high blood pressure, Type 2 diabetes and depression, and costs the NHS over £6bn annu-

ally.

A study on Gov.UK said obesity prevalence is also highest among the most deprived groups in society, with deprived children more likely to consume SSBs and twice as likely to be obese as their wealthier peers.

Greenhouse Sports is a charity that partners with London schools to bring sports coaching, nutrition workshops and mentoring to disadvantaged and disengaged children who face these health inequalities.

The charity functions in schools where it has been identified that two thirds of individuals are in financial

deprivation.

Basketball coach Teni Wood, 26, said: "We focus on breaking misconceptions about food that can become the gateway to eating disorders, and promoting healthy eating in children that set them up for their life ahead."

"No food is bad in the right quantity, it is about having the sufficient amounts of nutrients and the right kinds of nutrients."

The semi-professional basketball player added: "Coming off the back of Covid, a lot of young people missed out on developing motor skills and weren't involved in regular sport and exercise."

"I wanted to give back to the young people what I had from my experiences growing up and finding basketball. I know how much

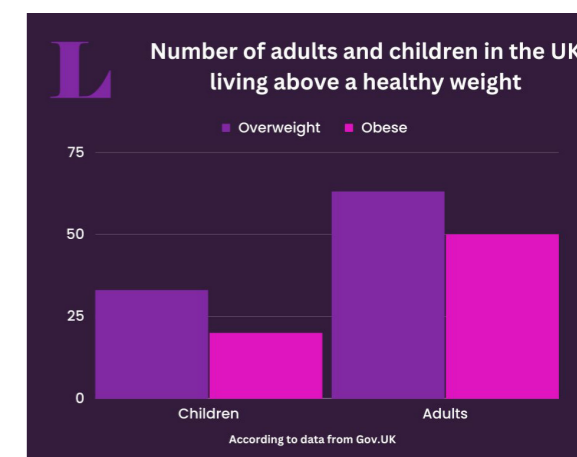
it meant to me and how much it changed the course of my life."

"Considering the backgrounds they come from and challenges they face I think it's absolutely essential that we are here as an extra layer of support and a safety net for these young people."

As a result of the levy, the average sugar content of soft drinks decreased by 46% from 2015-2020, according to the Department of Health and Social Care.

Additionally, the industry saw an overall sales increase of 21% due to an increase in the purchase of drinks containing less than 5g of sugar per 11ml.

Whilst many traders reduced the sugar content in their products as a result of the levy, 450 registered to pay



A HEALTH EPIDEMIC: Obesity is a major factor affecting the wellbeing of adults and children in the UK

the tax instead.

Statistics from HMRC reveal that soft drinks manufacturers paid over £970m in tax from 2019-2022.

This revenue raised is used by the Government to fund PE activities and breakfast clubs in primary schools across the UK.

Moving Matters is a local organisation fighting to reduce child obesity levels and promote healthy living in school-age children.

The physical education company works with over 70 schools across Lambeth, Wandsworth, Croydon, Southwark, Bromley and Lewisham providing children with positive learning experiences to inspire a lifelong commitment to health and fitness.

Director Rob Wilkin-

son, 43, said: "There are many factors into childhood obesity including the sedentary culture of inactivity, portion sizing and the huge amount of sugar and salt that goes into processed food."

"The Government has funded PE very well over the last few years but healthy eating is often ignored as part of the education process for children."

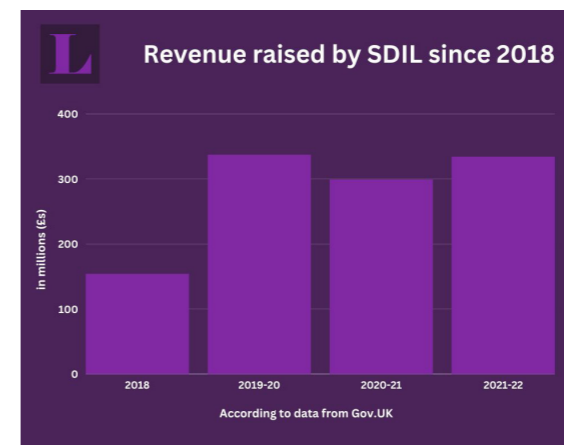
Wilkinson draws attention to the cost of living crisis which is forcing the hand of those less fortunate towards even more unhealthy and processed foods.

He added: "We want to impact children to be healthier and more active. Early years development is crucial in that."

"The conversation on nutrition needs to start earlier than it does."



A NEW TAX FOR HEALTH: Former Chancellor George Osborne included the levy in his 2016 budget. Credit: UK Parliament via Flickr



BY-PRODUCT: The revenue raised by the levy is being channelled back into health programmes

Welfare reforms fuelling evictions

by Oliver Murphy

Government reforms to welfare have fuelled a rise in homelessness across London with the cost-of-living crisis pushing households towards eviction, campaigners have warned.

According to The London Renters' Union, a grassroots organisation campaigning for a fairer housing market, Universal Credit claimants are at greater risk of losing their home as spiralling rents stretch household incomes.

Freedom of Information figures obtained by SWL from 15 London Borough councils reveal more than 24,000 households in receipt of

Universal Credit approached their authority as homeless between 2019 and 2022.

Siobhán Donnachie, a campaigns officer at The London Renters' Union, told SWL: "Universal Credit plays a huge role in homelessness, with rents rising faster than incomes and passing inflation.

"People who receive Universal Credit are much more vulnerable to unaffordable rents, especially when waiting for their monthly payments. Often not being able to pay your rent means a risk of eviction, and ultimately homelessness.

She added: "We need to massively increase the supply of

social housing and council housing because a lot of people don't have any other option than to privately rent, which is often not suitable for many reasons."

A range of factors, including five-week waits for payments, sanctions and automatic deductions of energy bills, can push households into financial difficulties, especially if a claim is likely to have followed a job loss.

Research published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2020, established a link between Universal Credit and poverty, with the five-week wait cited as the aspect most likely to result in householdsexperiencing financial difficulty.



PRICED OUT: The London Renters' Union's Siobhán Donnachie warns Universal Credit claimants are at greater risk of losing their home. Credit: LRU

Last July, a study published by the University of Sussex revealed the introduction of Universal Credit had cost society £465 million, resulting in more than 6,000 home repossessions.

Using data covering periods before and after reform, the study also found the transition from the legacy system of welfare payments to Universal Credit contributed to more than 35,000 burglaries and 25,000 car thefts.

Matthew May, a helpline adviser for the charity Porchlight, said: "People are being priced out of housing, and Universal Credit is playing a large part, especially the difficulties

individuals face within the system.

"People aren't receiving enough money to be able to maintain a normal lifestyle as most of their money gets eaten up by housing costs, and as the cost of everything else increases, most people aren't able to manage anymore."

He added: "This is having a significant impact not just financially, but mentally. I don't think I ever speak to anybody who has not suffered quite dramatically with mental health. The amount of calls we take relating to suicide is quite extraordinary which means we have to intervene as a lot of people can't see a way out of their situation."



HOMELESSNESS: Campaigners warn rising costs are pushing households into debt. Credit: Garry Knight

Taliban's LGBT+ violence escalates

by Oliver Murphy

Campaigners have urged the government to ramp-up efforts to evacuate members of Afghanistan's LGBT+ community amid reports of escalating Taliban violence.

It follows the publication of a Human Rights Watch report last year which found the lives of LGBT+ Afghans had become 'dramatically worse' since the militant group seized power in August 2021.

According to Freedom of Information figures obtained from the Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office in November last year, the UK resettled just

97 LGBT+ Afghans out of the 21,450 refugees relocated since the fall of Kabul.

Peter Tatchell, Director of the Peter Tatchell Foundation, said: "The government promised to give refuge to LGBT+ Afghans at risk of murder by the Taliban, including some who aided British forces, but so far it has given refuge to less than 100.

"This is all the more shocking when our government knows that LGBTs are being hunted, arrested, tortured, raped and executed by Taliban death squads. It must honour its pledge to protect vulnerable LGBT+ Afghans."

Last year, the Foreign Affairs Select

Committee condemned the UK's withdrawal from Afghanistan, describing the UK's evacuation as a "betrayal" to allies that cost lives and resulted in a number of Afghans being left behind.

In a damning report, MPs criticised the military's evacuation of British nationals, known as Operation Pitting, attributing Taliban persecution of those stranded to a "lack of seriousness in achieving coordination."

Nasrat, a trans woman whose name has been changed to protect their identity, served as an interpreter for British forces during the Afghanistan War and was almost killed by Taliban militants when detained in May last year.

Forced to take drastic measures to hide their gender identity, including dressing up in men's clothes, the former operative was captured at a checkpoint just outside of Kabul.

"Frankly, it's a miracle I'm still alive and I'm counting down the days until I'm caught again.

"I hoped that I would be accepted by the UK because of the interpretation I offered British troops,



PERSECUTION: Brighton MP Caroline Lucas warns the failure to resettle Afghanistan's most at-risk groups is putting more lives in danger. Credit: David Woolfall

but my case was rejected and I don't know why."

They added: "I've lost all hope of being helped and now I'm completely stuck here."

Brighton MP Caroline Lucas said the government's failure to safeguard Afghanistan's most at-risk groups is putting more lives in danger.

She added: "LGBT+ Afghans represent some of the most at-risk people, facing horrific persecution at the hands of the Taliban. Yet this government appears to be standing idly by – not only acting at a desperately slow pace in its processing of LGBT+ asylum cases, but in fact rejecting applications for re-

settlement in the UK, and prolonging their suffering."

"The failure to resettle even a hundred LGBT+ Afghans forms part of a wider picture, in which this government treats with disregard those fleeing persecution on the basis of sexual or gender identity."

She added: "More than one year after the launch of the ACRS scheme, the government's promise to resettle Afghans has not just been broken, but shattered into a thousand pieces and unless viable routes are established, lives will be endangered."

The Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office was approached for comment.



SHOCKING: The lives of LGBT+ Afghans have become "dramatically worse". Credit: Callum Daragh

“A new reality”: How Ukrainian lives have changed since Russia’s invasion

by Oliver Murphy

When Sergey Melnitchenko first learnt that his home town of Mykolaiv had come under attack from Russian forces, his fear was palpable.

A professional photographer since 2009, he began texting his friends in a frantic attempt to establish details and, to his horror, discovered that Putin’s forces had invaded Ukraine in a dramatic escalation.

Sergy had been preparing for this day ever since rumours of an invasion surfaced in

February last year following Russia’s “special military operation” to support the republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, but nothing could prepare him for the horrors that would unfold.

“I was in Kyiv at the time and I had a call from my girlfriend telling me that Mykolaiv was being bombed. I just panicked, but then I saw that the whole of Ukraine was being attacked”, he told SWL.

“I packed my things and travelled back to Mykolaiv feeling scared. I knew something was going to



PANIC: After reuniting with his family, Sergey travelled to the Ukraine-Slovakia border with his son and mother. Credit: Sergey Melnitchenko

happen, but I couldn’t believe that a full-scale invasion was happening – it was like I was dreaming.

“Everyone just began to do the best they could for themselves and their families. It was chaotic and people panicked at the beginning which has since had a significant impact on everyone’s mental health.”

With just a few bags of clothes and holding his young son in his arms, Sergey frantically searched for a car in an attempt to join the thousands of Ukrainians desperately fleeing Kyiv by road.

After more than 36 hours of continuous driving, the 31-year-old eventually reached his family in Mykolaiv where he soon embarked on a last ditch attempt to reach the

refugees have been registered across Europe, with 1.6 million people reported to have fled to Poland alone as of April this year.

Poland, which shares a 310-mile border with Ukraine has taken the majority of those who have fled their homes, with more than 10 million border crossings from Ukraine recorded since the Russian invasion.

Thankfully, Sergey was reunited with his young son and mother two months later in Ivano-Frankivsk, a city to the west of Ukraine where the trio now find themselves living, along with the photographer’s girlfriend.

However, while life for Sergey has gradually stabilised since the bombing of his hometown, Russia’s bombardment of Ukraine has inflicted huge personal loss on a family already struggling to grapple with the conflict.

“I lost my friend Xenia last year in a missile strike. She was just 33. The strike hit her house where she was living with her mother in my hometown,” he said.

“They never woke up that day and many more people were lost because of that attack – it’s one of many incidents that have killed

Ukraine-Slovakia border.

However, while Sergey’s son, Demian, and his elderly mother were able to make it across the border safely, the photographer was stopped from joining them.

Without official documents that could prove he was accompanying his son as a single parent, he was forced to bid an emotional goodbye to family members he feared he would never see again.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 8,791 civilians have been killed as a result of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, with more than 14,000 people reported to have been injured.

Meanwhile, close to 8.2 million Ukrainian



DISPLACED: Close to 8.2 million Ukrainian refugees have been registered across Europe since the Russian invasion

innocent civilians.

“It’s been very hard mentally – people are dying and children are suffering. It’s been incredibly difficult to imagine and very hard to read about the families torn apart. I’ve cried many times already about everything that’s happening right now, but it’s a new reality.”

Despite the trauma, Sergey refuses to give up hope and, through a number of specially commissioned photography exhibitions documenting life after Russia’s invasion, he continues to contribute to Ukraine’s military efforts.

He said: “Since last year I’ve donated more than one million Ukrainian hryvnia to the military and to volunteers by selling my photos and taking part in charity auctions.

“Whether it be through crowdfunding campaigns or creating NFTs, I’m doing the best I can to help end this invasion as soon as possible.”

For Yullia Bykova, who managed to flee to the UK with her young daughter and now lives with her sister in Scotland, the future is uncertain.

Living with her partner and daughter in Mykolaiv when Russian forces began shelling the nearby airport,

the former accountant was forced to flee her home to the sound of nearby explosions.

“The first explosion sounded early in the morning and was followed by a large number of Ukrainian aircraft. Panic fought with common sense and I prayed it was military training,” she told SWL.

“After some time a second explosion rang out. My husband ran outside and I started to look for information on the Internet, but eventually my friend in the military contacted me to tell me that the war had started.

“As we found out later, Russia attacked our

city’s airport. We only lived 20 minutes away, so it was very scary. I tried to keep calm for my daughter, Myroslava, but it was very difficult – everyone was confused and scared.”

With the city’s airport destroyed by Russian airstrikes, Yullia and her daughter travelled more than 800km to Lviv to cross the border into Prague before entering the Czech Republic.

After safely escaping across the border, the 36-year-old then moved to Poland for a month desperately awaiting approval for her visa application under the UK’s Ukraine Family Scheme.



TRAPPED: Yullia’s partner, Roman, remained in Ukraine to volunteer as a soldier. Credit: Yullia Bykova



PANIC: When Sergey realised Ukraine was under attack, he drove for more than 36 hours from Kyiv to Mykolaiv to unite with his family. Credit: Sergey Melnitchenko



RELOCATED: Yullia and her daughter, Myroslava, have lived in the UK for nine months. Credit: Yullia Bykova

However, without European biometric passports, Bykova and her daughter were trapped and were eventually forced to travel more than six hours away to the nearest visa application centre in Berlin.

Last year, SWL revealed a number of Ukrainian families had struggled to complete complex visa applications, with a number of refugees waiting weeks for their claims to be approved.

It prompted a number of MPs from across south west London to criticise the government for its response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis in Calais, citing poorly manned offices, long queues and 14-page forms before visiting the British consulate in Paris.

Figures published by the Local Government Association reveal local councils have helped settle more than 163,000 Ukrainians in the UK, including 47,800 arrivals via the Ukraine Family Scheme.

Meanwhile, data

published by the Home Office shows more than 193,000 visa applications were received as of 9 May this year, with a total of 228,300 visas issued since Russia's invasion in February last year.

With the help of family members already living in the UK, Yullia was safely relocated to Scotland where she now works at a travel agency, but the trauma of Russia's invasion continues to take its toll.

Owing to the explosions that rocked Mykolaiv Airport, Yullia's husband, after ensuring her safe passage, drove for more than 11 hours to enlist in the military.

She said: "It's still painful knowing he is in danger. He was mobilised in 2015, but everything was different: there were vacations and rotations. Now, he has almost no rest and although we keep in touch in Ukraine, there is still no hope that he will join us."

"Just imagine you had everything and

now you have nothing. The war is in every one of us but the main priority is the safety of my child, and while I try to make her feel normal, I can't replace her father."

With her visa due to expire in 2024, Yullia explains she is desperate to return to Ukraine and salvage what little is left of her home, but she knows life will never be the same again.

"It has always been my intention to go back, but it's been so long now and it's still incredibly dangerous. I know I'll never be able to return to my usual life, even simple things like going to the beach or walking peaceful-

ly in the forest will be fraught with risk due to land mines.

"In my city, technical water flows from the tap which can't be consumed, the nurseries are closed and the streets are desolate. I don't know anything about my future - everything and everyone has changed.

"The war must end, and only then will we be able to repair everything and return to a normal life. People will have to deal with the consequences for a long time and I know if I return to Ukraine, it is unlikely to be my hometown. I will choose a safer part of the country."

While Russia's inva-

sion has undoubtedly changed the lives of Ukrainians forever, for Dmytro Krukovets, a chief economist at the National Bank of Ukraine, preparing for the future is paramount.

Forced to take shelter on an almost daily basis following the invasion, the 26-year-old chose to remain in Kyiv despite the dangers posed by Putin's aggression.

"As the news of the Russian invasion broke, I was in a state of disbelief. It was a call from my friends in Poland that woke me and I was jolted by the surreal nature of what was happening," he told SWL.

"My mind was racing with thoughts of what to do next and how to react, despite the fact that there had been some plans prepared in the event of an emergency.

"As I made my way to work at the National Bank of Ukraine, I was aware of the importance of the institution and the potential danger it faced from shelling or other forms of attack, but we had much work to do. Despite the invasion, we couldn't just allow our work to stop.

"Some of my colleagues chose to relocate to Western Ukraine, or to other countries. I've been able to work remote-

ly so I thought about moving away, but I chose to stay. I love Kyiv, it's a unique city, and I knew I couldn't leave."

Unable to enlist into the military, Dmytro put his skills to use elsewhere and serves as a voluntary informant for the country's Territorial Defence Forces, frequently launching cyber attacks against Russian websites.

Ukraine's technology industry is estimated to be worth \$6.8 billion and has more than tripled in size since 2016. It's been on a war-footing ever since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, with fears that intensifying conflict could result in unprec-



DIMINISHED: More than 220,000 Russian troops and mercenaries have been killed or injured since the start of the Ukraine War. Credit: Ukraine's Ministry of Defence

edented cyber warfare. "While I am limited in terms of my ability to provide immediate aid on the battlefield, I do my part through donations and concentrate my efforts on promoting education in my country.

"As I reflect on those moments, it is clear to me that my fears were not merely hypothetical. I was confronted with the very real possibility that my life and the lives of those around me could be cut short by the violence and chaos of war.

"However, I knew that if I were to defend my home, it would not be out of romanticised notions of heroism, but out of a desperate desire to protect the things that make life worth living. The Russian invasion was illegal and myself and others will continue to preserve the memory of Ukraine.

Despite the escalating conflict, Dmytro is confident Ukraine will come out on top, but as Russia's bombardment

continues to claim lives, he knows there will be a price to pay.

"I hold a strong conviction that the future holds victory for Ukraine and the entire democratic world. I firmly believe that authoritarian regimes should never prevail and that the evil that

they propagate should never be allowed to triumph.

"The cost of victory will be steep. While it will be a victory for all of us, some will pay a much higher price than others, including those who will inevitably sacrifice their lives to ensure peace."



GLORY TO UKRAINE: Dmytro is confident that Ukraine will come out on top, despite Russian bombardment. Credit: Dmytro Krukovets



LOSING HOPE: While Yullia keeps in touch with her partner everyday, she is concerned about his safety as fighting intensifies and fears he will be unable to join her family in the UK. Credit: Yullia Bykova

Most Britons don't think there's gender equality in the UK workplace

by Emily Hemsley

According to a recent YouGov survey, only 10% of Britons think there's equality for women in the workplace, while 41% say the country is close to achieving equality and 38% say it's not close.

This is despite the fact that the female employment rate is at an all-time high: 72.3% from October to December 2022, a figure that has increased by more than two million since 2010. Furthermore, women in high-skilled jobs is up 38.5% since 2010, with the proportion of women progressing into top management roles growing by almost 25% over the last 12 years.

However, women evidently continue to face significant inequalities in the workplace, such as vital barriers to career progression, discrimination and the gender pay gap.

In response, organisations are striving to battle against these inequalities to create fairer career opportunities for

women, including Young Women's Trust, a feminist organisation working to achieve economic justice for young females, offering free coaching, support, networking and job application feedback.

CEO of Young Women's Trust, Claire Reindorp, said: "Equality in the workplace has absolutely not been achieved. We often talk about a broken rung on the career ladder and it needs fixing."

"Lots of factors are holding young women back: they're being pigeonholed into roles that are poorly paid and often seen as 'women's work' and they're working fewer hours for less money."

"Discrimination is still a huge issue and nearly half of the young women we spoke to said they have experienced discrimination whilst working or looking for work."

"When we spoke to young women with caring responsibilities, a quarter said that not getting support with their caring responsibilities made it difficult for them to apply for a job in the



TALKING WOMEN DOWN: Females are commonly subjected to experience gender discrimination and misogyny by peers and superiors in the workplace environment

first place."

Although the gender pay gap has fallen by approximately 25% among UK employees over the last decade, a government report revealed that the mean difference between men and women's pay in 2022 was 5.45%. Higher earners reportedly experienced a much larger difference in hourly pay between the sexes compared with lower-paid employees, indicating that the significant inequality is located higher up the career ladder. However, most of the population is against

this. According to a YouGov survey conducted in December 2021, the overwhelming majority of Britons thought that both unequal pay (93%) and the gender pay gap (74%) were unacceptable situations.

Reindorp said: "I'm not surprised at the statistics at all. We know that when young women start out in their careers they already earn a fifth less than young men. The income gap that women face is right from the off."

"In our last annual report, we heard from HR decision makers

and 11% told us that they were aware of women being paid less than men for jobs at the same level in their organisation."

Yet Reindorp stated that things can be improved: "The odds are stacked up against young women but change is possible. We need fairer pay, transparent recruitment drives, more flexible working and better childcare support as a start."

"We must do better and unleash the talent pool of people in this country who are being unfairly held back because of archaic attitudes and systems."

The Kingston hub helping tackle climate change

by Emily Hemsley

As the climate emergency persists, Kingston Hive is helping tackle the effects of climate change on the planet and people.

Located in the heart of Kingston upon Thames town centre, the hub offers workshops, advice and support to the community.

The Hive was set up in November 2022 with support from Kingston Council as part of a network of over 300 climate emergency centres across the UK.

Co-founder and director of Kingston Hive, Danielle O'Shaughnessy, said: "It was formed because local environmentalists needed to support each other by finding

a space where we can connect and show people what needs to be done.

"The Hive is strengthening our community by bringing people together, building their understanding and helping them learn new skills."

The Hive offers a packed weekly schedule of programs such as climate coach sessions, non-violent communications, campaigning days, wellness cafes, film nights, music sessions, upcycled art exhibitions, second-hand shops, repair workshops and pop-up events.

It is run by a diverse group of volunteers from different age groups, abilities, backgrounds and activism experiences 'who all recognise the need for strong



CARING CRAFTS: The Kingston Hive group participates in weekly second-hand arts and crafts sessions to give old items a new lease of life. Credit: Kingston Hive

and compassionate communities at this time."

The volunteers have also participated in marches across London alongside global environmental movement Extinction Rebellion to help spread the message

of the climate emergency and action change.

O'Shaughnessy commented:

"It's really quite extraordinary."

"If people are worried about climate change, and there are a lot of people who are, it's really nourishing and supportive to come to somewhere like the Hive because you will meet so many different people who feel similarly and have a space to see your feelings acknowledged."

"It's a massive relief for people because it is such a huge problem and we think it's easier when

you're in it together."

This proves true as according to data collected from September to October 2022 by the Office for National Statistics, 74% of adults in Great Britain said they felt worried about climate change, while London had the highest proportion who felt worried (81%).

Yet the group is urging for help as it is in need of vital donations to continue its survival. Money raised contributes to utility bills, educational materials, travel costs and items which cannot be sourced second-hand.

To find out more information or donate, visit the Kingston Hive website.



FIGHTING FOR THE CAUSE: Kingston Hive volunteers joined an Extinction Rebellion protest in London to advocate government action. Credit: Kingston Hive

Employees are more productive at home than a usual office, data reveals

by Lily Jobson

Employees are more productive working from home than their usual workplace, according to YouGov data.

In a recent report, 60% of UK adults have said they find working from home more productive than working from their usual workplace, with 17% finding it less productive.

The popularity of home working became more common during the Covid pandemic, but many assumed this would be a temporary change.

Lucy Gordon, director of Farley Cove, a financial modelling consultancy, believes working from home is much more productive than an office.

She said: "When you're working in an office people come over to you a lot and disturb you.

"My mental health has massively improved. Before I left my old job, I asked to work part time from home because when I was commuting, I would have a stressful start to the day and get overwhelmed.

"I previously worked in real estate which meant I needed to be in the office as they are very old school

and they found it very hard me working from home.

"I am very focused and good at getting on with the work so luckily, I don't find jobs at home distracting."

Just over 60% of those earning up to £15,000 are more likely to travel to work due to the type of occupation they are in, gardeners, hospitality, and retail.

Which meant 38% of those earning in a higher bracket of £40,000 or more are more likely to take on



hybrid working.

An analysis by ONS discovered employees who earn higher hourly wages have the abil-

ity to work from home due to the type of profession they are in.

Whereas low earning jobs who require a fact-to-face approach are less likely to work from home.

Many employees prefer a hybrid or work from home approach to help balance both a personal and professional life.

According to ONS (Office for National Statistics), three qua-

have an improved work life balance.

Common benefits of working from home included fewer distractions, quick to complete work and an improved wellbeing.

Gordon, 34, says she meets with a colleague once a month, who now works from home as well, to catch up face-to-face when there is a need to collaborate.

She said: "It works well for both of us, but I can't say it is the same for every employee."

"I am

without issues with work.

"The lack of social interaction is a downside from working from home, but I arrange to go out for lunch or a day out with my colleague.

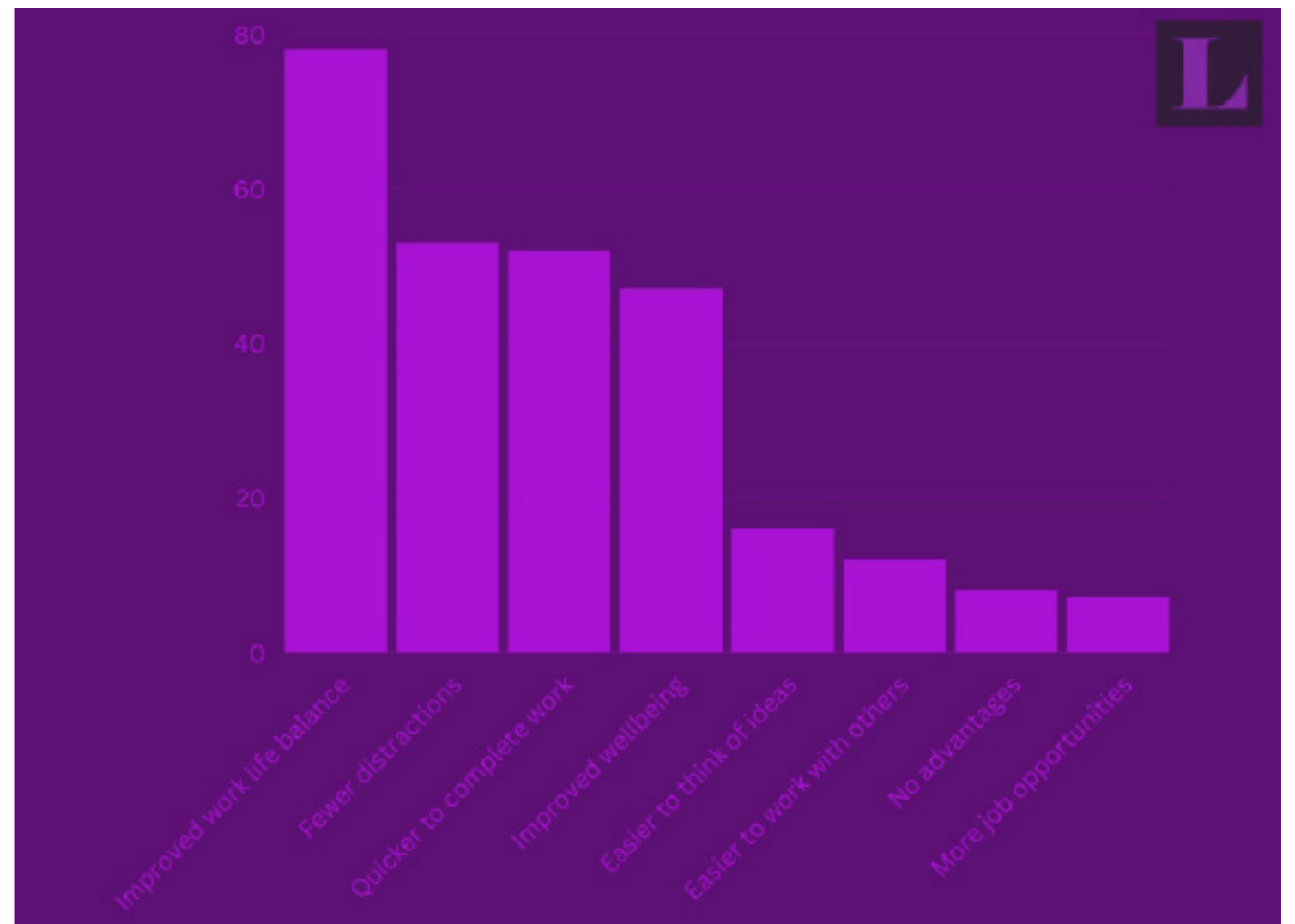
"Working from a sofa or bed is not good for your productivity or your posture but the first thing I did was buy a screen, desk, and keyboard to stay focused.

"Working from home means I can stop and walk away from my desk, get some fresh air, get a proper break which you can't get in an office because a lot of the time you either take your lunch while working because there is a lot to do.

With a new approach to how we can work, it is still not on top of everyone's list to go back to home working, with technical issues being a main factor why.

Research by Owl-Labs showed 30% of office workers found building relationships with remote colleagues harder because they are unsure whether to interrupt someone who is speaking.

A huge 75% of workers find it hard to be part or contribute to a conversation on a teams/ zoom meeting, making it hard to feel



A CLEAR BIAS: Figures from ONS show the percentage of homeworkers reporting advantages (left picture). Credit: Microbiz Mag via Flickr

engaged due to a miss of social cues.

Carole Railton, global body language consultant, said: "it's really tough just talking to a screen than to talk in person.

"I survive better when I'm around people because I need to

talk and hear what they are doing.

"It's having that communication which makes you part of society.

"I used to travel a lot for work, I've worked in 47 countries but due to covid a lot of the work dried up and

went on screen/ online which has really changed things for me.

"I am easily distracted working from home but the way I overcome that is to write things in my diary because it's so easy to start doing housework.

"It brought to my

attention that I need the stimulus of other people. I like the interaction and the vibe of living in central London and I thrive off that.

"As I'm at home all the time I try and get out the house for lunch or coffee, which means

I'm spending more money on food than ever before.

"I would always bring a salad for lunch when I worked in an office but now, I go out and spend money on food just so I can meet more people and get out."

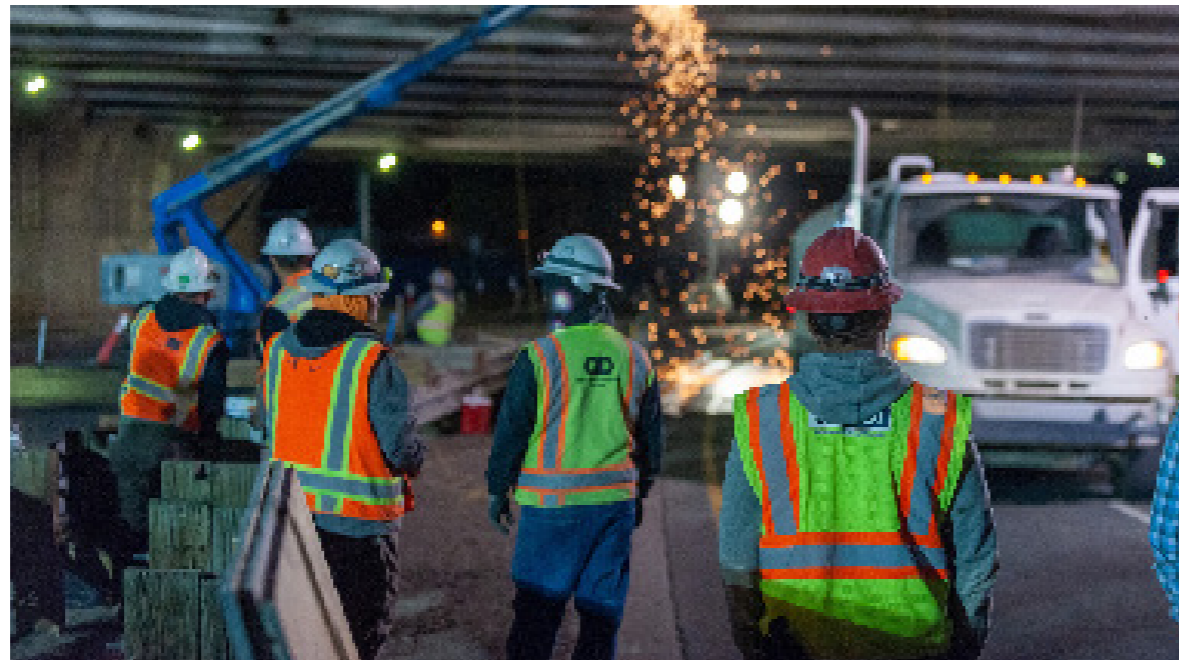
Young Londoners are being encouraged to join construction apprenticeships to build the future

by Emily Hemsley

The construction industry is one of the capital's best employers for young people looking to start their careers, with over 4,000 new vacancies a year in London.

With known skill shortages across the construction sector, South London Partnership (SLP) is looking to help build the future of the construction industry through apprenticeships.

Figures show that 22,800 more construction workers are needed in London by 2027.



LEARNING TOGETHER: Young people from all over south London are urged to take part in the local scheme to support their community and start their journey towards a new career pathway whilst learning new skills from industry experts

Supported by the Mayor of London, SLP is working alongside south London colleges and construction businesses to give young people an

insight into the opportunities a career in construction can provide. Head of economy, skills and employment at SLP, Polly Persechino,

said: "The experience you gain through apprenticeships is invaluable and the industry is crucial to the UK now more than ever.

"There is a common misconception that construction is all about hard hats and muddy boots. In fact, it offers the opportunity to learn new skills, significantly boost wages, and provide brilliant, sustainable, solid career pathways to allow people to progress and move up the career ladder."

A variety of construction roles include technician, architect, planner, coordinator, surveyor, manager, visualiser, estimator, installer, planner, roofer, groundworker and glazier.

Funded by a grant from the Greater London Authority, the SLP boroughs of Croydon, Kingston,

Merton, Richmond and Sutton, along with neighbouring borough Wandsworth, have joined forces to create the Mayor's Construction Academy (MCA) Hub. The Hub will collaborate with construction employers to help Londoners find new jobs, apprenticeships and work experience opportunities in the industry, and hire training providers to equip young people with the right skills.

The initiative is also looking for tutors, especially those who have retired from the business or have extra time to spare, to assist the future of the construction industry and pass on their skills and expertise to the next generation of workers.

Kevin Williams, 54, lecturer and former self-employed plumber said: "I love working with the students, seeing them grow and develop really drives me. You can literally see the passion and determination they have to learn and succeed."

Research conducted by Whole Life Consultants Limited on behalf of the SLP, found that 22,800 more construction workers will be needed in London by 2027 to build more homes and support the reduction of carbon emissions.

However, a survey of 1,000 people conducted by UK Construction Week last year found that there are several reasons young people are put off pursuing a career in construction. This included it being seen as a 'dirty job' (23%), a lack of career advice (19%), and the sector being seen as male-dominated (15%).

Breaking stereotypes and building her future, Shakir Kikomeko, 21, is an apprentice site manager working on one of south London's biggest projects whilst

studying one day a week at college.

"Most of my friends have gone to university, but I felt it wasn't for me as I was keen to earn money and get started in a career," she explained.

"Sometimes you can feel unsure about asking questions, but when doing an apprenticeship you are surrounded by people that have been in the construction business for 20 or 30 years and there isn't anything they don't know.

"I would say to anyone thinking of doing



BREAKING DOWN STEREOTYPES: Young women are encouraged to build a career in the construction industry

an apprenticeship: keep your options open. I didn't realise how great a career in construction was going to be and there are so many opportunities in this industry, so don't limit yourself, just go for it."

Councillor Gareth Roberts, leader of Richmond Council and chair of the South London Partnership said: "South London is a great place to live, but like other parts of London, provision of good quality, affordable and sustainable homes is a priority. Whether this is building new homes or retrofitting

existing housing stock, we are predicting an even greater demand on the construction workforce.

"There is a wide range of apprenticeships on offer, which give young people a pathway to good quality careers in the industry.

"There are construction roles all over London, but it will give young people a chance to work locally and contribute to building a great future for their community."

For further information on how to get involved, visit the Mayors Construction Academy Hub website.



REACHING NEW HEIGHTS: The apprenticeships offer young people the chance to experience new opportunities



A HELPING HAND: Figures show that 22,800 more construction workers will be needed in London by 2027 to build more homes and retrofit existing housing stock. To support this, the scheme aims to build a large new skilled workforce

London's Korean fashion wave

by Emily Hemsley

In recent years, the Korean wave, also coined as the Chinese term 'Hallyu', has become a global phenomenon with fashion, music, beauty, drama and food influences soaring in popularity across the world.

In the UK, the culture has not only become mainstream but widely idolised: K-pop artists flood our music charts and perform highly-anticipated sold-out shows; we buy leading Korean beauty products - one of the largest beauty markets in the world; we watch cinematography such as award-winning hits 'Squid Game' and 'Parasite'; and we even buy Korean food staples at soaring rates from supermarket shelves. Now South Korean style is making a tsunami-size splash in the UK's fashion scene.

In response to the cultural movement,



KOREAN'S FASHION FINEST: Display of designs from Korean designers at the V&A Museum's 'Hallyu!' exhibition

the V&A Museum in South Kensington curated a blockbuster exhibition titled 'Hallyu! The Korean Wave', open until 25 June, to put a spotlight on the global rise of South Korean culture, exploring different creative sectors including

the fashion industry with immersive installations, videos, photos, costumes, artefacts and artworks.

Yoojin Choi, leading project curator for the exhibition, said: "It's a really wide-ranging



WHIMSICAL DESIGNS: Moon Jar Dress, by Minju Kim 2021, on display at the V&A's 'Hallyu!' exhibition. Credit: V&A/ Sangmi An

exhibition. We noticed visitors were engaging in the Korea gallery and collections through the lens of Hallyu, which gave the idea to bridge historic and contemporary Korea together to explore the global impact of Hallyu, as it's not just the UK where it is becoming influential, it has spread to all corners of the world.

"We explore the effect of the Korean wave in the field of fashion by celebrating native designers and their work. We see how they reference traditional Korean garments and innovatively reimagine them into contemporary shapes and patterns which are worn over the world." As highlighted in

the exhibition, K-pop idols have become the crescendo, taking Hallyu global with their millions of social media followers and fandoms supporting their every move. Now, they're using their global influence to take big steps in the fashion industry.

The FW23 Fashion Week season saw a significant increase in the number of K-pop stars in attendance with major houses inviting top artists to shows, generating a valuable online buzz for designers' collections. For instance, all four members of K-pop's biggest girl group Blackpink attended the respective houses they have ongoing partnerships with,

while BTS' RM was spotted at Bottega Veneta, NewJeans' Hanni at Gucci and Hyein at Louis Vuitton. Elsewhere, members of the group (G)I-DLE sat front row at Miu Miu, Ferragamo and more.

The global fashion industry has clearly been taking note of the worldwide rise of K-pop and the value of idols, with big brands signing an increasing number of deals with leading stars to produce a successful marketing formula. Popular performers are used as brand ambassadors, starring in campaigns and attending presentations - all of which are advertised online to their millions of adoring fans.



SHINING STAR: BTS' Jimin in Dior by Kim Jones at the Jimmy Fallon Tonight Show in March 2023. Credit: courtesy of Dior

Examples include Dior's reputable contract with Blackpink's Jisoo and BTS' Jimin, girl group NMIXX as Loewe ambassadors and the championing of BTS for Louis Vuitton to name a few.

London, Paris, New York and Milan have been synonymous with high-end fashion for decades, known for their fashion weeks and household name brands, but now South Korea is considered one of the most important budding fashion capitals, with Seoul Fashion Week becoming increasingly popular.

The fashion industry has rapidly developed into an increasing economic vantage for South Korea, within 40



TAKING OVER THE WORLD: K-pop girl group Aespa. Credit: V&A/ SM Entertainment

years it has expanded into a market that currently makes 20 trillion won per year. According to Statista Market Forecast, South

Korea's fashion revenue is estimated to reach \$32.64 billion in 2023 and shows an annual growth rate of 3.02%, resulting in a projected market volume of \$36.77 billion by 2027. The thriving market boasts its own retail giants, influences and styles which cannot be packaged into one single trend and has evidently been adopted in the West.

Notably, the Seoul capital dominates the global streetwear scene, with brands catering to a younger demographic with unique and trendy designs which are in high demand here in the UK. Popular labels can be found in some of London's best up-and-coming stores which have travelled over from the East, such as XU London, Yuki Tokyo and UJNG.

Streetwear enthusiast and fashion photography student at the University of Arts London, Francis Blately, 21, explained: "I've never had a connection to South Korea but I definitely think that the style influences what I and so many of the younger generation wear today. Even if they aren't native brands, like Palace, Balenciaga and Supreme which are so sought-after, they are still so obviously influenced by Korea."

"I know people who have literally queued hours, online and in-person, for the chance to get their hands on the designs."

"I'm always looking to Seoul streetwear for inspiration for my looks. It's unparalleled, fresh and consistently ahead of other leading countries."



ELEGANT IN WHITE: Blackpink's Jisoo at Dior Spring/Summer Haute Couture 2023. Credit: courtesy of Dior



BOLD LOOKS: Ji Won Choi x Adidas co-ord trouser and jacket. Credit: V&A/Francesca Allen, courtesy of Adidas

Yet there's no shortage of notable Korean talent here in London's fashion scene, putting a spin on British style with key Korean trends such as contemporary twists on classic tailoring, bold lines, intricate details, loud prints and chunky accessories, which can frequently be seen flooding the streets and runways of London.

Seoul-born London-based designer Rokh Hwang of Rokh led the curve of putting Korean designs on London's high fashion map after shooting to fame following his LVMH Special Prize win in 2018. Now shown during London Fashion Weeks, his collections showcase his talent for modern tailoring and add a youthful flare to classic staples fit for an everyday woman's wardrobe.

London universities are also a hotbed for Korean creatives to study and hone their skills. Take Central Saint Martins graduate, Sohee Park, better known as Miss Sohee, for example. Debuted on Net-a-Porter as a 'new name to know', her extravagant peony dress from her 2020 graduate collection was worn by Miley Cyrus on the BBC's Graham Norton Show and is currently centre-stage on display at the V&A's 'Hallyu!' exhibition.

At just 27-years-old, the womenswear designer is taking the fashion world by storm after she debuted her highly-praised haute couture collection for Paris Fashion Week



TAILORING WITH AN EDGE: Rokh Spring/Summer 2023 collection presented at London Fashion Week. Credit: Daniele Oberrauch/Gorunway.com



in January, featuring an assortment of fitted silhouettes and intricate embroidery inspired by elaborate 19th-century Korean artistry, as well as dressing stars worldwide including Cardi B, Bella Hadid, Ariana Grande, Gemma Chan, Naomi Campbell, Gigi Hadid, Julia Fox, and Christina Aguilera.

Another notable name to mention is the inimitable Rejina Pyo. The London-based Seoul-born designer has long been a go-to for discerning fashion lovers after launching her eponymous fashion brand in 2014. Offering a minimal, powerful yet feminine style, the successful designer has dressed famed women such as Meghan Markle, Eva Chen and Michelle Obama.



A FEMININE TOUCH: Rejina Pyo Spring/Summer 2023. Credit: Daniele Oberrauch/Gorunway.com



CELEBRATING KOREAN ARTISTRY: Miss Sohee Spring 2023 Couture collection. Credit: Isidore Montag / Gorunway.com



BLOOMING BEAUTIFUL: Miss Sohee peony dress from the designer's 2020 graduate collection, previously worn by Miley Cyrus, now on display at the V&A's 'Hallyu!' exhibition. Credit: V&A Museum

So what is it like to experience the rise of Korean culture in the UK as a Korean?

Fiona Bae explained her view as the Seoul-raised London-based author of 'Make Break Remix: The Rise of K-Style', a bold, stylish look into the global rise of Korean culture and fashion in the words and images of those shaping it.

"K-style is beyond fashion, it's more about attitude and how you carry yourself. It's inspired by the bold and brave outlook of young Koreans who aren't afraid of breaking rules and making their own path. I think that attitude resonates with people from other countries too," she said.

"For a small insecure country, Korea is so outward-looking. We are heavily influenced by other cultures and we quickly absorb new trends to create something original. Plus, our hard work ethic and social media use has really helped Korean culture to have a voice.

"It's remarkable, as a Korean I feel very proud. Though at first, I felt a little perplexed because Korea's history has been so restrictive and it was such a closed society when I was growing up. Now I see marks of Korea everywhere I go.

"Although, it's undeniable Korean culture does have a lot of issues. There's a dark side, especially around K-pop, it's very manufactured with little freedom and Korean society is full of irony and contrast.

"It is such a

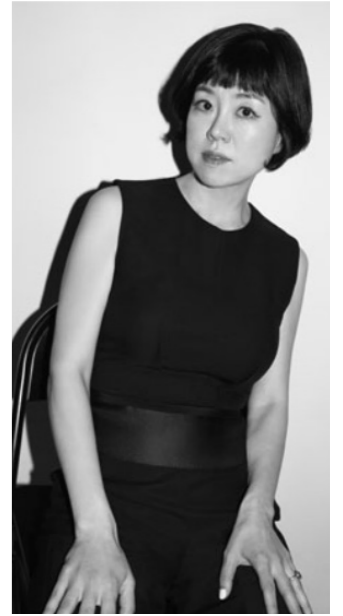
suppressive, competitive and fast-moving society so it's very hard to keep up."

Bae referenced the tragedy and hardship faced by Korean people. The country has the highest suicide rate in the developed world and is steadily growing each year. At least 13,000 people in South Korea ended their life in 2021, with a rate of 26 per 100,000, a 0.3% increase on the year before, according to data from the National Statistical Office.

"However, creatives are aware of the issues and are trying something new," said Bae.

"I'm very confident that we will be seeing more layers and different forms of Korean style across sectors.

"There is a very positive energy and solidarity among creatives. People are excited to see that happening and are looking forward to it shining even more light on Korean culture and talent."



READ IN STYLE: 'Make Break Remix: The Rise of K-Style' book by author Fiona Bae published by Thames and Hudson. Credit for both images: less_TAEKYUN KIM

Side hustle takes on fashion week

by Lily Jobson

A jewellery business in Buckinghamshire appeared at Paris Fashion Week runway show this month, just two years after the business started.

Dominique Croft, owner and designer of Elk&Bloom, unveiled her latest limited addition collection at Paris Fashion Week on March 7.

Croft quit her corporate career to pursue her passion in her business and is now making six figures in profit.

She said: "It's been an absolute whirl-

wind, my passion for the business has helped where it has got to today.

"It all happened so quickly, at first, I dismissed and deleted the invitation to attend Paris Fashion Week because I thought it was fake but a few days later I went back and realised it was real!

"I have never done a runway show before, so I was really thrown into the deep end to get new products, models and the collection ready but I was so happy with how it came together."

The 27-year-old businesswomen de-

signs and creates all the jewellery from home with a newly-hired colleague as the business is expanding daily.

The business has now signed a contract with Debenhams since returning from Paris Fashion Week.

Croft set up Elk&Bloom since noticing a gap in the jewellery market as she thought jewellery is either high-end, expensive pieces or cheap, throwaway pieces of jewellery.

She said: "There is a lot of jewellery that is very high end up market that costs the consumer a lot of money which would

end up being an occasional piece to wear and so would be kept in a jewellery box most of the time.

"Or you have the throw away fashion that is very cheap and tarnishes, so I wanted to create something that was luxury premium jewellery but an attainable and affordable piece."

Elk & Bloom offers a unique gifting experience which adds a personal element to the jewellery for the customers.

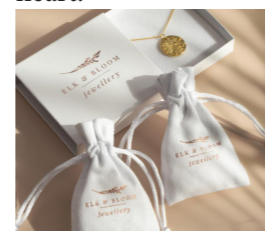
Croft believes the personal element to the jewellery business is what has made it grow.

She said: "I want to keep the personalised element to the business whilst continuing to grow and get the name out.

"I want to stay as true to a small business as possible and make sure I keep a direct link and connection with my customers as I think that's why the business is where it is today."

Although the business has racked up £500,000 in sales

since starting in 2021, Croft believes the company is still a small business at heart.

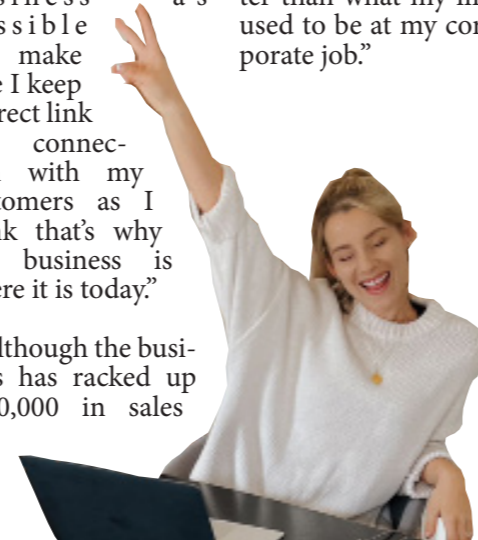


GOLD: Elk&Bloom jewellery

Croft said: "The business feels small to me because it's just me and my office, but it hits home for me when I realise I am dealing with hundreds of customers.

"It has been a very much self-taught experience as I started doing beadwork and silver and then eventually moved into the gold market.

"Having this business is so much better than what my life used to be at my corporate job."



POSE: Dominique (right) at Paris Fashion Week with model wearing her jewellery. Credits: Dominique

Young boy to star in new Peter Pan

by Lily Jobson

A teenager has become the first actor with Down Syndrome to star in Disney's latest Peter Pan. Noah Matthews, 15, plays Lost Boy, Slightly, in the film which released April 28 on Disney Plus.

The star recently became patron of Positive about Down Syndrome, a charity empowering people who have Down Syndrome, in the hope to inspire people around the UK.

Noah said: "I am proud to be an actor with Down Syndrome.

I don't take it as a negative thing, I take

it as a positive.

"My parents are my biggest supporters. Everyone at school has been really excited and they put my poster up on the TVs at school.

"It was so exciting watching the film with my family and friends.

"Everyone was buzzing about it and my town has been so kind."

"My favourite moment of the entire film is me hanging upside down on a canon, when the ship turns upside down and all the pirates fall into the sea."

Noah recalled meeting Captain Hook star, Jude Law,



STAR: Noah Matthews is the first teenager with Down Syndrome to star in Peter Pan. Credit: Zebedee



INSPIRED: Elise Stones, 9, has been inspired by Noah's achievements

was one of the best days on set as the A-lister brought an ice cream van on set for all the children to enjoy.

The actor signed to an agency, Zebedee, who helped him land the acting role which led to auditions throughout lockdown.

He said: "People who have Down Syndrome, you can do anything you like!"

"You can join a local drama group like I did and make loads of friends.

"We do lots of shows like Bugsy Malone and Oliver."

Nicola Enoch, CEO of Positive about Down Syndrome, said: "We are delighted to welcome Noah as patron.

"For too many years there have been limited opportunities for our children and young people.

"We are particularly excited that this blockbuster from Disney showcases the amazing acting talents of Noah.

"The news has cre-

ated a huge buzz in our community and we can't wait to meet him at future events."

SWL spoke too children, like Noah, from Positive about Down Syndrome about how they felt watching him in the movie.

Elise Stones, 9, said: "Look everyone, he's just like me."

Billy Davies, 13, said: "I want to be an actor and in a Disney film too.

"It's so cool, it will help me be on Strictly!"

Fast fashion v pre-loved: The fashion industry's impact on our environment

by Lily Jobson

People often used to turn their nose up if they heard someone buying second-hand clothes or going to a charity shop because it was seen as if someone had less money and couldn't afford high-street or high-end fashion.

But why does second hand clothing have this stigma?

Walking into a charity shop, buying 'dirty clothes' for little to nothing money was almost shunned upon, but now suddenly the new term of 'pre-loved' fashion has made everyone fall in love with the idea.

Pre-loved fashion has moved from niche to mainstream since retailers like Ebay and PrettyLittleThing have picked up the trend which everyone is starting to love.

The Gen Z are huge fans of pre-loved fashion whether it be for the reasons of saving the planet, trying something new or to save money.

However, it is questionable as to whether the new pre-loved fashion concept is just a trend or whether it is here to stay.

Chidera, influencer, model and avid pre-loved fashion shop-

per, said: "I'd say pretty much most of the time I mainly online Thrift or charity shop, most of my wardrobe now is pre-loved."

"I think second-hand shopping does have a negative connotation attached to it because it has the stigma of you can't afford anything nice."

"Depending on your size and proportion, it's sometimes hard to find things that fit you which are second hand."

I do tend to buy a few things from fast fashion shops if I can't find it sustainably as I'm not always able to find things that fit me."

Most people will think pre-loved fashion is a trend because right



now it's the cool thing to do, to go charity shopping and buy and sell items on clothing sites like Thrift.

There are a multitude of apps and websites for consumers to buy and sell clothes second-hand nowadays.

This makes it a lot easier than walking into the classic charity shop down the high street, which could be the cause of the stigma around second-hand shopping to be eliminated.

Vinted, Depop and Thrift are among the many sites which let consumers buy and sell clothes they no longer want or need.

I spoke to Natacha Blanchard, the consumer lead at Vinted, who explained over the past few

years, the resale market has grown with a much larger adoption of second-hand shopping. She said: "We've seen consumer behaviour generally change in favour of second-hand shopping since Vinted launched in 2008."

"We know that it's partially because of the rise in awareness of environmental issues, but also because second-hand can be both a more practical and financially beneficial option."

Although the stigma has improved and second-hand fashion is becoming more popular, Natacha said: "There is still some way to close the gap between first-hand and second-hand fashion

becoming more mainstream."

Depop is another popular app amongst the Gen Z shoppers. The site collaborates with brands like Adidas, Ganni and Ralph Lauren to reach and excite new audiences.

As well as being a marketplace, it offers an ecosystem of fashion trends and inspiration for pre-loved clothing.

According to Depop, they believe that even though trends within the pre-loved space may come and go.

The world is moving towards a more eco-conscious, sustainable way of thinking that is dominating long into the future.

A spokesperson at Depop said: "Good-quality, well-made items are always a good bet for maintaining their value on the resale market, over cheaply made fast fashion items which are inherently less durable."

Depop recognises that 90% of their users are under the age of 26 and so aims to make second hand and circular fashion as accessible and desirable for as many people as possible.

It has become suddenly increasingly popular to buy pre-loved clothing for a

more sustainable lifestyle in order to reduce consumption in our wardrobes.

But why are people more interested in second-hand shopping now?

Depop said: "The cost-of-living crisis is impacting shopping habits across the nation, with many of us having less disposable income to spend on replenishing our wardrobe."

"Shopping vintage and pre-loved makes it a great way to source timeless pieces at lower

What impact does the fashion industry have on our environment?

costs without scrimping on quality."

With new trends evolving every spring, summer, autumn and winter, there is no doubt our consumption of clothes is increasing.

With our annual winter/summer wardrobe clear out's, it might not seem an issue getting rid of a few clothes here and there, but it all contributes to textile waste which has become a huge problem over the years.

The fashion industry already accounts for up to 10% of global greenhouse gas emissions

and so if consumers aren't disposing of unwanted clothes correctly, we will continue to harm our planet.

It is estimated that 30% of unwanted clothing in the UK end up littering landfills, some of which are brand new, just 'out of fashion'.

Fast fashion brands like PrettyLittleThing, Shein, ASOS and H&M are spending millions on textile ma-

terials to just be put into landfills without a thought of care.

According to LabFresh, data found on average, each year people in the UK spend £980.50 on clothing. It found that people own 3kg of clothing a year but 1.7kg of this clothing is thrown in landfills.

Pre Brexit, LabFresh found the UK was the fourth largest producer of textile waste

Magic Wardrobe:

throughout Europe.

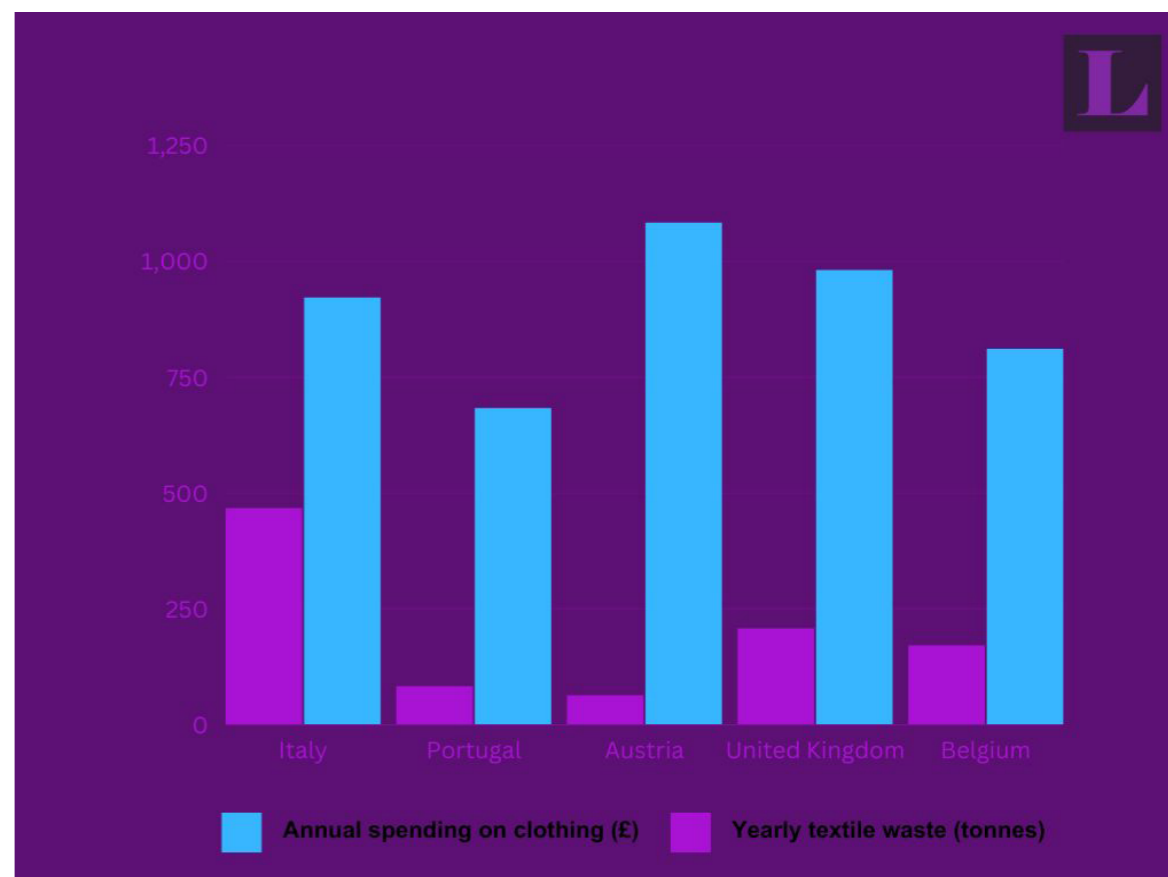
Shops like Magic Wardrobe are another way to improve the environment by buying clothing sustainably in a fashionable way.

Jenny MacDonald has owned Magic Wardrobe for over 15 years and has loved every second of what she does.

Magic Wardrobe in Leigh-on-Sea sells second-hand clothing from what the community hands in with brands ranging from PrettyLittleThing, Zara to Hobbs, Reiss and Ted Baker.

The shop benefits both Jenny's business, charity and the consumers themselves.

She said: "There is nothing better than walking into a shop, picking up a piece of



CHANGE: Chidera (left) uses Thrift to sell unwanted clothes to help the environment. Data (above) shows the annual spending on clothing and yearly textile waste

clothing, seeing what it looks like against you and feeling the quality of the fit.

"I love pre-loved clothing as it recycles everything.

"Too much stuff goes into landfills and when I'm sorting through peoples' things they want to sell, you can get genuine things, that are slightly different too.

"I have shopped pre-loved for years, even before starting my job.

"The joy of getting something original and getting something one-off is great.

"People see more things online now which encourages us to shop second-hand. More magazines are saying to try second-hand shopping as well.

"The pre-loved thing is really kicking off. People don't have an awful lot of money in their pockets so they are coming to me and I'd like to think they can come and get a whole outfit for £20-£30."

When a piece of item sells in Magic Wardrobe, half of the money goes to the business.

When seasons come to end throughout the year and some clothes haven't been sold, Jenny donates the clothes onto charity shops to

The influence of influencers...

try and be sold elsewhere to save them ending up in landfills.

February was the start of PrettyLittleThings resale launch in 2022. The launch came just after Love Island's Molly-Mae Hague was announced the UK's PrettyLittle Thing creative director.

PrettyLittleThing launched a 'PLT Marketplace App' where people can re-sell, re-wear, re-cycle their unwanted clothes.

A lot of people are guilty of buying one-off pieces for an event and so the app lets people sell their pieces they bought from PrettyLittleThing so nothing is wasted.

In a bid to push sustainable fashion, Ebay collaborated with Love Island in 2022.

Previously, Love Island had sponsors with fast-fashion brands

like Missguided, however this year was a big move in order to push pre-loved clothing.

The conversation for pre-loved fashion is continuing to grow everyday.

More people are interested in the idea as it helps the environment, saves money and you can essentially buy more for less.

With the help of influencers on Instagram, pre-loved fashion has blown up.

Ebay made Love Island's Tasha Ghori the first ever Ebay ambassador.

Social media has given influencers the platform to raise the discussion of environmental and ethical harms of the traditional fashion industry. With 1.5M followers,

the model is able to tell people pre-loved fashion is something everyone should get on board with.

This helps get rid of the stigma second-hand shopping had before.

So whether pre-loved fashion is here to stay or trend, the popularity has improved.

Pre-loved clothing shops, online sites and the help from influencers will steer us in the direction of lowering our consumption of textile waste.

The old stigma of charity shopping, meaning you don't have any money or own dirty clothes, has got a brand new name of pre-loved shopping. Pre-loved shopping could be here to stay after all.



PRE-LOVED: Jenny McDonald sells second hand clothing from what the community hands in with brands ranging from PrettyLittleThing, Zara to Hobbs, Reiss and Ted Baker



WASTE: The fashion industry accounts for up to 10% of global greenhouse gas emissions which will continue to harm the planet if clothes aren't disposed correctly. Credit: Flickr



DRESS-UP: Magic Wardrobe improve the environment by buying clothing sustainably in a fashionable way

Padel tennis builds momentum in London

by Honor Cockroft

Padel tennis, the fastest growing sport in the world, is rapidly growing momentum in London.

The hybrid sport, resembling a cross between squash and tennis, is attracting beginners with its defining qualities: it's easy to learn, cheap to play and more social than tennis.

The surge in participation is driving a burgeoning market in the UK, with the number of courts growing by over 300% since 2019.

George Sandbach, 30, co-founder of Padel People UK said: "The sport in general is really going to kick off. I think the number of courts is going to double each year for the next five to seven years."

"Some people

think it's a passing fad but I believe it's an untapped market commercially.

"It's accessible, good for kids and such an easy game to play. You get that pace of tennis without having to stop all the time."

Sandbach co-founded Padel People with James Rock, 34, utilising their work as rackets sports professionals to bring the sport to towns and cities across the UK that lack padel infrastructure.

The company aims to open and operate between five and ten sites in the next three years, with their first site opening in Wimbledon this June.

This will add to the plethora of courts across South West London where am-

ateurs can play, including Harbour Clubs Chelsea, Rocks Lane Club in Bishops Park and David Lloyd Raynes Park.

And new courts are opening every year, with the number of courts increasing from 50 in 2019 to 250 in 2023.

Sandbach said: "The only issue with the sport is accessibility to a court. But in the last 18 months it's gone from having to drive around 45 minutes to around 20."

"I used to have to drive an hour to play in Swindon but now I have three local courts in Oxford."

The sport is thought to have originated in Acapulco Mexico by Enrique Corcuera in 1969 and its popularity quickly flourished in Spain where more than 6m people play across 20,000 courts.

Now, padel is growing at a rapid pace in Europe and North America, with over 25m playing in over 90 countries, according to the International Padel Federation (FIP).

And some of the biggest names in the world of sport are embracing padel, including two-time Wimbledon winner



PRO TOUCH: Co-founder James Rock is bringing his experience in the world of rackets sports to padel

Andy Murray, Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp and F1 driver Charles Leclerc.

In the UK it was integrated as part of the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA)'s five-year-plan to develop tennis and open rackets sports to a wider audience in 2019.

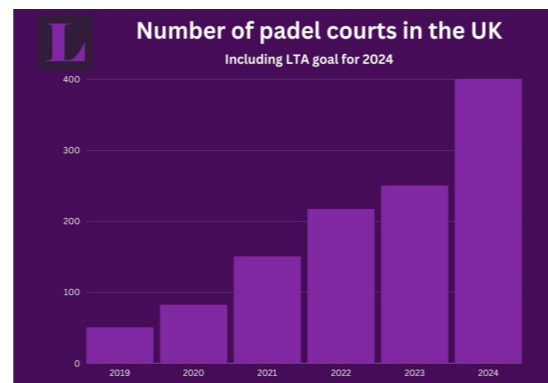
For its growing glamour, padel tennis remains affordable compared to its court

and lawn equivalents with beginners' rackets starting from £35, posing a threat to its father sport.

Sandbach said: "I think padel is a massive threat to tennis."

"If people have two nights free a week chances are they will play one tennis and one padel game a week."

"It's just growing, growing, growing."



A GROWING GAME: Padel courts in the UK



PADEL TO THE PEOPLE: George Sandbach is working to bring padel to towns and cities across the UK

Champion crowned at world's fastest ball game

by Honor Cockroft

A new World Champion of one of the world's fastest ball games was crowned at Hammersmith's Queen's Club last month.

Ben Cawston, 23, beat defending champion Tom Billings, five-games-to-love in a two-leg epic to become the youngest world champion in a century.

Rackets, a legacy of London's 18th-century debtors' prisons, involves players hitting a small hard ball around the walls of an indoor stone court at speeds of up to 185mph.

The Oxford Brookes University student said: "It's such an exhilarating sport and the thought of being the best in the world at one of the hardest and fastest ball games in the world is so exciting."

"I've been to every world championship since I was 11 and I remember watching those guys and being so inspired."

"Looking back I could never have imagined being world champion. It's an incredible feeling."

Cawston first got on a rackets court when he was five years old with his father, a professional

coach at Winchester College.

With rackets being an exclusive and expensive sport largely played at UK public schools, and Cawston having attended academy Westgate School and Peter Symonds sixth-form college, his father was pivotal in his rackets career.

Another influential figure was Tom Billings.

Cawston said: "Tom was a pretty influential character in my development - he's been so supportive of my rackets career through the years and playing with him is the reason I got good."

"I felt lucky to be on the court with him. It was an emotional thing - this guy was a role model for me when I started out."

"Each time you get on court with him it's intimidating because you walk out the door and see his name on every single honours board."

Tom Billings has been the most dominant force in rackets for the last five years, holding both the World Doubles and Singles Championships as he prepared for his sixth world challenge in seven years.

But a month before he was due to defend his title, Billings sustained a grade 3 tear in his hamstring, postponing the match.

A representative from the sport's UK governing body, the T&RA, was present at the first leg hosted in Chicago.

Rory Sutton, 36, said: "The 4-0 score-



BEST IN THE WORLD: A new champion is crowned. Credit: T&RA

line was not a fair reflection on the gap between the two players.

"The match was a great spectacle."

In London, the second leg began with a showcase of high-quality rackets in the form of five incredibly close points

with long rallies and skilful serves.

Cawston used a clever two-pronged offensive strategy of dropshots and winners which capitalised on his opponent's injury.

He ended up winning the game 15-3, and the world championship five games to love, the 33rd match in a string of unbeaten performances.

Billings said: "I'm not disappointed with the result. Ben is so good that unless you're 100% and playing well that's how you beat him. Anything but and it's going to be difficult."

The next World Singles Championship will take place in November 2024.



TWO GREATS OF THE GAME: Billings and Cawston vie on court. Credit: T&RA

The rise of women's rackets in a minority sport dominated by men

by Honor Cockroft

An empty rackets court is an eerie place. Used to balls streaming around the court at one hundred miles per hour, the large black concrete walls sit vacant, and quiet.

Peppered with white streaks, and split by red lines, the thick slate and terracotta structure looks less like a court and more like a historical monument, and there aren't many left.

The game first saw the light of day as the sun streamed in from above the walls of London's 18th-century debtors' prisons: Southwark's The King's Bench and Far-

ringdon's The Fleet.

Prisoners awaiting redemption idled away their time by playing a yet to be coined sport, rackets. The fundamentals are easy to grasp: the simple action of hitting a ball against a wall with a wooden racket. Just make the racket head small, and the ball smaller.

Soon enough the skilful game took hold in the empty court-yards of pubs across the capital, but as the popularity of this open court plan diminished, as did its future transcend from public spaces to the private ones of clubs and schools.

And as the British



GRUBBY ORIGINS: Rackets, a game now housed in the elitist fraternities of private members club originated within the walls of Regency London's debtors prisons

Empire was gripped by colonialism, hundreds of courts were set up in places such as Hong Kong, India and

Buenos Aires. Today courts remain in Canada, the US and the UK only.

From its grubby or-

igin, to the elitist fraternity that now houses this ancient forerunner to squash and follower of 'real tennis', a court sport favoured by Henry VIII, the game has barely changed.

It is still one of the fastest and most dangerous ball games, and spectator sports, in the world. The crowd still have to duck as balls come hurtling at their heads in the open viewing gallery.

Two or four people still attempt to control a small, white ball around the same size as a golf ball as it tears around the four walls of an indoor court at up to 180 mph. And they still do it with what look like primitive tennis rackets.

Except for one thing:

now women play.

In London rackets is headquartered near Hammersmith at the Queen's Club, known for hosting its namesake ATP Tour 500 tennis tournament.

This was the stage for the rise of Lea Van Der Zwalmen, women's rackets' trailblazer and champion of the world.

Van Der Zwalmen said: "It's such a thrill when you smash a backhand down the line.

"I love the adrenaline of the game because it's so fast and furious.

"There's no time to think it's just based on instincts."

Born in Leuven, Belgium and raised in Toulouse, Van Der Zwalmen played ten years of international squash for France before trying rackets.

She said: "Until 2008 women were not allowed to play because it was deemed too dangerous.

"I just rocked up to play and gradually I was able to prove to men that women could play at the same level and it was not too dangerous.

"The level is just getting higher and higher every year. The game has grown massively and I'm looking forward to seeing the game continue to grow

more in the future.

"This is perhaps my greatest pride, let alone being world champion. Just being part of this new generation of players is incredibly satisfying."

The Belgium-native first started playing rackets at Bristol's Clifton College under the tutelage of rackets professional Reggie Williams.

Chris Davies, CEO of governing body the Tennis and Rackets Association (T&RA), said he recalls the moment Reggie discovered her.

He said: "You just recognise talent immediately when you see it.

"Reggie said to me Chris you've got to come see this player, she's absolutely fantastic.

"She was such a wonderful player with the purest, sweetest backhand."

At the time, women's rackets was in its infancy stage and only a few women played.

In rackets, only the server can win points, with the returner having to win the point to win the opportunity to serve.

Whilst in the men's game you can often watch minutes-long rallies wherein the players chase the ball just as much as it chases them, women's

rackets began largely as a serve and return game.

supreme natural sporting prowess cut straight

on former Real Tennis World Champion Claire Fahey. And beat her two sets to one.

She hasn't lost since.

When Chris Davies spoke of women's rackets, he spoke of two time periods: before Lea, and after.

This time before Lea, or BL, was punctuated by a few talented sportswomen from the worlds of tennis and real tennis including Claire Fahey and Alex Brodie.

Having only started playing around in the late 2000s, soon enough women had created a new style of play.

As early player Sally Jones said: "No one was trying to pretend we're stronger than the men.

"It's a different game entirely."

Now the women's game is growing at a rapid pace, with entry into competitions increasing each year and the number of women playing proliferating to never-before-seen levels.

In 2011 there were nine entries to the first ever Ladies British Open. Ten years later this number has more than doubled.

At the forefront of that growth is Tara Lumley.

Lumley, 28, was drawn to the game



TRAILBLAZER: Lea Van Der Zwalmen has carved a path for others to follow. Credit: the T&RA

In a game of slice and cut, where groundstrokes can be played off any of the walls and fitness is everything, Van Der Zwalmen's

through early career opponents.

In the first Ladies World Singles Championship in 2015, van der Zwalmen took



LEADING LADIES: The inaugural Ladies World Doubles Championship in March 2020 saw six pairs vie for the historic title before the Covid-19 pandemic suspended tournaments for two years. Credit: The T&RA

through its counterpart: real tennis, and has since become British Open Doubles and Singles Champion.

The natural sports-woman, who is also a life sciences consultant at L.E.K. is one of the most dominant players on the circuit, with a strength and serve to rival that of the men.

Lumley and partner India Deakin even beat Van Der Zwalmen and her partner Louisa Gengler-Saint in the first and only World Doubles Championship in March 2020.

She said: "When I first played rackets I was instantly hooked."

"I love the fast pace of the game and testing my reactions; it is probably the most difficult game I have encountered and I enjoy the challenge."

"We have seen great developments in the breadth and depth of the game - both in terms of new players but also the overall standard."

"I think this is only

going to grow and expand over the years."

Another player heightening standards within the sport is British Open Singles Champion Georgie Willis.

Having started playing on an often empty court on Hayling Island with her siblings, Willis has become a quintessential member of the rackets community.

The 24-year-old law student said: "I'm really excited to see where women's rackets goes in the future."

"There's such a good community around it now, I've made so many friends through rackets so they keep me playing."

"I also just love how fast it is, how instinctive it is. It's just a great game."

Within the Gentleman's clubs, the women's game has not been self-founded. Instead, it has been helped along the way by a group of eccentric, and forward-thinking men.

From Howard Angus, whose wife donated her name to the U18 National Girls Cup, or Paul Danby, who helped establish a court at Hayling Is-

land, there have been many supporters to the game.

Angus, who spent most the 1970s as amateur rackets or real tennis champion, was in the gallery for November's British Open Doubles final.

He said: "I think the momentum is unstoppable now."

"We're going in the right direction, the average standard keeps going up and the standard at the top is brilliant."

"It is clear that today's match was the highest standard we've ever seen in women's rackets."

Ben Bomford, head rackets professional at the Queen's Club, is excited about the fu-

ture of the women's game.

Bomford said: "Women's rackets was such a hole, and now its building. We've seen so much growth over the last few years, and we just need to keep building on that."

"Rackets is such a brilliant game, there's just something about it. It's unique, it's quick, it's difficult, it's challenging and it's frustrating."

"It's like golf, you play a bit and get better and then you don't play and you take steps back. But it's also so rewarding."

"Most people that play, they come on court and play for an hour and they'll probably hit at least one great shot that makes it all worth it."

"You give a lot to any sport you play, but rackets is a sport that gives a lot back."

Queen's is the main place where rackets is played beyond school, and takes centerstage in developing the game.

One way which its

One man has been crucial in pushing the development of mixed rackets.

Amateur player Julius Manton-Jones thinks the distinct

someone worse than me I wouldn't have got to where I have so far.

"I think the boys find they enjoy it more than they thought they would, it goes both ways and it helps build the community."

"There are lots of good women's rackets players out there but did they come and play as regularly as they do now? Probably not."

"The impact of mixed rackets on the sport is definitely visible. It's clear we've got a more active playing community in the last six months."

Rackets has a few fatal flaws. Expensive, exclusive and extremely difficult, it's not a game made for 21st century, or Generation Z.

But with the sport giving new space to female players, and Queen's taking part in a number of outreach programmes in the local community of West London - the game is finally modernising.

And top players like Van Der Zwalmen, Lumley and Willis are inspiring new generations to keep the game alive.

Cesca Sweet started playing rackets five years ago at school, and quickly went on to win national singles and doubles competitions in rackets and real tennis.

In May this year, Sweet reached the final of the singles world championships and battled Van Der Zwalmen for the title. She was 17.

The university student said: "When I played in the final against Leah, I have to admit I was a bit star-struck."



SETTING A NEW PACE: Women are breaking into the sport of rackets, known to be the fastest ball game in the world wherein small golf-sized balls can travel up to 185mph around unforgiving concrete walls. Credit: The T&RA



CHAMPION: Lea Van Der Zwalmen is the back-to-back World Singles Champion since 2015. Credit: The T&RA



THE MIXED GAME: Mixed rackets is helping to grow the ladies game by fusing it with the centuries old men's game. Credit: The T&RA

College rackets professional Mark Briers.

Briers is almost single-handedly responsible for the growth of school-level women's rackets, having coached countless girls through national competitions to a high playing standard.

He said: "Rackets' achilles heel for generations has been about just winning things. But so many of these winners haven't carried on playing and don't give anything back to the sport."

"But if you enjoy the sport, it doesn't matter what sport it is or what level you're playing at, you'll play it because

you enjoy it and you're putting energy back into the sport."

"I don't invest my time in girls rackets because we're going to win things. I watch how they play it and it gives me an immense sense of pride because they play with a smile on their face."

"Having early success with the boys and championships helped me establish myself but it didn't make me a better coach."

"Girls' rackets and women's rackets has made me change more than anything - as a coach and as a person. Long may it continue and grow."



FIT FOR A QUEEN: The private member's club and host of the annual cinch Championships is pioneering in its approach to women's rackets

AFC Wimbledon top points-dropped chart confirming another dismal league season

by Tom Large

AFC Wimbledon ended their 2022/23 campaign holding the record for most league points dropped from winning positions in the top four flights of English football since 2014/15.

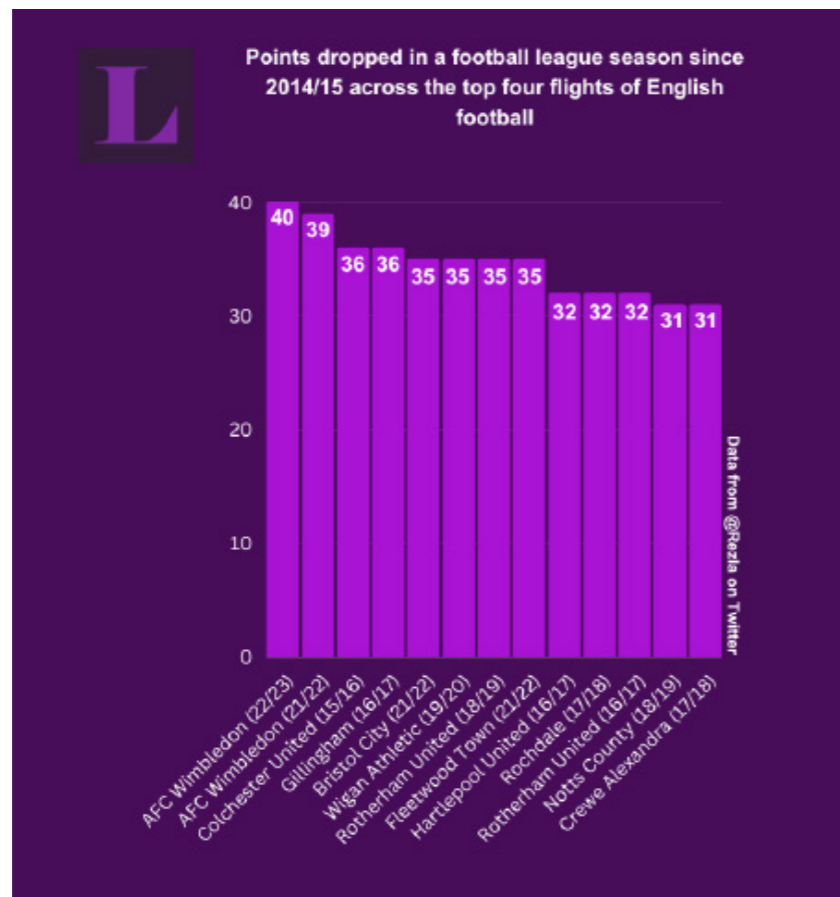
Wimbledon's 2021/22 campaign was already at the top of this list with 39 points dropped and they managed to better this tally, dropping 40 points this season.

They surpassed their tally in the second last game of the season after going ahead against Tranmere Rovers and conceding late on to a 79th minute Sam Taylor goal.

AFC Wimbledon's two seasons sit comfortably on top of this list, ahead of Colchester United's 2015/16 season and Gillingham's 2016/17 season where they both dropped 36 points.

The next four spaces, all on 35 dropped points, are filled by Bristol City (21/22), Wigan Athletic (19/20), Rotherham United (18/19) and Fleetwood Town (21/22).

There was a fair amount of excitement amongst the AFC



LEADING THE WAY: A graph showing AFC Wimbledon's poor form, dropping the most points in league games since the 2014/15 season. Data from @Rezla on Twitter

Wimbledon faithful going into this season, following the appointment of Johnnie Jackson, however it ended in huge disappointment with a 21st placed finish.

After six seasons of fighting relegation in League One, the Dons finally succumbed to relegation last season, following a run of 28 games without a win.

The season started

rough but picked up quickly when the Dons went unbeaten in the league from October 22nd until January 1st and that saw a surge towards the play-offs.

By the turn of the new year, however, this run was ended by local rivals Sutton United and the Dons would go on to only win two games in the whole of 2023.

This poor run happened even with

the arrival of 21-year-old prolific striker Ali Al-Hamadi who managed to net ten goals in just 19 games, meaning he has become a fan favourite in no time at all.

Where has it all gone wrong for Wimbledon?

SWL spoke to season ticket holder Matthew Simpson to get a better picture of where things turned for the worse for the Dons.

He explained: "There

was definitely two massive issues that hit us this season, injuries and the January transfer window.

"We lost two of our best players in January in Ryley Towler and Ayoub Assal, we also had all of our loanees recalled in that window.

"After January, the team experienced a bit of an injury crisis and that really made things worse.

"I also think there was still the reminder of last season that was overhanging the team and most likely contributed to us dropping so many points from a mentality standpoint."

SWL also spoke to Charlie Ross, a lifelong Wimbledon fan about the Wombles' season and he said: "It was disappointing if I am completely honest.

"We went into the season with a lot of hope as we were relegated, and I expected us to win a lot more games than we did.

"We should have been around the mid-table mark and then if we had a good run we could have snuck into the play-offs.

"The loans haven't turned out as expected, it was disappointing to lose some key players involved in our good

run.

"We failed to adequately replace our recalled loans in the January window and troubles with the January window seems to be a continual issue.

"The arrival of Ali Al-Hamadi was huge, especially on a permanent deal, to be as effective as he has been this season at such a young age means we can hopefully watch him develop and get

stronger each week.

"I am optimistic about next season if we get to see a bit more of Al-Hamadi and if we are able to keep hold our loans for the whole season."

As mentioned by Simpson, the Dons lost Towler and Assal, both integral players during the Dons unbeaten run.

Towler, on-loan side Bristol City, was

recalled to then be sold to League One outfit Portsmouth.

The time during the transfer saga surrounding Assal led to a lot of distaste amongst supporters as the young winger was out of the matchday squad for a lengthy spell due to an illness.

Eventually, it was then released he was on his way to Al-Wakrah in Qatar following a bid that met his release

clause.

The Dons also struggled to name a full bench at points in the second half of the season due to the number of injuries they were hit with, often having to dip into the club's academy to feature on the bench.

Wimbledon came down into League Two in an uninspiring fashion, failing to win in 28 games.

With a large number

of that playing squad still around this season, the emotions of the end of the season looked to creep back in at the back end of the current campaign.

All of this has made it no easy task for Jackson who is relatively inexperienced in management, having only retired from playing in 2018.

He has since received backing from the club's board after large



UNDER THE LIGHTS: Plough Lane under the lights after a 1-1 draw between AFC Wimbledon and Newport County

parts of the fan base were calling for his dismissal, their voices could be well heard at the end of home games with loud chants.

AFC Wimbledon lost all four of their loanees that arrived in the summer by January, two were recalled and sent to higher divisions either permanently or on a temporary basis (Ryley Towler and Paris Maghoma).

Nathan Young-Coombes picked up an injury and that then curtailed his season with the Dons as parent club Brentford recalled him.

Finally, Kyle Hudlin, the giant forward was recalled by Huddersfield after limited minutes in the first team.

Failure to see out games

The data previously mentioned in the story will be the main memory of this season for Wimbledon fans, dropping points late in games.

After an impressive 2-0 victory over Gillingham on the first day of the season, Wimbledon fans would surely have been thinking the shadow of the poor run the previous season was gone, and it certainly looked that way.

Whilst the start of the season was rough, the Dons also were under the watch of a new manager and to get a team clicking it takes time, these concerns were certainly gone

during their impressive run from late October till the New Year.

The new year was where it all started to go wrong and the Dons took early leads in most of their games, however a failure to hold onto that lead or even further their advantage started to become a worrying normality.

A low-point and potentially the worst part of the season for Wimbledon fans was a 3-2 loss against Salford City.

The Dons took an early lead inside 10 minutes and unsurprisingly Salford equalised shortly into the second half, three minutes later Ali Al-Hamadi put the Dons back ahead.

In the 92nd minute referee, Robert Madley, pointed towards the spot for a Salford penalty and all Dons fans assumed their fate was sealed and it was another dropped point, however, Nathan Broome stood composed on his line and emphatically kept out Callum Hendry's effort.

Hendry had the last laugh, as he went on to bag a brace in a chaotic last 5 minutes of additional time and the Dons lost 3-2 leaving almost everyone in the ground in complete shock, especially the ecstatic Salford faithful who travelled a long way to support their team in a play-off push.

Transfer Windows

The summer transfer window, which saw all the loan arrivals previously mentioned, was a good one for Wimbledon and it saw a new manager, and a heap of experience as the club welcomed Chris Gunter and Alex Pearce into the fold.

Harry Pell made his return to the club and he managed to stamp his mark on the league with his gamesmanship giving him the edge over opponents.

Josh Davison arrived, following Jackson from Charlton and he ended leading the way with 13 goal contributions (9G 4A).

An uninspiring January window, mainly due to recalling

of loans and loss of Ayoub Assal, seemed to overshadow the remainder of the season as replacements were sought after but not found.

All the additions were loans with the exception of Ali Al-Hamadi on a two and half year deal and Aaron Pierre on a six month contract who was an attempt to replace the gap that Ryley Towler left in the squad.

Diallang Jaiyesimi, Kasey McAteer, Saikou Janneh, Armani Little and Sam Pearson all donned a Wimbledon shirt in the second half of the season with mixed results depending on who you ask.

Armani Little, joined from Forest Green Rovers, slotted well into midfield and went down well with the fans, the same went for Kasey McAteer, who arrived from Leicester.

It was a tough run for Saikou Janneh who was brought in from League One Cambridge United and the forward didn't get many minutes to make his mark yet did manage to impress on occasion from the bench.

Diallang Jaiyesimi, who had previously worked under Johnnie Jackson made a loan switch from Charlton, he was unfortunate and picked up an injury that reduced his playing time to just 11 games.

Sam Pearson, joined from Bristol City with some saying he was sent due to them recalling Towler, he also wasn't able to get too much time on the pitch but his explosive pace and

determination to push forward meant he got praise from parts of the fanbase.

What is next for Wimbledon?

Johnnie Jackson and his staff will be looking to next season to win over the fanbase with good football and importantly results.

When asked of what can improve for next season, Matthew Simpson, said: "Getting some new faces through the door to strengthen the playing squad will definitely be a good start.

"I think Johnnie Jackson also needs to find an identity for how we play as that is something we didn't have last year.

"Once we nail down an identity we can then build on the pitch and I think that will also go down well with the supporters.

"If we can keep Jack Currie, Huseyin Biler and Ali Al-Hamadi, that will give us a great platform to build into the season."

Charlie Ross added: "Learning to hold onto a lead will be great place to start, even if we held onto half the points we dropped we would be in a much better position in the league and I think the fans would be a lot happier.

"I think if you are looking at the team, we could definitely do with some reinforcements in the middle of the pitch.

"Alex Woodyard featured heavily this season and was barely given any rest and he started to look jaded in the run in to the end



LOUD AND PROUD: Fans in the South London Movers stand have supported their team through thick and thin and this season



HOME COMFORTS: The West Stand crowd watching on as AFC Wimbledon lose 2-0 to National League side Chesterfield FC in the second round of the FA Cup.

of the season, if we had some more midfield options that the manager trusts then it will give him a bit less pressure to perform in every game.

"It could also help with how we see out games, a lot of teams in the division changed the game with their introductions from the substitutes bench and we did not have the quality on the bench to match it."

Ross mentions how important a rebuild in the midfield will be after a heavy reliance on Alsx Woodyard this season.

The Dons skipper amassed 2764 minutes this season and he came into the season off the back of a bad injury.

He featured most commonly with Paris Maghoma before his recall and latterly Harry Pell and Armani

Little. George Marsh was overlooked more often than not and was rarely called upon.

One reason why Wimbledon struggled in the later stages of games will be down to the lack of options from the bench.

In most of the games where Wimbledon capitulated the opposition were able to bring on an experienced head or two to manage games or even bring on fresh legs to combat the tiring Wombles midfield.

As previously mentioned the Dons were unable to list a full bench at times and, even when they could, there was usually a handful of academy players who were not up to the level required.

Whilst that is no fault of the young players themselves,

it was a huge responsibility to place on such inexperienced individuals.

It is a huge summer for Jackson and the Wimbledon squad whilst they will be looking to climb the League Two table.

There will be plenty of expectation for Jackson to bring in players that fit his desired football.

Another focus for Wimbledon will be to see their games out and try not to let the complacency of the last two seasons creep back in.

AFC Wimbledon will be hoping to be nowhere near the relegation zone.

A poor start to the season could lead to further outrage from the fans and additionally add to the pressure Johnnie Jackson is already facing.

Fixture congestion chaos in the CCL

by Tom Large

Westside FC were looking at a busy end of season schedule, with a combination of poor weather and an already heavily populated end of season run in combining to leave them with 11 games to be played in just 17 days.

Fortunately, the Combined Counties League (CCL) later extended the season, bringing it to 7 games in 14 days by the time fixtures were re-allocated. It made it easier but it was still going to be tough on the Westside squad.

All of the players have day jobs and lives away from

football meaning that the heavy amount of games would naturally creep into their daily lives, let alone the physical feat of playing so much football.

Westside FC striker, Sean McDonnell, explained: "I was on holiday so I came into the run in fresh and ready to go and even I still felt it.

"I'd be playing, thinking my legs are gone and then you realise you have another game the following night.

"If we were drawing 1-1 and we wanted to push on and win. We can't really send the big boys up because we have a game the following day so it



TEAM TOGETHER: Westside FC pre-match, Sean McDonnell front row third in from left. Credit: Sean McDonnell

stopped us being able to push at the end of games to get a win.

"You are obviously giving 100% but you know when it gets to the 80th minute, you try to take your foot off the gas a little bit and then you are in a foot race with the full-back thinking should I be doing this because I don't want to get injured with still so many games left."

The forward added: "We had been calling out for an extension, just more time to play games because it would help with the workload.

"Playing two games a week is doable, by the time they arranged the extra week we had already played two weeks of

three or four games and it has probably cost us points and a shot at the reaching the play-offs.

"It would have been great for Westside to be promoted, because it is such a good club."

With so many fixtures on the horizon, this is something that, understandably, the first-team squad couldn't manage purely on their own and the club dipped into their U18s to help with the collective workload.

This is something McDonnell was quick to say was a positive, he explained: "When I first heard about some of the U18s coming to the squad, I knew it was a really good thing.

"The congestion threw a spanner in the works, but it has allowed players to come through and show their ability.

"If they have a really good game, then they can stamp a mark on the team and secure themselves at that level for the next season."

McDonnell is now looking to next season as he looks to gain more first team minutes to continue his development, while at the same time focusing on completing his degree.

When his degree is done, the young forward said he is looking to climb the football pyramid and see where he can take his career to.



HARD GRAFT: McDonnell pictured mid-game

From PE teacher to PL academy coach

by Tom Large

Not many can say they have transitioned from teaching secondary school students PE to leading the coaching of goalkeepers at a Premier League academy.

Adam Skinner, however, can and it is something he is extremely grateful for, he credits a lot of his time at Raynes Park High School to the successes of his current role as head of academy goalkeeping with Nottingham Forest.

Coaching was something Skinner always wanted to go into but he knew he needed a backup, he explained: "I know football can be volatile and at some

point I will fall out of the game.

"I needed to have something behind me and I thought teaching was going to be a really good way to hone my coaching skills, especially in a school environment where you are going to have plenty of different characters, all with differing experiences and you need to be able to communicate and navigate with each of them.

"Coaching in its most basic form is the ability to communicate with another person, so teaching fit really well to develop my communication skills."

Sport has always been a part of Skinner's life as he was on the books at

Fulham, QPR and Chelsea at academy level and this love of sport led him to coaching, he added: "I realised early on that first I wasn't going to be good enough, and secondly I am still waiting for my growth spurt now, so I turned to my second love, coaching."

Skinner explained it was his time at secondary school that started his love for coaching when he was given the chance to lead some rugby sessions for the younger students.

His next plan was to combine that with his love of goalkeeping as he had the knowledge and passion for it.

When asked about the change from being a PE teacher, he said: "It is honestly not that different.



GK UNION: Skinner providing advice for one of his young goalkeepers. Credit: Adam Skinner

"From students sitting in a PE classroom to having young goalkeepers sitting and standing in front of you, it is still the same thing, you are just trying to help people get towards their goals.

"You are trying to be a small part of their journey and that is exactly the same as teaching." Whilst Skinner says there is not much of a change of the overarching aim between coaching and teaching the day-to-day definitely has.

When asked of the end goal for his career, Skinner said: "There is only two things I really want from coaching, the first thing is working

with a goalkeeper who goes on to play at the very top level of the game, that's not me suggesting I would be the reason behind that but just being a part of their journey.

"The second thing for me, later down the line when I finally hang up the gloves, I want to be able to walk into a room of people who I really respect in the field and I deem to be very good at what they do and for them to turn round and tell me I was also very good at what I do.

"I don't necessarily want to work for a specific club or have a specific role, I just love developing goalkeepers."



ALL SMILES: Adam Skinner beams during team training session. Credit: Adam Skinner

AFC Wimbledon Women miss out on promotion despite successful season

by Tom Large

It was heartbreak for AFC Wimbledon Women after they missed out on promotion by just four points, despite only losing one game, in this year's Women's National League.

They fell just short of Hashtag United Women despite handing the league champions their only loss, a 4-0 thrashing.

Speaking to star striker Ashlee Hincks, she said: "It has been a really positive season. We have only lost one game all season and it has been incredible but the aim was

promotion so we will go again next season.

"I think one of the standout games, weirdly, is the Billericay game where we beat them in the FA Cup.

"They had been a bit of a bogey team of ours from last season, so it was really satisfying beating them two nil and going through.

"There's been some really positive results like we've had a lot of injuries too and as a group and collective, everyone has really stepped up."

Hincks scored 40 goals in all competitions last season and when asked about her personal goals for the season,

further explained: "I wanted to try and backup last season and I was on course to do that, but I tore my achilles so I had to work really hard to get through that and I felt I had a positive season."

First-team manager, Kevin Foster, acknowledged how well this season has gone and attributed their success to the consistency amongst the team, he said: "We have a group from last year to this year meaning we didn't have to change loads.

"We only bought in three or four key players, but generally each year we find that we are having to bring

in less players and the core group is getting stronger.

"They all build off each other, their rapport and the way they work on and off the pitch is building up how they are as a squad.

"Plus, the coaching setup now is as strong as it has ever been. Everything is in it's second, third or fourth year and it's shown a big difference.

"To go through the whole league and only lose one game is pretty impressive.

"We are very happy." The division in which AFC Wimbledon Women play their football operates on a one up, one down system meaning only one team from the division can get promoted.

When asked about the league format, Foster said: "I think it's something that if you speak to anybody in the National League they will agree it needs to change and if you speak to tier three clubs as well, they've got it even harder than us.

"We are sitting here complaining but they can win their league and miss out on promotion because they might end up losing to the northern side, in the play-off

between the North and South teams, which is incredible and it's just something that just needs a little bit of time.

"You look at the money and the resources that are going into football and football clubs, you're talking about building up women's football.

"It just needs a little bit of a tweak as time goes on."

The Dons have played at Plough Lane, the men's first-team ground, on numerous occasions and also at Craven Cottage and Loftus Road, home of Fulham and Queens Park Rangers respectively.

This is huge for the women's game and allows for not only higher attendances but also higher gate figures and greater awareness of the game itself.

Ashlee Hincks said: "It's been great, there is nothing better than playing on decent grass pitches.

"So we are lucky that Wimbledon really back us and we play at Plough Lane a lot.

"I know a lot of clubs don't get that and it is a one-off playing at the men's stadium, it's a positive and hopefully we can continue to have more games in men's stadiums."

Kevin Foster added:

"The players love it and it's what they deserve, when you look at what they do and the time and effort they put in to do what they love.

It is also about building up crowds and women's football.

"When we play at Plough Lane we are getting crowds of over 1000 and that's only getting busier and busier.

At Loftus Road, you're getting a couple thousand and that side of it is just the more exposure we can get for them, the better it is for everybody.

Kelly-Jade Whelan has been involved with the club, on and off, for at least the last seven seasons when she was a regular starter for the Dons.

However, after a combination of having two children and the coronavirus pandemic she is back training with the club and managed to get ten minutes on the pitch, which for her was a huge achievement.

Whelan explained: "The opposition was probably thinking who the hell is this as I got a big cheer when I came on, it had been five years and I've had two kids in those five years but I was buzzing."

When asked about this season, she humbly said: "I'm going to say



CORNER AT THE COTTAGE: Ashlee Hinks curls in a corner during AFC Wimbledon Women's 3-1 victory against Fulham Women at Craven Cottage in a landmark fixture for both teams and the womens game. Credit: Ian Stephens



TEAM SPIRIT: AFC Wimbledon Women celebrate victory over tier three side Gillingham in the FA Cup. Credit: Emily Topping

First Team League Table

First Team League Table									
Pos	Club	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
1	Hashtag United F.C.	18	16	1	1	77	14	63	49
2	AFC Wimbledon	18	14	3	1	45	13	32	45
3	Actonians	18	10	2	6	52	26	26	32
4	Norwich City	18	9	3	6	32	34	-2	30
5	London Seaward	18	8	5	5	34	31	3	29
6	Ashford Town FC (Middlesex)	18	7	2	9	34	41	-7	23
7	Queens Park Rangers F.C.	18	6	4	8	31	36	-5	22
8	Cambridge United	18	3	5	10	30	45	-15	14
9	Cambridge City	18	2	1	15	17	50	-33	7
10	Chesham	18	2	0	16	16	79	-62	6

LEAGUE TABLE: The National League table showing AFC Wimbledon missing out on promotion by just two points. Credit: AFC Wimbledon Women's website

they, because it isn't me, but they're the best.

"It's been a really positive season, but also frustrating, as there were such high expectations.

"It was just a couple of unlucky games that meant they didn't win the league.

"We are absolutely the best team in the league 100% and we put up a really good fight for the title this season.

"So that is the sense of frustration, everyone has those

games where you just mess up and for us it was early on during the season.

"We said it at the time, it was really early in the season and we knew this could mess us up.

"It's been a really good season if you look at the positives, there's a lot more positives and negatives."

All eyes are now on next season with the solid aim of gaining promotion and carrying on their impressive performances.



AFC WIMBLEDON WOMEN MISS OUT ON PROMOTION DESPITE SUCCESSFUL SEASON

see page 42



The growth of padel tennis in London see page 35
Fixture congestion chaos in the CCL see page 40
From PE teacher to academy coach see page 41