

Conservative Conference 2022 Policy@Manchester Roundup

Policy@Manchester hosted a number of fringe events at Conservative Party Conference. Our panels were well-attended and facilitated important conversations on policy issues such as energy security, mental health and online safety.

Below is a roundup of our fringe panel events from this year:

Future local economies: How research and development can boost skills, jobs and security in the UK's regions (in partnership with Dods)

The University of Manchester's Professor Richard Jones, Vice President for Regional Innovation and Civic Engagement, was joined by Syma Cullasy-Aldridge, Chief Campaigns Director at the CBI, Robin Millar, MP for Aberconwy and the Rt Hon Lord Willetts. The panel was chaired by the Political Editor at Huffpost, Kevin Schofield, and discussed how a regional approach to innovation and investment in research and development is crucial for national prosperity and for helping us to build strong and self-sufficient local economies.

Key points:

- Syma Cullasy-Aldridge argued that a mix of "institutional, geographical, and political will" is needed to make a success story of UK research & development.
- Lord Willetts called for more focus to be placed on the role of UK universities and praised them as 'crucial anchor institutions' for economic growth and innovation.
- Robin Millar MP and Professor Richard Jones agreed that government must drive inward investment to areas outside of the South East of England, in order to tackle the evident regional disparities in research and development.
- Professor Richard Jones told us that more needs to be done to encourage innovation in smaller companies, suggesting that regional 'intervention packages' and an increased focus on making local connections could have a positive impact on national economic growth.

Digital harms: Is smart tech a threat to your privacy and security?

Dr Simon Kaye, Head of Policy at the think tank Reform, chaired this panel on smart technology and new virtual worlds, which have become a feature of our increasingly complex online habits. Professor Emma Barrett, Professor of Psychology, Security and Trust at The University of Manchester was joined by Helen Milner OBE, the Group Chief Executive of the Good Things Foundation, Lord Vaizey of Didcot, Donna Jones, Police and Crime Commissioner for Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, and Susie Hargreaves OBE, Chief Executive of the Internet Watch Foundation. The speakers discussed the importance of the Online Safety Bill and considered how policymakers can act to mitigate the threat of dangerous behaviour, all while protecting freedom of expression and user privacy online.

Key points:

- Lord Vaizey said that policy and technology must work together to shape digital policy and improve online safety.
- Susie Hargreaves called for the government's full commitment to the Online Safety Bill, adding that though the internet is a great way of connecting people, technology and policy must be connected to ensure children are not compromised in any way.

- Professor Emma Barrett raised future risks posed by the metaverse. As a technology that can amass vast amounts of personal data, extended realities pose many risks to personal safety and vulnerable groups in particular.
- Donna Jones argued that online content should be age-rated by the government, but simultaneously parents have a duty of care for their children's online safety.

Building a green wall: Can renewables catalyse levelling up and tackle the cost of living?

This panel explored how a commitment to renewables could power jobs, growth and impact rising energy bills and the cost of living crisis. Our experts discussed the success rate of decarbonisation programmes and considered how the drive to net zero could deliver long-term energy security. Akash Paun, Senior Fellow at the Institute for Government, chaired this session which featured the Mayor of Tees Valley, Ben Houchen and the CEO of Ecotricity, Asif Rehmanwala, as well as Dr Nina Skorupska CBE, Chief Executive at The Association for Renewable Energy and Clean Technology, Professor Matthew Paterson, Director of the Sustainable Consumption Institute at The University of Manchester and Rain Newton-Smith, Chief Economist at the CBI.

Key points:

- Dr Nina Skorupska said that while the transition to renewables cannot immediately solve the cost of living crisis, there has never been a better time to invest in clean technology for the future.
- Professor Matthew Paterson called for an 'aggressive' energy strategy to help us level up and prevent future energy challenges.
- Ben Houchen argued that governments and authorities need to "take the people along" with them on the transition to renewables, as getting people invested in clean technology and renewable energy is vital for its development.
- Asif Rehmanwala told us that the government should make planning easier for established renewable technology such as offshore wind.
- The panel agreed that certainty from the Government and its policy is the crucial next step towards energy security and development.

Tackling loneliness: Can better health care make us happier and more productive?

Our panels discussed how we can deal with loneliness in the UK, including the economic case for better and more integrated mental health care, the effect of place and community on isolation and how combating loneliness can improve success at school and the workplace. Professor Pamela Qualter, Professor of Education at The University of Manchester was joined by Zoe Abrams, Executive Director of Communications and Engagement at the British Red Cross, in this event chaired by Dr Aveek Bhattacharya, Chief Economist at the Social Market Foundation. The panel also featured Su Moore, CEO of the Jo Cox Foundation, Matt Vickers MP from the APPG on Loneliness and James Evans MS, Shadow Minister for Health and Wellbeing in the Senedd.

Key points:

- Professor Pamela Qualter reminded us that the pandemic has put loneliness on the political agenda, particularly for children and young people. Loneliness is universal, she said, so we must help people to transition out of short-term loneliness *and* intervene with those who get 'stuck in loneliness'.
- James Evans MS called on government, including the devolved administrations, to ensure mental health services are in place across local communities.

- Su Moore told us that the biggest issue facing those who are working to tackle loneliness is the cost of living crisis.
- We should be proud that the UK was the first to have a Minister for Loneliness, said Zoe Abrams, but to tackle loneliness properly requires a “cross-government approach” involving health, education and more.
- Matt Vickers MP argues that loneliness needs a ‘social solution’ because it is a ‘social problem’, and that we should look into the relationship between loneliness and technology to see if it has helped or hindered.

How do we level up health inequalities across the UK? (in partnership with Centre for Cities)

Policy@Manchester partnered with Centre for Cities for this event on health inequalities and levelling up across the UK. Panellists explored the impact of health inequalities on productivity and what is needed to achieve the Government’s aim of narrowing the gap in healthy life expectancy between regions. The impact this could have on places where productivity is ‘lagging’ was also discussed in this panel chaired by Andrew Carter, the Chief Executive at Centre for Cities. Our other panellists were Cllr Abi Brown, the Leader of Stoke on Trent City Council, as well as Dr Luke Munford, Senior Lecturer in Health Economics at The University of Manchester, and Liz Gaulton, Chief Officer of Population Health and Inequalities on the NHS Coventry & Warwickshire Integrated Care Board.

Key points:

- Dr Luke Munford told us that health inequalities are not necessarily a North-South issue, but they affect the ‘left-behind neighbourhoods’ in which life expectancy is significantly lower.
- Liz Gaulton said that addressing the wider determinants of health needs an integrated approach which takes into account everything including education, skills, housing, employment and transport.
- Cllr Abi Brown called for the new government to provide more support and stability, to help *people* level up as well as infrastructure.

Covid’s Children: How the pandemic has affected educational inequality, mental health and wellbeing for young people (in partnership with the Social Market Foundation)

Policy@Manchester co-ordinated this panel with the Social Market Foundation to explore how we can deliver better mental health and wellbeing support in schools, and how to build a fairer and more resilient education system for Britain’s young people. The panel was chaired by Dr Aveek Bhattacharya, the SMF’s Chief Economist, and featured the Chair of the Education Select Committee, Robert Halfon MP, the Chief Executive of Barnardo’s, Lynn Perry MBE, and Dr Ola Demkowicz, Lecturer in Psychology of Education at The University of Manchester.

Key points:

- Dr Ola Demkowicz explained that the disproportionate impacts from the pandemic led to particular schools being “buried” under new care responsibilities, creating further educational inequalities.
- Lynn Perry MBE outlined her thoughts including mental health support teams and universal free primary school meals in schools, as well as early access to specialist and community support.

- Robert Halfon called for school mental health councillors and school attendance officers, longer school days with a focus on extracurriculars, and youth mental health classes to be funded by social media corporations.

Policy@Manchester would like to thank all our panellists for their contributions and thank delegates who attended our events.

For more information, please see our website -

<https://www.policy.manchester.ac.uk/activities/party-conferences-2022/>.