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Mark, 2018 runner

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Hello, my name is Max

I came to The Big Issue after losing my job, getting into debt and spiralling into despair. Now I’ve got some regular customers, cleared most of my debt and things are much better. The next step will be to get my own place here in Leamington but it’s hard as I’m not from this area. In Glasgow they’re helping people excluded from applying online for things like benefits and housing. Read about the UK’s first digital inclusion officer on page 28. And you can read more of my story on page 46.

A HAND UP NOT A HANDOUT
This magazine was bought by your vendor for £1.25 and sold to you for £2.50. They are proudly working, not begging. Buy it, take it, spread the word.

If you can’t get hold of a copy of the magazine on a regular basis, you can subscribe to receive The Big Issue every week: bigissue.com/subscribe
the big list. Highlights of the week ahead across England

01 BACK OF THE NET!
This Time With Alan Partridge
Alan finally gets his long-coveted “second series”, as he returns to the BBC for the first time since 2002. Steve Coogan’s comic creation is back as temporary co-host of a teatime magazine programme not unlike The One Show, and he’s desperate to seize his chance. On-screen we get Alan’s awkward interactions and one-upmanship with co-presenter Jennie Gresham. When the cameras stop rolling, Partridge and his unfathomably loyal PA sidekick Lynn plot to ensure that, needless to say, he has the last laugh. BBC1, from February 25

02 JUST ANNOUNCED
Conversations with Nick Cave: an evening of talk and music
Since opening up his Red Hand Files one-to-one online correspondence with fans, Nick Cave has introduced a whole new side of himself as a kind of literate agony aunt of existential angst. He’s just announced a series of unique conversation events based on the format around the UK this June. He’ll take questions from the audience and perform some of his most beloved songs on piano. Described as “an exercise in connectivity”, no subject will be deemed too sacred, bold, challenging or confrontational. Wales Millennium Centre, Cardiff, June 15, then touring around the UK; nickcave.com

03 DISCOVER
Spare Parts: Rethinking Human Repair
A free exhibition and events programme explores the art, science, ethics and technology of organ transplants and tissue regeneration. Creative responses by world-renowned artists and designers to the latest research at King’s College will include experimental incubators hosting cellular life by Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr, auditory prosthetics from sculptor Tabatha Andrews and 3D-printed models of hearts designed by Salomé Bazin. Science Gallery London at King’s College, February 28-May 12 (free); london.sciencegallery.com

04 DONATE
Willo’s foodbank appeal
After Work and Pensions Secretary Amber Rudd finally admitted escalating foodbank use is tied to the rollout of Universal Credit, two Brit-rock veterans are stepping in to help fill hungry bellies. Dr Feelgood guitar legend Wilko Johnson, with Squeeze hero Glenn Tilbrook in support, is requesting fans bring foodbank donations to their upcoming 15-date tour. They’ll be talking about the Trussell Trust, have collection points for non-perishable food, and Tilbrook is donating all profits from merch sales to the charity. wilkojohnson.com; trusseltrust.org
05 Go
Submerge: Bristol International Digital Arts Festival
A diverse array of artists working at the edges of digital art, electronic music and live performance come together in theatres, galleries, music halls and underground spaces around Bristol for this festival of cutting-edge creativity and its remit to challenge the senses. Highlights will include headline performances from Gazelle Twin, Jazzie B, Klein, Batu, Rian Treanor and UK premieres from Guillaume Marmin and Jan Mocel. Various venues, Bristol, March 1-10; submerge.me/festival

06 Shop
Koko Collective for pets
The Big Issue Shop welcomes a new range of products for four-legged friends in the form of the Koko Collection. Their pet accessories including collars, leads and bandanas, are all designed and made in association with Calcutta Rescue in India, a charity employing around 15 people who would otherwise find it difficult to gain employment. They give them free healthcare, a pension, an education for their children and a fair living wage. bigissueshop.com/vendor/koko-collective

07 Get Fit, Do Good
Join the Good Gym
Forget running aimlessly on the treadmill – these Big Issue Changemakers combine getting fit with being part of a social group, and above all doing good. Be it running to shift earth for a community gardening project, sorting cans for a foodbank or stopping off to change a lightbulb for an isolated older or disabled person, it’s a great way to improve both your mental and physical health, meet new people and help not only yourself but others feel better as a result. There are groups already running or in proposal all over the UK. goodgym.org

08 Agitate
 Amend the law and reclassify the meaning of ‘intentionally homeless’
At present by law, tenants who are served notice are encouraged by their local council to remain in their home and not vacate – because if they leave, they are bizarrely classified as “intentionally homeless” and are unlikely to be rehoused as a priority. This causes costs which can be prohibitive to both tenants and landlords alike, and needs changing urgently. Sign a petition to the UK government and Parliament now to help trigger an official response. petition.parliament.uk/petitions/232433

09 Let Them Eat Cake
The Fantasy Bakes podcast
The return of the Bake Off’s months away, so here’s the perfect recipe to sweeten uncertain times until then. Hosted by 1950s-styled glamour queen and cake-maker supreme Charlotte White, Fantasy Bakes was borne out of a blog imagining creating magnificent confections for her heroes, from Superman to Bowie, Nigella Lawson and the women of Britpop. The ultimate comfort listen, it’s calming, cultured nourishment for your heart and head. Podcasting good enough to eat. Fantasy Bakes is on Spotify and iTunes now; restorationcake.com

10 See
Yoko Ono at Leeds
Since her first trip to the Yorkshire city for a happening in 1966, not long before she met future husband John Lennon, internationally renowned multimedia artist and peace activist Yoko Ono has long had a soft spot for Leeds. Celebrating this relationship, a special exhibition of her work opens the new multimillion-pound Blenheim Walk Gallery at Leeds Arts University. It includes a selection of interactive installations – Wish Trees, Mend Piece and Add Color Painting (Refugee Boat) among them – as well as political open calls such as Aising. Blenheim Walk, Leeds Arts University, until March 14; leeds-art.ac.uk

The songs that made blues legend Beth Hart – admitting she was wrong on Springsteen
Opening up great films to all – the arts centre offering pay-what-you-can cinema
Peter Capaldi and second cousin Lewis made a vital organ donation film. It’ll save lives

This week on…
BIGISSUE.COM

Photo: Koko Collective

LETS THEM EAT CAKE

The Fantasy Bakes podcast

Photo: Photo: Colin McPherson Photography

LET THEM EAT CAKE

The Fantasy Bakes podcast

Photo: Colin McPherson Photography
Beyond the tyranny of the screen

I think we need to think more deeply about young children using mobile phones, iPads, etc., listen to our own inner wisdom and take action on that [Are We Having Fun Yet?, February 4-10]. What is it that children truly need for a healthy happy childhood? We do have a choice and a responsibility to the future to get it right. We shouldn’t kid ourselves that it doesn’t really matter, that it’s a part of our culture now. What’s important is that we think things through, thoroughly.

Is it confusing for a developing child to have access to a virtual world, as compared to the real world that builds up all the senses? Is it good to sit passively in front of a screen when a young body needs healthy movement? How damaging is screen use for young eyes? What about the addictive nature of phones, games, etc., its exploitative element and so on. Can screen use compare to hands-on play with toys, sand, water, natural things; the building of dens, the excitement of games with a squabble of children, bedtime stories and so on?

It may not be easy to restrict screen use in our culture, but if it truly supports our children surely it is what we must do.

Julie Long, Walterstone, Herefordshire

Good luck Tony

I’m writing this email and holding the last Big Issue I will ever buy from the lovely Tony Wood at Cardinal Place/Victoria in central London as today’s his last day selling the magazine. Although we have many other vendors around Victoria to supply us with the weekly Big Issue (which is a sad thing, really), I will miss seeing him there, always playing classical music for us stressed commuters.

Tony, I just want to thank you for all the times you were there for a quick chat (and some laughs!) and wish you all the best in your next venture. You are a great human and a brave, focused professional, and hopefully more people will be inspired by you along the way. Good luck and please do keep in touch!

Cynthia Vanzella, email
It’s a girl thing

While Matt in Bristol makes every other pronoun female in Dear Zoo (Fact/Fiction, January 28-February 3), I make EVERY pronoun female to my toddler girl (in all her books!). Reading to her shone a torch at the gender discrepancy, and this is in pre-literacy! A 2011 US study showed male animals are central in more than 23 per cent of books, compared to 7.5 per cent female. Even where the animal’s gender was not explicit, readers assumed the animal was male. Janice McCabe, the author of the study, says this contributes to a sense of unimportance among girls and a sense of privilege among boys. I see it everywhere, the nursery rhymes we sing, the fairytales we tell, the expressions we use (cut out the middleman, it’s good for mankind, man on the moon). Astronauts, soldiers, police officers, firefighters, doctors…the majority of people say ‘he’, even when they don’t know the gender. Its implicit bias, and awareness is half the battle. So thank you for being aware, Matt, that it takes a village to raise a child—but let’s not forget the child can be a girl as well as a boy.

Ana Marreiros, email

Consensus politics

I would suggest to John Bird (Only unity can heal Brexit rifts, February 18-24) that a greater consensus is needed with regard to Brexit and unity cannot be achieved. Several years ago, on one day, 37 per cent of the registered electorate wished to leave the EU and it would seem that many chose to do so because of the effects of austerity imposed by the Tories over many years. Since 2016 Theresa May has not sought unity but has pandered to a very small minority in her party. Let us go for consensus—but only after asking the people again what they wish for regarding membership of the EU now that the misinformation has been exposed.

Stephen Hawkins, Edinburgh

Stop him and buy one!

A nice thing: stopped to buy @Bigissue at the train station this morning & the seller proudly told me he was the featured interview on the back page. What a journey he’s had & what a lovely guy he is. Temple Meads commuters, make sure you stop by Michael @Lyndsey_Fineran

This fantastic person is one of the many reasons we are exploring partnering with the @BigIssue! Also, why not buy a copy today and read how Michael turned his life around through his work. He is a star! #StoppingHomelessness #employability #partnership @CameronKinsella

EDITOR’S LETTER

So the house of cards has started to fall. Now what?

We’re really hard to please.

For the longest time, we (that’s you and me) have banged on about politicians being careerist and following party lines rather than standing up for what they believe in, or speaking first and foremost for the people who elected them.

And then, whaddayaknow, when a number of them make a stand, for reasons that they say are to do with personal belief and what they feel is right, we have a go at them.

The Independent Group of 11 MPs are (and you can insert/delete according to need) just what Britain has been aching for/careerists who put personal desire above party unity going to make a No Deal Brexit happen/going to stop Brexit happening/going to destroy the Labour party/going to destroy the Conservative party going to make an ongoing series of bad film title puns.

What do we want? Do we want politicians to believe in something? Do we want more by-elections? Do we just want the bins taken out on time?

There are two things clear about the new grouping of MPs. The first is that at present they all represent English constituencies. They are, essentially, an English party. Even though they’re not officially a party yet. Which makes them unique among the parties of the United Kingdom and this limits their influence and the influence on them.

The second is that they are not pulling up any trees. They have not come out swinging with a hugely energising, clearly defined statement of intent. Politics is broken, they say, let’s change it.

Our aim, they add, “is to pursue policies that are evidence-based, not led by ideology, taking a long-term perspective to the challenges of the 21st century in the national interest, rather than locked in the old politics of the 20th century in the party’s interests”.

That’s fine and upstanding, but it does not commit them to anything. At present it feels like a debating club or pressure group. And that is perhaps why space exists to have a pop at them.

The clear let down is that their move exposes reality. The mooted new way in British politics has been built on a mumbled hope—that this way would hold some golden keys and lead us through a new door. And through that door would be sunlit uplands where the Brexit impasse would be resolved and a solution to austerity and galloping poverty would be found. And everything would work out fine. Instead it’s well-meaning people who “recognise the value of healthy debate”.

Despite all this it is no reason to dismiss them out of hand. At least they are moving things, albeit incrementally rather than by revolution. Something is shifting.

We should welcome that.

Paul McNamee is editor of The Big Issue @pauldmcnamee Paul McNamee@bigissue.com
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**IT’S NO HOLIDAY ON THE STREETS OF OXFORD**

This telling photo is the work of homeless people given disposable cameras to document their unique view of their city.

The project, run by charity Homeless Oxfordshire, produced a wide variety of ‘clever and creative’ shots, ranging from funny visual puns to serious shots of rough sleepers’ places to stay. Charlotte Matthews, the charity’s communications officer, insisted that the project has been crucial in improving engagement between support staff and some of the charity’s residents.

“We find that projects like this allow our residents to take a break from worrying about being homeless,” she told The Big Issue.

“It was interesting to see how they saw the city because everyone thinks of Oxford as a university city but there is a real homelessness crisis here.”

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**Sister of tragic vendor Dianne in Big Issue thank you**

Joanne Cumper will pound the pavements next month after vendors’ moving funeral gesture

The sister of late Big Issue seller Dianne Cumper is taking on the challenge of The Big Issue Foundation’s Big Night Walk to give something back to vendors after they rallied around her grieving family.

Former paediatric nurse Dianne died aged 45 on August 14 just a few weeks after she began selling The Big Issue in Barnstaple, Devon.

Sister Joanne, 48, was inspired to support our charitable foundation’s annual 13-mile walk through the streets of London on March 8 after vendors made a shrine on Dianne’s pitch and even stepped in to support her at the funeral two weeks later.

“I was so touched that Di’s fellow vendors put up a shrine on her pitch,” said Joanne. “We saw it while we were on the way to her funeral when we saw people stopping to look at a picture of her. And then at the service I had a poem to read that was seven lines long and at line five I was too upset to continue. A vendor stood up to finish it for me – it was such a lovely moment.

“We as a family are so grateful to vendors. We do not judge people, especially those who have been through trauma like Dianne.”

Meanwhile, we are sad to report that much-loved Big Issue vendor Ivon Sanwell has died. The 56-year-old was found dead at Bath’s Julian House homeless hostel on February 19 – the cause of death is not yet known.

Ivon took over the Halfpenny Bridge pitch in the Widcombe area of the city following the death of fellow vendor Istvan Kakas last October.

“Ivon was well liked in the community by Big Issue Bath and Bristol service broker Geo Leonard. His was well liked in the community by customers, support staff and his friends,” said Big Issue Bath and Bristol service broker Geo Leonard.

“He told me that The Big Issue was the first job he’d ever had and it gave him a sense of pride. Ivon had a heart of gold. He will be missed by all of us in Bath.”

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**Tax Amazon to save high street**

The government should reform tax policies to target online giants like Amazon and avoid turning UK high streets into ghost towns, according to MPs.

The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee is calling for a shake-up in business which are closing in droves, and also suggested an online sales tax.

Acknowledging that the days of retail ruling the high street might be over, the MPs said councils and businesses should team up to regenerate town centres.

Committee chair Clive Betts said: “Local authorities must get to grips with the fact that their town centres need to innovate.”

Big Issue sales director Chris Falchi-Stead said there were implications for our vendors too. “If we see a continued decline it will become increasingly difficult to sell the magazine,” he said.

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For more details on how to get involved with TBIF’s Big Night Walk through central London, visit bigissue.org.uk
It is true that the readings found in the study did exceed those found in cities, but to say that they are more deadly than urban ambient pollution is misleading.

The study found that when the scientists cooked a roast, the levels of PM2.5 particles in the house rose to 200 micrograms for one hour.

“We were all surprised at the overall levels of particulate matter in the house,” said Marina Vance, the University of Colorado professor who led the research.

This is down to exposed flames on gas cookers, oil cooking on hobs and roasting meat and vegetables releasing the particles that are small enough to pass into the lungs where they can cause respiratory problems and cardiovascular disease as well as finding their way into the bloodstream.

But typically, cooking a roast dinner takes a couple of hours on a Sunday, so while it may be unhealthy, does that make it more unhealthy than living in a polluted city?

According to the World Bank, in 2017 the urban population in the UK was 83.14 per cent, which means that around 54 million people live and work in cities.

When you take into account that the average amount of time a person spends indoors in the UK – between 90 and 92 per cent of their time – that means that they spend about 14 hours outside in an average week.

The PM2.5 average in London is 13.8 micrograms at the roadside and 18 micrograms in the background as of January. That is dwarfed by the world’s most polluted city, Kanpur in India, which the World Health Organization’s Global Ambient Air Quality Database says has an average of 173 micrograms per cubic metre.

For anyone wanting to travel anywhere in that city, being exposed to pollution is unavoidable and just imagine the effects of that over time. But the advice for dealing with the potentially lethal effects of a roast? Open a window or use the extractor fan and you’ll be just fine.
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JOHN BIRD

From mighty oaks, vital street papers grow

It's interesting that the sense of threat hanging over the country isn't new to me. The threat from not knowing what's coming down the line seemed eternal when I was growing up. I sat in the back of a car passing through places that, as I grew older, became familiar to me.

A bridge, a shop, a pub, a high street. I was on my way to places that, over the decades, would become the backdrop of my life. As I passed them, I watched people going about their lives and was astonished that they weren't in a suspended place of not knowing what was coming next. Why were they not suspended, like me? Because they were not me. My world was me. And increasingly, it's become me and billions of others.

There was a time when it was just me and no one else. And it was feeling like that, back as a teenager in the Fifties, that led me to think that the world should suspend itself until I'd established what the hell was going on in my life.

Possibly Napoleon felt this. And maybe Hitler, and perhaps Churchill too. Of course, they had reason to because history was flowing straight through them. I wasn't even a dirty little rivulet. Not even a puddle on the road to history.

Today, amid the threat of social and environmental catastrophe – when suspense and anxiety rule over us – I think back to my youth and how, once upon a time, it was all about me (even though it ain't any more).

I was once taken to a part of the countryside – a corner of south-west Surrey that's now entirely familiar, but alien back then – and was pushing a gardener's barrow.

I left the barrow because I realised I'd forgotten my edging tool on a cricket table; not an actual table, but a big cricketing playing area. I walked the few hundred yards back to retrieve it, then headed back to retrieve my barrow when a vast oak tree, almost 100 feet high, suddenly fell in front of me.

It crushed my barrow, causing my screw-instructor to (jokingly) complain that I had no respect for my tools. I was told the oak tree was probably over 300 years old. It was planted on a particular day and didn't linger at my (unfortunately那时) edging tool on the cricket table and didn't linger at my (unfortunately crushed) barrow. I lived to tell the tale.

Not long after this encounter I discovered art, painting and Impressionism. That is, the 19th-century French movement that predominantly emphasised the changing qualities of light in nature.

I was shocked by all this light because, for the first time in my life I was living in the light. I was working on a large estate and was outdoors at all times. This wasn't the troglodyte existence of my earlier London life; all dark, damp and dirty. I walked around the estate and everything seemed to glisten.

Today of course you can see Impressionist paintings – and almost all of nature itself – on your smartphone. You've got an LCD backlight; a light that, at times, makes your back-lit handheld world look like a stained-glass window.

But do our kids, well-behaved as well as misbehaving, ever get the chance to be drenched in outdoor light? Or are we now living in a world of well lit-up troglodytism?

We will, I'm certain, read books in years to come that will recall the arrival of Brexit as a big tree that fell suddenly, even though it may have been a long time coming. That the UK's Eurosceptic rot set in decades before our contemporary times.

Things do have a habit of being a long time in gestation before coming into being. It takes dozens of little things to make up a big thing.

And the oak tree that neatly nearly crushed The Big Issue out of existence – and with it, the enormous impact of a street paper movement that's permeated the planet – has to be grasped as life itself. Which, often enough, is life going in another direction.

I'm sure you'd have found something else to read without me. Watch out for big trees: they don't last forever!
Judah Armani

Fighting prison violence by helping inmates face the music

Judah Armani is fighting prison violence and a broken system through the most universal language of all: music. He founded InHouse Records, a pioneering record label run by and for prisoners. But the writing, playing and recording of music is just the start. The initiative has produced a reoffending rate of zero from inmates and 30 “redemptive” songs written and recorded per month. And its success is now the talk of the Ministry of Justice.

The 48-year-old behind InHouse is no stranger to the music industry. After eight years working with Fender guitars and managing artists like Jamie Cullum, Armani wanted out. “I moved into the charity sector. For selfish reasons, really,” he says. “I wanted to feel better about myself from helping other people.”

He had studied product design at Central Saint Martins until 1995 and thought about using those skills to drive social change, eventually founding Public, a social design practice, in 2007. The single dad of three home-schooled his children while running Public, which he says was a challenge but gave him an alternative perspective on learning and self-development. Armani was inspired to set himself a 30-year challenge. He wanted to spend the first decade working in homelessness, another decade working to reform the criminal justice system, and the final 10 years supporting “families from challenging backgrounds”.

“At the end of 10 years, I felt as if I hadn’t achieved anywhere near the kind of impact I wanted to,” he said. But ready to tackle the next phase of his plan head-on, he dived into research—visiting upwards of 40 prisons—and he asked prisoners about their aspirations. Some guys wanted to work in fashion, some in filmmaking, but music was mentioned over and over again. “That lined up quite nicely with my skills,” Armani laughs. “A record label seemed exciting and had huge scope for accommodating loads of different skills.”

But first he had to convince the prisons to let him in. His aim was to reduce reoffending, which costs the UK £15bn a year, but Armani knew that made no difference to the system he was trying to infiltrate. “They measure things according to violence and unemployment, and positive or negative behaviours on a day-to-day basis” he says.

“In UK prisons 80 per cent of people aren’t taking part in daily work, which means they are locked in their cells for 21 hours a day. It doesn’t take a genius to work out there’s a relationship between high unemployment and more than 30,000 violent incidents a year.”

“Many of the guys come from an entrepreneurial background,” he explains. “They understand pricing products, stock flow, supply and demand. For the wrong reasons, but they understand. So why are we giving industrial cleaning and bricklaying work to clearly entrepreneurial people who aren’t using their strengths?”

Those in charge of HMP Elmley in Kent took a chance on his idea in 2017. Then so did Standford Hill, Lewes and Rochester. Each time InHouse spread to a new prison, Armani asked for up to 20 of the most difficult prisoners to work with. While he now has 15 staff, InHouse once rested solely on Armani’s shoulders. He taught prisoners how to play instruments, how to write songs, how to record and how to manage. “The idea is that while we learn technical skills, I’m secretly building their competencies. Their communication, their ability to deal with change, their accountability, teamwork, leadership. And their self-esteem soars.”

He adds: “People would come up to me and say ‘Look, I want to get involved. I can’t sing, I can’t rap, I can’t play an instrument, but I love music.’ And I’d say ‘Cool, what were you involved in?’ and they’d say ‘Oh, I had a drug ring.’ Brilliant. They’ve got communication skills, they understand management, accountability. They can come and be a music manager.”

Within three months, HMP Elmley had recorded a nearly 40 per cent drop in difficult behaviour among that first group. Armani was eventually fielding constant calls from prisons that wanted InHouse.

The songs produced are mostly hip-hop, though some pop, rock and ballads slip through. “This music is storytelling that has meaning,” Armani says. “I hope that will connect with a chunk of the public because they will want to hear real music about change and transformation by people who have lived those stories.” InHouse teamed up with the Universal label and will be releasing music to the public in a matter of months. The training and support continues after release, and 94 per cent of people freed from prison stay in touch with the InHouse team. Just like the workshops in prison, participants perform at a showcase every three months. Those who don’t want to pursue music still get help to work towards whatever they are interested in.

“I see our impact in the smallest and the biggest differences among the guys,” Armani says. “From how they listen to one another to the politeness they show, to empathy, to trust and taking responsibility. I see their personal change and their professional change and I’m incredibly proud of the steps that they take.”

This year the InHouse growth will continue on both sides of the bars, Armani wants to focus on the infrastructure in place for people released from prison, having seen how mistrusting many are of probation officers, sometimes their only source of support. And he hopes the public will really listen to the material when it is released. His 30-year plan is still in place after all.

Interview: Hannah Westwater
@hannahjtw

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WHAT MY GREATEST FAILURE TAUGHT ME
I gave too much responsibility to guys while they were in prison. On the outside responsibility is a good thing, it’s recognition, but for the guys inside that creates anxiety. I realised I had to better understand the individual backgrounds of the people, something everyone working with vulnerable people should remember.
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4314

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I was quiet and shy, but as a teenager I was very excited because I was starting to work with the National Youth Theatre. So at 16 I had done my first play with them, which was Julius Caesar – and I played Julius Caesar. Quite a nice way to begin! That was the beginning of acting feeling like a real possibility and understanding that people did this for their actual work.

It was one of those great youthful summers. The Youth Theatre took over these halls of residence in Tufnell Park [in north London], so there were parties all the time and a raucous lifestyle that I was newly involved in. There was a sense of youthful exuberance and optimism. But underneath that I was really falling in love with this idea of being an actor. I was all about theatre acting but was developing a real love, on the sly, for American films of the Seventies and early Eighties. I was starting to watch films like *Raging Bull*, trying to understand what De Niro was doing, seeing these extraordinary performances and how he was pushing things in a completely new direction. I was thinking about whether that had any relationship to what I was doing.

I could have given my younger self less of a hard time. Everything felt so monumental and so important. I had a tendency to put so much pressure on myself, as if every moment could be the one that burst the bubble of this dream. Any criticism was a crushing blow. There was a sensitivity and edginess and terror of it not happening that I was carrying. Maybe you need a little bit of that, but I could have taken it down a bit. I was carrying a lot of stress.

My father was a doctor but also a musician. So there was an element of performing in my family with him playing on stage and the videos for his music. Not that I put that together at the time. My engagement was so much more with the literature. I was so excited about understanding that sort of self-exploration.

I felt like I had discovered Shakespeare. At 13 or 14 I was going around telling everybody, “You have got to read this guy, he really gets it.” They were like, “Yeah, he is a fairly well-known writer!” I remember being surprised by how clearly this person from hundreds of years ago was talking about an experience and a personal, private feeling that I hadn’t really expressed to anybody. It was *Henry IV Part I* and I felt he was really speaking to an angst that I recognised and an anxiety about what the future would hold.

Being able to express emotions and feelings is an important part of the grieving process. And it is an important part of recovery in grieving [Ejiofor was in a car accident in Nigeria in 1988 in which his father was killed]. We are social and we want to communicate the feelings that we have. I felt very released when I started doing plays in a way I didn’t realise I needed. I would suddenly feel free to express myself in ways that I couldn’t in ordinary life... and then people would applaud at the end. Oh wow! It was overwhelmingly powerful.

Teenage me wrestled with a lot. It is amazing to me that almost everything I am now is dependent on this young teenager. He made these decisions that then affected me as an adult in profound ways. But if I saw myself as a teenager, I would probably say, “You are far too young to be making these decisions.” He was a young kid, but he did well. I feel we can empower young people – we are all the result of empowered young people.

Life takes you on these extraordinary journeys. My younger self would not be able to conceive of the world that has opened to me. My first film, *Amistad*, was in LA and it was a Spielberg film. So just a few years from when we are talking about, my expectations were completely blown out of the water. I gained the understanding that an artistic life, a life in the arts, can be a deeply unpredictable life and an unpredictable lifestyle. It can have these extraordinary highs and lows.
diversity for the sake of diversity. It is a diversity because underneath that is the end of apartheid. It was all kicking changing. The number of times our teacher would come into the classroom to say this new seismic event has happened – at that very aware of the world and global politics and that people were engaged in these big ideas. My advice to my younger self would be to avoid crisis management. Just deal with one issue at a time as opposed to a crazed scattergun approach. It was as if I couldn’t feel comfortable until everything was perfect. For a long time that was a struggle – see things as they are and be calm within that.

Knowledge, education, community – that is the clearest, most important thing we have. When people understand the capacity and opportunities they have, they can move towards them. That is true of education within the context of our film, but also of how we understand the world around us and our capacity to change things. Sometimes the status quo is reliant on us not having information. That is why it is really important to have a vibrant artistic community full of diverse voices and points of view. It enriches all of us to make informed decisions about the type of society we want. That is the privilege of living in a certain time and a certain place. You get access to all these different thoughts, feelings and places. The challenge around diversity is nuanced. It is not diversity for the sake of diversity. It is a diversity because underneath that is the possibility of different points of view.

My advice to my younger self would be to avoid crisis management. Just deal with one issue at a time as opposed to a crazed scattergun approach. It was as if I couldn’t feel comfortable until everything was perfect. For a long time that was a struggle – unless everything is brilliant, then everything is in tumult. I would ask my younger self to calm down and enjoy the ride, even if it seems a little bit crazy. And maybe I would apply that to everything, including relationships. To not try to make everything perfect, but to see things as they are and be calm within that.

The Boy Who Harnessed The Wind is on Netflix from March 1.

Interview: Adrian Lobb @adey70
the big picture.
SPLENDID ISOLATION

Spring cleaning season is around the corner. And 230 miles from John O’Groats, Faroe Islanders are preparing for an archipelago-wide spruce-up session – by ‘closing’ the chain of islands for a weekend.

From April 26 to 28 tourist sites will shut their gates for an improvement blitz. In the month of May the islands would normally expect to welcome up to 25,000 visitors. The shutdown will give locals and volunteers the chance to fix up paths, viewpoints, signs and other facilities in preparation for summer sightseers.

The canny move by the tourist board sparked curiosity (and headlines) across the globe, not least the offer of free accommodation and food for 100 volunteers to lend their labour to the project.
Derry Girls.
FAB FIVE
THEY'RE BACK.
ORLA
CLARE
ERIN
SAY HELLO AGAIN TO THE

THEY’RE BACK.
SAY HELLO AGAIN TO THE

FAB FIVE
Derry Girls was the breakout comedy hit of 2018. Created by Lisa McGee, it was a phenomenon that landed out of the blue and showed teenage joy and hope flourishing against the lurking dread of the Troubles. That shadow was alluded to but rarely fully addressed... until the great final scene.

And how people loved the show. It scored the best ever viewing figures for a Channel 4 comedy launch, and, since December, fandom via Netflix in the US, Cuba, Australia, Argentina, Canada and Mexico.

Now it returns as Northern Ireland – and Britain – are at a vital turning point again. Adrian Lobb tries to keep up.
The Big Issue: How has it been for you all since Series One took off so dramatically?
Nicola Coughlan [who plays Clare Devlin]: It is the most watched show in Northern Ireland ever, which makes it quite difficult to buy toilet roll when you are there. Me and Jamie-Lee once had a bunch of teenage girls following us around the shops. At one point we were like, there are 10 teenage girls in a group and they have been in every shop we have been in. I’m pretty sure they are following us. I was just buying toilet roll. I wish I was doing something better!
Saoirse-Monica Jackson [Erin Quinn]: It has been an amazing experience. A world of positivity.
Louisa Harland [Orla McCool]: We were very confident it would do well at home because we were pissing ourselves laughing at the script so much. And I’m delighted the UK liked it and it is doing so well in the States on Netflix. I don’t know how they are getting the jokes in places like Cuba, but they seem to be.

And Derry Girls has a mural now?
Jamie-Lee O’Donnell [Michelle Mallon]: It is a great honour, being from the city I know how important the murals are to the city. And it is so lovely to be part of that. I’m so honoured.

Why do you think it has struck a chord with so many people?
LH: There are so many elements – it’s set in the Nineties, the music is so great, it is shot so well, and it is a female-led cast and yeah, it is a comedy with not a very funny backdrop. But if we had to pinpoint anything, we would all say Lisa’s writing.
S-MJ: For her to write 11 leading characters and each one of them to be so well-rounded, so identifiable, so funny – every character has a different beat, a different tone, a different formula.
NC: Lisa has done an amazing thing, because a lot of the stuff we have seen about Northern Ireland in fiction has been so grim. Obviously a lot of awful things did happen, but they didn’t show the humour. And the humour is such an important part of that place.

And the depiction of teenage female friendship isn’t something we have seen done like this before.
NC: A lot of teenage shows are based around relationships, getting the boy or whatever. But this is more true to life. I was obsessed with my friends as a teenager. It is not spoken about, but I remember my best friend making friends with another girl and I wanted to murder her! I was not happy, driving home from her house, leaning out the window crying. You think you are going to form a band, go to college and all study the same thing. Lisa taps into that really well. Everything to them is so massive – the history exam is the biggest thing in the world, the dog dying is the biggest thing in the world, it is an intense age. But it is so nice because you care so much about stuff. There is a level of sincerity that we lose as adults.
Dylan Llewellyn [James Maguire]: And you see the innocence of the girls as well. The last episode, combining those two, with the parents watching the TV while they are dancing.

Brutal viewing: That unforgettable final scene

I DON’T KNOW HOW THEY ARE GETTING THE JOKES IN PLACES LIKE CUBA, BUT THEY SEEM TO BE.
LOUISA HARLAND

Talk us through that final scene, which encapsulated the series – there’s the freedom and solidarity of them dancing on the stage at school, juxtaposed with the adults watching a report of a major bombing on TV in silence.
LH: When I first read it I was really nervous. I realised it was such a beautifully written ending. And I didn’t want to go too over the top in terms of the dance. You have to get the balance right.
NC: It was a very emotional scene to shoot. We had never seen Louisa do the dancing before. They cleared the hall and the four of us saw her do it for the first time. I bawled crying. Then when we shot it, everyone was crying. And seeing it on screen for the first time, I just bawled again.
S-MJ: The stillness of that scene. It’s the first time in the whole show that you see any stillness within the characters and the subtlety of Ian McElhinney [Granda Joe] putting his hands on Tommy Tiernan’s [Da Cerry] shoulders. It was a beautiful small detail. It is a true testament to Derry at that time that people tried to shield their kids from what was going on and people got up and got on with it. But there were horrific moments that happened that did stop everybody in their tracks.
LH: It goes to show the reality of what it was like in Derry back then, the juxtaposition of the reality for the adults who understand the depths of what is going on and the innocence of the next generation living through it. You have the free spirit of the young people and that positivity in the future, dancing about on stage. It was gorgeous to act. I can see why so many people love that part.
NC: And Dolores O’Riordan [The Cranberries singer] had passed away a week after our first episode came out. So now Dreams has become so intrinsically linked with the show. I will never hear it and not think of it. So awful.

Was there any trepidation about following the success of Series One?
LH: That difficult second album? There were definitely fears. But Lisa outdid herself.
S-MJ: We were all scared that we would be completely different. I was scared that I had forgotten how to be Erin. But as soon as we got back we were right there immediately.
NC: Filming the first series, we didn’t know the universe of the show yet. Sometimes we might think we are making big choices acting-wise and wouldn’t know if it was maybe too much. But they gave us freedom to try mad things. And I don’t think you often get to see women on screen doing that. You had The Inbetweeners, which was brilliant and we all loved, but you don’t normally see girls get rid of that vanity and act like complete dicks.
What’s in store for the girls this time?
NC: There is no point in taking Clare out of the closet then shoving her back in. For me it was always a really important part of the character. I knew that Clare was gay when I very first auditioned. It ended up being about six months before anyone else in the cast knew. I think people will be very happy with how it is dealt with and how the gang support her. They wear rainbow badges – you can see it on the mural, actually.
S-MJ: Erin is definitely still ambitious and still thinks she is an incredibly gifted writer. Which I’m sure she will become one day.
DL: James still gets a scolding from the girls a lot, but it is a tough love thing. If someone random was to pick on him, the girls would be like, Hey! We are the only ones allowed to pick on him. That is a real thing.
LH: We meet a group of Protestant boys, which is really interesting.
J-LO’D: And if there are boys you will find Michelle, let’s be honest. That’s her goal. Michelle is bigger and badder than ever.
SM-J: There’s a new addition to the family with Ardal O’Hanlon, he is so amazing. Channel 4 reports that he plays “Eamonn, the awkward, middle-aged mummy’s boy of the Quinn/McCool extended family”). And we go to one of the biggest concerts in the North at that time which was really fun to film.
LH: There is a wedding, and Bill Clinton features as well.

What are Derry Girls’ tips for visitors to the city?
J-LO’D: You have to head to Doherty’s or McDaid’s Bakery for the buns. They are the best in the world. They have the best buns and fries. And there is quite a lot to see. A lot of history - The Derry Walls, the town museum, and the famine exhibition. Definitely hit the shops and then maybe a pint in Sandinos cafe bar.
SM-J: There is a real buzz around Derry. Even before we were The Beatles there was a massive buzz. Do the Derry Girls tour, get a blow-dry – we have the world’s biggest blow-dries. Go to the Playhouse theatre, we have some great live music. Then take a 20-minute drive to Donegal where you will see some of the most amazing views and landscapes in the world.

Has your new fame enabled you to use your voices to raise awareness of certain issues?
J-LO’D: I have relished it. It is one of the perks of the job. I am working with an abortion rights charity and on women’s sexual health rights. Abortion is still illegal in Northern Ireland and that is something we feel quite passionate about.
NC: We got really involved in the Repeal The Eighth campaign. That was an important time for Irish women and it is still a situation in Northern Ireland. And it was important playing a gay character on TV to support LGBTQ charities and causes that are close to my heart, and always have been.
LH: It is still illegal in the North to get married if you are gay. It is legal in the UK which they are part of, and it is legal in the Republic, as is abortion now. So we feel strongly about the North being recognised. Nicola’s character Clare wouldn’t be able to get married today and that is ridiculous, it is something we feel strongly about.
DL: Dealing with suicide in young people is quite close to home for me. Addressing that and knowing that young people need to express themselves more, and that it is OK to not be OK.

How do you feel about the new series coming out against the backdrop of a bombing in January, and Brexit and the border issue?
J-LO’D: There is a big conversation to be had. Unfortunately, As usual.
NC: The people of Derry deserve so much better. Lisa McGee has shown a brilliant spotlight on what is a brilliant city full of brilliant people. And I don’t think the true heart of Derry is going to be shaken by this at all, to be honest, because it is so resilient.
SM-J: I’m sure the whole of the UK and the whole of the world is scared of Brexit and don’t know what is going to happen - but especially Northern Irish people. What Lisa has done with this show is absolutely incredible given the social climate. It is a fantastic way to remind us that we don’t want to go back there, we don’t want to be divided. And what a fantastic way to remind us through humour and these beautiful characters that Lisa has created.

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J-LO’D: And if there are boys you will find Michelle, let’s be honest. That’s her goal. Michelle is bigger and badder than ever.
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Bigger than The Beatles: Saoirse-Monica Jackson meets the fans
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THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT WAS A MIRACLE. WE CAN'T DESTROY THAT

Creator Lisa McGee says that if there’s one thing she learned from writing Derry Girls it’s that we would be crazy to jeopardise peace in Northern Ireland.

I already knew, politically, where I wanted to go for Series Two of Derry Girls, which was the ceasefire and the beginnings of the peace process after the Bill Clinton visit in 1995. So the current political situation didn’t impact on where we were going in a big way.

But it happened accidentally that the story of the show sometimes reflects what is happening now.

When I was writing it, there are certainly points I made that I may not have underlined so heavily – one being that we can never, ever go back to violence here. What I am trying to show is how much Northern Ireland achieved in the mid and late-1990s and how brilliant it was that we pulled it off.

It changed my life and the lives of so many people of my generation for the better – and generations that came after me. It is so upsetting to hear politicians playing down the importance of the Good Friday Agreement. I find it unbelievable. I tried not to think about it too much while I was writing, though, because it might make me too angry and the show might not be quite so funny.

So much of the series is about that intense period when you lived in your friends’ pockets and you lived in their houses in that community where nobody locked their doors. A community where all this insane violence was going on but nobody locked the doors.

Derry Girls works because it was true. You had to be able to laugh. You had to somehow normalise these things that are insane. It is only when you move away, so for me it was when I moved to London, that you realise what we did and how we handled it was not normal. It was a survival thing.

The young people were aware of it, they grew up around it, but they were protected from a lot as well and didn’t have the grudges. They are just young and silly and just want to live their lives.

This violence should never be the backdrop to any teenager’s life. But it was important to me that we ended Series One on the girls dancing on the stage, not the violence. The final thing we saw needed to be the hope.

It was a strange thing to turn into comedy. But if you are going to walk this line of light and dark you have to show why these fears are everywhere. It is because these things actually happened. You couldn’t hide away from that. All the jokes exist because this stuff happened.

In shows I loved growing up, like My So-Called Life, the losers were often stylish and clever and got the boy or girl in the end. So Claire Danes was supposed to be a loser in My So-Called Life, yet she looks like a fashion icon, everything she wears is amazing, and she gets off with Jared Leto. That was not my experience. That’s never going to happen to the Derry Girls – they are proper losers! These people are never going to get the hot girl or the hot boy.

But they do meet an equivalent gang of Protestant boys in Series Two. I was writing from my background but on Twitter, there was a response from people across Northern Ireland saying they wish there were more Protestant characters. There was the boy who you think is from Chernobyl but is actually called Clive and from Belfast. People really responded to him. So there are these four new characters in the first episode.

They meet on a Friends Across the Barricades weekend – which is a cross-community weekend we all got sent on to mix with Protestants. It was another one of those things I only realised was so strange after I left. We were forced into doing these weekends and of course it doesn’t work – all the Catholic girls were interested in was the Protestant boys, and not for peace reasons! It was funny that adults thought it was going to work when all the teenagers wanted to do was just get off with each other.

It is so, so lovely that Derry has taken the show to its heart. People here would have let us know if they didn’t like it. That is what I was terrified of – because that is the truest thing ever said. They are so forthcoming. I probably couldn’t have come home again because of all the people telling me what I had done wrong.

Now I couldn’t imagine the place without Derry Girls because they have taken it so much to their hearts. It is so important to the city, it feels like we are all in it together. And if you walk around with the cast it is like being with rock stars. Everyone loves them, especially Dylan, ‘the wee English boy’. He is the favourite, which is hilarious.

I just hope Series Two makes people laugh. I hope it makes people from here laugh and reminds them there is so much good stuff happening as well. Despite people trying to stop us, and us being such a small country, there is so much talent here. I am probably biased, despite everything, including lack of government here, the creative industries are booming. That is an amazing, amazing thing and something I am really proud of.

People here have such a great sense of humour and such warmth, and we all need to laugh at the moment.

Lisa McGee was speaking to Adrian Lobb. @LisaMMcGee
One woman, her iPad and a pioneering approach to helping the marginalised help themselves.

Words: Liam Geraghty
Elaine Jameson has a tough job. As the UK’s first digital inclusion officer, her role is to ensure that the most vulnerable people in society can access Universal Credit. With iPad in hand, she ponders the streets, approaching rough sleepers and helping them to apply for the government’s controversial and troubled flagship benefit system.

The first benefit to have the ‘digital by default’ means of access embedded in it—heralded by the government as a pioneering and efficient way to streamline public services, cut costs and encourage people to embrace technology—Universal Credit was unveiled in 2012 by then Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan Smith.

It had its roots in a 2002 visit by Duncan Smith to the Glasgow satellite housing scheme of Easterhouse. There, in an episode that has passed into urban legend, IDS is said to have wept as he witnessed the hardships of people living there. This possibly apocryphal tale was, he says, the genesis of Universal Credit. While he may claim he wished to simplify a complex benefits system and direct money where it is needed most, the system became a byword for austerity’s most toxic and punitive measures.

There is a certain symmetry therefore in Glasgow being the city which is leading the way in trialling pioneering technology in an attempt to fight back against the imbalance that enforcing digital by default access to Universal Credit has created. In Scotland, where 21 per cent of adults do not have basic digital skills, this is an urgent and acute problem. And in Glasgow, Jameson is now the frontline force tackling it.

The role of digital inclusion officer was announced last August in a partnership between Glasgow City Council and the homeless charity Simon Community Scotland.

Jameson’s job is a bid to bridge the skills gap and ensure that rough sleepers are not forced to turn to begging on the streets, instead being able to access the benefits they are entitled to.

It forms part of the council’s attempts to curtail begging alongside the donate-with-one-tap Alternative Giving Scheme—like the ones used in Cardiff, Manchester and London—to combat begging. There’s also a new multi-agency city centre hub to tackle rough sleeping.

The Big Issue also plays a pivotal role in providing an alternative to begging, giving homeless and vulnerable housed people the chance to earn. We constantly hammer home the message that vendors buy their copies of The Big Issue to sell on, creating their own microbusiness and a legitimate route out of begging. That’s why we were keen to see how the moves at Glasgow City Council are working.

So the Big Issue joined Jameson on a two-mile route through Glasgow’s busy city centre as she spoke to some of the 15 or so people we encountered on the streets to offer help.

Rough sleeping remains a problem in the city—460 people who applied to the city council for homelessness support in 2017/18 have reported sleeping rough at least once.

“We see lots of new faces when we’re out on the streets, and lots of old faces returning too,” Jameson tells The Big Issue.

“My job is about building up trust. We are there to prevent rough sleeping and help people into emergency accommodation, and to do that we have to be out here on the street building up that rapport.

“It’s a unique service. My job allows me to help the person there and then’

Digital inclusion officer Elaine Jameson

“People on the streets don’t see us as authoritative, they see us as approachable. It’s about building trust between people on the street and the DWP because they are often seen as the baddies because they are in charge of something really important to people—their money. So it would be good if I could break down those barriers—we give people the tools to empower themselves to lift themselves out of their situation.”

These tools are in short supply among Britain’s most vulnerable—whether it’s the man we encounter on Dundas Lane using a heating vent from Greggs to keep warm, or the bloke on Glasgow’s main shopping street with a sign that reads “genuinely homeless”. Or for somebody not living on the streets but still stuck in poverty.

Even back when it was announced in 2012, Citizens Advice warned that Universal Credit’s digital approach would “risk causing difficulties for the 8.5 million people who have never used the internet and a further 14.5 million who have virtually no ICT skills”.

Since then the fears that those who are not computer-literate or who lack access to the internet have been front and centre in criticisms of Universal Credit as it lurches from delay to expensive delay.

Mental health charity Mind point to the DWP’s own research that suggests a quarter of claimants with long-term health problems could not complete the “labyrinthine” Universal Credit application process.

Shaw Trust echoed those calls for people with disabilities, insisting that “digital by default should not be default for everyone”.

UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights Dr Philip Alston’s damning preliminary report into UK hardship outlined how he believed the
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digital approach had already left people behind. He said: “Government officials assured me that anyone can walk off the street and get support to make an online claim for benefits, but that’s simply not the case for people living outside cities.”

And, most recently of all, a HuffPost UK Freedom of Information request found that 462,000 people clicked ‘Yes’ when asked in the application process if they had received any help to make their claim.

Work and Pensions Minister Justin Tomlinson responded to criticism last month by saying: “We need to improve communication in order to advise about alternatives; claimants can access support via the telephone, face-to-face or through home visits.” And it is against that backdrop that Jameson is trying to fill the skills gap.

But the problem is also about access. A couple we bump into near Glasgow Central train station are a fine example. While the pair are already on Universal Credit, according to Jameson, they require help with presenting for housing.

Chief among the young woman’s concerns is where to charge her phone — with Jameson reassuring her that she can use Simon Community’s facilities to top it up while sorting her affairs.

But if a rough sleeper cannot access a phone how can they apply or monitor their Universal Credit account? How can we avoid building a two-tiered society — with the haves and have-nots — defined by access to technology?

This has been Jameson’s focus since taking on the role in October, alongside computer access in Simon Community Scotland’s hub, while the DWP has moved to bring more computers into shelters.

The charity also keeps rough sleepers’ account details in sealed envelopes on site to ensure that they can remember the passwords and key details needed to progress their application.

“The online application for Universal Credit is pretty straightforward in itself if you have the relevant information to proceed online with it,” says Jameson. “So that being a valid email address and a bank or post office account details.

“Amber Rudd halted the UC rollout and admitted the benefit was driving people to foodbanks

If you’ve not got those then I’ve been finding that I have had to make the claim over the phone. We have to explain to the call handler that’s why you have to make the claim over the telephone.

“A lack of computer skills is one thing that our service can support people with. We are in partnership with the DWP and they are aware of the complexities and the difficulties that our service-users face and we need to continue to work together to ensure that the person is being treated fairly. The difficulties are being taken into consideration.”

Work and Pensions Secretary Amber Rudd recently admitted that Universal Credit is pushing people to foodbanks to stave off hunger, but the benefits system has not led to more people sleeping on the streets of Glasgow just yet in Jameson’s experience.

Last week, the latest Universal Credit figures revealed that there had been 3.6 million claims made so far, while the number of people on Universal Credit nationally has increased by seven per cent from December 2018 to January 2019 to 1.6 million people.

However, the rollout in Glasgow has so far been modest since it began in September last year. There are around 10,500 claimants on Universal Credit in the city while many of the people that Jameson encounters are still on legacy benefits, waiting to transfer on to the new system.

Rudd has put the brakes on that next stage — known as managed migration — which was intended to bring another three million claimants on to the system. That number has been reduced to a 10,000-strong trial to further assess the impact of Universal Credit after Work and Pensions Committee chair Frank Field warned of a “human catastrophe” if the government went ahead.

As The Big Issue’s walk with Jameson comes to an end at Sauchiehall Street, conversation turns to whether the digital inclusion officer role can make waves elsewhere.

“It’s a unique service — I’m not aware of anyone else who has done the same,” says Jameson, admitting that the trial is still in its early stages. “My role allows me to deal with that person there and then — whether it be with benefits, housing or whatever. A lot of our guys are chaotic and appointments are quite hard to keep for them.

“It’s great that we’re trialling it and that’s what it is – a learning curve and it is about trial and error because Universal Credit is new to everybody. I think that Glasgow is way ahead of other places in terms of the support it can offer and I daresay that if it does prove beneficial to people then other cities should give it a try.”

@Lazergun_Nun

Universal Credit by numbers

- 3.6m the total number of claims since Universal Credit began (DWP)
- 1.6m the number of claimants on Universal Credit as of January 2019 (DWP)
- 53% of people with long-term health conditions needed more support to set up their claim (DWP)
- 4.3m the number of Brits with zero basic digital skills, eight per cent of the population (Lloyds UK Consumer Digital Index 2018)
- 8.4% of adults had not used the internet in 2018. That rises to 20 per cent for disabled adults (ONS)

Photo: © Andy Scott-Photo
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STREET ART

“People think they almost recognise the places I try to draw, but they could be anywhere really,” reflects this artist, who was homeless for a time and now is vulnerably housed. His simple sketches vividly convey what it means to be down-and-out in London. “I see rough sleepers around town every day,” he goes on. “I identify with them, but I can’t really do much to help, except just being friendly. I draw pictures of people in doorways, or sitting out on the street. I don’t do likenesses very often... I don’t want to be intrusive. I tend to draw approximations of what I see around the town. Typical scenes... all too typical.”

HOME IS WHERE THE PARK IS
BY ANONYMOUS

Street Art is created by people who are marginalised. Contact street.lights@bigissue.com to see your art here. To see more and buy prints: bigissueshop.com At least half the profit goes to the artist.
AUTHOR FEATURE

Fabric of life

Sewing is about stitching things together – but this can refer to communities and social justice as much as to clothing. Clare Hunter salutes a deceptively subversive craft

I have sewn for most of my life. My mother taught me when I was young and the repetitive rhythm of hand embroidery and machine sewing seemed to suit my temperament.

It calmed me. It wasn’t however, until the 1980s, when I was in my thirties, that I realised there was much more to needlework than decoration and dressmaking: that sewing could have social, emotional and political purpose, used to campaign, commemorate, celebrate and protest. I went to Greenham Common where women in its anti-nuclear peace camp covered the nine-metre perimeter fence with sewn petitions, many of them made from materials found at home: old sheets, cast-off clothes, cleaning cloths. During the miners’ strike of 1984 I was in Nottinghamshire running a community arts project involving local groups making banners to carry on that year’s May Day parade. With the strike at its height, I became involved in creating banners for striking miners to provide them with bold, fabric proclamations of protest.

In those days, charity shops sold small patchwork pictures that had been made in Chile, smuggled out of a country silenced by Pinochet’s harsh regime. When those who spoke out were tortured, imprisoned or murdered, it was the poverty-stricken women in the shanty towns of Santiago, many of whom had lost husbands and children, who gathered up scraps of fabric to tell their stories of loss and grief and alert the outside world to the reality of their lives.

In the 1980s I was a community artist, devising creative ways to involve communities – particularly those most annexed from the everyday swim of life because of disability, poverty or ethnicity – in activities that could give them a voice and a presence. I set up NeedleWorks in Glasgow working with people in care homes, hospitals, youth and multi-cultural centres to promote the imagination and creativity of those whose talents were all too often neglected or overlooked. And I began to gather stories of sewing, across centuries and cultures, its hidden history, which I have now collected into a book Threads of Life.

The book tells of the shell-shocked soldiers of World War I who found a way to make an income, regain self-esteem and control of their mental and physical frailties through the Disabled Soldiers’ Embroidery Industry of the POWs in World War II, men as well as women, who unpicked worn clothing and unravelled jumpers to scavenge thread to coverly stitch defiance, patriotism, hope and survival; the African-American slaves who, forbidden to learn to read or write, kept hold of their spiritual beliefs through stitching them symbolically onto quilts. What struck me most as I excavated such stories was how much of our understanding of the purpose and potency of needlework has been lost over time: embroidered cloth folded away, its maker unknown, its connection to a cause or a personal or community trauma unrecognised. In the thousands of books written about sewing few discuss the reason why people sew. Yet sewing is a multi-layered language, created to be read. It is tactile as well as emotional: feel and feelings combined to preserve values and connect generations.

I find sewing therapeutic not only because of the soothe of its rhythm but because the concentration it demands allows my mind to settle. The focus and sense of accomplishment it brings are beneficial to our mental health. No wonder then that it was introduced into prisons by the 19th-century penal reformer Elizabeth Fry as an aid to the rehabilitation of women in Newgate gaol. Through sewing they not only learned an employable skill to use on their release, but a way to snatch a kind of privacy amongst the claustrophobia of prison life.

Fry’s work continues today through the organisation Fine Cell Work, which operates in nearly 30 UK prisons involving hundreds of predominantly male – prisoners in embroidering small products to sell online and larger commissions. These men sew in their cells, finding a quietude and respite from the clatter and clang of their world and sensory solace in the slip of thread and the soft touch of cloth.

Sewing is a democratic craft: its stitches are simple, its materials accessible. It doesn’t need a workshop or expensive tools and, as its history proves, it can be done even in the direst of circumstances. Today it is being used increasingly in collective projects to support and protect the most vulnerable. The Sleeping Bag Project in America invites people to make hand-crafted sleeping bags for homeless people, many sewn with messages of comfort, love and support; PremiesUK involves people making tiny clothing for premature babies, The Spruce Crafts offers free patterns for chemotherapy turbans, beds for rescue animals, walking frame bags for those with limited mobility and more. All these and others help to create donations from the heart: a way of passing on caring messages to those most in need of attention. They offer the personal touch of a tactile connection through the gift of needlework.

Threads of Life: A History of the World Through the Eye of a Needle by Clare Hunter is out now (Hodder & Stoughton, £20)
As a rule I favour short books over long ones but sometimes, just sometimes, the subject matter demands a grander approach. So it is with Don Winslow’s phenomenal The Border. It is 716 pages and the final instalment of Winslow’s Cartel trilogy, following The Power of the Dog and The Cartel. Taken together, the novels are a towering narrative achievement, as Winslow delves deeply into the machinations of the Mexican drug cartels, alongside the United States’ catastrophic war on drugs, the combination of which has now lasted half a century and killed countless thousands of people.

Winslow has spent years fully immersed in his subject and his knowledge and passion ooze from every page. Previous books have concentrated on the cartels’ operations, as well as digging into the hypocrisy, corruption and violence of various law enforcement bodies, and the way in which the two sides often mirror each other.

The Border brings all that up to date, but Winslow has also expanded his vision to include the outrageous political machinations in Washington, and the ways in which self-interest at the top can cause devastation on a personal level lower down.

The emotional focus is again Art Keller, a veteran on the American side of the conflict, but with sympathies for the ordinary Mexicans caught in the crossfire. Art has seen and even taken part in appalling atrocities in previous books, and wants out, but the offer to head up the US government’s Drug Enforcement Administration is too good an opportunity to finally try to make a positive difference.

But it’s not that easy. Adan Barrera, the head of the dominant Sinaloa cartel, is dead but the power vacuum left in his wake has led to a bloody war between rival factions. The cartels are moving from cocaine into heroin, prompted by America’s opioid crisis, and more and more ordinary people are dying on the streets.

Instead of targeting the flow of heroin north into the US, Keller targets the flow of money south to Mexico, and the plot deftly weaves together the worlds of drug trafficking, high finance and the upper echelons of politics and business into a terrifying depiction of the ways in which compromise clouds the morality of all involved.

Winslow’s genius is his ability to keep the stories personal and moving among all the madness. The sense of ordinary people pushing against impossible forces is omnipresent, and by the end the reader is shellshocked by the whole experience. Winslow is a born storyteller and The Border is an astonishing end to a truly important trilogy.

And so back to my beloved short books, with Simone Buchholz’s Beton Rouge. This is the second Hamburg-set novel to feature acerbic state prosecutor Chastity Riley as she haphazardly negotiates her cases and personal life. A man is found unconscious and tortured in a cage outside the office of a prestigious magazine and Riley, along with police colleagues, is tasked with investigating.

The case is fascinating and intricate, Buchholz using it to probe at the murky worlds of class and privilege, but the real star is Riley, a very damaged but hugely engaging central character. Like the best classic noir, Beton Rouge is an existential examination of the meaning of existence, and a blackly funny and super-cool journey into life’s darker side. Wonderful stuff.

@doug_johnstone

**THE TOP 5 BOOKS BY BLACK BRITISH MEN**

01 **Kill The Black One First**

by Michael Fuller

This provocatively titled memoir is one of a kind and offers up a perspective that is lacking in the current discourse surrounding race in Britain.

02 **Prisoner To The Streets**

by Robyn Travis

Travis is the voice of a generation whose adept use of language is without equal. Prisoner To The Streets is a book we need to put into the hands of so many young black boys in Britain.

03 **Hold**

by Michael Donkor

Michael Donkor is the freshest new voice in Black British literature, and Hold crosses borders and brings Ghanaian culture to life in Britain.

04 **Think Like A White Man**

by Boulé Whytelaw III, as told to Nelz Abbey

A satirical work of non-fiction in the same vein as The Sellout by Paul Beatty. I have no doubt this is the book to keep up 2019 the same way Nii Eddo Lodge’s Why I’m Longer Talking To White People About Race did in 2017.

05 **Kumukanda**

by Kayo Chingonyi

Chingonyi is the living writer who inspires and influences the most. The texture andconomy of his poems ensures that I always aim for honesty in mine.

__Derek Owusu__
There’s little fresh to the idea of the Rocky story, of a sporting underdog attempting to triumph against seemingly insurmountable odds. Depending on which Rocky sequel you happen to be watching at the time, they sometimes succeed too.

What’s not been done to date is the tale of a family of wrestling fanatics from Norwich, from which a teenage girl attempts to scale the heights of WWE wrestling in the US. And, as with many unlikely stories of its ilk that make it to the big screen, this particular story is based on a true story.

In *Fighting With My Family*, then, the terrific Florence Pugh and Jack Lowden take on the roles of the pair at the heart of the story, sister and brother Saraya ‘Paige’ and Zak ‘Zodiac’ who share a dream of being professional WWE wrestlers. They’re egged on and supported by their parents – played by Lena Headey and Nick Frost – as they look to fulfil their dreams in America.

It’s a sibling story at the heart of the tale, with life having different things in store for each of them. And as has been pointed out by the film’s writer and director – *The Office* co-creator Stephen Merchant – there’s quite a dark, down-to-earth gritty British drama that could be made out of the ensuing narrative. It’s not too tricky to see that.

Yet for Merchant, helming his second feature following the underappreciated coming-of-age drama *Cemetery Junction* (made back in 2010 alongside Ricky Gervais), a dark, gritty film is clearly the last thing he wanted to make.

Instead, backed by the not-inconsiderable physical and business heft of Dwayne ‘The Rock’ Johnson, Merchant is far more interested in making a funny, broad, accessible version of the brother and sister’s story, with genuine family appeal.

And that’s exactly what he does. What’s more, thanks to the backing of Johnson – who brought the idea of making the film to Merchant in the first place – he doesn’t have to skimp in doing so. On the one hand, then, you get the Norwich side of the story, shot in and around the area. On the other, you get an official WWE event, filmed in America, and a very funny cameo from the film’s superstar producer.

Which all gives the film something to aim for in its final act, certainly. But what’s impressive is how much heart it boasts on the way there.

Merchant’s witty film takes a few minutes to find its feet, and you’ll quickly work out the formula it’s following. Yet by injecting a familiar path with characters to really root for (in spite of their not always easy past misdemeanours), you can’t help but get sucked into it, wrestling fan or not.

Granted, if you are a wrestling devotee, you’re going to have to sit through some necessary explanations for everyone else as to just what’s going on. Yet it’s the price of aiming – successfully – for such a crowd-pleasing slice of fun in the first place. A price well, well worth paying.

*Fighting With My Family* is in cinemas from March 1.
Back when I was a carefree twentysomething with brown Nineties lipstick and a Rachel haircut, my job was a joke (I didn’t have one) and I was broke (see previous predicament). So broke I couldn’t afford a light bulb because I only had 13 pence. I lived on instant chicken-flavoured noodles and cheap cider, I was a deeply unemployable university dropout and the previous tenant of my condemned bedroom was an artist whose project was to er, recreate the smell of her vagina. Yep, things were bleak.

So I needed a weekly fix of *Friends* to protect me against the harsh realities of the world. These crazy characters lived in Manhattan despite working as baristas, they had great hair and teeth, they were kooky and danced in fountains and got up to comedy scrapes while wearing leather trousers or dancing with a turkey on their heads. Apart from Matthew Perry’s worrying physical deterioration between Seasons Two and Three there was nothing to dim their gleaming smiles. I wish my life was like that, I thought, as I poured the last centimetre of Strongbow into a chipped mug with Heinz Tomato Soup written on it, lit a damp roll-up and contemplated an uncertain future.

Fast-forward 25 years and that uncertain future has arrived. And where am I? I’m on the sofa with my son, who is nearly 12, watching all 77,000 episodes of *Friends* from start to finish. You see, the kids love *Friends*. Since it arrived on Netflix it’s become the most watched show for under-16s. They like it for exactly the same reasons as everybody else – the worst thing that ever happens is that someone steals Ross’s sandwich, or Phoebe burns the house down with her hair straighteners and meets a hunky fireman. Actually, perhaps the episode where Monica wears a fat suit was the worst thing that happened on TV, but generally, they manage to cheerily gloss over life’s complexities with a few hilarious zingers and a couple of ‘How YOU doing?’ And there’s always a group hug at the end of the day in an apartment with a rooftop balcony that would now be worth around $40m.

One thing that’s alarming me is that my son is deeply identifying with Ross, but if one day he grows up to be an oversensitive, emotionally constipated paleontologist, at least he’s not Joey. And watching *Friends* with him has actually become one of those rare Werther’s Original-style cross-generational joys. Everybody is happy, Jennifer Aniston’s hair still looks amazing, the jokes are still funny, and crucially, the internet is hardly mentioned at all because NOBODY USED IT.

The way I see it, no-one told us life was gonna be this way, so let’s all sit back, relax and watch the one where Rachel makes the beef trifle for the millonth time.

*Friends* is on Netflix now @lucytweet1

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**CREATURE DISCOMFORT**

Ridley Scott’s iconic *Alien* may have been indifferently served by its most recent prequels, but that doesn’t in any way dampen the impact of the 1979 original. The film has been spruced up with a 4K makeover and remastering, and is playing in cinemas around the UK at the start of March. See it in a dark room, with a huge screen and a quality sound system. And don’t forget to scream...

*Alien* is in cinemas from March 1

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**They’re still there for you**

In the Nineties, *Lucy Sweet* was broke and lived for her weekly fix of *Friends*. Even though life’s brighter now, the show’s become a surprise intergenerational joy.

Since it arrived on Netflix, *Friends* has become the most watched show for under-16s.
Picking up the baton

Women have been woefully under-appreciated in classical music, says Claire Jackson. But there’s been a key change.

When composer Rebecca Saunders was recently announced as the recipient of the prestigious Ernst von Siemens Music prize, it was inevitable that her gender prefaced the coverage. Saunders is the first female composer to receive the notable 250,000 euro award, following in the footsteps of the likes of Benjamin Britten. It’s a recurring theme: earlier this month, Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla made history as the first female conductor to sign with iconic classical record label Deutsche Grammophon. Gražinytė-Tyla, who is music director of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, will release a collection of orchestral works by Polish composer Mieczysław Weinberg, whose centenary falls this year. Last week, I spoke to conductor Valentina Peleggi, the first female conductor to become a Mackerras Conducting Fellow at English National Opera (ENO). Peleggi has just made her ENO conducting debut with La Bohème and will work with the opera house for the upcoming season. These are extraordinary firsts, and each artist deserves attention for their achievements. But it remains shocking that, for complex reasons, being a high-achieving – female – composer and conductor is still a something of an anomaly.

Berlin-based Saunders comes to Birmingham on March 21 for a concert given by Birmingham Contemporary Music Group (BCMg). Murmurs, curated around the idea of creation without borders, features the world premiere of a newly commissioned concerto for sheng – a Chinese mouth organ – by Korean-born BCMg apprentice composer in residence, Donghoon Shin. The work is bookended by Saunders’ CRIMSON – Molly’s Song 1 (1995) and the titular Murmurs (2009). There are several ways to find out more about the music on offer: sheng expert Wu Wei presents the instrument in a variety of accessible events, including an interactive family concert (March 17) and composers Saunders and Donghoon Shin give a pre-concert talk (CBSO Centre).

Classical music is a broad church – sometimes literally. As well as groundbreaking concertos for instruments like the sheng, the genre includes the sacred works that are firmly embedded into Western art music. Naturally, this music can often be heard in churches and cathedrals, where the distinctive acoustic and ready-made concert seating makes them popular venues for chamber and choral music (respectively, broadly speaking). You don’t need to be a Christian to appreciate the artistry of Bach’s Mass in B minor, in the same way someone of any religious inclination can enjoy looking at Leonardo da Vinci’s The Last Supper.

There’s something very special – some would say spiritual – about hearing gorgeous music in a beautiful building. For example, last Christmas, I enjoyed hearing Norwich Cathedral Choirs sing in that exquisite setting as much as I appreciated the Suffolk Ensemble’s performance of The Snowman at Snape Maltings. I’m currently looking forward to a special performance of Wagner’s Parsifal (Prelude to Act 1 & Act 3) in York Minster, presented by Ryedale Festival during Holy Week (April 17). This performance will feature the marvellous Hallé Orchestra under their chief conductor, Mark Elder, and is a rare opportunity to hear Wagner’s masterpiece in a magnificent setting.

Sacred music continues to be written today, from John Rutter’s popular carols to James MacMillan’s large-scale settings of the Catholic mass. The latter’s Straight骡 Moets, Videns Dominus and Miserere feature as part of The Sixteen’s current cathedral tour, which sees the choral group – conducted by founder Harry Christophers – visit Newcastle Cathedral (February 28), Ripon Cathedral (March 1) and Wakefield Cathedral (March 2). Scottish composer MacMillan’s work is interspersed with late 16th-century traditional choral settings of liturgical texts, such as Palestrina’s Stabat mater.

@claireiswriting

LISTEN TO…

Intrigued by classical music but don’t know where to start? Try David Walliams’ Marvellous Musical Podcast, courtesy of Classic FM. Walliams introduces key historic figures (Liszt, Mozart, Clara Schumann), instruments and types of music in an accessible and Walliamish way. The idea of Mozart playing practical jokes with a whoopee cushion isn’t for everyone, but eight-year-olds will love it (remember: ‘Farts are never hollows’, according to the podcast MozArt). There are also plenty of musical examples to whet your appetite. Classic FM has managed to share a wealth of information in nicely paced, 15-minute chunks.
Why I like living in Ljubljana

Everywhere is very tidy and clean. Ljubljana is our country’s capital and centre of all cultural happenings.

Ljubljana was the fifth-cleanest country in the world in 2018 and Ljubljana was Europe’s greenest capital in 2016. In 2018 Slovenia was also declared the world’s most sustainable country. It’s nestled among emerald fields, the Adriatic sea and snowy peaks. Nearly 60 per cent is 40 parks and reserves home to some 20,000 different plants and animals. I have to mention our cuisine as well. It’s exquisite. Visit Ljubljana, you won’t be sorry.

The best bit about Ljubljana

The history

Ljubljana is a beautiful city with lots of history and an old centre. You never get bored living here. I love the city’s commitment to preserving historical sights, especially the ancient Roman ruins. At that time the city was called Emona and it was on an important trade route. I went on a Roman Emona guided tour and loved it. Besides all the museums, there’s a city within the city called Metelkova. It is autonomous and is more of an alternative place. There are many clubs and bars and hostels, where craftsmen, painters and other artists reside. It’s definitely a place to visit.

My favourite park

Tivoli

Ljubljana has got lots of green areas and Tivoli is one of the biggest parks in the city. It’s great for walks and relaxing. It’s very neat and doesn’t get crowded. You can almost forget about your daily struggles. Surrounded by nature you can think in peace about your next steps in life.

What I love about the locals

They’re friendly

I must say most of my customers are really friendly. My regular customers know me well and often stop to chat so I’m never bored. Still, you will encounter people who act superior or are bitter. They try to lower your self-esteem. It’s really important you don’t let yourself get bummed out by them. Since I’m retired due to health reasons I consider selling the street paper a job. Be positive.

The best time of year to visit

Spring and summer

Besides all you can see in Ljubljana, you can also take a trip to the seaside or visit the Alps – both are within one hour’s car drive.

Not in the guidebooks

Invisible Ljubljana

No tourist guide will show you Invisible Ljubljana. The street paper offers a tour around city’s hidden spots, mostly related to homelessness. I’m one of the guides showing the spots where I used to live. You are cordially invited to take part if you find yourself in Ljubljana.

Interview: Jean Nikolić

kraljiulice.org

Our guide this week: Spela, 35, has been a vendor of Slovenian paper Kralji ulice (meaning king of the street) for nine years. She sells in the underpass of the car park Trdinova in the centre of the city and helps train new vendors.
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I'm a mechanic by trade, tyres and exhausts and things like that. But I lost my job and did what I could to make ends meet, but I was left with a lot of payday loans. I just couldn’t pay them back and it was all getting a bit too much for me. I didn’t have to go bankrupt, fortunately, and I ended up getting rid of about half of it. There’s still a few cards left but I’ve got them right down to about £200 or £300. I feel like I got a fresh start though.

When things were bad I was suicidal. I was so low, and people kept saying ‘Why don’t you go and do the Big Issue?’ That was about four years ago. I’ve had this pitch for about two-and-a-half years. It’s busy on a Monday and a Friday and I do have some regulars but it took me quite a while to build them up.

I like being at Tesco because there’s cameras outside so if anything happens it’s all on tape. You feel vulnerable because things can go wrong. The staff in Tesco are friendly bunch though.

I used to be a Samaritan and sometimes in this job I have to use those skills as best I can. A customer came up to me today and broke down, actually crying, so I just held out my arm and said, “Let it out.” I’d like to be a Samaritan again in future, you really help and you also get something out of it yourself. I wouldn’t do it that’s going on with me. I don’t think I’m strong enough to take on a lot of cases just yet.

My partner Mark was really supportive through my troubles. I live here in Leamington with him at the moment but I’m not there all the time. Maybe three or four nights a week and I also stay at refuges and other places. I really would like my own place and I’ve discussed it with Mark and he doesn’t mind. But there’s nothing. I’m from Tamworth originally and the authorities just keep telling me I can’t have anything because I’m not from the area. You could go to any area and they’d say the same thing! And renting privately would be a bit expensive for me at the moment. But Leamington’s a lovely place, I’d like to keep living here.

My main hobby is doing abstract painting. Paul Klee kind-of-thing, mostly self-taught. I do oil on canvas, sometimes oil pastels. I’ve sold a few pictures in Leamington for about £50-£70 depending on the size.

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Now working with 2,700 cocoa producers, Pink Foods is also helping the farmer groups involved to register themselves as co-operatives. In the meantime, they continue to assure farmers a guaranteed price for their cocoa throughout the year, cushioning them from price fluctuations. In addition, Pink Foods has been providing free medical and health insurance cover for all farmers. They also distributed free exercise books to every child in cocoa producing households at the start of the season. There are also plans to scale up their health insurance scheme by building a health centre in the farm this year.