



University
of Glasgow



JOHN
SMITH
CENTRE

ANNUAL REPORT 2025



16 INTERNSHIPS

900
PEOPLE
ATTENDED
THE JOHN
SMITH
CENTRE
MEMORIAL
LECTURE

231 MILLION WEB
IMPRESSIONS FOR OUR
UK YOUTH POLL

3 LEADERS, ONE
EACH FROM THE
SNP, CONSERVATIVE,
AND LABOUR

10 YEARS AT THE UNIVERSITY
OF GLASGOW

INTRODUCTION BY PROF SARA CARTER AND CHAIR IAIN ANDERSON

Welcome to our first ever annual report!

This year marked the 10th anniversary of the John Smith Centre, based here at the University of Glasgow. It's been an opportunity to celebrate a decade of achievement - and to look forward too.

The John Smith Centre's mission is to inspire and enable more young people to get involved in politics and public life. Over the last ten years, 150 students have participated in a paid political internship, gaining first-hand experience of working with an MSP or MP. The Centre has built on that ten-year record this year as student interns have worked with politicians in Edinburgh, London and Manchester, gaining a unique insight into how politics is done on the ground. John Smith Centre alumni now work in all areas of public life including the civil service, charities, and corporate public affairs. We are particularly proud that the Centre has supported young people from less well-represented backgrounds, helping those with the talent but not the means to get into public life.



Prof Sara Carter

Vice-Principal and Head of the
College of Social Sciences,
University of Glasgow

We've marked the 10th anniversary with a series of events, welcoming high-profile politicians such as Gordon Brown, Ruth Davidson, Michael Gove and Humza Yousaf among others, to share their experiences of life in politics with our students and wider community.

The Centre's work has never been more vital. Political engagement in the UK is down: only 59% turned out to vote in the 2024 general election, the lowest figure since 2001. At the same time, many of the young people who took part in the Centre's newly launched UK Youth Poll said they were disengaged from the political process.



Iain Anderson

Chair John Smith Centre

Inspiring and enabling more young people to get involved in politics and public life is fundamental to a healthy democracy and is a key task in the years ahead. Our successful 10th anniversary year means we can look ahead with great confidence to a second decade of playing our part.



2024-25 saw a host of events take place in Glasgow and London. We welcomed Michael Gove and Humza Yousaf for a talk on 'Surviving Politics', former Scots Tory leader Ruth Davidson on the anniversary of Equal Marriage legislation, 'Rock'n'Roll Politics' podcaster Steve Richards on the US elections, and pro- and anti-independence supporters on the 10th anniversary of the independence referendum. Our events programme culminated in London in May when Gordon Brown delivered the John Smith Memorial lecture.

DIRECTOR'S REPORT

The stand-out highlight from my first year at the John Smith Centre has been the opportunity to work with the passionate, smart and motivated young people who study here at the University of Glasgow.

It's easy to feed the doom-loop narrative that currently dominates the conversation around Britain's younger generation. But despite the headwinds they face, the students who attended our events, applied for our internships, and challenged us to do better have shown to me that many are still resilient and hopeful. A big thanks to them.

Those headwinds remain strong. Politics too, both nationally and internationally, remains volatile. Our faith in the ability of politics to deliver is fragile. It means that, as Baroness Catherine Smith put at the John Smith Memorial Lecture in May, our work at the Centre has gone from being merely important when it was created a decade ago to essential today.

At that lecture, Gordon Brown set out what he believed our politics needed to deliver if we were to meet the hopes of young people: firstly, policies to deliver a growing economy that can provide the jobs and rising living standards but, secondly, a commitment to rebuild our civic realm – or Mr Brown put it “our public square”. This, he argued, was central to the task of combating the forces of polarisation and extremism. We need to show there really is such a thing as society.

This is something we have sought to do at the Centre over the last year. Our events have sought to set out a more constructive side to politics: which, in the words of one student who attended one, help us “think rather than doomscroll”. Through the publication of our UK Youth Poll, we put the spotlight on Gen Z, slaying a few myths and shining a spotlight on their priorities and needs.

And with our pioneering internship programme, made possible thanks to the generosity of MSPs and MPs, we've given students a fresh insight into a career in public service – and you can read Matthew White's blog in this report to understand that more.

The case for democratic politics isn't easy to make right now; not when economic benefits are miserly nor when our public realm is so fractious. But the young people who work with the John Smith Centre continue to show that there are reasons for optimism nonetheless.

In 2026, with your support, we hope to create more opportunities for young people to serve in public life and politics.

Eddie Barnes

Director



INSIDE SCOTTISH POLITICS: MY JOHN SMITH CENTRE PARLIAMENTARY EXPERIENCE

When I found out I'd be interning with Anas Sarwar MSP, I was both excited and a little in awe.

I called my parents, texted my friends – the general reaction was a mixture of disbelief, excitement, and the collective realisation of what an incredible opportunity had just been presented to me. It's not every day you get the chance to work alongside the leader of a major political party – and I can say without hesitation that the John Smith Centre Parliamentary Internship Programme has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my academic career.

Throughout the internship, no two days were the same, and that's what made it so brilliant. One moment I'd be helping with constituency casework, the next I was writing briefings, sitting in stakeholder meetings, or shadowing Anas around Holyrood. I got to help facilitate and organise policy roundtables, which felt surreal at times. This wasn't just filing paperwork or making tea – I was trusted to be part of real, meaningful work.

One thing that really stuck with me was the sheer volume of constituency issues MSPs deal with. Housing problems, healthcare concerns, education support – you name it, it crossed the desk. I got to see firsthand how one phone call could change someone's life for the better. It's easy to forget when you're caught up in the drama of national politics that this, right here, is where politics is at its most powerful: helping real people, quietly, behind the scenes.

Being around the Scottish Parliament was another highlight. I once watched Anas bump into the First Minister in the corridor after a particularly heated FMQs exchange and within seconds they were laughing and chatting away like old friends. It's a side of politics you rarely get to see, but one that gave me a bit of hope for how politics could be.

Looking ahead, this experience has sparked a desire to get more involved in political campaigning ahead of the next Holyrood elections, because now more than ever, I appreciate how important it is to have passionate, thoughtful people involved in shaping the future of our communities.

I can't recommend the John Smith Centre Parliamentary Internship Programme highly enough. It's an opportunity to step into the engine room of politics, develop skills that will serve you in any profession, and, perhaps most importantly, remind yourself why public service matters.

I'm incredibly grateful to the John Smith Centre, the University of Glasgow, and of course Anas Sarwar and his brilliant team for making this internship an unforgettable journey.



Matthew White

Parliamentary Intern 2024/5

“ Now more than ever, I appreciate how important it is to have passionate, thoughtful people involved in shaping the future of our communities. ”



Chiera McLaughlin

Parliamentary Intern 2024/5

My internship with Collette Stevenson MSP and her incredible team was an invaluable experience.

Over 3 months, I split my time between the constituency and the Scottish Parliament, working on everything from drafting motions and press releases to supporting casework, engaging with constituents, and preparing research and policy briefings. This hands-on exposure was both eye-opening and deeply rewarding.

A highlight was engaging in meaningful discussions on social mobility, representation, and inclusion, topics that resonated strongly with my personal values and aspirations. Observing Parliament's work up close gave me a richer understanding of the intersection between law, policy, and lived experience, and further fuelled my interest in public law.



Murrin Lee

Parliamentary Intern 2024/5

I was fortunate enough to be selected as a 2025 John Smith Centre intern and the experience changed me for the better.

During my time with my host MSP I was taught invaluable skills that are essential for a career in parliament and I was led by a team who genuinely wanted me to thrive beyond my internship. The experience built my confidence, research skills and my knowledge of the inner workings of politics. It challenged my preconceptions about politicians and political parties, allowing me to see first hand the work it takes to be in these roles. I made valuable connections too. I cannot thank the John Smith Centre enough for the opportunity to support me in developing both my career and my personal values.



Parliamentary Interns 2024/5

UK YOUTH POLL 2025

In March, we published our first ever UK Youth Poll, a major survey of opinion among 16-29 year olds across the UK.

Key findings included:

- » Young people believe in democracy over dictatorship by two to one, but they are worried about its future: 63% say that democracy in the UK is in trouble.
- » A third of young people say they would consider getting involved in organised politics.
- » Two out of three young people say they are optimistic about their personal future, but many admit to living with anxiety.
- » Financial issues are the biggest source of anxiety for young people, and affordable housing is their top policy priority.

Polling was carried out by FocalData and our report was sponsored by Nationwide Building Society.

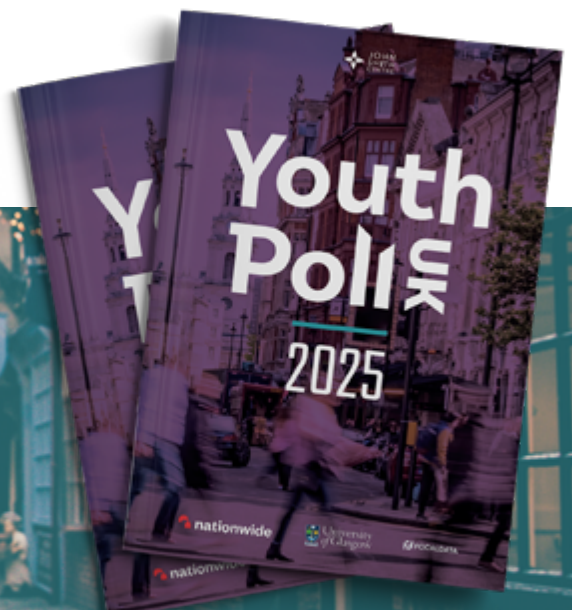
The poll was discussed across the media, including on Good Morning Britain, the Rest is Politics, and in many national newspapers.



RESEARCH & INSIGHTS

We have launched our refreshed Research & Insights platform on our website, featuring articles on topics including the links between health inequalities and voting behaviour, what the data tells us about whether young people really support dictatorship, the impact of voter ID regulations on young people's trust in democratic institutions, and more.

Our research has been viewed by more than 233+ million people worldwide.



OUR BOARD & NEW AND OLD FACES

This year has seen a lot of changes to the Centre personnel.

Iain Anderson took over in March as our new chair. Iain says:

“The John Smith Centre has never been more important. I’m excited to lead the Board as we develop innovative programmes with our focus on the next generation of political leaders.”

We also welcomed three new board members to the team:

- » Fiona Hill CBE, former Chief of Staff to the UK Prime Minister
- » Amy Fraser, Office Manager to Humza Yousaf MSP and Parliamentary Internship Programme alumni
- » Adam McInnes, Head of UK Regional Public Policy at NatWest Group and Parliamentary Internship Programme alumni

We said farewell to our long-standing Centre Development Manager Alison Hopper and welcome her replacement, Lauren White.

We also welcomed on board our first ever lecturer, Dr Joe Greenwood-Hau, who will be leading the Centre’s UK Youth Poll course at the University of Glasgow next year. The team is completed by Dr Elisabeth Loose, who was promoted to become our Research and Engagement Manager this year, and our new Project Admin Assistant Rebecca Rae.



Chair Iain Anderson



Amy Fraser

“I am delighted, as a former JSC parliamentary intern, to have joined the JSC Board this year. I feel I can contribute to the Centre’s development, drawing on my personal experience, whilst honouring our core values. I look forward to more events which engage the wider public in political conversations and change, alongside a range of paid internship opportunities to make politics accessible to all.”



Adam McInnes

“I’m very excited to be joining the board of the brilliant John Smith Centre at the University of Glasgow. I owe a great deal to the opportunities that the Centre provided to me while I was at university (which now feels like a long time ago!). I’m delighted now to have the chance to support and shape the Centre’s essential work of building trust in politics and public service.”





Political Conversations Pilot Launches at Kilmarnock Academy

The John Smith Centre launched its pilot schools outreach programme at Kilmarnock Academy, aiming to inspire young people to see politics as accessible and impactful. Former MSP Alex Neil and Jackson Carlaw MSP shared stories of cross-party collaboration and public service, sparking thoughtful discussion among students.

This successful first event marks the beginning of a Scotland-wide rollout over the next year, bringing “Political Conversations” to more communities across the country.

IN 2025-26, THE JOHN SMITH CENTRE WILL

- » Run a new course for honours students at the University of Glasgow, giving them the chance to plan the Youth Poll
- » Deliver the second UK Youth Poll
- » Roll out our new schools programme in the west of Scotland
- » Host more big name politicians to speak about the state of politics and the future of civic life
- » Expand our renowned internship programme to young people with the talent but not the means to break into public life
- » Break down the barriers that stop young people from entering civic life and politics

We need your help to inspire more people from diverse backgrounds to get involved in politics and public life.

You can show your support for the UK's marginalised voices by donating to the John Smith Centre.

To add your support, follow the QR code.



THANK YOU!



**WE WANT TO INSPIRE
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FROM DIVERSE
BACKGROUNDS TO GET
INVOLVED IN POLITICS
AND PUBLIC LIFE.**

