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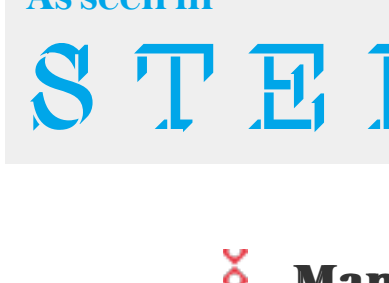
Generation reboot: 'How we found our dream jobs in midlife'

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Teacher turned baker Liz Wilson, photographed in her kitchen. CREDIT: DANIA OPAKO



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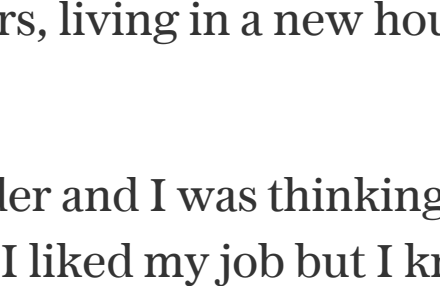
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By Clare Thorp

9 APRIL 2020 • 6:07PM

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Many of us don't peak creatively until our 50s, Clare Thorp talks to five entrepreneurs who reached their career nirvana when they were least expecting it

Six years ago, at the age of 53, Liz Wilson was feeling adrift. Recently separated from the father of her three children, she was on her own for the first time in 25 years, living in a new house and working as a primary school teacher.

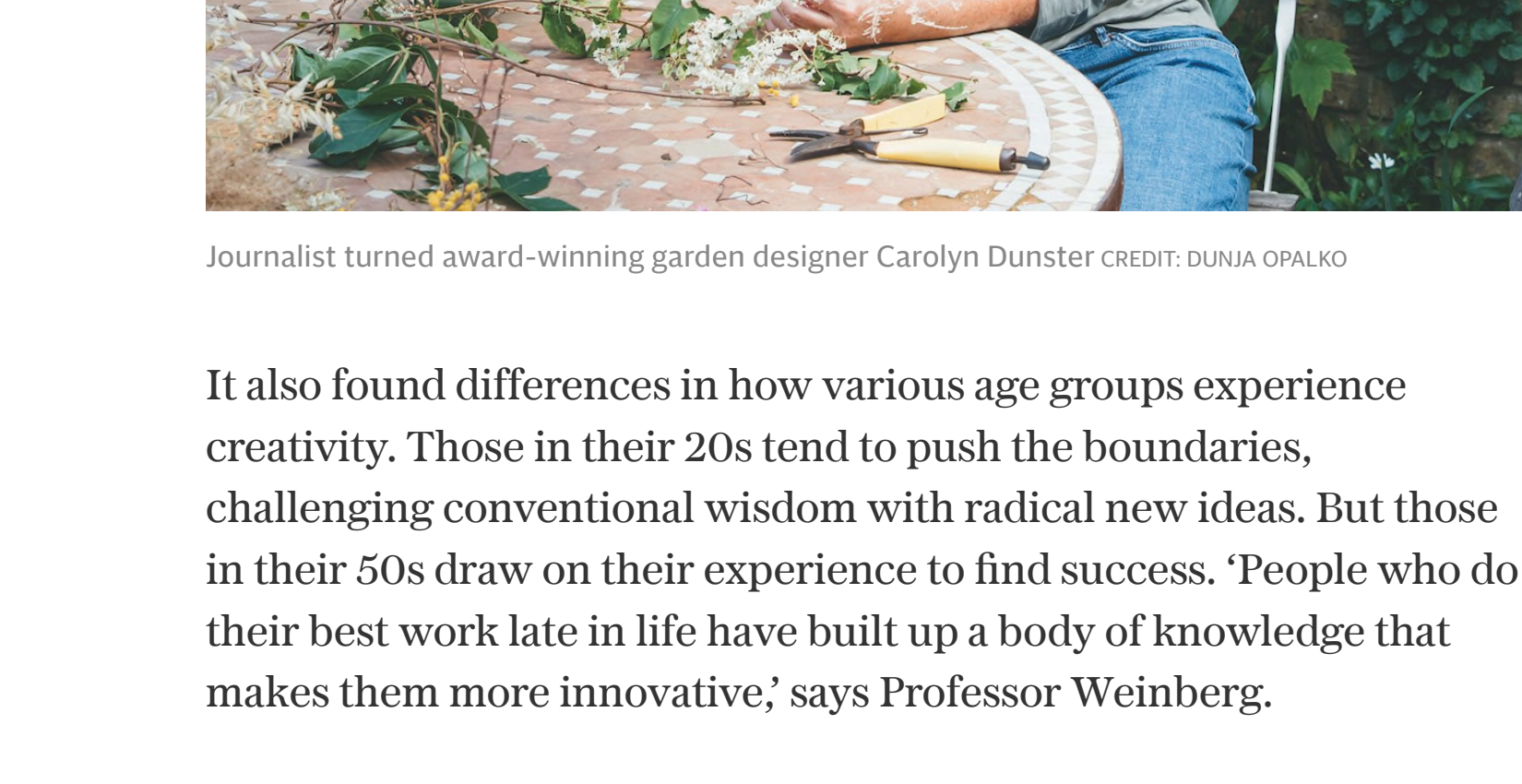
'The kids were getting older and I was thinking, there's got to be more than this,' she says. 'I liked my job but I knew there was something more in me. I didn't want to be doing the same thing in five years' time.'

To take her mind off things, the keen home cook signed up for a three-day bread-making course. 'I had a lot of energy and I didn't want to sit in the corner feeling miserable,' she says. 'Making bread provided the most therapeutic distraction. I became obsessed overnight: I baked and baked and volunteered in bakeries and cookery schools, went on more courses and read books about baking.'

A creative spark was ignited and Liz began making bread for friends, who encouraged her to start selling it. After a year juggling baking and teaching, she quit her job to take it full-time, starting a micro-bakery and bread school, Ma Baker, in Fulham, south London.

Today, she has won several awards, teaches sellout courses and bakes up to 100 loaves a day. While many of her peers are looking ahead to retirement, Liz feels like she is just getting started. 'It has turned out to be the biggest surprise of my life,' she says. 'I've worked harder than ever in the last five years, but I've never been happier.' She hasn't just found career success, but a new husband too, something she puts down to her new-found confidence. 'Being happy in work can make such a difference to all aspects of your life.'

Finding her calling later in life was a revelation to Liz, but having a creative breakthrough in your 50s may be more common than previously thought. An Ohio State University study, which examined the work of Nobel Laureates, found that there are two life cycles of creativity, with some people peaking in their 20s, but others not until their 50s. 'Many people think that creativity is a young person's business and that is certainly not exclusively the case,' says Professor Bruce Weinberg, co-author of the study.



Journalist turned award-winning garden designer Carolyn Dunster. CREDIT: DANIA OPAKO

It also found differences in how various age groups experience creativity. Those in their 20s tend to push the boundaries, challenging conventional wisdom with radical new ideas. But those in their 50s draw on their experience to find success. 'People who do their best work late in life have built up a body of knowledge that makes them more innovative,' says Professor Weinberg.

Few of us will ever be Nobel Laureates, but it's good news for those of us who thought we'd missed our chance to tap into our creative potential. And that doesn't necessarily mean writing a novel – creativity goes much further than the arts. The Office for National Statistics figures show that more people are seeking a change in midlife: 2.27 million over-50s are now working for themselves – up 57 per cent in a decade.

For women especially, it's a time that's ripe for reinvention. Magazine journalist turned full-time mum-of-three Carolyn Dunster was 53 when she found her calling.

'My husband had the big job and I was doing the bulk of the childcare, and that's basically what my life was like for a very long time,' she says. 'I wanted to be at home with my children, but I also didn't feel like I'd achieved my true potential.' Then, two years ago, with her children gradually flying the nest, she took a garden-design course with the intention of redesigning her own, but enjoyed it so much she ended up setting up a business. 'I started off being almost embarrassed asking people for money,' she says. 'The hardest part was learning my worth.'

She has since designed an award-winning garden for RHS Hampton Court and published a book about city gardening, with another in the pipeline. 'Everything came together in an unexpected and amazing way,' she says. 'I've managed to carve out something that is really mine now, and at 55 I'm at the peak of my professional career.'



Recruitment consultant turned Ayurvedic practitioner Sonja Shah-Williams. CREDIT: SONJA SHAH-WILLIAMS

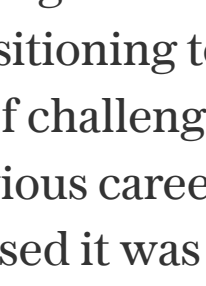
'Few of us are expecting to retire at 60 any more, whereas 20 years ago there was an assumption that, by the time you hit your 50s, you were just rolling towards retirement,' says Claire Harbour, co-author of *Disrupt Your Career: How To Navigate Uncharted Career Transitions and Thrive*. For women in particular, it's also an age when many of us start to reflect on what we've achieved. 'It's a time when seemingly insurmountable obstacles have gone, and you're able to ask, "What is important? What do I want to do?"' Everybody deserves to leave an imprint that they're proud of. Allow yourself to dream. In the end, it's about how willing you are to take a risk.'

Sonja Shah-Williams, 55, previously had a successful career in recruitment, running her own consultancy and working with clients including Revlon, Burberry and Cartier. But a lack of work-life balance, plus a feeling that she wasn't utilising her creative talent, led to a rethink. So, in her late 40s, she went back to university to study for a degree in Ayurvedic medicine, which was always a passion. Then, aged 50, she set up her own practice, Anala.

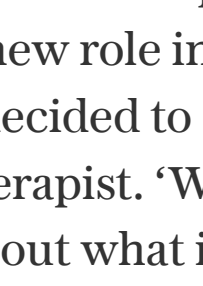
'While I help people with their health, everything surrounding my practice is creative,' she says. 'I write blogs, take photographs, run supper clubs, and I'm about to launch my own body oils. I've found this creative self that was always there, but I was too busy to look for before.'

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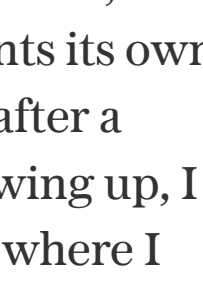
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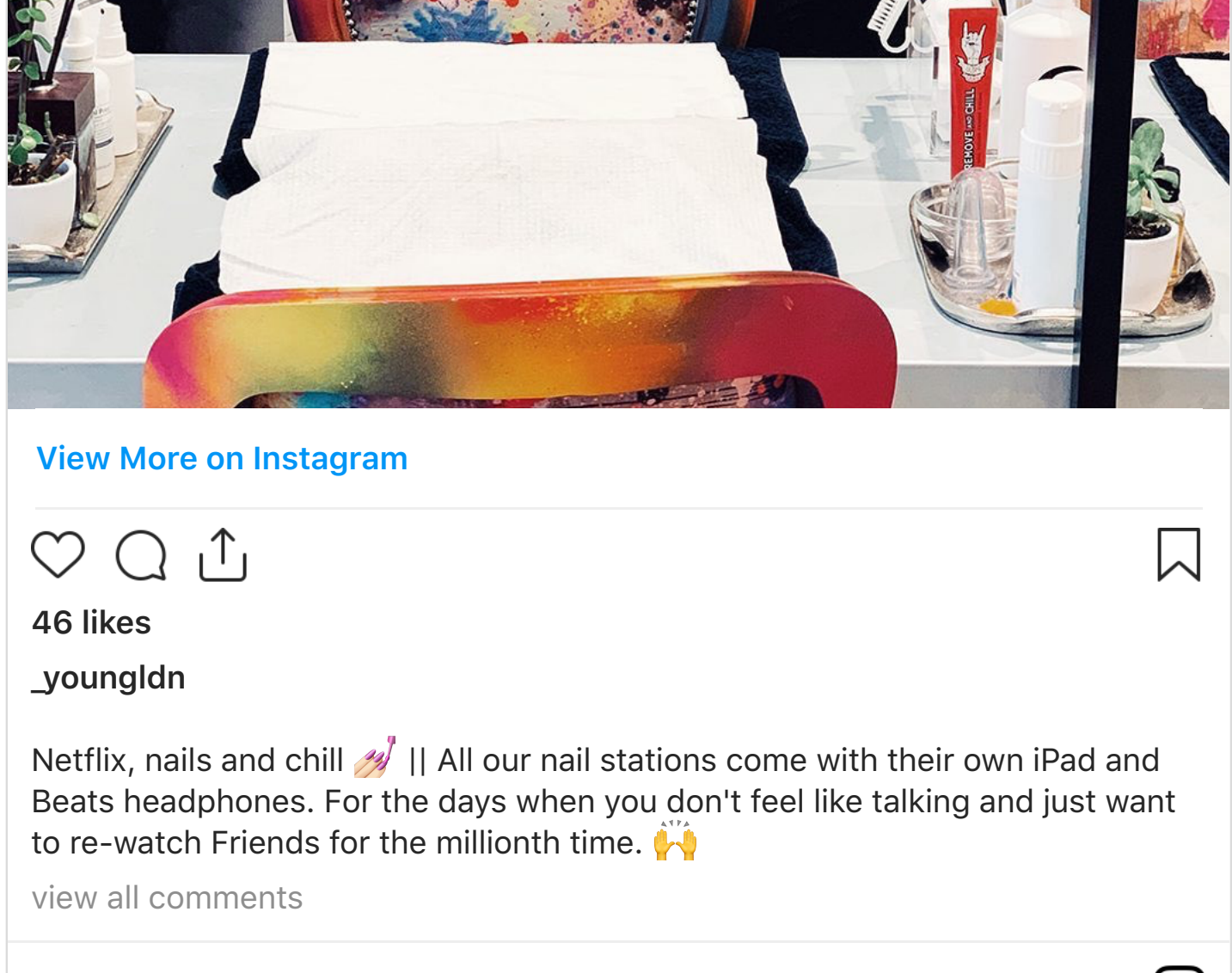
That's not to say it's all been easy. 'I thought the minute I opened my practice, I would be inundated with enquiries,' she said. 'That didn't happen. It's taken until now to feel really confident about what I'm doing.'

Making a radical career change isn't simple at any stage in life, and transitioning to a demanding new role in your 50s presents its own set of challenges. Sue Carroll decided to start a business after a previous career as a speech therapist. 'With the kids growing up, I realised it was time to think about what inspired me and where I could make a difference,' she explains.

The idea for Young LDN, a Notting Hill beauty salon aimed at teens and young adults, hit her when she was trying to find somewhere to treat her son's acne. 'I decided there needed to be a place that was fun, trendy and inviting to the younger market,' she says. She opened the salon in January, recruiting Sadie Frost as an ambassador for the brand. But despite its success, it's been an adjustment. 'Life is tougher than before,' she admits. 'I'm juggling a lot of balls and always feel I should be somewhere else. I've had to relinquish some control of both family and work, which is challenging – I'm a bit of a control freak. And I rarely go to the gym, which used to be part of my daily routine.'

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But finding your spark needn't mean radical change. Alex Harwood, 53, began composing music at four and trained at the Royal College of Music and Juilliard in New York. Yet before her career could really take off, she took a break to have kids.

'It was my choice. But my first child was also born with kidney disease and needed a tremendous amount of care.' Aside from music for school plays, she stopped composing. But as her children grew up and she and her husband divorced, she realised she wanted to try again.

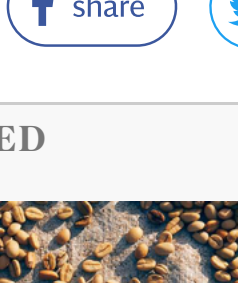
After a few years teaching music theory at a boys' school, at 44 she won a place at the National Film and Television School, and started picking up work. But it wasn't until she hit 50 that she got her real break, when a film-school colleague recommended her for a project. 'One afternoon an unknown number rang my mobile. It was Disney, asking me to put myself forward for a nature documentary. I got the project, and that landed me my agent.'

She's since composed music for films including last year's *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*, and is scoring a production for the Northern Ballet. For Alex, the timing is no coincidence.

'In my 20s, I wasn't confident enough – I don't think I would have dealt with the difficulties very well,' she says. 'I definitely got to the age of 50 and stopped giving a damn what people thought. I've got fire in my belly now. I think I always have, but it's only now I've acknowledged it.'

Her advice? 'Take the risk! Who cares if you fail?'

**Have you hit your creative stride in midlife? Have you changed direction, or would you be too nervous to start over? Join the conversation in the Telegraph Women Facebook group, or in the comments below**

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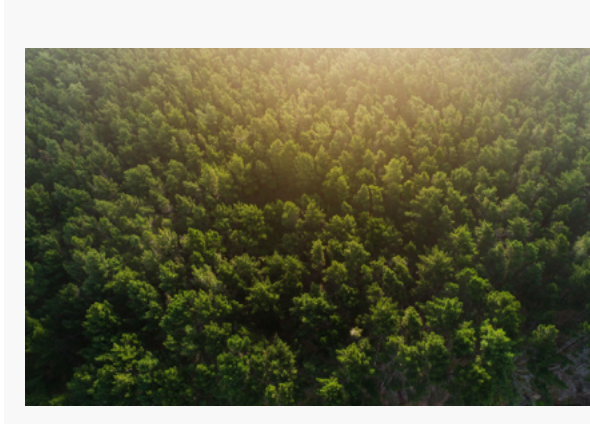
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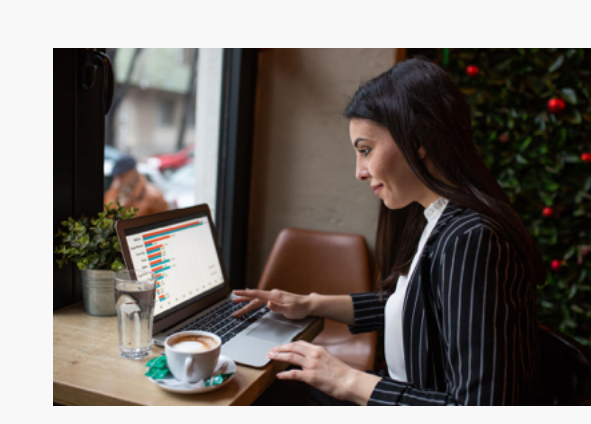
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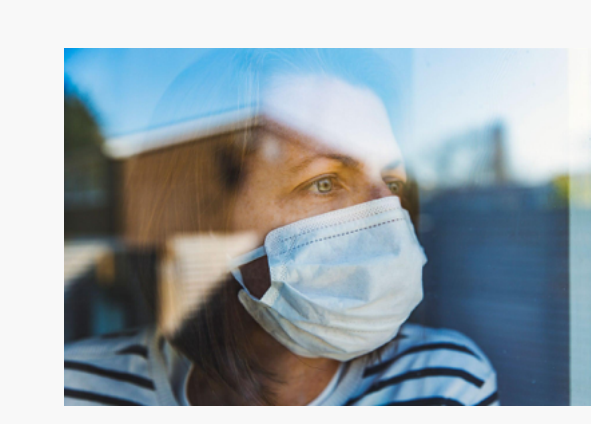
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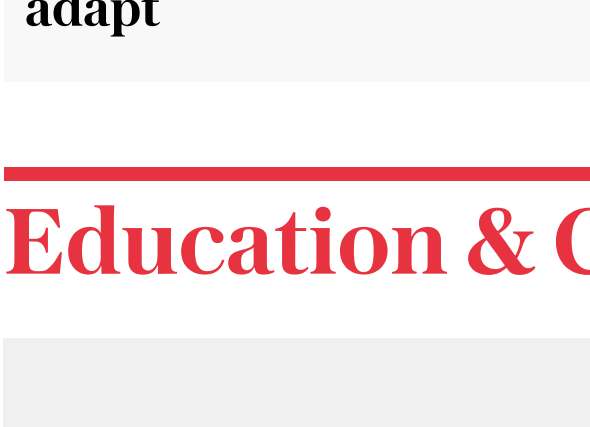


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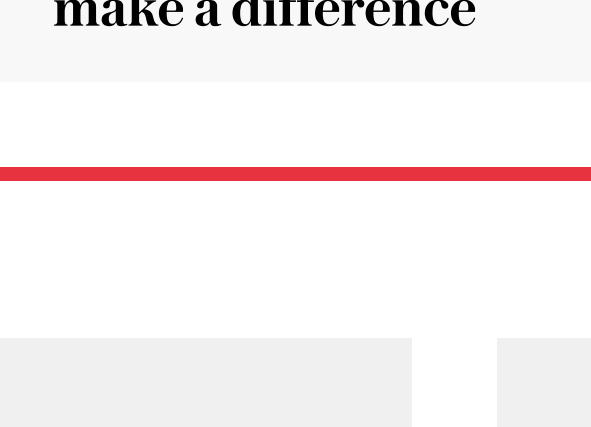
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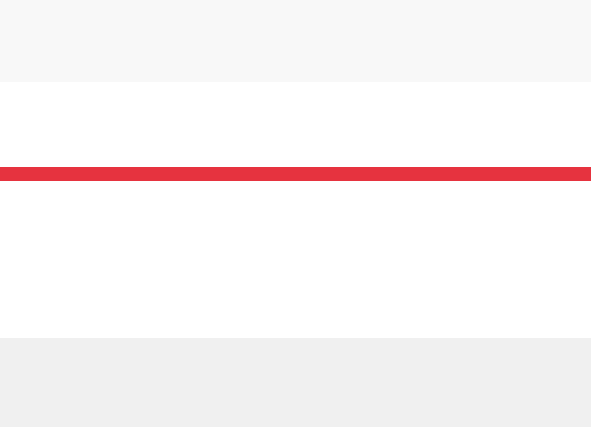
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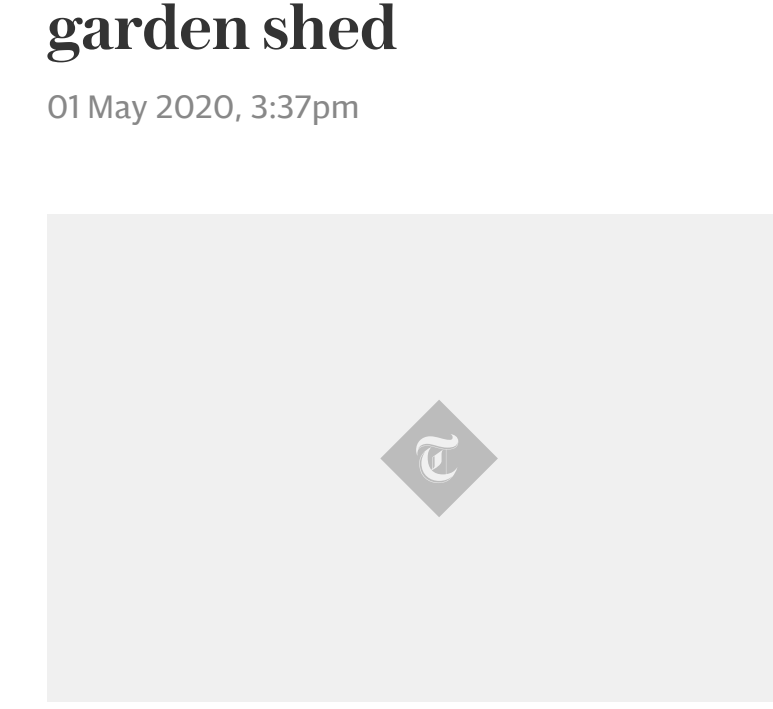
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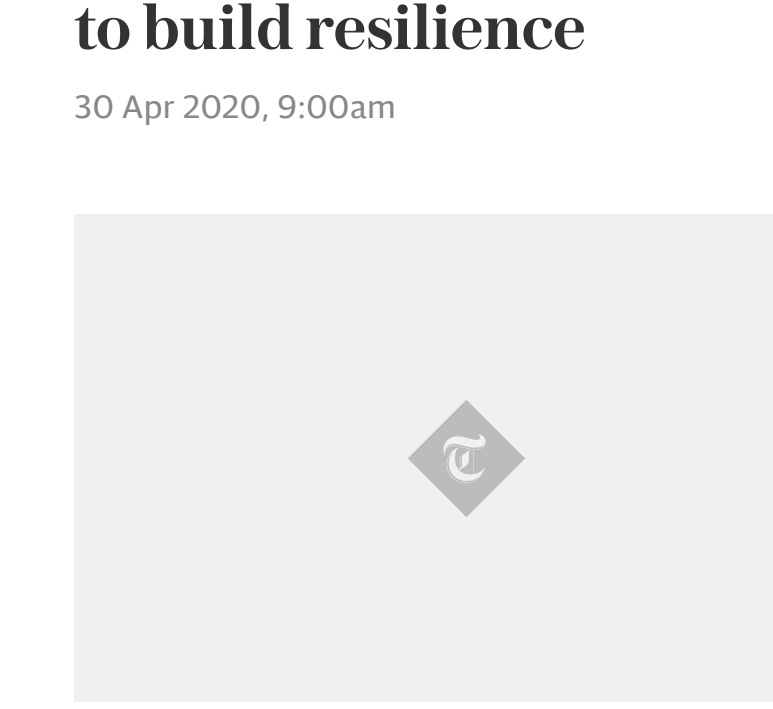
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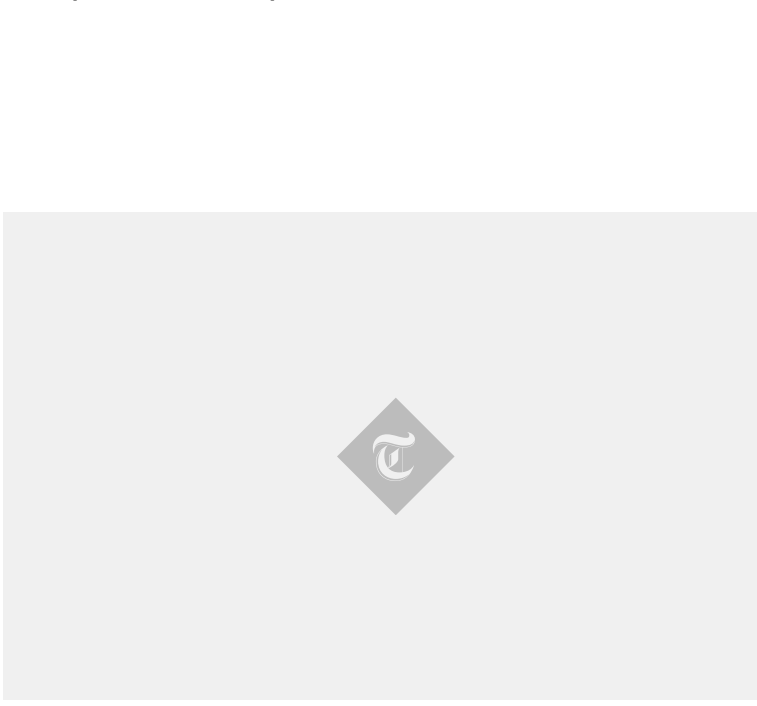
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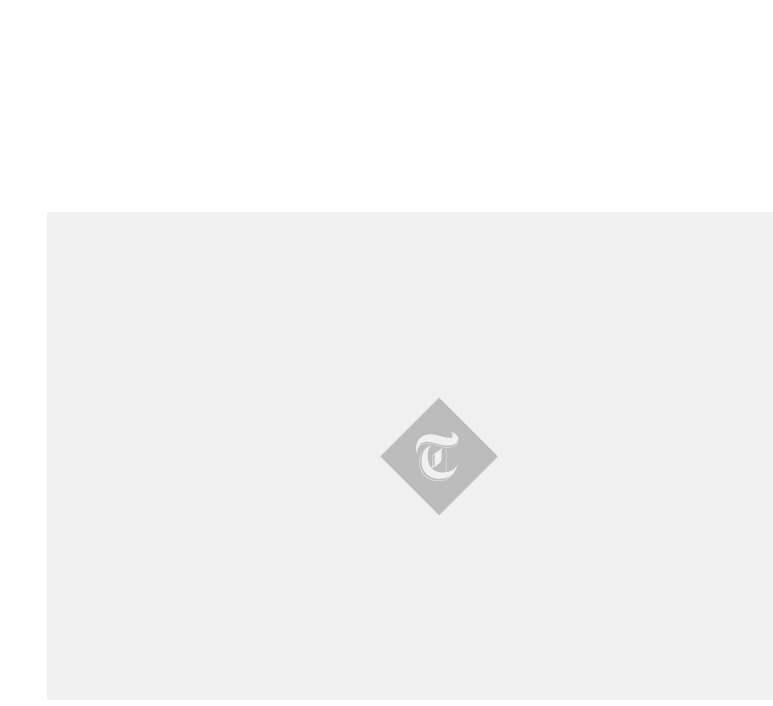
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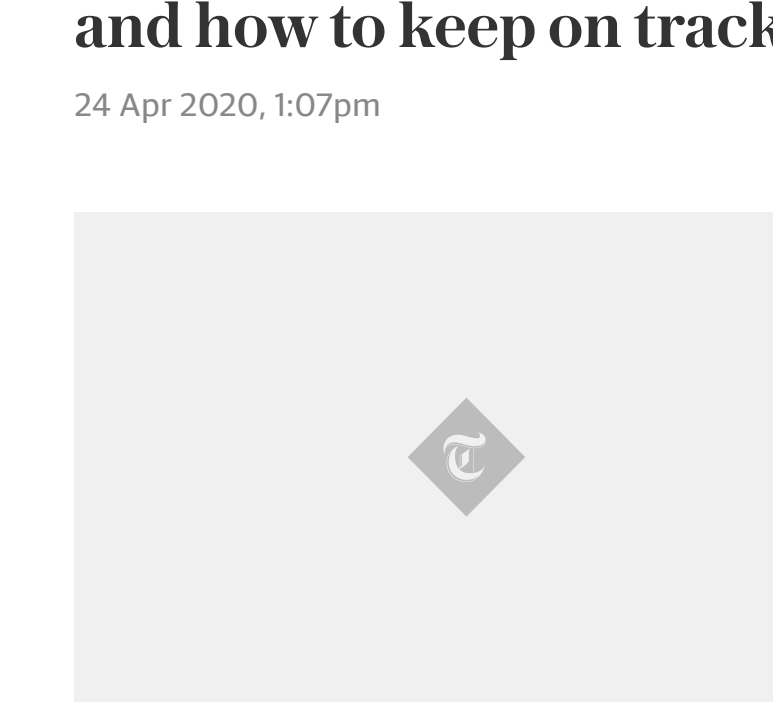
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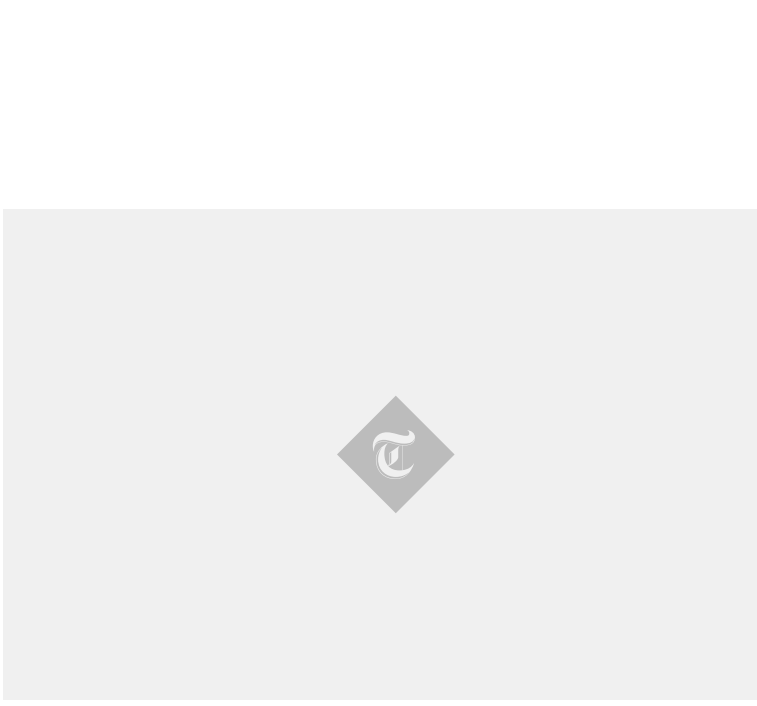
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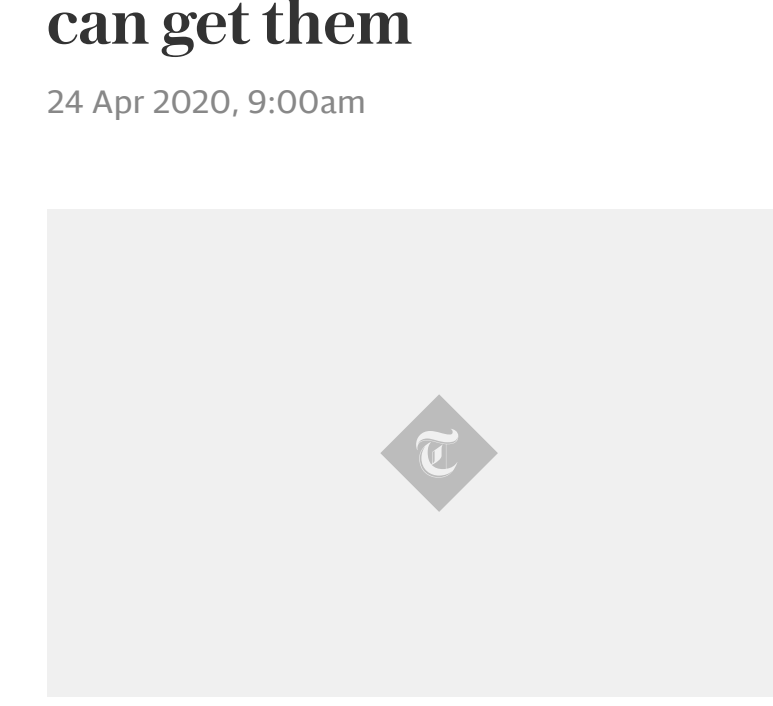
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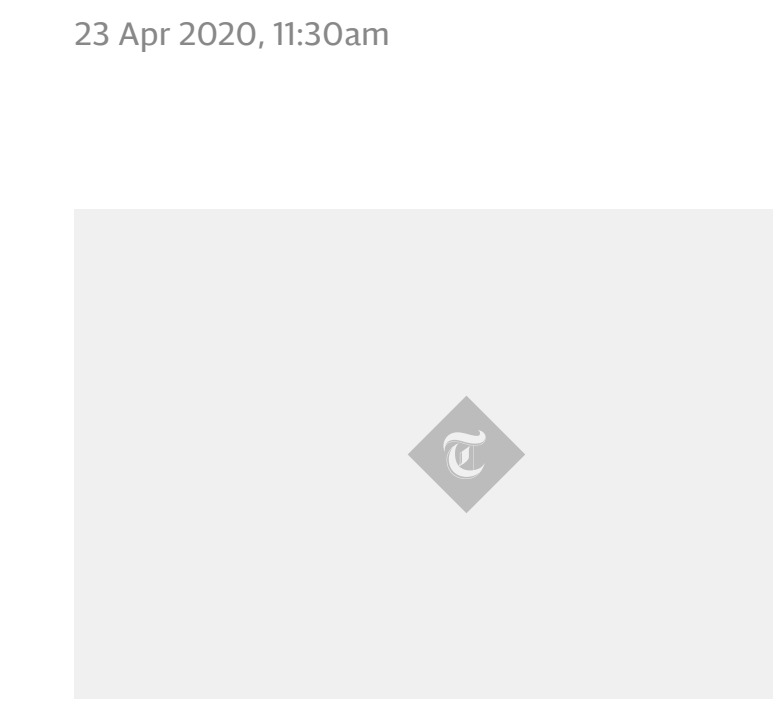
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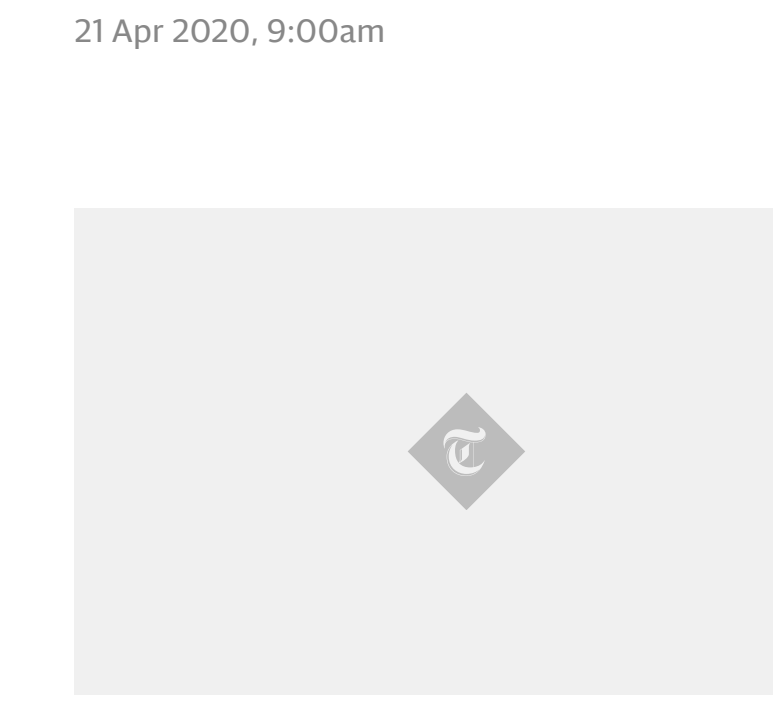
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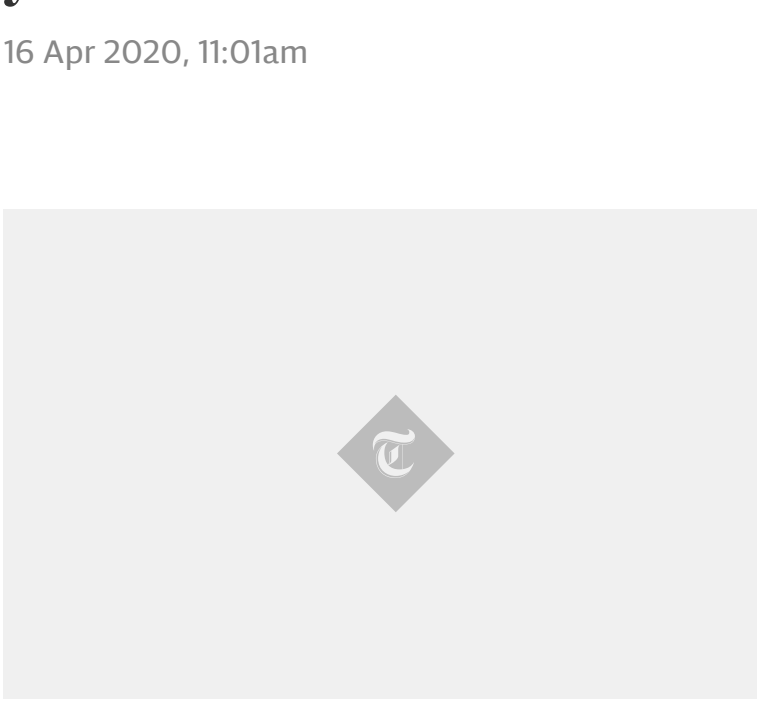
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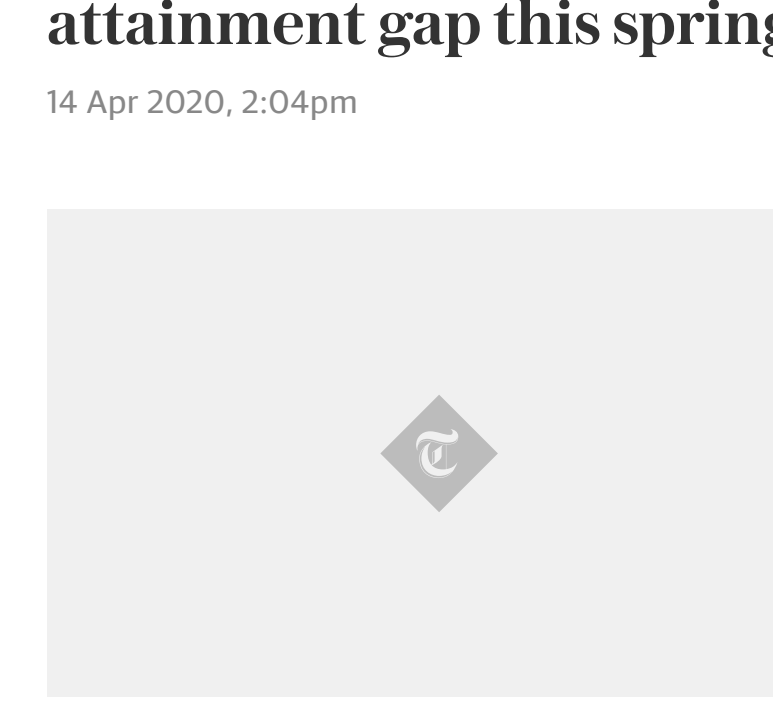
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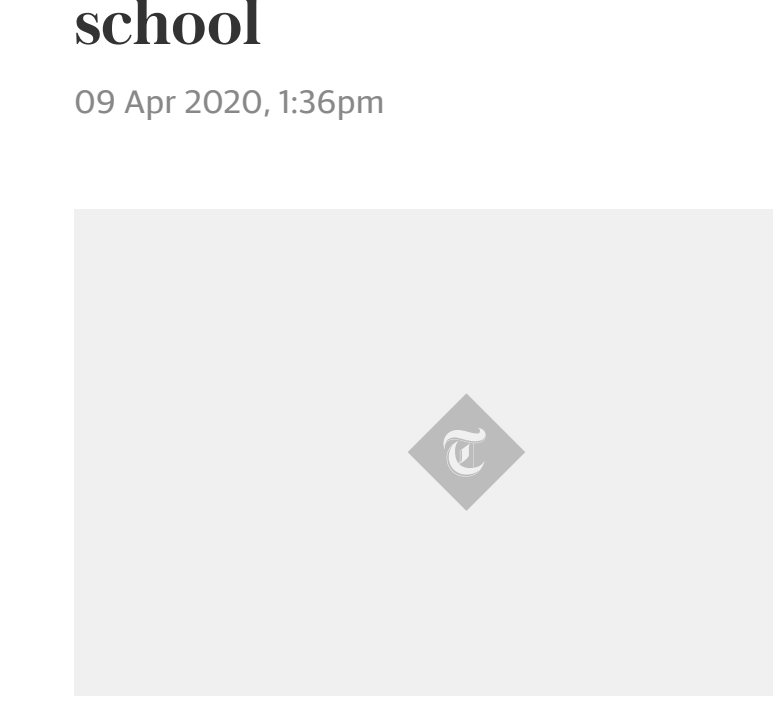
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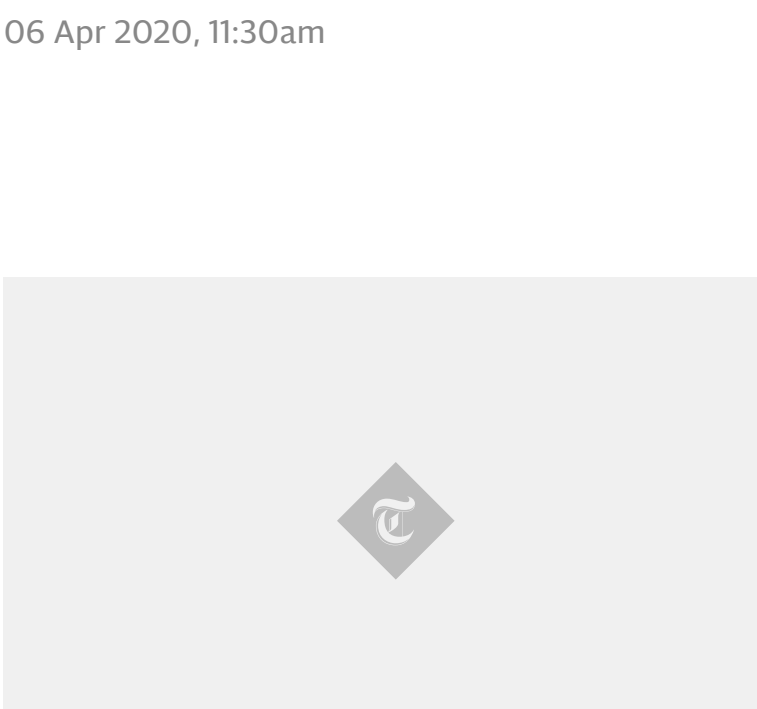
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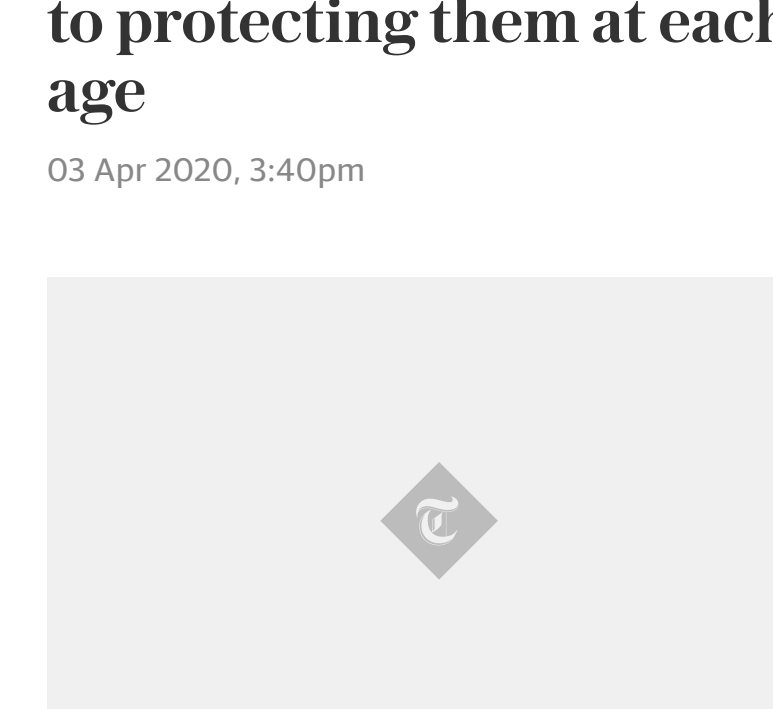
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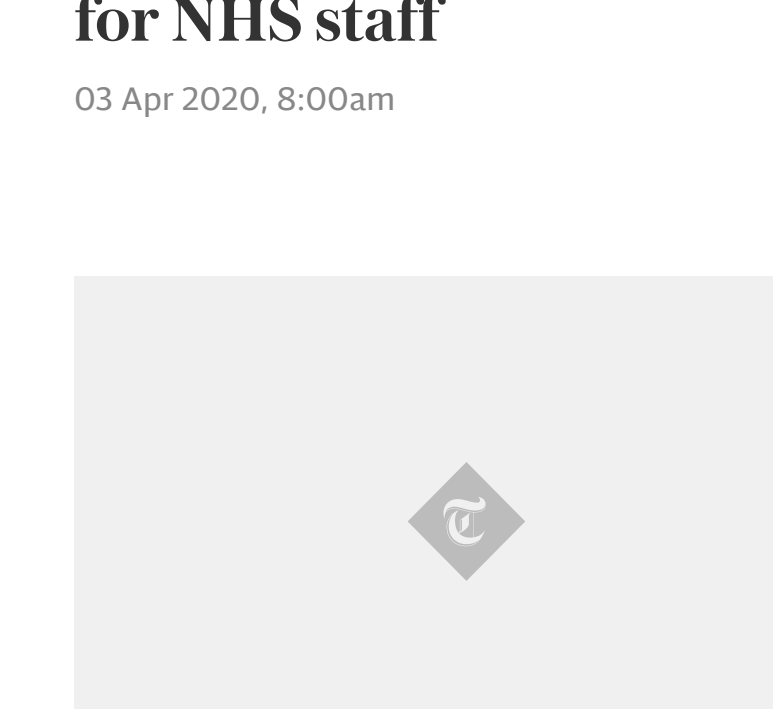
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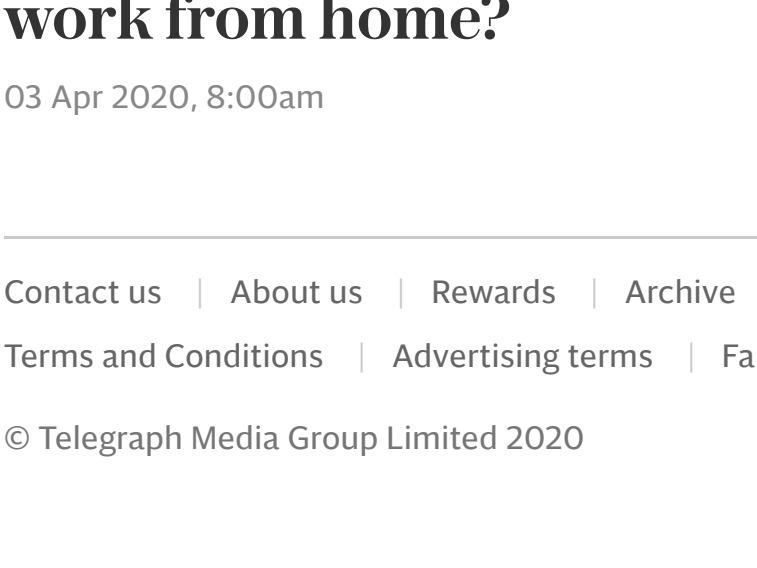
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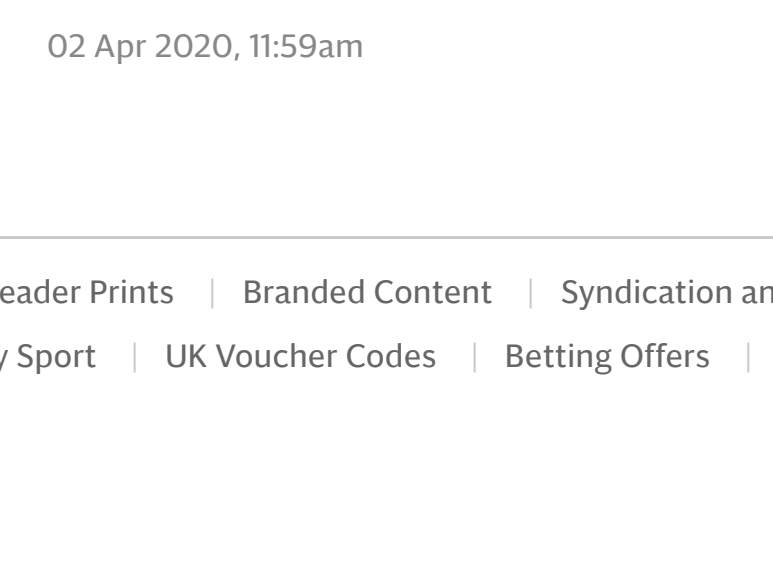
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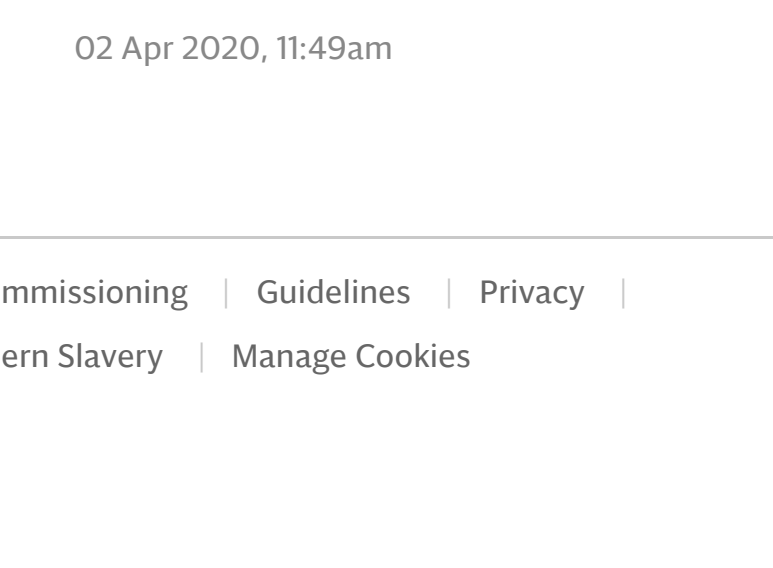
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