



Councils should ‘stop shaping all policies based on counting COVID cases and need to start balancing risks across a broader spectrum’, writes **Claire Fox**

It’s the first anniversary of my mother’s death. She died last October, aged 92. I spent hours with her the day before she died, in a nursing home in North Wales. She was very weak. I held her hand, talking to her incessantly, re-telling those favourite, much-repeated funny anecdotes from our family history. She couldn’t speak, but would squeeze my hand, smiling at key moments.

At one point, she struggled to sit up and leaned forward: she smoothed my ruffled hair and pulled at my creased shirt – an old habit of reprimand, because she always thought I looked scruffy. She was smartening me up. I was astonished at this gesture of agency, but delighted to recognise that familiar, affectionate tut-tut look. This was my Mum in her final hours, emphasising that she was still there and in charge. With stupendous effort – even at the end of life – she was declaring: ‘I am still able to assert this little bit of control and authority.’

I tell this story now because, mid-COVID, it can be easy to forget that there is more to life than the physical reality of breathing. The person still counts and battles to be themselves to the last.

Long before COVID, but especially apparent during this crisis, too many local authority public health professionals seem to view everything through the prism of health as the core value, longevity – at all costs – as the point of life. This can distort the priorities for living. Much of what is life-enhancing can be a risk to health, whether playing rugby, driving a car or a boozy night out with mates.

Well into her eighties, before she became ill, my mother dashed about, forever busy,

often visiting the sick and organising get-togethers for the local elderly (often years younger than she). When her GP suggested she take it easy, she was indignant. She was not going to neglect lonely and ill neighbours. Her doctor eventually conceded that as she had the energy, on a balance of risks, putting her sociability to good use for the community was better for everyone’s health.

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When she moved into local authority care, the staff (who proved to be fantastic allies) were initially disapproving that we insisted on taking her out to restaurants, dressed up as the chic, stylish woman she always had been. Formally, the care home’s advice was that it would be bad for her new routine to drag her out to a local wine bar. However, for those weekly few hours she laughed and chatted and while dementia stole the context, she had fun. Care staff admitted this stimulation made her more coherent for the following week.

If a narrow, public health outlook can be joyless, today’s tendency for national and local government to only see risks through the prism of COVID can be even more misanthropic and counterproductive.

A letter to Matt Hancock from 66 GPs

highlighted that it is important to balance all the harms their patients face rather than focusing exclusively on any single risk.

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What about the devastating structural unemployment, higher inflation, downward pressure on living standards that loom ahead for generations?

Hurrah for the independent elected mayor of Middlesbrough, Andy Preston, for refusing to lock down his city, in defiance of the Government’s new restrictions, because he wants to ‘preserve jobs and well-being’.

Those GPs are right when they echo Chris Whitty’s words that ‘if as a result of economic downturn for prolonged periods, deprivation increases, that will have a health effect’, noting that a ‘one-track response threatens more lives and livelihoods than COVID lives saved’.

Councils should also stop arguing that the whole reorganisation of society is necessary to protect the elderly. Older people I know are not all tucked away worrying about their own welfare: they, too, are concerned about the catastrophic effects on the young and the less well-off. And in the spirit of my Mum, many in their eighties and nineties want to enjoy as much human interaction as they can in their remaining time, not be locked up by public health officials ‘for their own good’. ■

Claire Fox is director of the Institute of Ideas

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soapbox



By Paul Wheeler

What has got into the County Councils’ Network (CCN)? Previously known for having the best drinks reception at the Local Government Association conference, it is now rampaging around the debate on local government reorganisation like the boxer Rocky on speed. If the CCN was not so male-dominated it would perhaps recognise that size isn’t everything.

The case for council reform is less clear cut than its well-paid advisers suggested. After all, if council size was the only consideration then Northamptonshire and Bedfordshire would be vying for council of the year rather than a distant memory.

The problem for the shires is that whole county unitaries only make economic sense when they include cities as well as districts. For many, such as Devon and Derbyshire, those cities have long since bolted, leaving them more like doughnuts than economic powerhouses.

What is also evident from the COVID pandemic is that working from home has refocused the policy debate on towns. How will a large and remote unitary council choose between competing towns for regeneration bids? Sadly, this is displacement activity when the whole of the local government family should be focused on the appalling underfunding and political neglect of its activities. France and Germany are big state nations but have an infrastructure of small well-funded and politically influential localities.

If the advocates for big unitary paused for a moment they may want to address the democratic challenge of creating too few councils with too many councillors. Council chambers of 100-plus councillors are not effective in terms of good scrutiny or local representation. As for the sudden enthusiasm for elected county-wide mayors, be careful what you wish for. The experiment with police and crime commissioners has shown an unusual willingness of the public to elect mavericks and attention-seekers. Add in highly unpopular Government policies on planning and housebuilding and we may see our own mini Trumps in the shires.

With the resignation of the principal ministerial advocate for reorganisation, it may be that the big unitary push has peaked too soon. If so, it gives time for a more reasoned debate on how to get effective and well-funded local government across the English shires. ■

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