

opinion

After the pandemic has passed there will be no return to the old normal

**Ed
Maxfield**



The prime minister has returned to work and has talked of Britain being past the peak of the coronavirus crisis. But as we look beyond the pandemic, do we really want to return to the old normal?

Many have discovered a personal resilience that perhaps they had forgotten they had. Feeding and educating a family at home; adapting to fast-changing challenges in the office; working extra shifts to support colleagues. Most strikingly, a new community spirit has blossomed. People are sharing more of what they can spare – whether it is time or money or their skills.

There has been talk of a new Blitz Spirit which was worth celebrating as we approached VE Day. But don't forget that after the war, people voted overwhelmingly for a new kind of society. Will we see the same demand for revolutionary change again?

For me, we have to tackle three vital priorities if we are to build something better from the struggles and personal tragedies of the current crisis. We have to recognise the fragility of our planet and our power to save the environment from ourselves. We should harness the new spirit of giving to rebuild a sense of volunteering and sharing. We also have to recognise the vital role public services play in keeping us safe and well, and that the only way to support them is to pay enough taxes.

Whether it's videos of goats taking over town centres or noticing how much less we are using our cars (my spending on petrol has gone from around £200 per month to basically nothing) we can all see how our relationship with the environment has changed. Scientists tell us there has been a record fall in global carbon emissions which is critical to correcting the damage we are doing to the planet. Sure my legs are aching from all the cycling I am doing – but perhaps they would ache less if I had ditched the car sooner. It seems like now is the time to build mass support for plans for a healthier



Now is the time to build mass support for plans for a healthier way of living in harmony with our planet, says Ed Maxfield

Picture: AARON CHOWN/PA

way of living in harmony with our planet.

A million people volunteered to help the NHS. There was a huge response to captain Tom Moore noble fundraising effort. Across Norfolk people helped their neighbours, communities organised themselves, parish councils lent support.

Organisations like Norfolk Community Foundation, Community Action Norfolk and Voluntary Norfolk added co-ordination and distributed funds. If we really recognise what voluntary action can do – and give charities and community groups

the tools to grow their work – perhaps we can finally deliver the Big Society that David Cameron promised to build a decade ago.

Personal lifestyle changes and voluntary action can only get us so far, though. The pandemic has thrown a sharp light on corporate leaders who ask for state handouts while hiding in the Caribbean to cut their tax bills. It has shown the huge value – and cost – of vital public services. Norfolk's director of Social Services has talked about the millions of pounds needed just to cover agency staff in care homes as workers get ill or self isolate. We've had warnings

that the pandemic could break the bank at County Hall. Yet each year care for adults and children in Norfolk runs tens of millions over budget because we have under-funded services for more than a decade.

Politicians have to be brave enough to talk about tax. It's the only way we can properly fund the services we know we all rely on. Taxes can help to encourage the other changes we want to see too. Isn't it time to think about a Congestion Charge for Norwich to cut car use and fund public transport for example? Or to back North

Norfolk MP Duncan Baker's call for a tax on online retailers to support our local High Streets?

For the future health of our nation, our economy and our planet we can't afford to go back to the new normal. It means all of us changing the way we do things and think about things. And it will demand some of that Blitz Spirit to make people brave enough to confront the battles ahead.

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