

Local Areas and Localism

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In the current (third) lockdown, attention has once again been focused on what we've been instructed that we should, and should not do, in terms of essential daily activities. One issue that's come to the fore is exercise and the 'requirement' we should stay within our local area.

Two cases immediately come to mind.

The first involved two females who drove five miles from their homes in Ashby-de-la-Zouch, Leicestershire to meet each other for a socially distanced walk at Foremark Reservoir in Derbyshire. Having been "surrounded" by police officers they were fined £200 each. As was explained to the two ladies by Derbyshire Police, driving to exercise is "not in the spirit" of instructions provided by government.

The second case involves no less than the Prime Minister. Boris Johnson, on Sunday, was spotted cycling in Queen Elizabeth Olympic park in Stratford, east London. This is seven miles from Downing Street. It is not clear whether Johnson cycled to the Olympic park (which would require a return journey) or whether he and his bike were transported.

Though this issue of transport would seem irrelevant as, importantly, being seven miles from home would not seem to be staying local, matters were somewhat muddled by a 'source' within the PM's office stating that though he followed his own government's guidelines on Covid, "It does not say in the regulations that driving somewhere to take exercise is a breach of the rules."

It's worth pointing out that the £200 fines handed out to the two ladies were, on Monday, rescinded by Derbyshire Police together with an apology.

Clearly, the issue of what constitutes a local area is problematic.

For the sake of absolute clarity it's worth restating what's stated on the [government website](#) 'National lockdown: Stay at Home':
“..exercise with your household (or support bubble) or one other person, this should be limited to once per day, and you should not travel outside your local area.”

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As a solicitor friend of mine pointed out to me in a telephone conversation when this matter arose, there may many who, believing they've been treated unlawfully by being fined for an 'offence' defined so imprecisely, may appeal. We may see the further clarification that many commentators contend is essential for ensure government guidance is credible and therefore followed by everyone.

Notably, among the other UK nations there's no consistency.

Guidelines for Scottish citizens is that exercise should “start and finish at the same place (which can be up to five miles from the boundary of your local authority area) as long as you abide by the rules on meeting other households”. Wales, like the UK government, state no definitions of what local is but that citizens should stay as close to home as possible; “Your exercise should start and finish from your home and you should exercise alone or with a member of your household or support bubble.”

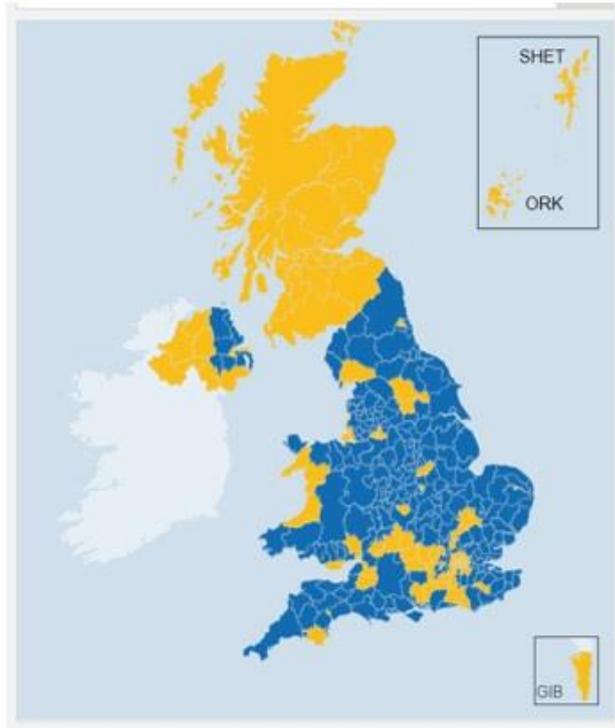
Northern Ireland's guidance is that citizens “should not travel more than 10 miles from your home in order to take exercise”. As a point of reference, citizens south of the border in the Republic, a member of the EU, are instructed to travel no more than 5km for exercise.

In a pandemic that's claimed over 80,000 lives and, critically, because of the recently identified highly contagious variant of the virus, likely to overwhelm hospital capacity, it is worth remembering that the guidelines are intended for collective benefit. Regardless of what detractors argue, no government imposes lockdown without good reason; the economic impact is phenomenal.

Nonetheless, the issue of what is a local area is crucial and, it may be speculated, given the importance localism is likely to assume beyond the pandemic, deserves a better and more precise definition.

As examined in the book I co-edited with my colleague Beverley Nielsen last year, [*English Regions After Brexit: Examining Potential Change through Devolved Power*](#), a number of contributors considered how greater focus on provision of service and amenities at a 'local' level would assist regions of England post-Brexit.

Examining English regions only was deliberate as the three other nations already have devolved power enabling locally elected politicians to provide representation in accordance with exigencies considered relevant. As was made clear by a number of those who wrote chapters, strong evidence exists suggesting that many people who voted to leave the EU based their decision on frustration at what they perceived to be the remoteness of politicians making laws they were expected to obey. Regardless of the veracity of such beliefs, people voted in the EU referendum in whatever way they saw fit producing the pattern shown in the diagram below:



Key:

■ Majority leave ■ Majority remain

Source: BBC News Website https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/eu_referendum/results

Nation results

England



Northern Ireland



Scotland



Wales



Source: BBC News Website https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/eu_referendum/results

As an exercise in presenting a simple question to all voters within the UK, the referendum may be judged successful. The problem, as has been pointed out *ad infinitum* by commentators including myself, is that asking whether voters wished to leave or remain in the EU was an abstraction and insufficiently cognisant of reality. There were far too many determinants and policies, usually complex, and frequently inter-related, impacting on their lives to be 'distilled' into a binary choice.

Inherent difficulties in understanding the workings of the EU by most are probably a major reason why the culmination of negotiations concerning a Free Trade Agreement is proving not to everyone's satisfaction; particularly among local communities who believed their livelihoods were negatively affected by the UK's membership of the EU.

Not for the first time, though you may please some of the people some of the time, it's rare to achieve policies and laws producing satisfaction among all citizens.

Among many contributors to *English Regions After Brexit*, was the firmly held belief was a belief that far too many voters see the concentration of power in Westminster in a way not dissimilar to the EU; those who wield power and the ability to make laws affecting everyone's lives are too removed from their concerns. Instead, the book advanced the key thesis that greater prosperity and improvement in prospects can only be achieved by decentralisation, devolvement of power and enhanced localism.

This raises certain challenges.

Firstly, how to engage citizens in being more willing to participate in localised voting? Whilst the EU referendum achieved a turnout of 72.2%, elections in most parts of the UK at local level are characterised by apathy among voters. Localism is all very well, but how to motivate people to be willing to consider the issues that affect them?

More crucially, the question arises of how local should local be?

After all, as my own chapter in *English Regions After Brexit*, 'Ending 'Stand and Deliver' and Enhanced Localism Based on Citizens' Juries' explained, current system of democracy in England, though far from perfect, is based on a long history of evolution and development originating with *wittans*.

Unfortunately, since the second world war there has been an inexorable decline in the importance attached to local democracy. Frequently it is viewed as irrelevant. The influence of regional and, more especially, national, government has eclipsed decisions made at local level.

Which brings us back to the question causing so many, including Metropolitan police commissioner, Dame Cressida Dick, to be perplexed, of how local should a 'local area' be?

It is well known that whilst there is a democratic deficit in local and regional elections, people have a much greater propensity to engage in organisations with the ability to achieve direct improvement in the quality of their local areas and, therefore, lives. This is particularly so in terms of residents' associations.

Significantly, and as reported on Tuesday in the [Guardian's Politics live feed](#), "More than one third of people feel closer to their local community as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, a survey suggests. PA Media says almost 70% of people said they feel part of their locality, and 35% said Covid has boosted this sense of belonging, according to a poll of 7,000 Britons by market researcher Opinium."

If people truly believe that they have control over what goes on in the immediate lanes, streets and roads in the area in which they live, including matters of housing, recreation, health and employment, they are infinitely more inclined to make their views known. In so doing, they are far more likely to be acquainted with the details of issues that are being discussed and therefore, equipped to informed decisions.

This is the theory of citizens' juries.

Turning the vicious circle of declining voting at local level into a virtuous cycle of participation. This is easy to say but hard to achieve. Fundamental to success is leadership and increased funding from Westminster.

Importantly, achieving the aspiration of greater localism depends on the size of the population in an area. Within densely populated areas many thousands live. In rural locations the inverse is true.

For this reason, in recommending citizens' juries, I did so fully aware that population is one of the determining factors not arbitrary measures of distance or size of geographical area achieved by faceless bureaucrats with little or no understanding of issues affecting people.

Perhaps this is the reason why Boris Johnson's government, in providing guidance on exercise, chose to be so enigmatic with the advice on what constitutes a local area?

As academics are fond of answering when asked a question to which precise answers have different outcomes depending on the contingencies, it all depends.

However, as experience during this pandemic has shown, when citizens are asked to use their common sense when exercising literally, and in their judgement, locally, many will seek to interpret whatever advice they are given in a way that suits their purposes but, potentially, in a manner that could prove devastating collectively.

As is well known, adherence to rules is achieved through consent.

If recent events have taught us anything, it's that Boris Johnson's government should be recognise that better decisions in dealing with all problems that confront us, most particularly Covid, will be attained by consulting citizens who intimately appreciate what localism and local areas means to them.

Dr. Steven McCabe is co-editor of *Brexit and Northern Ireland, Bordering on Confusion* (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13:978-1694447807) and *English Regions After Brexit: Examining Potential Change through Devolved Power* (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13: 979-8666953099). He has contributed chapters to a number of texts in the last year (in 2020 unless otherwise stated): *Brexit Negotiations after Article 50: Assessing Process, Progress and Impact* (published in 2019 by Emerald Publishing, ISBN: 978-1787697683); *The Wolves in the Forest: Tackling Inequality in the 21st Century* edited by Hindley and Hishman (published in 2019 by Social Liberal Forum); *Boris, Brexit and the Media* edited by Mair, Clark, Fowler, Snoddy and Tait (published by Abramis Academic Publishing, ISBN-13: 978-1845497644); *The Virus and the Media: How British Journalists Covered the Pandemic*, edited by Mair (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13: 979-8643725824); *The Pandemic, Where Did We Go Wrong?* edited by Mair (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13: 979-8665858326); *BBC, A Winter of Discontent?* edited by Mair (published by Bite-Sized Books ISBN-13: 979-8694863117) and *The Pandemic, Where are We Still Going Wrong?* edited by Mair, (published by Bite-Sized Books ISBN-13: 979-8563726338).