



Jez Buffin is a principal lecturer at the University of Central Lancashire and a member of the Centre for Citizenship and Community

A wasted opportunity to achieve a greener, connected community?

Every year, about 600,000 people in the UK die.

The Covid-19 pandemic has seen a heavy focus on the number of 'excess deaths'. Excess deaths are calculated by subtracting the expected number of deaths in a given period (based on past mortality rates) from the total number actually recorded.

In the fourteenth week of 2020, which ended on Friday 3 April, the total number of deaths from all causes for that week were 16,387. That figure was 6,082 (or 59%) above the average for that week of the year. Week 15's total was 7,966 (76%) above average. In Week 16, it was 11,854 above, or 113%.

This concern with excess mortality has driven the most stringent of restrictions on all aspects of our lives, certainly in my lifetime, and since the second world war. But why have we been so concerned by this one cause of excess deaths, when we have, for years, so palpably ignored another?

Globally, climate change is already estimated to cause 150,000 excess deaths annually. There were nearly 400 additional deaths caused by heat stress and heatstroke during the Black Saturday fires in Victoria, Australia, in 2009 for example. The World Health Organisation estimates that global warming will cause an additional 250,000 deaths per year between 2030 and 2050. On top of this, air pollution is estimated to kill 600,000 children under 5, each year, mainly from pneumonia.

In the UK, Public Health England published a report in 2019 stating that air pollution is the biggest environmental threat in the UK, with between 28,000 and 36,000 deaths a year attributed to long terms exposure.

As the globe continues to warm, these figures are set to get worse.

The lockdown has been tough on us all. We have paid a huge economic, cultural and social price. So why do we now not capitalise on the gains? We have got out of our

cars. We have stopped taking cheap flights. We have stopped sitting in queues on motorways every morning, evening and bank holiday weekend. We have already taken a hit and we have already changed our behaviour. We have found a new localism and re-discovered the spirit of community.

Although I understand the governments political and economic imperative to get back to normal, it seems incredibly short-sighted to throw the baby out with bath water. The government has urged those of us who cannot work from home to go back to work if we can and if it is safe to do so, but it has also urged us to stay away from public transport and to get back in to our cars.

Surely now would be the ideal time to think about a new way of living; to take what positives we can from the pandemic and to try to reap some premium from the crisis. Now, while we are already in the midst of behaviour change, is the time to think about whether there are sustainable new ways of living and working. New ways of living and working that enable us simultaneously to maintain both social distancing and a carbon gain?

- Do we all need to work 9 – 5, five days a week?
- Do we all need to go in to the office?
- Can we organise public transport differently (frequent, free, 24 hours?). Think of the new jobs we could create
- Can we organise food production and distribution differently?

Yes, this would all cost money. But this crisis is already costing us money, and, unless we are able to find a vaccine soon, in all likelihood, is likely to cost us money again in the future. And if Covid-19 doesn't, some other virus will. And if that doesn't, then, eventually, climate change will. So the question is not whether we spend the money, but when we spend the money, how we spend the money, and whether we reap the potential rewards.