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The Independent Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE)

The Independent SAGE Report 45

Why social solidarity is still needed

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Submitted to The UK Government and the People of Great Britain
& Northern Ireland by Sir David King, former Chief Scientific Adviser,
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Why social solidarity is still needed

It's widely recognized that [social solidarity in the public has been essential in combating the pandemic](#). The high point of national togetherness was in the first two months of 'lockdown' and was a major [driver of adherence to the guidelines](#). In the year since then, inequalities have become more evident. While we face the same storm, we are on different boats -- particularly in relation to [class and ethnicity](#). Nevertheless, there has still been a crucial level of mutual respect, acknowledgement, and [care across the majority of the country](#) as we have faced the threat of the pandemic together. We were all expected to adopt the same mitigating behaviours -- wearing face coverings, physical distancing, washing our hands. We did this for others -- for our community, for our family, for those who were vulnerable -- often more than we did it for ourselves personally. Our common adherence was a visible sign of this solidarity -- a sign of respect and care for others. All this was a recognition too of the nature of the threat of infectious diseases: we are interdependent; I'm only safe when you are too.

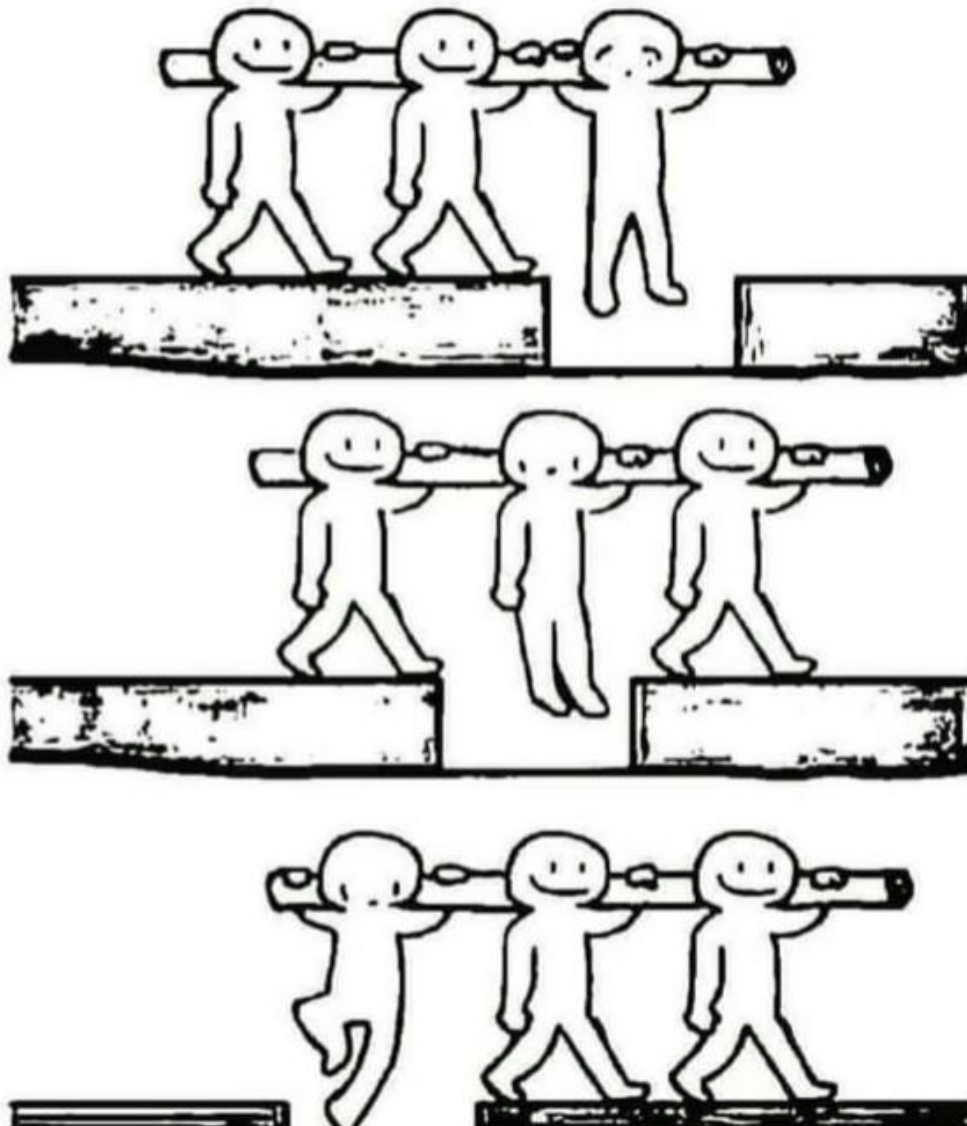
The [change in policy announced on 5th July 2021](#) that, instead of a universal approach in the form of official regulation, '*personal judgement will now be key*' risks sowing social divisions and undermining this crucial solidarity. Instead of something we are all expected to do as members of a community, it renders adoption of public health behaviours optional by each individual. Implicitly it suggests that personal interests and (presumed) personal risk should determine whether we adopt protective behaviours, rather than collective responsibility for collective safety.

After July 19th, there will be people who continue to wear face-coverings and try to observe physical distancing. They may see those who *do not* do so as selfish, uncaring, and disrespectful. At the same time, those who drop the behaviours may see those who continue to adopt them as over-anxious and joyless. Where these differences become seen as defining groups of people, not only will [it lead to interactional trouble \(criticism, argument\)](#), but it could also create further major division in society, in a similar way to Brexit, undermining the collective spirit shown to be essential in suppressing the pandemic. Another possible level of division that could be between frontline staff and members of the public, where shops and businesses require facemasks and some members of the public insist on their right

to refuse; or between those venues insisting that customers show [vaccine passports](#) and the sections of society (young, deprived, minoritized ethnic groups) that haven't been vaccinated.

The pandemic is not over. Many people are still suffering socially, psychologically, and financially. Anger is understandable that the sacrifices we have already made are being squandered. Seeing (non)mask-wearers as the problem might serve to distract from the government policies that have led to over 128K deaths and so much illness, privation and distress. But until the pandemic is over, we still need to protect the vulnerable from mortality and we need to protect everyone from serious illness and risks of long covid. Social solidarity is still needed.

If we unite nobody falls



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