

South London **opinion**

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THE SPIRIT OF SOUTH LONDON

OUR COMMENT

Let's all do the shake and vax

Smoking stopped being cool when we all realised how many non-smokers were dying as a result of the habit. Drink-driving was only ever a laughing matter to people who did not know a victim.

Drugs can trigger mental illness – and addicts often start stealing to feed their habit.

Hurling yourself off buildings would be a lot safer – with the added bonus that it would stop the risk to others in an instant.

But for some reason, large numbers of people seem to think it is perfectly sane to refuse the most-tested vaccine in history.

Members of the black, Asian and minority ethnic communities have been killed in far greater numbers than white people by Covid-19. They desperately need a safe, effective vaccine most of all.

What can be deterring people – especially in Croydon, where take-up is low and deaths are high?

There are some bonkers theories out there. Some celebs actually entertained the theory it was brought on by 5G masts. Others suggested it was “Frankenstein foods” – genetically modified crops; or that it causes infertility.

Another claim is that it is a figment – or should that be pigment – of the imagination.

That last deranged one is from an ex-Premier League star who believes the world is run by an elite breed of lizards. Unless the scales have fallen from his eyes.

President Trump thought it might be cured by light shone in the lungs. And 74 million people voted for him, so perhaps it's no surprise misinformation has taken hold over here.

Government blunders of the last year have increased distrust in the powers that be, which is understandable.

But thankfully, church and community leaders in South London are speaking out with clarity – and unanimously.

That is a relief to the rest of the population, who like to think they are sane. Relatively.

It's only once a decade but it's so important to fill in

Households across Lewisham will soon be asked to take part in Census 2021.

The census is a once-in-a-decade survey that gives us the most accurate estimate of all the people and households in England and Wales. It has been carried out every decade since 1801, with the exception of 1941.

It will be the first run predominantly online, with households receiving a letter in the next three weeks with a unique access code, allowing them to complete the questionnaire on their computers, phones or tablets.

Iain Bell, deputy national statistician at the Office for National Statistics, said. “A successful census will ensure everyone from local government to charities can put services and funding in the places where they are most needed.

“This could mean things like doctors’ surgeries, schools and new transport routes. That’s why it is so important everyone takes part and we have made it easier for people to do so online on any device, with help and paper questionnaires for those that need them.”

Census day is March 21, but households across the country will receive letters with online codes allowing them to take part from early March.

The census will include questions about your sex, age, work, health, education, household size and ethnicity. And, for the first time, there will be a question asking people whether they have served in the armed forces, as well as voluntary questions for those aged 16 and over on sexual orientation and gender identity.

Results will be available within 12 months, although personal records will be locked away for 100 years, kept safe for future generations.

For more information, visit [census.gov.uk](https://www.census.gov.uk).
Mike Howes, Census Engagement Manager, North Lewisham Office for National Statistics

National school meal deal should have started earlier

If the Government had launched a national voucher scheme prior to term starting then we would not have seen those shocking images of low quality food parcels being delivered to children that are simply not enough to keep families fed.

Over the two week Christmas holidays, the council provided £30 per child to families in receipt of benefit-related free school meals and a healthy breakfast on top of this. This was in addi-

tion to our holiday meals provision that took place across the borough.

When term started again schools, in our borough, had a number of different arrangements as each one could use their respective school meal caterers to provide food parcels or pursue a voucher option.

We are pleased that the Government has finally announced that schools can opt into the national voucher scheme from next Monday, so we can provide our schools and families with all the options available to them, but this should have been a choice for schools from the very beginning of term.

Information on the Government’s scheme: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance-for-schools>.

Cllr Matt Morrow, Greenwich cabinet member for children and young people

The wheels have already fallen off the Brexit bus

It is just a few weeks since the Brexit transition period ended and the wheels have already fallen off the Brexit bus.

Fishermen can’t export their oysters, live farm animal exports are at a standstill, companies are being advised by the Department of Trade and Industry to open offices in the EU to circumvent border issues.

Those who voted Remain were accused of inventing Project Fear; this pales into insignificance in comparison with Brexit Living Reality.

“We are where we are”, as they say. But there is a large group of people in the UK who may soon not officially be allowed to be ‘where they are’. I refer to the hundreds of thousands of EU citizens who made their home in the UK, who were told that their situation would not change post Brexit, but who now face being stripped of their right to be in the UK on July 1 if they have not applied for Settled Status.

The good news is that many of our EU friends have already received Settled Status. The bad news is that informing and encouraging all those who have not yet applied has been extremely difficult due to the pandemic, when surgeries and advice centres have been closed.

Citizens Advice Wandsworth has been working hard to alert local residents of the need and are hosting online sessions in a number of EU languages. We were proud to support a Polish language event in December.

We also have been liaising with the EU delegation in London who have prepared information

leaflets on Settled Status in all the EU languages to be distributed as appropriate. We ordered a number of leaflets to help this process and were hoping to receive them last month. Yesterday we received an update on this delivery, and I quote the reply from the delegation:

I can confirm your order was received and sent to our contractors for printing and distribution (based in Belgium and France). The order was due to reach you about this time last month however, because of Brexit, new customs checks have been put in place since the January 1 2021 and unfortunately this is causing some serious delays.

This is Brexit Living Reality. You couldn’t make it up.

Barbara Callender, Chairwoman European Movement Wandsworth & Merton

Childline’s keeping parents and children safe and appy

The online world has done wonders at keeping us together, entertained and informed recently. But while the benefits have been felt more widely, the dangers have also become apparent to more of us.

February 9th was the UK Safer Internet Centre’s Safer Internet Day, a point in the year when we all get a chance to stop and look at how we, and especially our children, spend time online.

At Childline, in many of the conversations we have with children, they mention some element of online connection.

This can vary hugely, and many of these conversations will involve the positive aspects of going online – finding support from friends or the Childline website, for instance.

But we also see a wide range of the negative side, from children seeing something online which confuses or upsets them, to online bullying, grooming and even sexual abuse.

Keeping up with your child’s activities online may seem daunting, but there are plenty of ways for parents to help protect children online.

One way is to set controls on the devices and apps children use. It’s always worth checking on what you can control on each app, and what features they have, before they’re downloaded.

Our Net-Aware site offers free advice on a lot of the most popular apps available. Here, you can find out about privacy settings and the risks each app can pose.

And the most important thing any parent can do is to talk to their children about what they’re doing online.

For more information, visit www.saferinternet.org.uk/
Edmond Chan, NSPCC Childline team manager



**Vicky Foxcroft,
MP for Lewisham Deptford**

in my view

February 6 had the dubious honour of marking the one-year anniversary of the first time a constituent contacted me about coronavirus. When I replied to that message, I had no idea that 12 months later we would still be dealing with a devastating global pandemic.

This lockdown seems to have been the hardest of them all and we have passed some very grim milestones in recent weeks. I therefore thought I should use this week’s column to try to spread some positivity among readers.

It has been fantastic to see the way the people of Lewisham have pulled together to support those who need it most.

Much of this has been organised via local

social media and volunteer services.

Many of these contributions have been recognised by this year’s Lewisham Mayor’s Award Scheme.

The scheme received almost 200 nominations for individuals, organisations and businesses who have gone above and beyond to support their community.

The mayor decided that all nominees should receive an award and has shared a selection of their stories at www.iamlewisham.uk/mayors-awards

Lots of my constituents were recognised, but I want to give a special mention to the Evelyn Community Store. The store opened almost two years ago and is run by Dawn Atkinson, Natasha Ricketts, Christine Norman and a team of other dedicated volunteers in conjunction with Lewisham Homes. It is open to anyone who lives in Lewisham and is in receipt of benefits or on a low-income.

Dawn, Natasha and Christine were appointed Mayoresses of Lewisham in July 2020 in recognition of their response to the pandemic and their work caught the attention of footballer Marcus Rashford, who visited in September to discuss child food poverty.

Another unexpected positive to come out of the last year is that I have started to discuss my own health more openly. I was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis in 2019 and am on medication which suppresses my immune system.

This means that I am on the ‘clinically extremely vulnerable’ (CEV) list and have been shielding.

Although this has been difficult, opening up about my condition has enabled me to connect with other CEV people. This has really helped me to understand the issues affecting their daily lives and to press the Government to make improvements. It has also enabled me to build up a great network as part of my work as Shadow Minister for Disabled People.

Three weeks ago I received my first vaccine, which was a huge milestone for me. I should point out this had nothing to do with being an MP; the medication I’m on for my arthritis puts me in priority group four. I would strongly encourage everyone to take up the offer of a vaccine when their time comes.

There is, of course, still a long way to go, but at the time of writing more than one million Londoners have received their first dose. That’s got to be a big positive.