

Back to school



After the High Court's ruling on unauthorised school absences, **Claire Fox** warns against the rising tide of 'ludicrous' local diktats affecting parents

Whatever you think about the High Court overthrowing the Isle of Wight Council's decision to fine and prosecute dad Jon Platt for taking his seven-year-old daughter on holidays to Disney World in term time, it throws up an interesting dilemma for local authorities.

What is the line between the state's responsibility for children versus their parents? Too often authorities assume they know best and over-reach into the private sphere, leading to some ludicrous situations.

Surely Karen Wilkinson of The Parents Union is right when she welcomed the High Court ruling because now local authorities will think more carefully before issuing fines, rather than the present practice of 'dishing them out willy-nilly'.

That parents have been fined for taking their children to visit dying relatives is an indication of a state system lacking compassion and with scant regard for family life. This culture seems to be driven by a lack of trust in parental decision-making. Too often officialdom deploys a worst-case scenario, misanthropic view of parents' ability to raise their own children.

The most egregious contemporary example is the Scottish Government's sinister Named Persons legislation. The SNP's scheme to assign every child a state guardian is due to come into force in August and means the NHS will appoint a health worker to act as a named person for every child under five, charged with looking after children's 'wellbeing' defined vaguely and open to a wide range of interpretations. Post five, the baton is passed to councils until the young reach 18.

Opposition to this draconian state contempt for parents that threatens to undermine parents' rights to raise their

children as they see fit is growing apace, led by the broad NO2NP coalition comprising everyone from The Christian Institute to the Family Education Trust. Unison Scotland reveals that more than half the health visitors it represents believe the scheme is not a 'good thing'.

Dr Stuart Waiton, senior lecturer in sociology at Abertay University points out the real problem is professionals who come into contact with children are being trained to be suspicious of parents: 'Rather than using their common sense, their professional judgment and their basic humanity to recognise problems, they are being educated to be risk averse, to think "safety", and danger, and to intervene in a family's life based on minor issues.'

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This assumption that 'the state, rather than parents and families, has the primary obligation to look after children' informs far too many council initiatives, no-more-so than local authorities' patronising public health campaigns which adopt a default presumption that parents are hopeless at parenting.

Liverpool City Council's recent headline-grabbing 'Is your child's sweet tooth harming their health?' campaign may be purportedly to 'name and shame' fizzy drinks manufacturers but implicitly names and shames any mum or dad who dares to

defy the nanny state fuss pots by buying their kids Coca-Cola or Lucozade.

Of course councils and LEAs should have sanction if parents wilfully deprive their offspring of education, but what is needed here is case-by-case discretion.

The Local Government Association's response to the High Court decision seems reasonable, concluding that 'parental requests should be given individual consideration and a common sense approach applied'.

So how disappointing that – rather than greeting the legal ruling as a chance to allow grown up teachers and parents to maturely resolve disputes informally – leader of Isle of Wight Council, Cllr Jonathan Bacon, is pressing the Department for Education to urgently create even more prescriptive legislation that would make every unauthorised absence illegal.

Cllr Baker may think he is stating the bleedin' obvious when he claims 'attendance and educational attainment are intertwined', but is it always so black and white?

If the only way councils and schools can assert their authority is by creating ever more ludicrous and stringent rules, then it is ultimately they – not parents – who jeopardise children's educational attainment. ■

Claire Fox is director of the Institute of Ideas. Her book I Find that Offensive! has been published by Biteback

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soapbox



By Ben Page

Another day, another decision about what to cut. To help make difficult choices, we have been working with a range of councils looking at residents' perspectives about what to prioritise. They are pretty clear – they put children's social care above everything else, followed by services for disabled people, and then vulnerable older people. The challenge of course is that this is what local government has been doing – and is starting to run out of road.

The other problem of course, is that the public don't appreciate how services interconnect. Many want to cut planning and building control further, if forced to choose between this and, say, refuse collection, for example. But given 88% of Britons say there is a housing crisis, cutting planning and building control isn't likely to help – unless we let developers do what they like, which local NIMBY groups will go berserk about.

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Nevertheless, asking people what their priorities are is always instructive. What are seen as fripperies – council magazines, high speed broadband and even street lighting in many areas – are all relatively popular choices for cuts, if forced to choose between these and services for the vulnerable. And there are areas where people are deeply divided – for example school transport is one area that will be prioritised for cuts in part because most people do not have school-age children.

Above all, we can still find very little willingness to contemplate rises in council tax – at least until people are made to sit down and go through the realities of councils' budgets. Instead more shared services, more outsourcing or transfer to charities or volunteers are seen as the answers. And of course – yet again, councils are doing it already. The fact that satisfaction with most services – except care of the elderly and road maintenance – are holding up, six years into austerity, suggests that the sector does listen – whatever the perennial stereotype of local government. ■

Ben Page is chief executive of Ipsos MORI