



London

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2020;370:m3015<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m3015>

Published: 29 July 2020

Covid-19: Social care was “thrown to the wolves” by government, say MPs

Adrian O’Dowd

The social care system was let down badly and dangerously neglected by the government during the covid-19 pandemic, MPs on an influential committee have concluded.

The sector was effectively “thrown to the wolves” when it needed support to fight the coronavirus, says a report by the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee.¹ The government’s “slow, inconsistent, and at times negligent approach” to social care in the covid-19 pandemic had exposed what the MPs described as the tragic result of years of inattention, funding cuts, and delayed reforms of social care.

In the highly critical report the committee’s MPs cited various examples of how the sector had not been treated well, such as the “appalling error” committed when 25 000 patients were discharged from hospitals into care homes earlier this year without ensuring that they were all firstly tested for covid-19.

While the NHS had been able to deal with the challenges of the pandemic at its peak in April thanks to the efforts of staff and volunteers as well as postponement of many elective procedures, adult social care had gone through a very different experience. Failure to protect staff by providing adequate personal protective equipment had weakened staff morale and confidence, while a lack of timely testing contributed to increased stress and absence, said the MPs.

“We are deeply concerned about the frontline workers and volunteers who have endured the strain and trauma of responding to covid-19 for many months,” says the report. “These same staff will be called upon in the event of a second peak and the NHS will need extra staff to deal with the backlog of treatment.”

During their inquiry the MPs said they had heard from witnesses how “frequently social care had taken second place to the NHS’s needs,” particularly in accessing test kits and results and securing reliable PPE supplies for care homes.

The report calls for a “second wave ready” plan for health and the economy and for the government to provide, by September, more detail on what capacity it believed would be needed, particularly for PPE and testing.

Meg Hillier, the committee’s chair and Labour MP for Hackney South and Shoreditch, said, “The failure to provide adequate PPE or testing to the millions of staff and volunteers who risked their lives to help us through the first peak of the crisis is a sad, low moment in our national response. Our care homes were effectively thrown to the wolves, and the virus has ravaged some of them.

“The deaths of people in care homes devastated many families. Putting all else aside, government must use the narrow window we have now to plan for a second wave.”

Layla McCay, director at the NHS Confederation, which represents organisations across the healthcare sector, said, “We need decisive action now to ensure social care services and staff have the support and resources they need.

“There is much in the report that the NHS will need to examine and learn from. But we think it is unfair to say NHS trusts systematically discharged patients who were known or suspected of having covid-19 into care homes.”

A spokesperson for the Department of Health and Social Care for England said, “Alongside an extra £1.3bn to support the hospital discharge process, we have provided 172 million items of PPE to the social care sector since the start of the pandemic and are testing all residents and staff, including repeat testing for staff and residents in care homes for over 65 or those with dementia.”

¹ House of Commons Public Accounts Committee. Readying the NHS and social care for the covid-19 peak. 29 Jul 2020. <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/127/public-accounts-committee/publications>.