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## Covid-19: Government's handling of pandemic had "big mistakes," MPs say

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The government's actions in dealing with the covid-19 pandemic have received a mixed review from MPs in a report that set out the successes and failures of the UK response.<sup>1</sup>

Although the joint report from the House of Commons' Science and Technology Committee and Health and Social Care Committee praised the UK's covid vaccination programme as highly effective, it also condemned serious errors, especially delayed lockdowns and how a test, trace, and isolate system was set up.

Overall, the MPs' inquiry found that some government initiatives were examples of global best practice but that others represented "serious mistakes." The report focused primarily on how England handled the pandemic.

The UK's pandemic planning was based too narrowly on a flu model that had failed to learn the lessons from the SARS, MERS, and Ebola epidemics, said the MPs, which meant that its covid planning was worse than in other countries.

The report praised ministers for correctly identifying that a vaccine would be the long term route out of the pandemic and for supporting the research and development of several vaccines, describing the UK's vaccination programme as "one of the most effective initiatives in the history of UK science and public administration."

However, delays in establishing an adequate test, trace, and isolate system hampered efforts to contain the outbreak, said the MPs, and the government's initial decision to delay a comprehensive lockdown had revealed its then "fatalistic" assumption that it was impossible to suppress the virus, which amounted, in practice, to accepting that herd immunity by infection was inevitable.

The report said that many thousands of deaths could have been avoided if the government had not let hospitals discharge people into care homes in the initial phase of the pandemic and that this showed the "longstanding failure" to give social care sufficient priority and the same attention as the NHS.

Jeremy Hunt, chair of the health committee and Conservative MP for South West Surrey, and Greg Clark, chair of the science and technology committee and Conservative MP for Tunbridge Wells, said, "The UK response has combined some big achievements with some big mistakes.

"It is vital to learn from both to ensure that we perform as best as we possibly can during the remainder of the pandemic and in the future."

The BMA's chair of council, Chaand Nagpaul, said, "The report gives well deserved praise to the development and deployment of one of the most successful vaccine programmes in history, which was delivered largely by the hard work and dedication of doctors and healthcare staff.

"Lives were lost due to the government's delay in bringing in the initial lockdown, ignoring scientific advice at crucial junctures, and the institutional failures of NHS Test and Trace. The way in which the government abandoned social care, the inadequate provision and supply of PPE [personal protective equipment], and the lack of proper health risk assessment, especially for black, Asian, and ethnic minority staff, forced health and care staff to put their lives at risk to protect their patients."

Robert West, professor of health psychology at University College London, said, "There is no escaping the damning conclusion that it [government] failed to take crucial public health advice on key decisions relating to test and trace and timing of restrictions and that led many thousands of British citizens to perish."

The report came after the release last week of the report from exercise Alice on coronavirus planning,<sup>2,3</sup> which showed that the government had been warned in 2016 that it needed to stockpile PPE, screen overseas travellers, and set up a contact tracing system in the event of a large outbreak of a coronavirus.

Moosa Qureshi, an NHS consultant haematologist who obtained the report under the Freedom of Information Act, told *The BMJ*, "I have definite concerns regarding a conflict of interest of the chair of the [health and social care] committee, not only with regard to exercise Alice but over 10 pandemic exercises which were conducted under his watch.

"Jeremy Hunt should have been answering questions on our pandemic preparedness, not asking them."

A government spokesperson said, "Thanks to a collective national effort, we avoided NHS services becoming overwhelmed, and our phenomenal vaccination programme has built a wall of defence, with over 24.3 million infections prevented and more than 130 000 lives saved so far. We are committed to learning lessons from the pandemic and have committed to holding a full public inquiry in spring."

1 House of Commons Science and Technology Committee and the Health and Social Care Committee Joint Report: Coronavirus: lessons learned to date. October 2021. <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/81/health-and-social-care-committee/news/157991/coronavirus-lessons-learned-to-date-report-published>.

- 2 Public Health England. Report: Exercise Alice Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS-CoV). 2016. <https://cygnusreports.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Report-Exercise-Alice-Middle-East-Respiratory-Syndrome-15-Feb-2016.pdf>.
- 3 Iacobucci G. UK was advised to stockpile PPE and screen travellers in 2016 after coronavirus modelling. *BMJ* 2021;375:n2475.

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