

Thirteenth Report of Session 2021-22

Cabinet Office, HM Treasury and Department of Health and Social Care

Initial lessons from the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic

Introduction from the Committee

The scale and nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and the government's response are unprecedented in recent history. By the end of March 2021, the estimated lifetime cost of measures announced as part of the government's response was £372 billion. By 10 June 2021, we had held 20 evidence sessions on various aspects of the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These have included the employment support schemes, the Bounce Back Loan Scheme, NHS Test and Trace, supporting the vulnerable during lockdown, and government procurement and the supply of personal protective equipment.

This report sets out our views on what government can learn from its response to the pandemic and what it should do to ensure that those lessons are applied and improve both its ability to respond to emergencies and its business-as-usual service delivery. This report is the first in a body of evidence that we are developing and which will inform the future independent public inquiry into the government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. The public inquiry is expected to start in spring 2022 and may take some years to complete. We are clear that government cannot wait for the review before learning important lessons.

Based on a report by the National Audit Office, the Committee took evidence on Thursday 10 June from the Cabinet Office, Department of Health and Social Care and HM Treasury. The Committee published its report on 25 July 2021. This is the government's response to the Committee's report.

Relevant reports

- NAO report: [Initial learning from the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic](#) – Session 2021-22 (HC 66)
- PAC report: [Initial lessons from the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic](#) – Session 2021-22 (HC 175)

Government response to the Committee

1: PAC conclusion: We remain seriously concerned by the extent of PPE supply that is not fit for purpose.

1: PAC recommendation: The Department should update us with the following data on a quarterly basis:

- **the number and cost of PPE items which, during the quarter: have been received; have been cancelled, with all relevant prepayments recovered; have been (received and) quality assured; have been distributed; have failed the initial quality assurance and are not fit for use in medical settings (i.e. 'not fit for intended purpose'); have failed the initial quality assurance and are not fit for any purpose ('exit stock');**
- **the percentage of the total items of PPE ordered in the last complete quarter which were manufactured in the UK;**
- **the number and cost of items of PPE currently held in central/pandemic stocks;**
- **whether there are any types of PPE for which the central stocks do not contain at least 4-months' supply under the Department's current planning assumptions (if yes, describe); and**
- **the weekly cost of storage of the central stocks of PPE (or, if preferred, the total running cost to date of PPE storage).**

1.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Target implementation date: August 2022

1.2 The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) takes its responsibilities around providing value for money seriously. In this unique situation, the department's focus was on securing a strong and continuous supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to the frontline. Given the dynamic market, DHSC had to place orders with some degree of risk as it was not possible to determine the quality and reliability until products had been received in the UK. As a result, some of the PPE that was supplied in the early months of the pandemic had not met the exacting standards in place to protect frontline health and social care workers.

1.3 DHSC now has a very strong supply of PPE; this includes robust safety stockpiles and contracts with over thirty UK PPE manufacturers. DHSC is working to minimise the costs associated with storage and [wrote to the Committee on 09 June 2021](#) outlining the progress made. Work remains underway to minimise these further.

1.4 The Department is considering its approach to procurement activity through the work to implement the recommendation from the [Boardman Review](#).

1.5 In the letter sent to the Committee on [22 June 2021](#), DHSC committed to providing quarterly data on the amount of such stock that has been classified as 'Do Not Supply'. The additional information requested by the Committee will be provided in parallel and the first return will be sent to the Committee directly in November.

2: PAC conclusion: Government's ability to make well-informed decisions and address issues as they arise during the pandemic has been hampered by slow progress in addressing longstanding issues with data and legacy IT.

2a: PAC recommendation: HM Treasury and the Cabinet Office should write to us by 31 October 2021 setting out how they plan to reflect the need to address data and IT issues when prioritising bids for the next spending review.

2.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Recommendation implemented

2.2 During this Spending Review, experts within the Central Digital and Data Office (part of the Cabinet Office) have worked with HM Treasury on a Digital, Data and Technology (DDaT) bid assurance process. As part of this process, the Cabinet Office provided expert advice to HM Treasury on departmental bids with significant DDaT elements. Advice encompassed factors such as alignment to strategic priorities across the DDaT function as well as the feasibility of the bids.

2.3 This advice was provided in accordance with a standardised and agreed assessment framework shaped around critical digital and data priorities and took into consideration requirements around topics such as legacy IT, cyber security and automation. This specialist advice has helped to ensure critical priorities are funded.

2.4 This advice went into the Spending Round outcomes which made substantial provision for Digital Data & Technology, as set out in the Chancellor's statement on 27 October and accompanying documentation, and with the additional detail being provided to the Treasury Select Committee this week. HMT departmental settlement conditions will reinforce priorities, and departmental performance will continue to be monitored through CDDO's Quarterly Business Reviews.

2b: PAC recommendation: The Cabinet Office should also provide us with a list of its ongoing projects aimed at improving the quality and interoperability of the data available to government by 31 October 2021, detailing goals, target dates and progress for each project.

2.5 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Recommendation implemented

2.6 The Data Standards Authority (DSA) is a part of the Central Digital & Data Office (CDDO), and is responsible for cross-government work to improve the quality and interoperability of data across government. The DSA is currently driving four key initiatives to achieve this:

- **Setting common data standards:** Metadata standards were published in August 2020. The DSA is now working on data-enabled programmes across government, on potential common standards such as Beneficial Ownership, a single Legal Entity Identifier and Digital Identity work.
- **Application Programming Interfaces (APIs):** initial milestones to establish an API catalogue and community of expert practitioners have been achieved. The DSA has recently expanded the API catalogue to include 230 APIs from 27 departments and is developing an API assessment process.
- **Data Sharing Governance:** implementing a shared framework to centralise and standardise data sharing documentation, create a shared understanding of resource implications and agree a shared language of terms for creating agreements.
- **Adoption of data standards:** The first iteration of changes to Point 10 of the Technology Code of Practice (TCoP) were made in December 2020 and further changes are planned as well as potential updates to the Service Standards.

There are also a number of other key projects being implemented across the wider Cabinet Office; a full list has been sent to the Committee by letter.

3: PAC conclusion: Government risks undermining public trust and accountability for the pandemic response because of departments' repeated failure to provide a full rationale for key decisions.

3: PAC recommendation: The Department should update us by 31 October 2021 on the number of contracts awarded during the pandemic that are yet to be published.

- **In the longer term the Cabinet Office should ensure that lead departments for each of the main pandemic response programmes publish post-project evaluations in a timely manner. These should provide an evidence-based assessment of each project's impact and the extent to which it met its objectives**

3.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Target implementation date: November 2021

3.2 DHSC will write to the Committee, as directed, on the number of contracts awarded during the COVID-19 pandemic that are yet to be published.

3.3 The Cabinet Office will write to departmental SROs who lead on each of the main pandemic response programmes, setting out the expectation that each department should publish post-project evaluations within a reasonable timeframe after each project's conclusion and they should include an assessment of the extent to which the projects have met their objectives. Cabinet Office will request updates from lead departments on when they expect to be in a position to finalise the post-project evaluations.

4: PAC conclusion: A lack of clarity, timeliness and the volume of government communications has, at times, hindered the public's understanding of guidelines and ability to comply with them.

4: PAC recommendation: The Cabinet Office should write to us by 31 October 2021, setting out what lessons it has learnt regarding communicating with the public and stakeholders and what guidelines or procedures it has implemented to minimise issues concerning the volume, clarity and timeliness of communications

4.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Target implementation date: October 2021

4.2 The Cabinet Office wrote to the committee on 29th October 2021.

4.3 Communications has been a critical lever for the government to deploy during this crisis. Government Communication Service professionals have used best practice from across the industry, public, private and third sectors to deliver COVID-19 Communications.

4.4 During the pandemic, evolving scientific understanding of the virus and the unpredictable nature of the spread and its impact has required agile policy and communications (fast, flexible and proportionate to risk level).

4.5 Key lessons learnt include:

- Communications are significantly more effective on behaviour compliance when mutually supported by policy advice and regulation. Collaboration across policy and communications is essential, with a strong strategic communications and centralised

insight programme delivering regular reporting. This avoids duplication, provides a single source of the truth, and valuable insight for policy making and stakeholder engagement.

- Volume, clarity and timeliness of communications are essential considerations in any communication programme. Standard effectiveness procedures and majority of lessons learnt from pre-pandemic times are equally applicable. Clear, simple and actionable messaging backed with evidence aids public understanding and should be communicated across channels, including accessible formats.
- Communicating through partners provides credibility, authenticity and relevance to audiences. This includes partnering with stakeholders and charities locally, regionally and nationally. They also provide insightful two-way dialogue with key stakeholders around the country.
- Paid-for media can give an issue prominence and prime audiences en-mass or in a more targeted way. Creativity is crucial in achieving cut-through, particularly when there is audience fatigue. This includes using appropriate messengers as well as media planning to specific reach and frequency levels.

5: PAC conclusion: Government has yet to improve its approach to managing risk or set out which trade-offs it intends to make in future emergencies.

5: PAC recommendation: The Cabinet Office should, by 31 October 2021, write to us detailing how, and when, it will implement the Boardman review's recommendation to establish a risk management profession and training programme and provide us with a quarterly progress update until this has been fully implemented.

5.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Recommendation implemented

5.2 The Civil Service Chief Operating Officer and the Director General, Public Spending, HM Treasury wrote to the Committee on [23 June 2021](#). Developments will be progressed by the Government Finance Function, working with Civil Service Human Resources, over the next 12-18 months.

6: PAC conclusion: Government needs to do more to support the health and social care workforce, who have been under constant pressure during the pandemic, to ensure its resilience going forward.

6: PAC recommendation: The Department should write to us by 31 October 2021 setting out what it is doing to provide mental health and emotional support to NHS staff, what metrics it is using to track the effectiveness of the measures adopted, and how it is performing against those metrics. It should also write to us by 31 December 2021 to provide an update on the substantive long-term NHS workforce plan to ensure the resilience of the health and social care workforce.

6.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Target implementation date: December 2021

6.2 The government recognises that pressures on the workforce throughout the pandemic have been extremely high and is committed to providing the workforce with the support it needs now and in the longer term to ensure its resilience.

6.3 At an early stage of the pandemic, the government prioritised the need for enhanced mental health and wellbeing support. NHS England and NHS Improvement (NHSEI) has invested £43 million in mental health hubs in 2021-22, building on the £15 million which was invested to establish these last year. The hubs provide outreach and assessments services to ensure staff receive rapid access to evidenced based mental health services. The 40-system wide mental health hubs are being rolled out nationally, operating at ICS level, meaning any health and care staff within the ICS area can access the hub for support.

6.4 DHSC has recently commissioned Health Education England (HEE) to undertake '[Framework 15](#)'. This will set out the strategic drivers of future workforce demand and supply including, but not limited to, demographics, science, the nature of work and public expectations.

6.5 While previous iterations of Framework 15 have focused on healthcare, this version will also include registered professionals working in social care, such as nurses and occupational therapists. This reflects the interlinked nature of health and social care as well as the introduction of integrated care systems.

6.6 HEE will lead the work working closely with DHSC, NHSEI and Skills for Care. They will engage widely over autumn and winter 2021 bringing in views from staff, patients / service users, carers and their representatives with a final publication planned for Spring 2022.

6.7 DHSC will write to the Committee as directed in the recommendation.