Supplementary written evidence submitted by Professor Paul Rogers

Early Warning of the COVID-19 Pandemic from the European Union

Introduction

Written evidence submitted in February, Early warning of biosecurity incidents – the COVID-19 experience (NSM0006), analysed the early response to the developing pandemic in the period from November 2019 to February 2020. It explored the contrast between a government view that the UK had “world-leading capabilities to address significant biological risks” and that “the UK has in place a comprehensive and well-tested system for rapidly detecting and identifying disease outbreaks”, and the very slow rate of response to emerging news of the COVID-19 outbreak in China. In particular, it was concerned with the response in early January when territories neighbouring China were already taking stringent public health measures to prevent entry of infected visitors.

In the UK the first meeting of the COBRA emergency committee was not until 27 January without the Prime Minister being present. On 3 February Mr Johnson delivered his major policy speech in Greenwich and warned of “bizarre autarkic rhetoric when barriers are going up, and when there is a risk that new diseases such as coronavirus will trigger a panic and a desire for market segregation that go beyond what is medically rational to the point of doing real and unnecessary economic damage…” This served to confirm the government view at that time that the economy was the priority, not the pandemic.

This supplementary note provides further information on the early experience of the pandemic relating to its being reported to the EU Commission by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC). This was before the UK had left the EU and would have been in receipt of the warnings of risk.

EU Early Warning of Pandemic

The ECDC is an agency of the European Union established in 2004 in Solna, Sweden, following the global experience of the 2003 SARS outbreak and concern over the need for the EU to be more prepared for future disease outbreaks. Its annual budget (2020) is €57 million and it is tasked principally with improving EU protection against infectious diseases. Membership comprises all EU states together with some additional members of the network, Norway, Liechtenstein and Iceland.

On 1 April 2020 the following questions concerning COVID warnings were put to the commission from the European Parliament:

“On 31 December 2019, China notified the WHO of several cases of an atypical pneumonia in Wuhan of unknown origin. The new virus causing this new disease was identified on 7 January 2020 and the first cases outside of China were reported on 7 January in Thailand and on 16 January in Japan.

Wuhan was only effectively quarantined on 23 January and, given the globalised world in which we live, the possibility that the virus was inadvertently spreading around the world before then was a very real one.
The Commission has an Early Warning and Response System (EWRS) specifically created to monitor such situations, alert Member States and issue recommendations. Member States were not prepared for this situation, did not have adequate sanitary measures in place and had not provided themselves with the necessary protective equipment and medicines. In view of the above, will the Commission say:

1. Did the EWRS alert Member States to the severity and risks of the epidemic?
2. What criteria did it use to determine the risk of an epidemic?
3. What measures are being taken to prevent such a situation from recurring in the future?"

Ms Kyriakides of the European Commission replied on 24 July 2020vi

“The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) informed the Commission on 7 January 2020 that 27 cases of pneumonia of unknown aetiology, including seven severe cases, were reported in Wuhan, China, with a common exposure to a seafood market. Authorities placed all cases under isolation, but did not yet identify a causative pathogen for the viral pneumonia. At that time, no human-to-human transmission or deaths were documented. On 9 January 2020, based on a threat assessment from ECDC, the Commission posted the first notification on the pneumonia on the Early Warning and Response System (EWRS).

The decision to post a notification is based on criteria defined in the decision 1082/2013 on serious cross-border health threats(1) and involves expert assessment regarding the potential for a cross-border health threat, which is what ECDC provided in its first threat assessment on 9 January 2020. The first rapid risk assessment on COVID-19 was published on 17 January 2020 and shared with the Member States through EWRS.

The Health Security Committee (HSC) was established as a formal mechanism for rapid information exchange, consultation and coordination of preparedness and response to health threats across Member States, including control measures and communication messages. Its first meeting on COVID-19 was held on 17 January 2020. As more information was gathered about this virus, ECDC updated its risk assessment.

A significant number of health related but also socio economic measures(2) have been taken to minimise the spread of the virus and its impact on the European societies. Improving Europe’s preparedness and response to pandemics will be informed by a comprehensive lessons learnt exercise once the threat of the pandemic has waned.


Thus, the Commission was notified on 7 January and posted the first notification two days later, subsequently providing a rapid risk assessment through the EU’s Early Warning and Response System on 17 January, with the EU’s Health Security Committee meeting the same day. This indicates that at that time the EU was some way ahead of the UK on the COVID issue. It raises the question of whether the UK, then still in the EU, was following these
developments and acting on them, given that the first Cobra meeting was still ten days away and the Prime Minister’s Greenwich speech even more distant.

**Conclusion**

In determining the reasons for the UK’s slow response to the pandemic, this additional information warrants further questions:

1. How was the EU notification received on 9 January?
2. How was it acted on?
3. Why was the first COVID-related COBRA meeting not held until ten days after the EU issued its first rapid risk assessment?

The context of this was the government’s claim to world-leadership in pandemic preparedness. This claim now appears to be unwarranted, a crucial issue if the UK is to prepare more effectively for future pandemics.

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i “Early warning of biosecurity incidents – the COVID-19 experience” NSM0006


vi Ibid. I am grateful to Dr Andrew Glencross of the Department of Politics and International Relations and Senior Fellow of the Foreign Policy Research Institute at Aston University for drawing my attention to this information.