

Sasha Hammond

Secondary school pupil

Essay title 1

Discuss the role of Public Health England in the COVID-19 pandemic.

PHE, the organization responsible for preparing and responding to a pandemic, has taken much of the blame for England's poor handling of the COVID-19 crisis. The majority of the criticisms lie in the failure of PHE to efficiently carry out diagnostic testing and the track and trace system, which was hindered by a lack of staff. PHE has also been held accountable for the shortages of protective equipment, high deaths in care homes, and the questionable advice given to the government and public. Though those allegations may be true, PHE is an executive agency, sponsored by the Department of Health and Social care. This means that it is accountable to and under the oversight of its sponsor department and minister Matt Hancock. Therefore, it can't be portrayed as an independent body and so can't be entirely responsible for all the failures of the COVID-19 response.

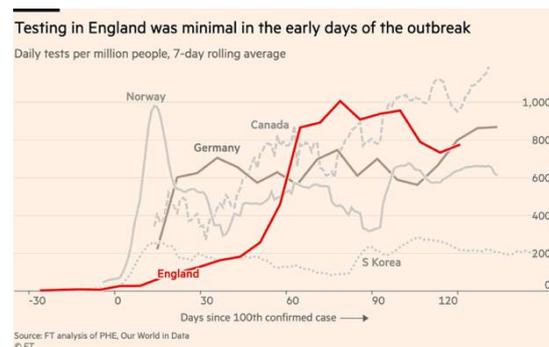
Changed in guidelines set by PHE

From the start, PHE didn't give the public clear guidelines to follow about face masks. They initially went with the advice from WHO which claimed that wearing masks did not provide protection, then later changed the guidelines making face coverings compulsory on public transport. However, this change only came about in June, and was hardly enforced. Many people frequently travelled without face masks, and yet drivers made no comment on it. The leniency of tests in airports is also largely the fault of PHE. To begin with PHE rejected airport temperature checks because they stated that less than 50% of confirmed cases would have been detected, however this decision was criticised since the measures should not have been rejected simply because they did not create a full solution on their own. The government was also following PHE guidelines when it changed border procedures to no longer make routine testing a requirement (1).

Who was responsible for the initial minimal testing?

Another initial flaw in the response implemented by PHE was that early on in the outbreak very few people were getting tested, which allowed people to unknowingly spread the virus. Because the government had decided to operate with a centralised system, only one PHE lab was initially used to process the tests when university and other non-PHE labs should have also been involved (2). This was not the failure of the PHE as it was the government's responsibility to enrol other laboratories. The other problem was the shortage of qualified staff to carry out the

tests, which suggests that the UK educational system was at fault for not training enough of these specialists.



Comparing centralised approach to local response

For the track and trace system to be carried out effectively, responsibility should have been given to local administrations, such as the approach taken by Germany in which the government provided resources to local authorities to carry out the tests, as well as extra funds to hire medical students to help. The German local authorities also reallocated resources from functions that could no longer run during lockdown, such as libraries (3). However, Matt Hancock opted for a more centralised system, which didn't make use of the directors of public health and the 5000 staff they commanded to assist the understaffed PHE that had only 290 contact tracers (4).

Limitations of the NHS COVID-19 app

The failures of the contact tracing app have also been blamed on the desire for a centralised system, which led to the government developing the NHS app rather than making use of the already existing app that was based on Google and Apple's protocols. Not only did the app take months to develop and cost the resources of the NHS and private companies, people with older generations phones were unable to download the app. However, the main limitations of the app lay in the reluctance of the population to use it. Elderly people, who are most at risk, are also least confident with technology so would be less likely to download the app or understand how to use it. Even those who could have downloaded the app may have chosen not to as they believed that it was a breach of privacy. The app was not enforced, so aside from encouraging people to download it, the government could not have expanded its usage.

Lack of resources to blame for high number of deaths in care homes

The excessive deaths in care homes also cannot be blamed on PHE. As the NHS worked to free up hospital beds for patients requiring intensive care, care homes had to receive those who had been discharged from hospital, but were still ill with COVID-19 and posed an infection risk to staff and other residents. These people required strict isolation, which placed an additional burden on homes that were already struggling with a shortage of staff and space. Even before COVID-19, the sector could not cope with the needs of an ageing population, and underfunding left care homes with a lack of staff and personal protective equipment (5).

Role of PHE in sequencing for new variants

Credit should also be given to PHE as England is one of the few countries that regularly sequences COVID-19 for mutations, with PHE working on interpreting the significance of these mutations for human health. This will become important for evaluating whether vaccines being deployed will still be effective against mutated viruses. Due to the proactive monitoring from PHE, the rapidly spreading variant in the South East of England was quickly identified, which is currently subject to investigations coordinated by the agency (6).

Responsibilities overburden PHE budget

PHE was also faced with many responsibilities beyond responding to the pandemic, as it had been handed a leading role in tackling issues such as obesity, smoking and alcohol. Alongside placing the agency accountable for too many tasks, the government has also reduced its budget by 40% since its

inception (4). This has left the fewer staff who remained after the cuts overwhelmed, weakening the ability of PHE to respond to the crisis.

Conclusion

For these reasons, the failures in Britain's handling of the pandemic cannot solely be blamed on PHE. Although they had a part to play, the current dire situation is also the result of slow political decision making and the highly centralised nature of the response, which can ultimately be blamed on the decisions made by government. We must also take into account that this is Britain's first experience dealing with this type of crisis, and many of the countries with the best response, such as China and Korea, have a memory of managing the SARS outbreaks (2). It is understandable that the government and PHE made some blunders, as they were unsure how the public would react and which measures would be most effective. However, the government should have followed the lead of the countries which knew how to better control the spread of the virus. Despite the fact that some had opposing political systems and different cultures to Britain, this should not have prevented the government and PHE from taking advantage of their experience for the benefit of the population.

References:

1. FT reports. 2020, April 16. Britain's open borders make it a global outlier in coronavirus fight. Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/91dea18f-ad0e-4dcb-98c3-de836b1ba79b>
2. Clark, P. Cookson, C. Hughes, L. 2020, March 27. How the U.K. got coronavirus testing wrong. Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/fa747fbd-c19e-4bac-9c37-d46afc9393fb>
3. The Economist group limited. 2020, July 18. How centralisation impeded Britain's Covid-19 response. The Economist. <https://www.economist.com/britain/2020/07/18/how-centralisation-impeded-britains-covid-19-response>
4. Neville, S. 2020, July 22. Covid-19 unmasks weakness of English public health agency. Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/e149101a-1c93-4b0a-bc12-14ca8bf11b0e>
5. Oliver, D. 2020, June 18. Let's be honest about Covid-19 deaths in care homes. BMJ. <https://www.bmj.com/content/369/bmj.m2334>
6. Public Health England. 2020, December 14. PHE investigating a novel variant of Covid-19. Gov.uk. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/phe-investigating-a-novel-variant-of-covid-19>