

Key failings in government's approach to COVID-19 preparations and emergency response

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The UK government made key failings in their strategic preparations and emergency response to coronavirus and this, in turn, undermined the

NHS's ability to cope with the crisis.

These are the findings recently published in a [research paper](#) for the *Journal of Risk Research* by academics from Cass Business School, Glasgow Caledonian University, Vlerick Business School, and Nottingham University Business School.

The researchers conducted an extensive review of the literature focusing on key organisational resilience research, allowing them to identify the 'good, the bad and the ugly' of preparedness in readiness and response to the current pandemic.

The academics found that the NHS's resilience to the pandemic was compromised by an over-reliance on 'lean production' and 'just in time' continuity planning. This left NHS stockpiles short of vital supplies and capacity for personal protective equipment (PPE), ventilators and testing.

They argue that 'strategic redundancy' and 'slack in the system' could have left the NHS much better prepared to avoid the late 'ramping up' of capacity by government health officials in the face of the immense stresses and demands placed on global supply chains by a pandemic.

However, the researchers suggest this flawed strategy was not simply due to a lack of foresight. Instead they suggest that the UK government failed adequately to take account of known threats and clear signals of systemic weaknesses in the event of a pandemic uncovered by emergency exercises such as Operation Cygnus, the three-day simulation in 2016 which focused on the response and planning to a flu pandemic involving government and public health bodies.

The researchers suggest that, as the UK undergoes a period of adjustment in response to Covid-19, a new independent body should be

set up to take responsibility for future national emergency preparedness free from political interference.

Lead researcher Dr. Cormac Bryce, Cass Business School, said the paper has implications for future inquiries into the UK government's handling of the pandemic. He said it also highlights the need for new institutional arrangements to strengthen independence and transparency at the science-policy interface between expert advice, government decision-making, and provision for future pandemic threats.

"Benjamin Franklin suggested that by failing to prepare we should prepare to fail. We are witnessing the tragic consequences of such governmental failures—an overreliance on 'just in time' delivery amongst other factors has led to inadequate stockpiling of PPE and ventilators. Even though the warnings to prepare were there for those willing to look and act for years," he said.

"This inability to develop resilience in the face of Covid-19 has hampered the adaptation to the [pandemic](#) due to the slow upscaling of testing for key workers and the vulnerable in care homes—those most at risk."

More information: C. Bryce et al, Resilience in the face of uncertainty: early lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, *Journal of Risk Research* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/13669877.2020.1756379](https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2020.1756379)

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