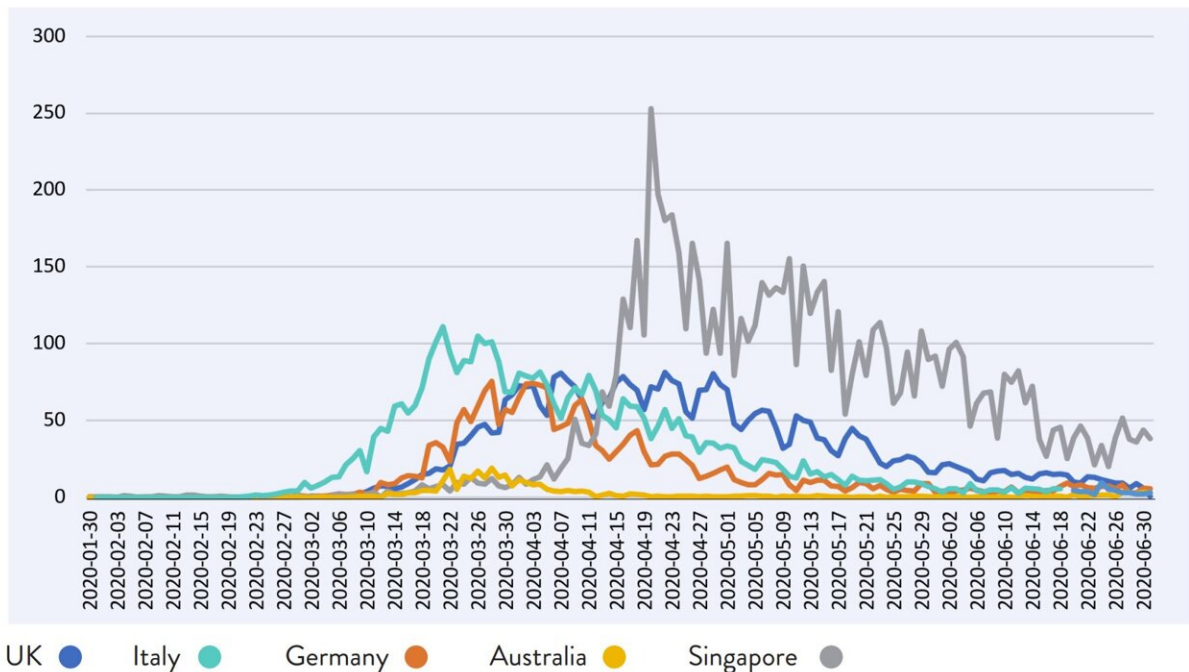# UK report: Lessons on crisis preparation learned from COVID-19

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Daily new COVID-19 cases per million people, 30 Jan–30 June 2020. Credit: *Crisis preparation in the age of long emergencies: What COVID-19 teaches us* (2023)

A new Blavatnik School report examines how the UK's crisis systems fared in the first half of 2020.

The early months of COVID-19 tested the UK's highly-regarded crisis

management capabilities to their limit, and there are things that should be done now to prepare better for the next emergency, according to a report from the Blavatnik School of Government.

The UK's crisis management system was designed for, and practiced at, managing much shorter, more localized emergencies. This partly explains some of the key findings of the report: there was no preparation for [large-scale testing](link); no detailed planning for the economic consequences of a medical catastrophe; and no detailed plans in place for the possibility of school closures.

The report examines what this tells us about the broader system for managing crises, and looks in detail at what worked well or less well once the crisis was underway, drawing lessons for the future. It examines the UK alongside four other countries—Italy, Germany, Singapore and Australia—and gives 10 recommendations specific to the UK, and 10 lessons for any government.

"Crisis preparation in the age of long emergencies: What COVID-19 teaches us" is a 180-page report by Ciaran Martin, Hester Kan and Maximillian Fink, with the aim of contributing to countries' preparations for the next, undoubtedly different, crisis.

It asks: when a sustained, all-encompassing emergency happens again in the UK, whatever its cause, what capabilities would we want to see in place to enable the country to handle the crisis as effectively as possible? It aims to answer the question by looking at the first six months of the pandemic, not just in the UK but in four comparator countries—Singapore, Australia, Germany and Italy.

The report authors argue that as 'long emergencies' like COVID-19 become more common, a priority for the UK and other governments should be to update their crisis systems and preparation.

Lead author Ciaran Martin, Professor of Practice in the Management of Public Organisations at the Blavatnik School of Government, says, "The aim of our report is not to question the decisions of those in office at the time, but to look at how the mechanisms we need to respond to the next crisis can be improved."

"Those who had to deal with the pandemic, wherever they were in the world, were very heavily dependent on what they'd been bequeathed, particularly in the early period. If we want to be properly prepared for future crises we need to learn the lessons of the early months of COVID-19."

"Climate change, conflict and other factors will make cross-cutting, prolonged, population-wide crises more common—whether it's pandemics, environmental disruptions, or national security crises. So we need to look at our crisis systems now."

Ciaran Martin points to three key areas for improvement: coordination, capacity and capability.

"We must look to improve to improve the coordination of crisis management across the different layers of government, particularly across the different parts of the United Kingdom," he says. "There was a lot of confusion early on about what was done at devolved level and what was not, for example."

"We must also look at capacity: local services especially bore a weight of responsibility during COVID-19 that they weren't resourced to bear."

"Finally, there are major issues of capability. In a crisis, the state needs to mobilize huge amounts of things and people fast. The pandemic showed the government needs different skills to be able to rapidly procure the things and abilities that are essential to the response. That

requires different skills in the civil service, and the involvement of all parts of government—especially the economic and social policy departments—in crisis planning."

Key findings of the report include:

- Despite the UK's high scores for pandemic preparedness and crisis response, the central crisis management systems had to be set aside and replaced early on in the pandemic. Economic and social policy responses—like managing school closures—had not been developed in advance, and much of the planning did not account for the measures people would take (or wish to be taken) to avoid getting sick. In effect, planning for managing large numbers of deaths had been done; planning for the population's response had not.
- The British state struggled to mobilize capability to the scale required in the early stages of the crisis. Existing structures were set aside in the procurement of personal protective equipment, testing and tracing, and vaccine procurement. Vaccines were a notable success, and eventually, testing also came good, with the UK ending the pandemic as one of the easiest and cheapest places in the world to get an effective COVID-19 test—but this was after a slow and painful start. These innovations required setting aside some existing procedures and bringing in commercial, procurement and other skills that were not in existence in the civil service.
- Since the reform of the UK's crisis management systems two decades ago, local capabilities have been at the heart of crisis plans. But the hollowing-out of local capacity left local government struggling to deliver what was theoretically required of it.
- This was the first major sustained national crisis in the era of devolution. The breakdown of the initial united 'four nations'

approach of early March—with all the different parts of the UK going their separate ways by 11 May—indicated a lack of understanding of how arrangements were supposed to work in practice and effective mechanisms for coordinating them. For example, the First Minister of Wales expressed surprise in public that his administration was able to set different rules for international travel.

- Singapore benefited from the high priority and attention it gives to crisis preparation; Germany for effective coordination between the federal and state levels (and from competitive innovation between states); and Australia from very early decision-making that correctly assumed COVID-19 would be a major crisis.

More information: Report: www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/sites/default … long-emergencies.pdf

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