

# A decade of pandemic planning was ignored despite knowing millions could die in UK

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One of the main lies contained in parliament's recent inquiry report on the UK government's pandemic response is that no-one in power could have foreseen the COVID pandemic that hit Britain in early 2020. The inquiry claimed that mistakes were made because all previous planning assumed that Britain would face a *flu pandemic*.

The report by the House of Commons health and social care and science and technology select committees, "Coronavirus: lessons learned to date," states in the very first paragraph of its executive summary, "The UK's pandemic planning was too narrowly and inflexibly based on a flu model which failed to learn the lessons from SARS, MERS and Ebola."

The report cites the testimony of former Chief Medical Officer for England, Professor Dame Sally Davies. In paragraph 19 of the chapter "Pandemic preparedness", Davies states, "We all, in the UK, US and Europe, as experts and in policy, had a bias to flu, and planning for flu and diseases that had already occurred. As I look back, going back to [flu preparedness exercise] Winter Willow [held in 2007], which was well before my time, and the national risk assessment, we underestimated the impact of novel and particularly zoonotic diseases."

In paragraph 27, Davies states, "Quite simply, we were in groupthink. Our infectious disease experts really did not believe that SARS, or another SARS, would get from Asia to us. It is a form of British exceptionalism."

Given that the British government had conducted, going backed several decades, numerous exercises to simulate a pandemic, and that many of these were in the public domain, the document cannot just ignore them.

Exercise Cygnus is referred to in the report. It states, "The prospective national response to an influenza pandemic was tested in an exercise which took place from 18–20 October 2016. Exercise Cygnus was led by Public Health England. As part of the exercise, participants considered their capacity and capability to operate at the peak of a pandemic affecting 50% of the population which could cause between 200,000 and 400,000 excess deaths in the UK."

But alas, goes the inquiry narrative, this exercise predicting hundreds of thousands of deaths, was really a waste of time as, "It is important to note that Exercise Cygnus focused on the treatment and escalation phases of the pandemic response. It did not simulate the detection and assessment phases."

The document cites the testimony of then Health Secretary Matt Hancock who told the inquiry in November 2020, "The problem with Project Cygnus was [...] that it started from the assumption that we were going to have a pandemic flu that was already rampant and widespread. It was an exercise in what you would do in the period at

which lots of people were already dying. What it did not ask were the prior questions, What type of pandemic is most likely? What are the different characteristics of different pandemics—flu or coronavirus being two obvious examples—and can we act to stop getting into the position at which Project Cygnus started off?"

These statements are aimed at covering up the fact that extensive planning for a pandemic had been drawn up and large-scale simulations carried out for well over a decade, but also that among these were Exercise Alice.

Exercise Alice was carried out in February 2016 and was specifically simulating a response to a *coronavirus pandemic*—an outbreak of Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS-CoV). The full title of the report into the exercise is "Report: Exercise Alice-Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (Mers-CoV) 15 February 2016."

Dame Sally Davies is happy to mention Exercise Winter Willow and Exercise Cygnus as they were preparations for a flu pandemic, but not Exercise Alice. And for good reason.

It was she who commissioned Exercise Alice, the existence of which was kept hidden from the public by the government for more than five years, only finally being acknowledged as having taken place in June this year. Acknowledgement was forced out of the government as the result of diligent efforts of Dr. Moosa Qureshi, backed by Leigh Day solicitors. Qureshi, a hospital consultant, took action after seeing the social devastation caused by the COVID pandemic, to uncover what preparations government had carried out to prepare for such a pandemic.

Freedom of Information requests established in June that officials from Public Health England (PHE) and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) were involved in Exercise Alice.

The requests forced the government to reveal that there had been a total of 11 reports into pandemic planning exercises hitherto unknown by the public in the five years before COVID hit. These included four dealing with an influenza pandemic, three on Ebola, two on Lassa—an acute viral haemorrhagic illness—and three on bird flu.

Along with Exercise Alice, the existence of further reports into pandemic exercises were revealed through pressure from Dr. Qureshi's legal campaign. These were Exercise Broad Street, Exercise Cerberus, Exercise Northern Light, Exercise Pica, and the Ebola Preparedness Surge Capacity Exercise.

Earlier this month, the government was forced to disclose the partially redacted 23-page report on Exercise Alice, after declaring in August that publication could "lead to loss of public confidence in the government's and the NHS' COVID-19 response... based on misinterpretation of the report."

Their fear was it becoming known that some of the key findings of Exercise Alice revealed the criminal nature of the government's pandemic response, which has led to the mass infection of nearly 9 million people and over 163,000 preventable deaths.

In an October 7 press release Leigh Day noted, "Exercise Alice was carried out in 2016 and identified 12 specific actions and four key themes that Public Health England should address to make the NHS ready to cope with Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (MERS-CoV): quarantine versus self-isolation, levels of PPE, community sampling planning and effective and consistent public messaging."

It added, "The 2016 report [Exercise Alice] identified key issues which needed to be looked at more closely such as quarantine and self-isolation requirements, the level of PPE [personal protective equipment] and the setting up of a proper contact tracing system, yet when the Covid-19 pandemic broke in 2020 the Government discharged positive covid cases into care homes and did not have a contact tracing system which could be brought immediately into action."

Speaking on the publication of the document, Dr Qureshi said, "The Department of Health argued that Exercise Cygnus was not relevant for COVID-19, because it modelled an influenza pandemic, not a coronavirus. In fact, the disclosure of these [initial] seven reports shows a range of pandemics were modelled in the five years leading up to COVID-19. Disgracefully, the Government covered up Exercise Alice – a coronavirus exercise which predicted the importance of isolating patients, contact tracing, PPE provision, trained personnel and adequate NHS beds.

"The fact that COVID-19 is a novel type of coronavirus is irrelevant—every pandemic is different, but the lessons of Exercise Alice were generally applicable to coronaviruses including COVID-19, they were agreed by general consensus, and both political leaders and NHS England executives failed to implement that consensus. They failed to maintain contact tracing capacity and isolate patients, they failed to provide adequate PPE, and they cut NHS beds. Going forward, future pandemics remain at the top of our national risk register, and we will continue our legal campaign to establish a new paradigm of transparency and accountability for pandemic preparedness."

The government's claim that all the planning for a pandemic prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 was essentially a waste of time as it was premised on the main threat being a flu pandemic is also exposed as a contemptible lie based on what was contained in the reports uncovered.

Leigh Day stated that the "most significant" findings in the exercises revealed in August were those relating to Exercise Broad Street and Exercise Pica.

Exercise Broad Street was "a 2018 testing of the UK's readiness to deal with a high consequence infectious disease, revealed concerns about surge planning for airborne pathogens."

Exercise Pica, was "a 2018 report on how primary care would deal with a severe pandemic influenza for which there was no vaccine and no immunity."

Leigh Day noted, "It was based on the premise that there were national stockpiles of PPE in place for healthcare workers to treat half the population and anticipated an upsurge in mental health care demand. It highlighted the need for 'co-ordinated communications', remote working by primary care staff and the possibility of fuel and staff shortages."

In parliament's "Lesson's learned to date," all that is said is the anodyne single sentence comment, "Despite carrying out simulation exercises, we heard that the UK did not adequately learn the lessons of previous pandemics."

The fact is that none of the planning was put into operation because the government was intent on imposing its homicidal herd immunity strategy from the outset. Dominic Cummings, who is lauded in parliament's report as an avowed enemy of "groupthink", was a leading advocate of herd immunity. The *Sunday Times* reported in March 2020 that at the end of February, Cummings had outlined the government's strategy at a private meeting, with one observer describing the policy as, "herd immunity, protect the economy and if that means some pensioners die, too bad."

Cumming revealed earlier this year that a Public Health England exercise presented to the government as the pandemic broke out worked out scenarios based on up to 800,000 people dying of COVID-19 in the UK.

Such an agenda informed much of the planning for a pandemic going back years. In a 2011 exercise findings document, a paragraph in a section headed "Business as usual" states, "During a pandemic, the Government will encourage those who are well to carry on with their normal daily lives for as long and as far as that is possible, whilst taking basic precautions to protect themselves from infection and lessen the risk of spreading influenza to others... the Government does not plan to close borders, stop mass gatherings or impose controls on public transport during any pandemic."

On twitter this week, an intervention teacher/special needs tutor commented that this statement "reads like a playbook of the government's pandemic strategy. A focus on saving life is not anywhere in the document. But this is. Notice wording—Any pandemic. They were never going to save us, we are just collateral damage."

As to the scale of death the government was prepared to ignore, Exercise Winter Willow, dealing with an avian flu pandemic, was conducted in January and February 2007 and involved all the emergency services, local authority officials and Labour government Health Secretary Patricia Hewitt and Environment Secretary David Miliband. The *Sunday Times* reported on January 27, 2007 of the upcoming operation, "The exercise is designed to ensure that the authorities could cope with up to 30% of the population being infected and a possible 750,000 deaths."

Those in government were acutely aware of the terrible scale of deaths that could result from a pandemic, with the *Sunday Times* noting, "Government experts have expressed fears that up to 7m Britons could die in an epidemic if bird flu mutated into a form that could readily spread among humans."



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