

Managing the public sector

There are a number of worries about the day to day management of public services by Departments and quangos. Ministers are responsible for policy decisions , for budget priorities and new legislation. They rely on the goodwill and abilities of many officials to supervise the day to day running of existing policies, to hire good people, to buy in necessary stocks, to distribute benefits, collect taxes and provide licences and approvals.

We have seen in recent months parts of the public sector struggling to carry out regular functions, It is true the lock downs were disruptive, but most of the things government needed to do could be carried out from home with suitable computer back up, and by a limited number of key workers continuing to go into offices and other government installations.

I have drawn attention in past blogs to the big shortfall in normal NHS work , and the shortage of work sent to the private hospitals which were contracted to undertake some of it. As the CV 19 hospital numbers came down there was a slowness in creating isolating units for the remaining CV 19 patients and returning most NHS capacity to the other needs. It appears the NHS is still well below capacity on many specialities , and it is taking time to restore full GP services in some locations.

It appears that the Passport Office allowed a substantial backlog to build up for UK passports. This is something which allows on line applications and processing and should be compatible with more homeworking. I also learn from the media that there is a backlog in issuing provisional driving licences to new drivers. Again it is difficult to see why this could not be done remotely.

I have not had reports of failures to issue cash payments to furlough employers, to benefit seekers or to small businesses under the new scheme. It shows that some parts of government were able to deal with large new surges in demand and to implement new programmes rapidly. It makes the failures in established areas more surprising.

We saw the failure of Public Health England to buy enough protective clothing and to establish a strong enough test regime quickly. We are now witnessing Ofqual's inability to implement a policy which does uphold standards whilst being fair to young people when the ability to take examinations was removed.

I would be interested in your examples of where the public sector responded well to new circumstances, and where it failed even in areas where it was simply meant to be doing what it had always done, adapted to more homeworking and social distancing.