

PHE response to a Sun newspaper column

On 20 April the Sun columnist Trevor Kavanagh made a series of claims and accusations about Public Health England's role and response to the COVID-19 outbreak. PHE have made the following corrections.

"...and the advice from those experts – the sprawling Public Health England in particular – was that Britain faced no more than a larger-than-usual dose of winter flu"

This is nonsense. We have never advised that the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak was going to be like a normal winter flu season. Working alongside the whole of government, we have been planning for a reasonable worst case scenario in the UK, with COVID-19 having the potential to kill many more people and cause more hospitalisation than seasonal influenzas.

"PHE was against German style mass testing and, when caught flat-footed, rejected help from commercial laboratories in providing those tests"

This is wrong. The UK was one of the first countries after China to rollout a diagnostic test. PHE published the protocol for a new test on the 23 January which meant any lab could replicate the test from that date. The roll-out of PHE's COVID-19 diagnostic PCR test across the network of PHE and NHS laboratories is the fastest deployment of a novel test in recent UK history. The DHSC testing strategy is clear that PHE is responsible for Pillar 1 of the plan – which is ensuring that all patients in hospitals that need a test have been tested. We are working to the maximum of PHE's laboratory capacity and this has meant that in addition to patients, NHS staff and other key workers can also be tested. Responsibility for what the Sun calls 'mass German-style testing' using the support of commercial labs is being taken forward by the DHSC and Office for Life Sciences.

"PHE failed to build stocks of personal protective equipment – including masks, gowns and gloves – despite a 2016 test run showing these were a priority"

PHE is not responsible for determining what stock is held in the pandemic stockpile. We are responsible for developing the UK guidance on PPE and advising how to keep clinicians safe. The DHSC is responsible for the procurement of PPE on behalf of the NHS, not PHE.

"PHE dragged its feet over sourcing ventilators for intensive-care patients and extra hospital beds"

Completely wrong. PHE does not source or procure ventilators or beds on behalf of the NHS.

“Frequently when running short of crucial gear, PHE resisted offers of outside help, leaving the NHS scrambling to catch up”

Wrong. PHE is not responsible for the supply of PPE. The DHSC and NHS England is leading this work including dealing with offers of help from private companies.

“...and when it came to opening London’s 4,000-bed Nightingale emergency hospital, it was the Army that did the job in nine days”

The work that has been undertaken to set up the Nightingale hospitals has been fantastic and is the result of much hard work by colleagues across the health system. PHE has not played a role in this but nor would we be expected to.

“It was also PHE who insisted the British public would be protected by ‘herd immunity’”

PHE has never suggested herd immunity as a strategy to protect the public against COVID-19. We have not made any statements about herd immunity and nor have we advised ministers that this should be a policy objective.

“PHE has a giant budget of 4.5 billion”

No we don’t. PHE’s annual budget from government is just shy of £300million – which is about half the cost of a district hospital. The 4.5bn figure the Sun quotes is the amount the Treasury allocates to local government for local public health services – not PHE budget.