

COVID response one of worst ever public health failures in UK

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The cross-party report accused the government and officials of 'fatalism' and said their early response to the pandemic was one of the biggest public health failures in the country's history [File: Andy Rain/EPA]

London, October 12 (RHC)-- The United Kingdom government's early response to COVID-19 and the delay in imposing a lockdown early last year was "one of the most important public health failures" in the country's history and cost thousands of lives, a damning parliamentary report has found.

The cross-party group of UK legislators also noted the government failed to develop an effective test-and-trace system, which could have helped curb the spread of the virus, and followed a policy of what effectively amounted to “herd immunity”.

“The UK, along with many other countries in Europe and North America made a serious early error in adopting this fatalistic approach and not considering a more emphatic and rigorous approach to stopping the spread of the virus as adopted by many East and Southeast Asian countries,” said the 151-page report published on Tuesday. The review was based on hours of testimony from more than 50 witnesses, including advisers on government policy, health and science.

More than 138,000 people have died from the coronavirus in the UK, one of the world’s highest death tolls. While the country’s top emergency decision-making body met for the first time about COVID-19 on January 4, 2020, the legislators said, a lockdown was not imposed until March 23 of that year. The “gradual and incremental approach” to non-pharmaceutical interventions cost lives, it added.

“Decisions on lockdowns and social distancing during the early weeks of the pandemic – and the advice that led to them – rank as one of the most important public health failures the United Kingdom has ever experienced,” they wrote.

Professor Neil Ferguson, who was part of the government’s Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), told the Science and Technology Committee that if the national lockdown had been imposed even a week earlier than it was, “we would have reduced the final death toll by at least a half”. Former health minister Matt Hancock and Dominic Cummings, a former adviser to Prime Minister Boris Johnson, were also among those who gave evidence to the committees.

The report also criticised the government’s decision to return elderly patients to care homes without testing them for the coronavirus – a move which led to a surge of cases among the most vulnerable people in the population – as well as decision making in relation to ethnic minorities and people with disabilities.

It noted some areas where the UK had done well, citing its vaccine programme and treatment development research. “A significant part of the success of the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine was due to the Government’s early investment in research and development which originally started with the UK Vaccines Network set up in 2016,” the report said. “That investment and support through successive governments has clearly paid off.”

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