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The 'lost' Covid plan from 2005 is a tragic example of bureaucratic amnesia

Editorial: Lives could have been saved if the government had followed the coronavirus blueprint

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The 2005 document makes for eerie reading

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and indeed when the public inquiry into the government's Covid response eventually starts.

Almost two decades ago, a **detailed plan of how the UK should respond** to a Sars-type **coronavirus** was drawn up by public health officials. They carefully examined the experience of the 2002 Sars outbreak in east Asia. Fortunately, the active virus at that time was not infective enough to trigger a global pandemic and was contained within China and its surrounding countries.

Nonetheless, the opportunity was taken to envisage what precautions should be taken if a subsequent episode developed in a more sinister fashion. The report was drawn up in 2005, apparently shelved and forgotten, and **has only now come to light** via a freedom of information request.

Too late to have any impact on decision-making now, had it been “remembered” in the early, panicked months of 2020 it would have been a useful guide and blueprint. From what can be gathered from the detailed **eye-witness account of Dominic Cummings** and other stories, Whitehall was by turns complacent, bewildered, panicked, and then disastrously slow and disorganised in its response to this unfamiliar crisis.

Yet what was clear from the first cases identified in Wuhan province, China, was that this was a coronavirus, and one with some features in common with the Sars, or avian flu, infections some years earlier. But the UK's various public health authorities, along with the government, based their planning on the assumption that it would cause an influenza-style epidemic. It was the wrong diagnosis, and the outbreak could have been better managed if the correct lessons of past experience had been acted upon and the 2005 plan implemented.

The 2005 document makes for eerie reading. Its prescient recommendations included limiting travel, stopping “super-spreader” events, building stocks of appropriate protective equipment, “clear and

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six “action levels”, roughly equivalent to the tiers and stages later used to guide restrictions and relaxations.

The lesson learned now from this sorry story should be that the government needs urgently to create contingency planning for civil emergencies that may seem remote but which could, nonetheless, cause huge disruption, loss of life and economic damage.

So-called “black swan” events are not predictable, by definition, but there are certainly areas of threat to national infrastructure that deserve to be planned for, with regular “exercises” and a designated lead agency or government department, as well as named individuals, responsible for keeping data.

The banking crisis of 2008-09 was only the latest financial panic to expose the fragility of the credit system, prompting the Bank of England to plan for future responses. There is also the continuing risk of a mass hacking attack on the national digital infrastructure, covert activity from hostile foreign powers, energy shortages, and, of course, climate change, and **the floods, damage to buildings, and droughts** that could flow from that.

History suggests that, for whatever cultural reasons, the British response to an impending existential crisis has generally been a mixture of denialism, amateurishness and improvisation, and usually with disastrous consequences.

The nation has hardly ever been prepared for any war it has had to fight, for example, but the Dunkirk spirit should not be relied upon. Where, for example, is the plan for a response to the arrival of some heavily vaccine-resistant new coronavirus variant? It would be reassuring to know that Whitehall hasn't already forgotten the lessons of what went wrong last spring.

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