

The government's failure to plan was astonishing accord...

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The House of Commons Public Accounts Committee issued a report this morning attacking the 'astonishing' lack of preparedness on the part of the government for the coronavirus crisis when it had identified a pandemic as a major risk. This is what they said, and I am quoting at length simply because doing so seems to be appropriate:

“Astonishing” failure to make economic plan for pandemic could have long-term consequences

In a report published today Thursday 23 July 2020 the Commons' Public Accounts Committee says it was “astonished” to learn that, despite the threat of a pandemic being one of the government's top risks for years, it failed to consider specifically in advance how it might deal with the economic impacts of a national disease outbreak.

The Committee heard in evidence that HM Treasury waited until mid-March - days before the lockdown that closed schools and businesses across the country for months - before designing the economic support schemes it would put in place.

The nature of Government co-ordination and decision making in the pandemic is having major and long-lasting impacts on people's lives. It will be a huge task to ensure lengthy school closures do not have long-term or irreversible effects on children and young people's future health and education. Yet, while school closures were predicted in pandemic planning, there seems to have been no plan for how schools and pupils would be supported to continue to learn.

Central government has not given local authorities, on the front line of the response for both the SME and care sectors, the clarity or support they need, and overall there has been unclear planning and advice for lifting lockdown in a number of sectors.

The Committee reiterates its urgent call for Government to learn the lessons from its response to the COVID-19 pandemic so far, and do the work now to ensure it doesn't repeat its mistakes again in the event of a second spike in infections - or another novel disease outbreak. The Committee expects a report back from the Cabinet Office, by

September 1st, on Government's progress on a "second wave ready" plan.

Three thoughts follow from this.

Firstly, I am not surprised.

Second, good luck with hoping for a second wave plan by 1 September.

And third? The PAC is calling for the wrong plan on that date. Of course, a plan for a second wave is required. The risk of a second wave exists, although there remains epidemiological doubt on how severe it will be (and we can hope). What is not in doubt is that we are going to face a tsunami of unemployment and for that there seems to be no real plan at all at present.

I would suggest that the plan the PAC should have demanded was one for managing well over the minimum 3.5 million unemployed people that the Office for Budget Responsibility thinks there will be in the UK sometime later this year and into next. The PAC did not ask for that. Their own ability to forecast crises and their consequences has to be in doubt as a result.