



Kent

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Covid-19 taskforce called for a new national vaccine agency to prepare for future pandemics

Jacqui Wise

The UK needs a permanent ecosystem for rapidly developing, manufacturing, and supplying vaccines for future pandemics to ensure domestic resilience and security, a report from the now disbanded Vaccine Taskforce said.¹

The report was originally prepared in December 2020 and submitted to the government, but not previously made public. Clive Dix, who headed the task force in 2020 and is now chief executive of drug company C4X Discovery, submitted the report to the House of Commons Science, Innovation, and Technology Committee as part of its inquiry into learnings from the covid-19 pandemic.²

The report makes several recommendations to develop system resilience and maintain the legacy of the Vaccine Taskforce. This includes the creation of a national vaccine agency whose remit would include vaccine scale-up and manufacturing as well as supply chain readiness. “For vaccines to play an effective part of pandemic recovery and preparedness they need to be available quickly and be manufacturable at scale,” the report says.

Over the course of its inquiry the committee heard witnesses express concern about the legacy of the Vaccine Taskforce and whether the gains made in UK diagnostic and therapeutic capabilities and capacity were now at risk of being lost.

Giving evidence to the committee on 28 February, Jenny Harries, chief executive of the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA), said she hadn’t previously seen the Vaccine Taskforce recommendations but there were parts that could be taken forward. “We developed a vaccine development and evaluation centre, we published our own science strategy, and we are majoring on pathogen genomics. It won’t be a vaccine task force but we will be creating something similar as part of our organisation over the next few months,” she said

Diagnostics

The heads of two of the lighthouse laboratories currently providing diagnostic testing for covid—Berkshire and Surrey Pathology Service and University Hospitals Plymouth NHS Trust—gave evidence to the committee that their contracts with UKHSA come to an end at the end of the financial year with a backstop of June 2024. Greg Clark, committee chair, said that it was concerning that in a matter of weeks the country will be back to square one in terms of diagnostic capacity.

In response Harries said that funding for the laboratories came from covid funding which finishes at the end of the financial year. “We are moving to a living-with-covid agenda,” she said, adding that the

country needed to review what level of preparedness, including testing, was wanted in the future, but that the “decision sits with ministers.”

Harries told the committee that one could argue that a pandemic of this type happens once every 100 years and so not to do anything, scramble a response when it happens, or retain everything were all possibilities. “My suspicion is somewhere in between there are some sensible parameters.”

She told the committee that UKHSA is not resourced to maintain the levels of response seen at the height of the pandemic, but that what was critical “is how quickly we can respond and ramp up” to any new pandemic threat.

Rosalind Franklin laboratory

Previously the committee had heard evidence from scientists concerned about the fate of the Rosalind Franklin laboratory, a state-of-the-art facility built as part of the lighthouse network to increase diagnostic capacity. The laboratory, which is owned by UKHSA, has been mothballed and recently listed for sale. Clark said the site should be considered for the manufacture of bacteriophages “rather than be lost to the nation and to science in a fire sale.”^{3 4}

When questioned, Harries said that the laboratory had been set up in record time “but it didn’t deliver huge amounts of value in respect of the contribution to the totality of testing.”

She told the committee it was important to consider whether massive laboratories would be wanted in any future pandemic. “We might do, we might not.” But, she said, “there is no real justification for running it at the moment and keeping it hot.” She said that the lease is for sale and not the building and various options were under consideration. “Like many people I would like to see it used to support the life sciences,” she added.

¹ <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/128108/pdf>

² UK Parliament. Emerging diseases and learnings from covid-19. <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/7167/emerging-diseases-and-learnings-from-covid19>

³ Wise J. Antimicrobial resistance: MPs call on UK government to maximise potential of bacteriophages. *BMJ* 2024;384:doi: 10.1136/bmj.q12 pmid: 38171590

⁴ House of Commons Science, Innovation and Technology Committee. The antimicrobial potential of bacteriophages. Jan 2024. <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/7045/the-antimicrobial-potential-of-bacteriophages>