



# United Kingdom Report

Andreas Busch, Iain Begg,  
Nils C. Bandelow (Coordinator)

Sustainable Governance in the  
Context of the COVID-19 Crisis

© wellphoto - stock.adobe.com

## Executive Summary

Having suffered high infection and death rates as well as a deep economic contraction, the United Kingdom has faced several profound challenges due to the coronavirus pandemic. Some of this was due to factors largely beyond the control of the incumbent governments at different levels in the United Kingdom. These factors included the infectiousness of the coronavirus; the legacy of previous governments, which had done too little to implement recommendations from previous Whitehall pandemic exercises; and the insufficient stock of personal protective equipment (PPE), resulting from the austerity policies of the previous decade. The emergence of the more infectious coronavirus variant toward the end of 2020 derailed plans for a more targeted lockdown approach. Economically, the high share of personal services and hospitality in the economy made it more likely that lockdowns would have an enduring adverse effect. Given that 2020 was not only the year of the coronavirus, but also of the United Kingdom leaving the European Union after more than 45 years (this factor alone would have made it a challenging year), it could be argued that the government actually did quite well under difficult circumstances.

But in many other respects, government in the United Kingdom must shoulder some blame. The authorities were slow to recognize the magnitude of the COVID-19 threat, often indecisive, and – despite claims to be “following the science” – had difficulty in managing the trade-offs between economic, health and social imperatives. The United Kingdom failed to learn lessons from the unfolding of the pandemic in Italy and thus squandered a three-week window of opportunity. Furthermore, it failed to act promptly to cancel potential super-spreader events (e.g., the Cheltenham festival), dithered over imposing all three national lockdowns and belatedly introduced mandatory mask-wearing. A particular failing was in the discharge of elderly patients from hospitals to care homes – which aimed to free hospital beds for COVID-19 victims – without sufficient testing. In October, the BBC reported that in Scotland barely one in six were tested and deaths in care homes accounted for half of the total number of deaths from COVID-19 in Scotland.

The government’s economic response was extensive. The furlough scheme that kept millions in the workforce as well as various financing facilities for businesses allowed the economy to quickly rebound quickly after the first

lockdown. The establishment of a vaccine task force, which took bold and early decisions on funding vaccine development, and the speedy rollout of vaccines after rapid regulatory approval was secured were success stories. But the slow progress of testing, exaggerated claims to be creating a “world-beating” track and trace system, and the fiasco over a bespoke contact tracing app for smart phones were high-profile failings. Questionable policy decisions included the “eat out to help out” support scheme for the hospitality industry and the manner in which the grades of school pupils were handled after exams were canceled.

Tensions at the heart of government contributed to a sense of disarray and were accentuated by a series of U-turns. An egregious case was when the prime minister stood by his chief political adviser when the latter broke travel protocols, eliciting widespread condemnation. Relentless media scrutiny and pressure from parliamentarians demanding that the government justify emergency legislation, and the information provided both by the government and news outlets has kept the public well-informed and is testament to the resilience of democracy in the United Kingdom. The Labour Party’s shift in direction under Sir Keir Starmer has restored its role as a credible party of opposition, which, for the most part, has been constructive. Even so, a balanced verdict must be that central, devolved and local governments could all have done better in a substantial number of areas.

Citation:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/live/uk-scotland-54718380>

## Key Challenges

Although the coronavirus pandemic is far from over in the United Kingdom, it is expected to ease progressively over the course of 2021 as a result of the third lockdown and the rapid vaccination effort. Dealing with the legacy of the pandemic while confronting the underlying governance weaknesses that led to the United Kingdom to suffer poor health outcomes and a sharper economic downturn than many comparable countries will be the key challenge over the next two to three years. The rapid vaccination rollout was already producing encouraging results by Easter 2021, with a sharp fall in infections, hospitalizations and deaths. Despite concerns about vaccine supplies, especially if the European Union blocks vaccine exports to the United Kingdom, further vaccines are expected to be authorized soon, as such there should be little risk of the rollout stalling. This has led to a reasonable expectation that the re-opening of the economy will proceed according to the

cautious schedule laid out by the government. Already, official and private forecasters anticipate a faster economic recovery than initially forecast in the autumn of 2020. However, this assumes that no new mutations of the virus emerge and alter the underlying situation, as they did in December 2020.

Economically, the trickiest decisions facing the government will be how and when to unwind the exceptional support measures introduced during the pandemic. If, as expected, the economy rebounds relatively strongly in the second half of 2021, policies to preserve jobs and keep viable companies afloat can be withdrawn, but there will be a need to target further support at sectors disproportionately hit by the lockdowns. In parallel, a medium- to long-term strategy to stabilize the public finances will be needed. Politically, the government will come under pressure to deliver on the “leveling-up” agenda on which the Conservative Party was elected, while also having to find solutions to long-standing problems, all against the backdrop of making the best of Brexit. Several domestic challenges remain just as pressing as they were before the pandemic, notably housing, the integration of social care and the National Health Service (NHS), as well as low investment and lackluster productivity. Both Brexit and the coronavirus pandemic have accentuated tensions among the four nations that comprise the United Kingdom, raising questions about the future integrity of the union.

In July 2020, the prime minister promised an independent inquiry into the handling of the pandemic. Such inquiries (e.g., on the Iraq war) tend to be slow, with the result that the policy agenda has long since moved on by the time they report and offer recommendations. There will, therefore, be a need for complementary mechanisms (e.g., parliamentary committees) to undertake more timely analyses, ideally with bipartisan support, to establish the facets of the machinery of government that require reform.

The 2020 pandemic demonstrated the pitfalls of “siloe thinking” in dealing with a crisis of the magnitude of the coronavirus crisis. The need for better joined-up government had already been identified as a priority, but had been inadequately addressed prior to the coronavirus crisis despite recommendations. Reorganizing government will need to go hand-in-hand with a redistribution of tasks between the various tiers of government. This will best be done in conjunction with a new territorial deal which recognizes and gives a role to the English regions. The pandemic has demonstrated that local governments cannot be reliant on individually negotiated financial settlements with the government of the day if they fulfill important tasks for the whole of the state (e.g., a regional lockdown) and that they need an institutionalized voice. The devolved governments, which have gained prominence during the pandemic, need to be recognized as “partners in

leadership” for some UK-wide tasks if coordination is to work better and the unity of the United Kingdom is to be preserved. To maintain unity, Westminster will need to recognize that big gestures are not only required (as in 2014) when an independence referendum hangs in the balance, but even more after it has been won – if another one is to be avoided.

# Resilience of Policies

## I. Economic Preparedness

### Economic Preparedness

Economic Policy  
Preparedness  
Score: 7

In the first half of the last decade, the UK economy underwent a process of fiscal adjustment following the global financial crisis. Due to the combination of a deep recession, and massive state spending to bail out banks and firms during the financial crisis, government deficits surged (peaking at nearly 10% of GDP in 2009) and debt rose substantially. Improved economic performance in the second half of the decade was adversely affected by the uncertainty arising from Brexit, which especially affected investment. Nevertheless, the OECD in its most recent survey of the United Kingdom judged that, prior to the coronavirus pandemic, the United Kingdom had “a position of relatively high well-being on many dimensions.”

Heading into 2020, the UK economy was on a modest economic growth path (1.3% in 2019) and – following the clear general election victory of Prime Minister Johnson – renewed political stability was expected to improve economic growth prospects, even though ongoing negotiations with the European Union and the projected exit from the European Single Market still left areas of uncertainty. Given that the trade regime is about to change, which will likely lead to tougher export conditions, export performance must be improved. But this will be a challenge given that the United Kingdom’s performance in this respect has declined over the last two decades. Poor labor productivity performance is one contributing factor. While economic policy has attempted to address this challenge for a long time, there has been limited success. Furthermore, growth in productivity has slowed over the last decade. Many of the United Kingdom’s main economic competitors both in the European Union and overseas perform better in this respect. A number of policy initiatives to stimulate labor productivity have been introduced, addressing inter alia regional and skills disparities. The success of these policy initiatives will be important for future economic development.

With its economic structure dominated by the service sector, the UK economy is both sophisticated in some areas (e.g., financial and business services) and dynamic in others (e.g., the new digital sectors). Growth in aggregate employment has been maintained over recent years (see next section), reaching a record level. Private consumption has driven economic growth, shielding economic growth to some degree from potential disruptions caused by changes in export performance. The corollary is that a decline in household income and spending would adversely affect the overall economic situation. The sustainability of economic growth – measured as a combination of capacity utilization, total hours worked, the productivity gap (the deviation of output per hour from its linear trend) and growth duration (the length and strength of expansion from the previous trough) – has weakened over the last decade. A supportive monetary policy has boosted consumer spending, but business investment has shrunk as uncertainty increased substantially following the Brexit referendum. Worries about fiscal sustainability (see below) are already present and would be enhanced by a monetary tightening. The economic policy framework, while stable in principle, faces a number of challenges that need to be addressed but have had to compete for political attention during a period largely dominated by the political fights over Brexit.

Citation:

OECD Economic Surveys: United Kingdom, 2017 and 2020

### Labor Market Preparedness

Labor Market  
Policy  
Preparedness  
Score: 8

The United Kingdom's labor market performance has long been positive when compared to euro zone countries or the OECD average. The legacy of the Thatcher years was a flexible labor market, at least relative to most other European countries. Although subsequent governments restored some worker protections and introduced a national minimum wage, the UK labor market continues to be regarded as relatively liberal. At the end of 2019, with employment reaching an all-time peak, an unemployment rate of 3.8% and a high labor market participation rates, the government declared full employment an official government objective. A steady inflow of economic migrants, despite concerns that Brexit would deter EU workers, testified to the attractiveness of the UK labor market.

On the qualitative side, however, there are a number of areas that need improvement. These include a disappointing long-term record on enhancing skills, which contributes to mismatches between skills and jobs, and regional differences in labor market performance. Active labor market policies and the

nature of incentives for those not in work play an important role in sustaining high levels of employment. However, these policies have not done enough to alleviate long-standing problems associated with low skill levels. The UK youth unemployment rate is at the lower end of the scale compared to other European countries, but remains a problem in some localities.

The government's Universal Credit program was introduced – albeit with some controversy – in an attempt to simplify the benefits system, make it more effective, and reduce friction and disincentives associated with transitioning from unemployment to work. Further increases in the national minimum wage will improve spending power, with the goal of achieving one of the highest minimum wage rates in Europe. So far, there have been few signs that increases in the national minimum wage have had a negative effect on employment. The conjunction of policy goals that aim to further social inclusion and maintain high degrees of labor market flexibility may lead to policy tensions. Tackling dysfunctional elements in the housing market will be necessary if problems with low relocation rates are to be solved, while improving transport infrastructure will further improve labor market conditions for lower-skilled workers – given that high-skilled workers show far fewer problems in that respect.

Taken together, however, the UK's labor market policy problems have been pretty constant over the last few decades.

Citation:

<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8819/>

<https://data.oecd.org/united-kingdom.htm#profile-economy>

### Fiscal Preparedness

Fiscal Policy  
Preparedness  
Score: 6

The United Kingdom is fiscally a highly centralized state. As such, the central government has considerable control over budgetary policy. Most public spending is directly or indirectly controlled by the central government, with few other influences compared to, for example, federal countries. This means, however, that the central government has to shoulder the blame if things go wrong.

Public spending as a proportion of GDP increased during the 2000s and, in hindsight, was too pro-cyclical. In 2009, the fiscal rules introduced by the Labour government that came to power in 1997 (limiting deficit spending to investment over the business cycle and keeping public debt low) were abandoned because of the need to counter the economic effects of the financial crisis. Although a new fiscal framework was introduced in 2010, which set a

path toward deficit and debt reduction over a five-year period, the framework lacked teeth and the target date for achieving these goals was repeatedly pushed back. Nevertheless, tough austerity policies enabled the government to reduce the budget deficit to below 3% of GDP in 2019 from a peak of nearly 10% in 2009 and public debt was stabilized at approximately 90% of GDP.

After 2017, as the policy focus shifted from consolidation to achieving Brexit, fiscal policy became looser. In 2019, both major parties declared that “austerity is over” and pledged to boost public spending, especially in the general election campaign toward the end of the year. This signaled a substantial shift in priorities for the Conservative government, but was in line with the positive effects on public spending that were promised in the pro-Brexit campaign.

In October 2020, the ratings agency Moody’s downgraded the United Kingdom’s credit rating, citing a decline in fiscal strength driven by a weakening in the United Kingdom’s institutions and governance over several years. Moody’s remarked that government debt had already been high and sticky before the coronavirus crisis, and that policymaking – especially with regard to fiscal policy – had become less predictable and effective. Although a formal fiscal framework is in place and a fiscal council was established in 2010 (the Office for Budget Responsibility) to independently assess the sustainability of fiscal policy, the post-2010 goal of consolidating fiscal policy remained unfinished prior to the coronavirus pandemic.

Citation:

<https://obr.uk/efo/economic-and-fiscal-outlook-november-2020/>

<https://www.oecd.org/gov/budgeting/budgeting-and-public-expenditures-2019-united-kingdom.pdf>

<https://www.parliament.uk/about/how/role/check-and-approve-government-spending-and-taxation/the-budget-and-parliament/>

## Research and Innovation

Research and  
Innovation Policy  
Preparedness  
Score: 7

The United Kingdom – the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution – is home to some of the world’s leading universities and has a long tradition of linking academic research with industries like biotechnology or information and communications technology (ICT). However, in terms of R&D spending (especially public sector R&D spending) the country’s performance (compared with other leading economies) can only be rated as moderate at best. In part, this reflects the low share of manufacturing (which tends to engage in R&D much more than other sectors) in the UK economy. Rapid innovation in business services and certain major consumer services is not adequately reflected in R&D data. Weaknesses also exist in the conversion of innovation into sustainable, large-scale production, which holds the potential for long-term profitability.

Successive governments have attempted to address this situation, not least by targeting weaknesses in technical education. Proposals have included investing in digital infrastructure, improving incentives for R&D investment by extending tax credits, and setting up institutions like the regional Technology and Innovation Centre and Innovate UK to promote economic growth through science and technology. UK universities have been highly successful in winning competitive funding from European-level budgets.

However, since the Brexit referendum in 2016, the United Kingdom's place in the closely knit European research collaboration network has faced substantial uncertainty. The fact that the United Kingdom will remain involved in Horizon Europe, confirmed in the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, is a positive development. However, uncertainty remains over the future of highly skilled foreign nationals working in UK science and universities, and corporate research units, while universities risk losing fee-paying EU students. An early pledge by the Johnson government to protect research spending is a signal of the government's commitment to the sector.

Citation:

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/corporation-tax-research-and-development-rd-relief>

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/governmentpublicsectorandtaxes/researchanddevelopmentexpenditure>

[https://academic.oup.com/oxrep/article/33/suppl\\_1/S155/3066079?login=true](https://academic.oup.com/oxrep/article/33/suppl_1/S155/3066079?login=true)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-pledges-to-protect-science-and-research-post-brexit>

## II. Welfare State Preparedness

### Education System Preparedness

Education Policy  
Preparedness  
Score: 8

Education is a competence devolved to the four constituent nations of the United Kingdom, an assignment that long pre-dates the more recent devolutions of power that established the devolved national administrations. In Scotland, for example, the school curriculum, the exam system and the structure of undergraduate university degrees have long differed markedly from England. Consequently, it makes little sense to talk in terms of UK education policy and performance. Specifically, the Department for Education in the UK government covers only England. In Scotland, a delegated agency of the Scottish government, Education Scotland, is responsible for delivering education and there is a similar agency in Northern Ireland, although local authorities have a primary role in implementation.

There is both state and independent school provision, and a general recognition that pupils from independent schools (around 7% of those in England) fare better. The English Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission finds there to be a significant divide between the quality of education at state-funded and independent schools. However, this can be a dangerous generalization, because it is also recognized that there can be marked variations within the state sector. Parents are often inclined to relocate in order to be in the catchment area of better state schools, with some state schools matching the provision of education available in the best independent schools. In 2015, the Department for Education (DfE) proclaimed its intentions to support under-performing schools in England, which was followed by the Education and Adoption Bill that planned to convert failing schools into academies. The Educational Excellence Everywhere white paper also extends this to primary schools in England, which should be converted into academies by 2020.

In the Queen's Speech in December 2019, the Johnson government announced its intention to boost education by increasing levels of funding per pupil in every school. It announced that the government will focus on further and technical education and establish 20 institutes of technology. The institutes will offer higher technical education and training in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM subjects). In 2017, the United Kingdom ranked 16th out of 37 OECD countries with regard to public spending on education, spending 4.1% of GDP. The political salience of education has seen a concerted effort to improve the quality of education in schools, including the development of new curricula in Wales and Scotland. In England, the DfE and Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) were jointly tasked with ensuring the quality of the educational system. Following the Children and Families Act 2014, substantial changes were made to the existing support-system for children and young people in England aged 0 – 25 with special educational needs (SEN).

UK universities have a high international standing, attracting many overseas students and access for domestic students has been considerably widened over recent decades, since the Blair government set a target of 50% participation. In tertiary education, several policies to address the accessibility of university education were implemented in England, with equivalents in the other constituent nations of the United Kingdom.

In 2017, the government's digital strategy included initiatives to enhance students' digital skills, such as the Raspberry Pi Foundation, and provide computers to widen access to computing and digital learning. Although some digital competencies are supposed to be developed through the compulsory

“computing” subject, which was introduced in 2014, no strategy explicitly addresses media digital literacy. Nevertheless, these changes are intended to develop a skilled labor force able to meet the needs of the future and thereby enhance employability in the United Kingdom.

Based on tests taken in the United Kingdom in 2018, the latest PISA results showed positive developments in reading, science and maths, with England topping the list of the four devolved education systems, while but the results for Wales faces greater problems are more mixed, with a worsening of especially in regard to reading performance. Scotland has seen some decline from its previous levels, leading to criticism of the SNP, which has been in power for well over a decade. However, this is a sensitive matter because, as an OECD report commissioned by the Scottish government observes, “Scotland has an historic high regard for education.”

Despite continuing variation in educational quality at local level and the disproportionate success of independent school pupils in gaining access to the best universities, the United Kingdom’s overall performance is strong.

Citation:

<https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/en/content/youthwiki/67-skills-innovation-united-kingdom-england>

<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn01078/>

<https://www.bbc.com/news/education-50563833>

<http://www.oecd.org/education/school/Improving-Schools-in-Scotland-An-OECD-Perspective.pdf>

### Social Welfare Preparedness

Social Welfare  
Policy  
Preparedness  
Score: 7

A traditional system of social class has long been a feature of British society. Since 1997, successive governments have sought, through a variety of policy initiatives, to promote social mobility and inclusion. The last three Conservative prime ministers (Cameron, May and Johnson) have all expressed their ambition to govern in the “one nation” tradition of British Conservatism. A key plank of Johnson’s election manifesto was a leveling up of conditions for citizens in areas across the Midlands and north of England, who are adjudged to have been “left behind.”

Although the United Kingdom’s Gini coefficient has fallen recently, it remains relatively high compared to other OECD countries and the distribution of wealth has become more unequal. According to Eurostat data, the proportion of the population at risk of poverty was around the EU average before the coronavirus pandemic, although increasing demands on food banks had become a political challenge in the aftermath of the financial crisis. The youth unemployment rate (11.9%) is still more than double the overall

unemployment rate (3.8%), and significantly higher than Germany and the Netherlands, although at the lower end of the scale compared to most EU member states. There are quite marked disparities in the NEET rate, which is highest in a number of “old” industrial cities, many of which are the subject of the Johnson government’s leveling-up agenda.

Central to the United Kingdom’s provision in the fields of income support and social assistance are Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) and Universal Credit. Compared to average earnings the replacement rate of less than 20% is quite low. SSP is not accessible for the self-employed people, who have to rely on Universal Credit.

The availability of paid sick leave exceeding the statutory minimum varies across sectors, with workers in “Personal Care and Service” among those least likely to receive such an offer. Hence, many employees in this field are likely to show up for work irrespective of whether they are experiencing symptoms (e.g., of a fever or cold) or not. This highlights the importance of an adequate substitute for paid sick leave in order to prevent the spread of contagious diseases (e.g., COVID-19).

With regards to the most vulnerable, around 17 million people belong to the higher risk category for coronavirus because they are elderly, have health-related predispositions or are pregnant. Around 860,000 of those were struggling to purchase adequate food preceding the coronavirus crisis and even more will have had difficulties finding people to deliver food while shielding. People employed on zero-hour contracts will be particularly disadvantaged in terms of income and job security.

To achieve the goal of social inclusion, the UK government strives to curb barriers to equal opportunities for everyone. A contributing factor to inclusion, social mobility, is addressed by the Social Mobility Commission (SMC), an independent statutory body that monitors social mobility progress within the United Kingdom. In 2017, the Department for Education (DfE) adopted the national “Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential” plan. The plan allocated £800 million to deal with social mobility through education. In August 2018, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport published the Civil Society Strategy.

Citation:

<https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/1810/305395/cwpe2023.pdf?sequence=1>

<https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/en/content/youthwiki/4-social-inclusion-united-kingdom-england>

Health Policy  
Preparedness  
Score: 7

## Healthcare System Preparedness

The National Health Service (NHS) remains a cornerstone of the United Kingdom's universal welfare state and is widely regarded as a core public institution. Most healthcare provided by the NHS is free at the point of delivery. However, there are charges for prescriptions and dental treatment, though specific demographic groups (e.g., pensioners) are exempt from these charges. There is a limited private healthcare system.

Despite consistent real increases in public funding for healthcare by governments of all colors, provision has been unable to keep pace with rising demand. Winter healthcare "crises" and the cancelling of routine operations to free up bed space in order to cope with high demand were a standard occurrence long before the coronavirus pandemic. These issues reflect an aging population as much as problems of central funding.

As a universal service, the NHS scores very highly in terms of inclusion. The Health and Social Act 2012 enabled patients to choose a general practitioner without geographical restriction. The quality of medical provision is generally high, although waiting lists and a lack of spare bed capacity in intensive care units are known shortcomings. A particular problem, repeatedly acknowledged by successive governments, is the lack of integration between healthcare and social care systems. The problem is compounded by institutional responsibilities, which can lead to elderly patients "blocking" hospital beds because local authorities lack the resources to move them to care homes better suited to their needs. When the coronavirus pandemic struck, this became an acute problem as potentially infected patients were moved to care homes without adequate testing.

Since the Civil Contingencies Act of 2004, NHS trusts have the duty to maintain plans for public health emergencies. Together with Local Resilience Forums (LRFs), the local coordination and policy implementation were improved, thus enabling clear command structures.

Toward the end of 2019, precautions for a no-deal Brexit had seen stockpiles of many drugs increased, which created a good foundation for when the coronavirus pandemic struck. The relationship between public services had been strengthened by the framework of Local Resilience Forums (LRFs). However, emergency plans focused on the case of an influenza pandemic, which meant that aspects specific to a coronavirus (e.g., social distancing and especially stocks of personal protective equipment) were insufficiently addressed.

In addition, public services suffered from the usual budget pressures, which led to suboptimal performance levels, severe staffing pressures, and underinvestment in buildings and equipment, which in turn weakened the resilience of public services and the healthcare system.

Citation:

<https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/public-services-coronavirus>

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0141076820931452>

## Families

Family Policy  
Preparedness  
Score: 6

The United Kingdom's family policy cannot be characterized as expressing a preference for either dual-earner or traditional household concepts. This is reflected in high female labor force participation, weak employment protection and relatively little funding for family policies.

Over the last 20 years, policy initiatives to improve work-life balance and opportunities for women's participation in the labor market have included expanding the provision of childcare facilities, generous maternity leave and the introduction of more limited paternity leave. Among OECD countries, the United Kingdom has the most weeks of available maternity leave, although negative implications for career prospects still contribute to a more traditional gendered division of family work. Shared Parental Leave (SPL) was designed to improve gender equality in the workplace and – through a more equal division of labor – at home as well. Additional Paternity Leave (APL), introduced in 2011, enabled fathers to take between two and 26 weeks leave, with a maximum of 19 weeks paid. APL was only available to fathers and dependent on the renewed inception of work by the mother. In 2014, the flexibility of parental policy was boosted by Statutory Shared Parental Pay (ShPP), which challenged traditional gendered concepts by promoting paternal care and encouraging women to return to work. The main intentions behind this were the improvement of workplace equality, a reduction in the gender pay gap and increased tax revenues. ShPP allowed parents to receive 90% of their average weekly earnings, and to take leave together, at different times or split into three separate blocks of at least one week. However, take up by fathers has been low, implying a bias toward a de facto male breadwinner model.

Nursery provision is a devolved competence, with somewhat different arrangements across the four constituent nations of the United Kingdom. In England, up to 15 (for some, up to 30) hours is available for free for all children aged three to four years; Scotland offers a little more and has some provision for two year olds; and Wales offers up to 30 hours; all are subject to

some form of means testing. Because these nurseries operate during the customary working day, access to care is poor for families working outside standard working hours, leaving parents with the option to either adopt a tag-team parenting approach or look for informal childcare (e.g., through relatives). As UK childcare costs are high in comparison to most Western countries, part-time employment among women was high (40%) even before coronavirus. Before the coronavirus crisis, the OECD finds women accounted for almost twice as much home-related work as men.

Citation:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14616696.2015.1124904>

<https://www.utpjournals.press/doi/abs/10.3138/jcfs.48.2.175>

### III. Economic Crisis Response

#### Economic Response

Economic  
Recovery  
Package  
Score: 7

Responding to the economic impacts of the coronavirus pandemic has been central to policymaking in the United Kingdom in 2020. A broad array of policies has – over time – been designed and implemented to mitigate at least some of what has become the deepest economic recession since the 18th century. Given the unprecedented nature of the situation, it was to be expected that reactions would have to be adjusted to react to new developments and events, even if initially they had been presented as fixed-term measures. Measures that were planned to be temporary had to be extended (e.g., the labor market furlough scheme) and some had to be redesigned. The central goals of the measures were to keep businesses afloat by helping bridge cashflow shortfalls and thereby retain employment (and consumption), which would provide the basis for a stronger eventual recovery.

Government first reacted on 11 March 2020 with a £30 billion package in the budget. On 17 March, the government announced a £330 billion package of loan guarantees to support businesses affected by the coronavirus. On 20 March (the number of deaths from coronavirus had just passed 100), the chancellor announced the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) of “furlough” wage subsidies in which the government offered to pay 80% of the wages of employees temporarily laid off in order to protect their jobs long term. Although initially limited to three months, the scheme was eventually extended several times and, at its peak, supported 8.9 million jobs (or roughly 40% of private sector workers). For more detail on labor market measures, see below.

According to a Bruegel analysis, the UK fiscal stimulus up to early November 2020 consisted of a fiscal “impulse” (meaning a demand injection) of 8.3% of GDP, complemented by deferrals (mainly of taxes) amounting to a further 2.0% and loan financing worth 15.5%. Further measures around the lockdown at the turn of the year will add to this effort. The package includes spending to support businesses and households, strengthening healthcare, and fighting the coronavirus pandemic through testing, contact tracing, and investment in vaccine research and production. Although UK public finances had still to be consolidated after the crises of a decade earlier, the Treasury and the chancellor emphasized that they would do “whatever it takes” to support the economy, putting questions of fiscal sustainability to the side in the face of the enormous challenges.

The Bank of England took complementary action by cutting interest rates in two steps to 0.1% (the lowest rate ever) in March 2020 and expanding the existing quantitative easing (QE) program by £450 billion (again, in several stages), which eased the government’s massive borrowing effort.

In spite of the enormous size of the recovery effort, the economy contracted massively during the first lockdown, with GDP 25% lower in April than it had been in February – a decline in GDP three times larger than during the financial crisis in 2008. The government was, therefore, anxious to avoid a second nationwide lockdown, as the prime minister said before a committee of members of parliament on 16 September, because it would be financially “disastrous.”

This fear about the economic consequences likely contributed to the late imposition of further lockdown measures, despite infections rates rising throughout autumn. Tighter measures were, nevertheless, imposed on a tiered basis. Then, as evidence of a new more transmissible variant of the virus emerged, a full lockdown was imposed in early January 2021 accompanied by further public support measures.

In summary, the recovery package was sizable, appropriately adjusted when required, but did not prevent a massive economic contraction (projected to be around 10% of GDP in 2020), and was unprecedented and deeper than in many comparable countries. Fiscal and monetary policy worked well together, but coordination with non-economic policy measures (e.g., the timing of lockdowns) could have been better.

While the successive adjustments in the package were probably due to unforeseeable developments, preparation could have been better and fewer

changes might have been needed if any forward planning had been done in advance by the government. As the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee put it in their report in July 2020, the committee was “astonished to have heard in evidence that, despite a pandemic having been 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. HM Treasury waited until mid-March before designing the economic support schemes it would put in place, creating initial uncertainty for many businesses and individuals.” In addition, criticism focused on the fact that the majority of business support measures were of a one-size-fits-all nature, despite some crucial sectors of the economy needing more bespoke support.

Citation:  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/chancellor-of-the-exchequer-rishi-sunak-on-covid19-response>  
 OECD Economic Surveys: United Kingdom, 2017  
 OECD Economic Outlook, Volume 2020 Issue 2;  
<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/2024/documents/22788/default/>  
<https://www.bruegel.org/publications/datasets/covid-national-dataset/>

**Sustainability of Economic Response**

Recovery  
 Package  
 Sustainability  
 Score: 4

As described above, the central purpose of the recovery packages was to help cope with a public health emergency and support the economy through the encompassing economic crisis, one that (as Chancellor Sunak put it) was an economic fight like no other peacetime fight. To that end, government interventions on a scale hitherto unimaginable were employed, which consciously crossed boundaries of ideology and orthodoxy.

The UK’s economic recovery plans made no specific reference to using the crisis to “build back better” (a slogan used inter alia by the United Nations). However, when the economic situation improved over the summer and the economy rebounded sharply, the prime minister at the end of June announced ideas that sounded similar, emphasizing that this was the time to be ambitious and use the moment to correct long-standing economic problems. Announcing a £5 billion plan for a “new deal” to build homes and infrastructure, Johnson set out to accelerate plans from the Conservative manifesto.

The investment plan included £1.5 billion for hospital maintenance and buildings, £1 billion for new school buildings, and £12 billion to help build 180,000 new affordable homes for private ownership and rent over the next eight years. Most of these measures had previously been announced and budgeted for. With the focus on maintaining jobs and livelihoods during the coronavirus crisis, there was little appetite for new ideas and no consensus on or obvious ways that things should be done differently in the future.

The United Kingdom has always emphasized the importance of an environmentally sustainable economy and in 2019 the United Kingdom was the first G-7 country to introduce legislation committing the country to becoming carbon neutral by 2050. However, this had little impact on the government coronavirus recovery plans. Although the Plan for Jobs included measures to increase the carbon efficiency of the public sector and social housing, together with subsidies to improve home insulation, this was only a minor measure over a period of several years.

Citation:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-53234058>

### Labor Market Response

Labor Market  
Policy Response  
Score: 9

The chancellor of the exchequer was quick to introduce measures to safeguard workers employed in sectors forced to close during the lockdowns, arguing that the very high cost to the public purse was justified. As early as 20 March, he announced a comprehensive scheme to protect jobs during the coronavirus pandemic, namely the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS). It was to become the government's most expensive part of the economic recovery program, costing £47 billion between April and October 2020, according to Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) estimates. Paying up to 80% of the wages of employees unable to work due to the coronavirus pandemic (up to a maximum of £2,500 a month), the scheme saw massive and rapid take up. The scheme subsidized the wages of 9.6 million "furloughed" employees at some point, which is about a third of the workforce. Initially limited to three months (March to May), the scheme was later extended until the end of October. From July, the scheme became more flexible regarding the permissible number of hours worked by employees, and a higher share of wages and national insurance contributions had to be paid by employers. As the worsening of the pandemic situation triggered another national lockdown at the end of October, the scheme was further extended shortly before Christmas until 30 April 2021. A replacement scheme (the Jobs Support Scheme) – which was less generous, had a higher work requirement for employees and was intended to weed out unviable jobs – was postponed several times.

After representations from business interests and media pundits complaining that the self-employed had been neglected, a similar Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) supported up to 2.7 million people in several rounds. When infection declined during the summer, the Eat Out to Help Out scheme, which offered a subsidy of up to £10 to eat out, was introduced to encourage people to return to hospitality venues.

The furlough scheme was generally regarded very positively. It constitutes an innovation in the UK approach and can be considered successful in preventing a sizable rise in unemployment. Although it was supposed to expire in the autumn, the government was fairly quick to extend it as a further lockdown became necessary.

However, the government's attempts to strictly limit the time during which the scheme would be available can be criticized. Circumstances forced the government to U-turn on this issue at the end of October 2020, but the government's hesitation to extend the scheme sufficiently in advance and thereby create certainty represents suboptimal policymaking.

Citation:

<https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/coronavirus-job-retention-scheme.pdf>

<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8898/>

<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8879/>

### Fiscal Response

Fiscal Policy  
Response  
Score: 7

As stated above, the volume of fiscal interventions in 2020 was unprecedented, comprising a mix of loans, loan guarantees and direct payments. This included spending to support businesses (through loan guarantee schemes) and households (through wage support schemes) as well as strengthening healthcare, and fighting the pandemic through testing and contact tracing. Spending has been wholly transparent with details explained on the government website, in press briefings and conferences, and in ministers' statements to parliament, and can be regarded as appropriate. At the time of writing, the government has provided limited information about how it intends to stabilize public finances following the coronavirus crisis, although the government has signaled that it will raise corporation tax, and stick to electoral commitments not to raise income tax and VAT rates.

Given the unprecedented nature of the economic crisis (affecting nearly all economic sectors and regions at the same time and to the same extent), the government was committed to doing everything it could to dampen the economic crash. Echoing the famous words of ECB boss Mario Draghi during the euro crisis, Chancellor Sunak repeatedly proclaimed that he would do "whatever it takes." After a modest original package in March, a succession of additional measures were introduced. According to the latest IMF tracker, the United Kingdom had committed to fiscal interventions worth £280 billion in 2020/21 by November 2020. The government has since announced further support in the wake of the post-Christmas lockdown.

Prime Minister Johnson thus deviated from his earlier (and classically Conservative) position of fiscal prudence as a central value. The Johnson government had already changed course and announced a more flexible fiscal stance compared to its predecessor. The government has sought to support future economic viability by helping to cushion the economic downturn so as to preserve as much of the economic structures as possible. The projected budget deficit for 2020/21 may reach an unprecedented £400 billion or 19% of GDP, almost twice that during the financial crisis.

Government debt, which was largely stable and on a downward path to around 80% of GDP prior to the coronavirus pandemic, is projected to rise significantly in 2020/21 and exceed 105% of GDP in 2021. Very low interest rates as well as the fact that the Bank of England holds significant amounts of government debt (due to quantitative easing) helps keep the amount of interest to be paid on this growing debt low. However, an obvious implication of this approach is that it will place a burden on future generations to service and, potentially, repay the debt incurred.

Citation:

<https://www.bruegel.org/publications/datasets/covid-national-dataset/>

<https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/decision-making-crisis-coronavirus>

<https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19#U>

## Research and Innovation Response

Research and  
Innovation Policy  
Response  
Score: 9

To fight the coronavirus pandemic, the United Kingdom was able to draw on the strengths of its research infrastructure as well as its biotech industry, which is among the best in the world. In 2020/21, its main contribution was the quick development and production of COVID-19 vaccines. Among over 100 vaccine projects initiated worldwide, the University of Oxford project was one of the first to make significant progress, as demonstrated by the fact that as early as July 2020 it was in phase three clinical trials and it was authorized for clinical use in the United Kingdom at the end of December 2020.

Government support and coordination came both in the form of the UK Vaccine Taskforce (led by Kate Bingham) and from early financial support for the individual vaccine projects. AstraZeneca, the British-Swedish pharmaceutical company which partnered with the University of Oxford to produce their vaccine, received £150 million for test services, for example. However, it is important to stress that the vaccine research strategy drew on long-term funding for research and support for scientific excellence, specifically in life sciences. Trials of existing drugs (e.g., the steroid,

dexamethasone), which examine whether the drugs could be used to alleviate severe cases of COVID-19, have been a feature of the UK scientific effort.

Starting in July 2020, the UK government also began to enter into contracts about vaccine doses with (as of 29 November 2020) seven different developers for a combined 357 million doses. Like many other countries, faced with uncertainty about the eventual success rate of individual vaccines and competition for (initially limited) supplies, the United Kingdom decided to spread its risk and place generous orders in order to achieve its goal of protecting its population as early as possible. The government also invested in manufacturing capacity.

An attempt to develop a UK track and trace app was rapidly abandoned and must be regarded as a policy failure.

There were no other discernible attempts to foster social innovations on a scale comparable to the biotechnological R&D effort.

Citation:

<https://www.europeanpharmaceuticalreview.com/article/136739/vaccine-innovation-in-the-uk-smes-and-national-capabilities/>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/vaccines-manufacturing-and-innovation-centre-to-open-12-months-ahead-of-schedule>

<https://www.ukri.org/our-work/tackling-the-impact-of-covid-19/vaccines-and-treatments/how-the-uk-is-transforming-vaccine-manufacturing/>

## IV. Welfare State Response

### Education System Response

Education  
Response  
Score: 6

Because education is a competence devolved to the four constituent nations of the United Kingdom and in which there is a substantial role for local authorities, approaches to education have varied. Nevertheless, there has been a common commitment to trying to keep schools open as much as possible and concern that the loss of education time has diminished opportunities for the COVID-19 student generation. Schools generally remained open for the children of key workers, and there has been a preference for nursery and primary pupils as well as older children in key exam years. University approaches have varied, with some universities trying at the start of the 2020/21 academic year to continue with at least some in-person teaching, but obliged to move to online only teaching at the start of 2021. Nevertheless, university courses are being delivered, although students complain of missing out on part of the university experience, and there have been demands for fees

and lodging costs to be reimbursed. This will be an issue for individual universities to decide.

Planning for England at the Department for Education (DfE) only started when schools were closed, so initially schools were left to come up with their own answers. While schools were able to use their free school meals budget to provide for students, the DfE came up with a voucher scheme only weeks later. The novel challenge of online learning was aggravated by the lack of government guidance and a national learning-framework, combined with a shortage of digital devices for socio-economically disadvantaged students. Only after a month did the government begin to respond to the need for digital devices to support disadvantaged students' remote learning and to issue guidance to schools on conducting remote learning. This contributed to a significant disparities between schools in terms of the quality of education provided. Students in the private school sector and in better state schools have been offered more.

In the context of COVID-19, the government announced funds to upgrade the further education (FE) estate in England, support for institutes of technology and a national skills fund to help access technical training. Over £100 million has been invested in remote education by the Department of Education, mainly for providing laptops and internet access. In addition, children from the most vulnerable families had access to nurseries, schools and colleges. However, concerns have been raised about inadequacies in the support children and young people with special educational needs (SEN) received during school closures.

To compensate for the loss of teaching time caused by COVID-19, the government announced a £1 billion COVID-19 catch-up plan in June 2020. Under it, £650 million was to be shared across state primary and secondary schools over the 2020/21 academic year, while £350 million was pledged to set up the National Tutoring Programme, which will provide up to two million disadvantaged young people with greater access to high-quality education. Moreover, in August 2020, statutory guidance for schools was released by the government regarding special educational needs and learning disabilities, online learning, safe working, and access to digital devices and summer schools. When schools reopened in September 2020, further guidance on how to keep children safe in education was published.

Despite the many efforts, toward the end of 2020, Ofsted stated that education had been disrupted on a large scale due to COVID-19 school closures and pupil absences. Especially in north west England and the West Midlands, school attendance has been significantly disrupted. Despite Scotland's earlier

experience with using algorithmic grading as a substitute for school exams, which proved highly controversial, and created a lot of uncertainty for pupils and parents, the same mistakes were made in England only a few days later. In both cases the governments had to backtrack on their approach. These government U-turns, reverting back to teacher assessments, became a political fiasco. In England, the government was also (twice) forced to U-turn on free school meals after a widely supported social media campaign led by footballer Marcus Rashford.

Citation:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/billion-pound-covid-catch-up-plan-to-tackle-impact-of-lost-teaching-time>

<https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/decision-making-crisis.pdf>

### Social Welfare Response

Social Welfare  
Policy Response  
Score: 7

The government sought to promote social inclusion by rapidly implementing social security changes, mainly introduced through the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), and other departments. To curtail negative economic effects on households, the government expanded social security benefits, and loosened existing restrictions on accessing Universal Credit and the Working Tax Credit. In addition, the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) and the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) can be seen as measures designed to prevent exclusion by keeping people supported by the schemes connected to the labor market.

To guard against losses of income, the government put in place several protections for employees. These included the ability to claim Statutory Sick Pay from the first day of illness or self-isolation, mortgage holidays, and new rules temporarily banning evictions. In addition, housing benefit was increased for all new and existing claimants to cover up the 30th percentile of market rents. Between March and October, the number of Universal Credit claimants in the United Kingdom rose from around three million to over 5.7 million, while CJRS and SEISS covered around 10 million claims – a third of the total workforce – at its peak.

On the one hand, the gap between employees' full salaries and the replacement payments still results in a loss of household income – and with it aggregate consumption spending. On the other hand, terminating these support policies will be a challenge, as the government's frequent last-minute extensions to the policies has demonstrated. Young people, low-income earners and those on insecure work contracts will be especially hard hit, with many having problems paying their bills.

In terms of the inclusion of people with disabilities, the United Kingdom's coronavirus response is an example of good practice. Important information has regularly been provided in British Sign Language or in a simple format, while the National Health Service has offered guidance on how to include people with mental health conditions, learning disabilities and autism in coronavirus responses. In addition, the government encouraged supermarkets to give priority access to disabled customers (and NHS staff) at certain times of day. Altogether, substantial efforts have been made to include chronically ill and vulnerable groups. With the high incidence of infections among certain ethnic groups, efforts were made to enlist community leaders to ensure people in these groups obtained access to healthcare services and information.

Citation:

<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8973/>

[https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/coronavirus-job-retention-scheme\\_0.pdf](https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/coronavirus-job-retention-scheme_0.pdf)

<https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/the-effects-of-the-coronavirus-crisis-on-workers/>

### Healthcare System Response

Health Policy  
Response  
Score: 6

On 31 January, the first coronavirus infection was confirmed in the United Kingdom. After a relatively quiet February, infection numbers exploded in the United Kingdom in March and it became evident that not enough attention had been learned from the situation in Italy where the trajectory of the virus was three or so weeks ahead of the United Kingdom. As the healthcare system had to adapt, the Department of Health and Social Care, and NHS England recommended radical changes to the provision of NHS primary care services in England, which were mainly implemented in the week beginning 16 March 2020. Similar changes were adopted in the three other constituent nations of the United Kingdom. To ensure that the healthcare system was not overwhelmed and to reduce risks of transmission of the virus, many services were provided remotely and primary care providers operated a system of triage to screen patients before allowing an in-person consultation. Patients with coronavirus-related symptoms were sent to dedicated respiratory clinics or “primary care COVID-19 hubs” to minimize the risk of contagion in general services. Coronavirus homecare services were put in place by the NHS to provide as many patients as possible with adequate health services.

The use of existing information technology during the coronavirus crisis combined with patient support available through the NHS 111 advisory service played a key role in coping with the increase in demand caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Additionally, regulatory requirements were reduced and clinical care optimized to relieve healthcare services. A striking feature of

the response to the coronavirus crisis was the speed of innovation, both in treating COVID-19 patients and organizing health services. However, there was considerable uncertainty in approaches, especially in the earlier stages of the pandemic, including whether or not to wear masks.

Regarding testing capacity, the government proclaimed at the beginning of April its commitment to perform 100,000 tests per day by 30 April after being criticized for the United Kingdom's low testing capacity compared to other countries. Although this eventually led to a rapid expansion in testing capacity, the original decision lacked adequate coordination and communication between those responsible for its execution – the diagnostics industry, the NHS and government experts – which hampered its effectiveness. Testing capacity continued to increase and the testing target was attained, albeit with some massaging of the figures, but for several months it was a clear testing was catching up rather than being ahead of the curve.

Despite organizational changes, healthcare services were under severe pressure, but were just about able to cope with COVID-19 patients. As spare capacity ran low, emergency hospitals (Nightingale hospitals) were rapidly built to great fanfare, but then hardly used as the peak of the first wave passed and infections fell. But a significant failing across the United Kingdom involved the transfer of patients from hospitals to care homes, with many patients being admitted without testing to care homes, which led to a high number of deaths in care homes.

Patient waiting times for other health conditions and alterations to remote services led to worsening inequalities for technologically or otherwise challenged patients. Elective surgery was postponed for many conditions, and delays in referrals and diagnoses for other diseases risk poorer health outcomes.

At the beginning of the pandemic, stocks of quality personal protective equipment (PPE), the availability of ventilators, coronavirus testing capacity and the contact tracing system were deficient. Testing sites lacked tests, as testing kits were difficult to obtain, and a clear directions for NHS and social care workers on how to get tested was lacking.

An undoubted success was the approach to vaccination. Early decisions on purchases and the rapid authorization of the first proven vaccines by the health regulator allowed the United Kingdom to be the first country in the world to launch its vaccination program, which started on 8 December after regulatory approval had been given by British authorities on 2 December. At the start of January, the program was scaled up and intensified, enabling a high proportion

of the most vulnerable groups to be vaccinated. A somewhat controversial decision involved concentrating on giving as many first doses as possible, while delaying second doses beyond what the manufacturers recommended.

Citation:

<https://journals.sagepub.com/eprint/EWGGCYX8SUPDA4JE2WFP/full>

### Family Policy Response

Family Support  
Policies  
Score: 5

When the United Kingdom went into lockdown on 23 March 2020, families had to adapt as schools were closed, parents were furloughed or worked from home, and outside support was no longer available. This meant that many parents had to homeschool their children while also working. The exception were children of key workers for whom schools remained open, but otherwise there were hardly any explicit measures to support families. Many parents reported that their work had been disrupted as a consequence of having to take on new childcare responsibilities. This is evidenced in parents being twice as likely to be furloughed as those without children and changes in weekday working patterns. Studies find that parental time spent on developmental childcare, such as helping with homework and homeschooling, has risen by 169%.

With regards to the gendered distribution of childcare, women carried out two-thirds of additional childcare per day, while men contributed on average more than 45 minutes per day more in paid work than women. Women are said to be more likely to lose work through childcare burdens during the coronavirus crisis, with a third of mothers stating they lost work or work hours due to a lack of childcare support. This is especially prominent with respect to black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) mothers, where the proportion rose to 44%. Furthermore, the coronavirus has led to a widening of the gender pay gap.

Due to the disproportionate share of part-time employment undertaken by women, women were hit harder than men, as part-time jobs fell by 70% in the first three months of the pandemic. As schools and daycare centers closed, essential childcare support for working women disappeared. Compared to fathers, mothers were 47% more likely to lose their jobs, were more likely to be furloughed and 50% more likely to have their work hours cut, according to a study by the Institute of Fiscal Studies shows. It seems that – during the lockdown – the government mainly responded to this with remote working solutions, which proved inconsistent with adequate childcare.

Citation:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/business-55002687>  
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/articles/parentinginlockdowncoronavirusandtheeffectsonworklifebalance/2020-07-2>  
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/07/how-coronavirus-is-widening-the-uk-gender-pay-gap>

## International Solidarity

International  
Cooperation  
Score: 7

At the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, the United Kingdom refused to join its former EU partners and join a PPE procurement initiative. Mainly for symbolic political reasons, the government wanted to go it alone, even if that led to increased costs and less market power.

In September, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced a 30% increase in funding to the World Health Organization (WHO) at the United Nations' 2020 General Assembly. The stated amount of £340 million in funding over the next four years would not only make the United Kingdom the WHO's largest state donor, but would also contribute to the COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund, initiated by the WHO. The COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund will ensure tests, treatments and vaccines will be widely accessible and affordable.

The United Kingdom pledged to contribute up to £500 million toward the COVAX initiative, coordinated by Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) and the WHO.

In order to support the world's poorest countries, UK Finance Minister Rishi Sunak suggested updating a G-20 action plan in October 2020. Specially, Sunak suggested extending the Debt Service Suspension Initiative, which aims to ease the debt burden for the world's poorest countries, and thereby foster international cooperation and solidarity during the coronavirus pandemic. However, the government was widely criticized, including by all living former UK prime ministers, for its plans to temporarily reduce the United Kingdom's foreign aid budget.

Citation:  
<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2020-03-16/29852>  
<https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/uk-largest-donor-who-covid-19-covax-facility/>  
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-britain-g20-imf-idUSKBN26Y37A>

# Resilience of Democracy

## Media Freedom

Media Freedom  
Score: 8

The United Kingdom has a lively and independent media sector, and although politicians often complain about coverage and have tried from time to time to curtail the activities of journalists on national security grounds, they have made scant headway. Indeed, as the coronavirus pandemic has unfolded, the media have given the government a hard time. Broadcasters have a statutory obligation to be balanced, which can lead to one side or the other complaining about bias.

Despite the massively increased importance of social media and the internet, television remains the most important medium in the United Kingdom. Ofcom, the media industry regulator, oversees the statutory requirement for public and private television and radio channels to remain politically neutral, and aim to provide fair and balanced coverage of all major parties.

As usually happens when a new government comes to power, the Johnson-led government floated ideas for reforming the BBC's structure and funding, challenging the flat rate BBC license fee, which has been in place for decades. Faced with criticisms of partisanship, in October 2020, new BBC Director General Tim Davie issued a guideline to restrict BBC staff from expressing personal political views on "controversial" matters, such as trans-rights or the Black Lives Matter movement. He has also curbed the ability of presenters to undertake paid activities like contributing to corporate events. The appointment of Richard Sharp as the new chair of the BBC raised some eyebrows, as he was a former adviser to and boss of the chancellor, Rishi Sunak. However, Sharp is well qualified for the role, and it would be exceptional and a matter rapidly seized on by other media interests if he showed favor to the government.

The British newspaper landscape and nowadays the British online news portal landscape is traditionally varied, but highly competitive, although the loss of advertising revenue and the need to make a success of subscription models is proving challenging. Some publications like the Guardian and the Times Group set international standards for investigative reporting, and the Financial

Times has a global reputation for quality. Other news outlets are often openly partisan, favoring their preferred political party (though their allegiances can change) or, in the case of Brexit, having a one-sided stance on a key issue of the day. This can, however, be regarded as an expression of freedom of speech, not a restriction of press freedom. It is, nevertheless, noteworthy that during the coronavirus pandemic, there has been critical and at times merciless media coverage of the shortcomings of the government's actions by both broadcast and print media, the latter regardless of their traditional allegiances.

While there is no formal mechanism for penalizing "fake news" most observers would consider it not to be a concern. During periods of lockdown since the start of the pandemic, the government has held daily press conferences, usually led by either the prime minister or a senior minister and also featuring experts, such as the chief medical and scientific officers. These press conferences tend to be carried by the rolling news channels, and serve both as a means for the government to communicate its approach and to have it scrutinized.

Citation:

<https://rsf.org/en/united-kingdom>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/speeches/2020/a-roadmap-for-reform>

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/sep/03/the-guardian-view-on-boris-johnson-and-the-bbc-its-our-fight-too>

### Civil Rights and Political Liberties

Civil Rights and  
Political Liberties  
Score: 9

From the very beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, the Johnson government has been quite reluctant to curtail the civil rights of British citizens. Extended lockdown regulations did not come into effect until late March 2020, when thousands of citizens, several members of the government and the prime minister himself had already fallen ill with COVID-19. Furthermore, the government has been quite eager, under pressure from some members of parliament to lift, restrictions as early as possible, sometimes against the recommendation of its own expert advisers. There has, in short, been a persistent three-way tension between restrictions to contain the virus (e.g., wearing of masks), concerns about civil liberties, and worries about damage to the economy and other health considerations (e.g., cancer care and mental health outcomes).

On March 25, the Coronavirus Bill received royal assent after its swift adoption in parliament. The bill includes countless measures that aim to address the COVID-19 crisis, such as support for the National Health Service and its workers. Lockdown powers were granted to the government through the Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984 and at that time already

enforced by the secretary of state, although some regulations regarding quarantine and prohibitions on gatherings were covered under the Coronavirus Bill. The Coronavirus Act 2020 has a sunset clause of two years, which can be extended by six months if parliament approves.

Restrictions have to be reviewed by the government at least every three weeks and, as soon as they are no longer seen as necessary, they have to be terminated. The regulations expire after a period of six months. As its provisions can only be interpreted as relating to COVID-19, the Coronavirus Act is not designed to create permanent change. Enforcement has been relatively low-key, initially aiming to persuade rather than penalize, despite some high-profile instances of overzealous policing. However, faced with some egregious transgressions, the authorities have been prepared to issue sizable fines, especially since the start of the post-Christmas lockdown as evidence of a mutation of the virus with a higher transmission rate emerged.

In summary, the government has unquestionably protected political and civil rights, and it has done so in the face of strong political criticisms about its handling of the pandemic.

Citation:

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/sep/21/coronavirus-government-liberties-tories-police-powers-laws>

<https://policynetwork.org/opinions/essays/power-and-the-pandemic-civil-liberties-in-the-age-of-coronavirus/>

<http://blog.petrieflom.law.harvard.edu/2020/05/26/united-kingdom-global-responses-covid19/>

## Judicial Review

Judicial Review  
Score: 9

As yet, there have not been any high-profile court cases concerning the handling of the coronavirus pandemic by the different levels of government, although there have been some mutterings by politicians about civil liberties and the equitable treatment of localities subject to differentiated lockdown restrictions. Emergency regulations or laws have not been widely challenged, because they are generally seen as necessary even where liberties are restricted. Where objections have been raised by Conservative Party members of parliament, support from opposition parties (or abstentions) have ensured the smooth passage of bills.

The UK system of common law and the centralization of political power in the UK parliament provide a different case for the point of judicial review from many other political systems. Courts in the United Kingdom provide independent judgments on a given dispute. It is not the courts' task to engage proactively in the review of policies or politics. The Supreme Court of the

United Kingdom, established in 2009, holds jurisdiction over actions of the UK government and can rule on interpretations of laws, but cannot overturn primary legislation.

Although the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 provides the United Kingdom with extensive emergency regulatory powers, statutory instruments were introduced by the Coronavirus Act 2020. Due to the notion of parliamentary sovereignty, this primary legislation cannot be challenged in a court of law. Instead, the regulations can be challenged if they exceed the powers conferred in the Public Health (Control of Diseases) Act 1984 (as amended). As the Coronavirus Act 2020 was not excluded from the Human Rights Act 1998, judicial review can examine its compatibility with ECHR rights. Similarly, the provisions based on the 1984 Health Act, which provides legitimacy for regulations by the secretary of state such as movement restrictions, have to be compatible with ECHR rights.

As the final court of appeal for civil cases, the UK Supreme Court ruled in January 2021 that insurance agencies have to cover businesses' losses caused by the government's COVID-19 measures.

The legal review mechanisms in parliament and the scrutiny of independent "watchdog" agencies have, however, been fully functional throughout the pandemic and the government has made no attempt to interfere with their work.

Citation:

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/covid19-uk-constitution/>

<https://verfassungsblog.de/right-restriction-or-restricting-rights-the-uk-acts-to-address-covid-19/>

### Informal Democratic Rules

Informal  
Democratic Rules  
Score: 10

The logic of the two-party system is a key characteristic of the United Kingdom's political landscape, no matter how many parties are actually represented in the UK parliament. Since Keir Starmer took over as leader of the opposition Labour Party in April 2020, public confrontation between the government and opposition has somewhat regained its characteristically tough yet fair tone. After the drift of the Labour Party under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, the opposition has been largely constructive, even when criticizing the government.

Party polarization, while undoubtedly present, has not proved to be problematic for decision-making in dealing with the pandemic. Indeed, if anything, objections from inside the ruling Conservative Party have been more

of a problem for the government. Tensions have flared periodically between central government and the devolved administrations. But there has also been cross-party cooperation, since ministers from the devolved governments led by the SNP, Labour Party and the DUP have been invited to emergency COBRA meetings. The Labour mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, was also allowed to join the meetings, which coordinate the actions of government bodies. Nevertheless, there have been disputes, such as when the (Labour) Mayor of Greater Manchester sought greater financial support to sustain the local lockdown, when his area had more severe restrictions imposed on it than other parts of the country.

The UK parliamentary system is designed to provide political stability even in situations of societal polarization. The first-past-the-post electoral system (usually) equips the winning party with a comfortable majority, while the centralization of power in parliament ensures the possibility of stable government, explicitly in times of crisis. Given that the incumbent Johnson government has an 80-seat majority in the House of Commons, party polarization is no obstacle to policymaking in the United Kingdom.

Citation:

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/24/covid-coalition-government-considered-by-senior-conservatives>

# Resilience of Governance

## I. Executive Preparedness

### Crisis Management System

Crisis  
Management  
System  
Score: 5

The Cabinet Office had long considered a pandemic to be the most likely non-malicious risk facing the government. In 2011, the UK Influenza Pandemic Preparedness Strategy was initiated (and updated in 2014). In 2013, the Pandemic Flu Guidance report provided information for local planners and the business sector, and an ethical framework for the government's response (updated in 2017).

In 2016, Exercise Cygnus looked at preparations for an influenza-type pandemic. A three-day simulation exercise carried out by NHS England, Exercise Cygnus involved 950 emergency planning officers from, among others, 14 government departments, local public services and prisons. Afterwards, a number of problems were identified, including that the National Health Service was in danger of collapsing in a pandemic and there would be shortages of essential equipment (including a lack of PPE and intensive care ventilators). The exercise concluded that the United Kingdom's preparedness was not sufficient and made several recommendations to improve the situation. Among the issues mentioned were the lack of coordination between the involved agencies ("silo planning") and the need for better understanding of the public reaction to a pandemic. A total of 22 recommendations were presented. However, while accepted, these recommendations were not implemented by government before 2020. Since the findings of the exercise were not published, many actors were unaware of the findings, and could neither learn from the exercise nor address the identified shortages.

An illustration of “siloed planning” was that Exercise Cygnus did not address the potential economic impacts of a pandemic. As a consequence, economic support schemes were delayed at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, as they first had to be put together very hurriedly in the weeks leading up to the budget, and were then adjusted during the course of the coronavirus crisis.

The United Kingdom crisis management systems in the United Kingdom were thus in place and ready for action prior to the pandemic. However, while problems were in principle known, this information had not been (or at least only insufficiently) acted upon and too little use was made of Italy’s experience in anticipating the United Kingdom’s vulnerabilities. If the readiness of the crisis management system had really been as good as the United Kingdom’s second place in a worldwide ranking of the 2019 Global Health Security Index indicated (and first place in the sub-category “rapid response to and mitigation of the spread of an epidemic”) the number of infections and the death toll from coronavirus would have been lower without doubt.

:  
<https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/how-fit-public-services-coronavirus.pdf>  
[https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/502/pdf/;](https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/502/pdf/)

## II. Executive Response

### Effective Policy Formulation

Effective Policy  
Formulation  
Score: 5

The UK government’s reaction to the increase in coronavirus infections was slow and volatile. Given that UK scientists developed the first test for the coronavirus on 10 January, the first two coronavirus cases in the United Kingdom were confirmed on 31 January and the first coronavirus-related death in the United Kingdom was recorded on 28 February, action by the UK government was relatively late.

One reason for this was the limited political attention coronavirus received in the United Kingdom due to the fact that on 31 January the United Kingdom formally left the European Union, thus bringing to a close five years of intense political battle.

The government made extensive use of scientific advisory committees (e.g., SAGE, the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, and NERVTAG, the New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group) and has claimed throughout to be “following the science.” But in the early stages of the

pandemic, this advice, as signaled at SAGE meetings in January and February, was that the coronavirus posed only a “low” to “moderate” risk.

It was only when one of the advisory teams modeling the spread of infections produced dramatic projections of the likely number of deaths that the tone changed. In early March official action kicked into gear, with a widely publicized press conference by the prime minister and the publication of the government’s Coronavirus Action Plan. The latter set out information about the virus, emphasized that the United Kingdom was well prepared for disease outbreaks, and laid out four phases that would guide government action, namely to “contain, delay, research and mitigate.” The government also outlined national responsibilities and the scientific evidence on which their actions were based.

Compared to other, equally affected European countries, the United Kingdom was slow to impose non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPI), such as closing down sports and cultural events with over 1,000 spectators, or other restrictions. With hindsight, allowing the Cheltenham horse-racing festival to proceed was a mistake. The first lockdown came into effect on 23 March – two months after the first COBRA meeting on COVID-19 and two weeks after Italy had implemented a national lockdown. Most European neighbors introduced measures in the first week of March, then gradually strengthened them in the middle of the month. The United Kingdom waited and then (after closing schools on 20 March) suddenly moved into lockdown with the closing of shops and restaurants on 24 March. Checks or testing at borders were never introduced.

Once the main policy elements were put in place (the emergency economic programs and labor market interventions, the repertoire of NPI measures from social distancing to lockdowns, and support for the development of a vaccine), there were no fundamental changes, just changes in emphasis. The economic and labor market programs were repeatedly extended, NPI measures were deployed with increasing regional differentiation, and lockdowns were avoided as long as possible. While opposition to lockdowns among Conservative members of parliament contributed to the latter, this was counterproductive since the unavoidable lockdowns then had to be longer and deeper to rein in the number of infections.

Citation:

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/869827/Coronavirus\\_action\\_plan\\_-\\_a\\_guide\\_to\\_what\\_you\\_can\\_expect\\_across\\_the\\_UK.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/869827/Coronavirus_action_plan_-_a_guide_to_what_you_can_expect_across_the_UK.pdf)

<https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/decision-making-crisis.pdf>

<https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/blog/boris-johnson-coronavirus-leadership>

## Policy Feedback and Adaptation

Policy Feedback  
and Adaptation  
Score: 8

The UK government (acting for England, while also making certain pan-UK decisions) and the three devolved national administrations had the capacity to adapt rapidly as the pandemic has evolved. However, the aggregate response has been hindered by political hesitation and, sometimes, conflicting views among decision-makers about the best course of action. In a perverse way, the many changes in policy direction testify to this capacity for change.

As far as scientific advice about the coronavirus pandemic is concerned, the government has a range of advisers in place. The most visible among them are the chief medical officer and the chief scientific adviser. These advisers largely build on the work of a number of advisory committees, such as the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), (particularly important for the coronavirus pandemic) the New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group (NERVTAG), and the Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Modelling (SPI-M).

Although the government claimed from the outset to be “following the science,” there have been accusations that the membership of these committees is too narrow and unbalanced, leading to the neglect of some of the harder trade-offs involved in managing the pandemic, especially where scientific findings and data do not suggest a clear course of action. Moreover, advisory committees are set up to provide tailored scientific advice based on available evidence, but are not responsible for formulating government policy, which is the domain of ministers and their departments. Governments can draw on a range of other sources for advice, including the academic community, party political interests, parliamentary scrutiny and the analyses of think tanks. Their direct influence on the course of government is probably in reverse order: while think tank and academic reflections give the deepest analyses, they have little direct influence. During the coronavirus pandemic, parliamentary committee inquiries have proven to work in a timely manner and that their findings can have consequences if they gain political traction. At a political level, pressure from members of parliament belonging to the ruling Conservative Party concerned about the adverse effects of lockdown have had some influence, as have interventions from local government leaders.

The politicization of lockdown measures among Conservative members of parliament (on 10 November, a group of Conservative members of parliament formed the COVID Recovery Group, after 34 of them had voted against the lockdown in parliament on 4 November) prompted the prime minister in late November to engage with them.

Citation:

<https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/decision-making-crisis.pdf>

Public  
Consultation  
Score: 2

## Public Consultation

The United Kingdom has a weaker tradition, compared to many EU member states, of systematically incorporating civil society organizations into decision-making processes. However, since 2010 a significant effort has been made to make government more open and, in 2019, the UK National Action Plan for Open Government 2019 – 2021 was published. The plan sets out eight commitments in the areas of policymaking influence, transparency on publicly owned resources and access to data. One of these commitments involves public participation, although not in a very detailed way, since it only vaguely commits the government to take citizens' views into account.

As a founding member of the Open Government Partnership, the United Kingdom has long been committed to improving engagement and interaction with civil society. One of the instruments through which this is being done is impact assessments, with drafts circulated before being finalized. Feedback on these drafts is then considered before decisions are taken on whether or not to proceed with the policy change under review.

That said, during the coronavirus crisis, time was of the essence. While other consultations went on as usual, this was not the case as far as measures related to the coronavirus crisis were concerned. Because the assumed readiness in terms of the pandemic response turned out not to be as good as expected, and plans for dealing with the economic emergency had to be rapidly designed and implemented, the government did not have the time or capacity to involve societal actors in the process to any significant degree. Media scrutiny and campaigns by high-profile individuals (e.g., the footballer Marcus Rashford, who successfully campaigned for the government to extend the provision of free school meals) have had some influence. Some efforts have been made to engage with community leaders, for example, to encourage vaccine take-up within black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities

The government consulted with health experts and professionals. These consultations were neither unfair nor clientelistic.

Citation:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-national-action-plan-for-open-government-2019-2021>

## Crisis Communication

Crisis  
Communication  
Score: 8

Beginning in early March 2020 with the presentation of the Coronavirus Action Plan, the UK government has actively attempted to keep the public informed about the COVID-19 pandemic. For three months, between 16 March and 23 June, it did so through daily press conferences in which the prime minister or a member of the cabinet provided updates about the pandemic's development and government measures. The devolved administrations, reflecting their lead role in healthcare, have made an equivalent effort. Emphasizing the government message to "follow the science," the prime minister (or cabinet minister) was regularly accompanied during the press conferences by two leading representatives of the medical and science fields, namely the chief scientific adviser, the chief medical officer or another adviser, depending on the subject of the day. The daily briefings by the Scottish first minister, Nicola Sturgeon, followed a similar format.

This direct communication was intended to symbolize the centrality to the government of fighting the pandemic – with the side-effect of being able to exert a degree of control over the message. Journalists were only able to attend via video link and were limited in how many questions they could ask, although this did not inhibit intense media scrutiny of government actions. Journalists representing local newspapers were able to pose questions, not just the "heavyweights" from the main broadcasters. As these press conferences evolved, some members of the public were also able to ask questions. The regular presence of scientific advisers – some even acquiring a media "persona," such as the deputy chief medical officer Jonathan van Tam (known to the tabloids press as JVT) – lent the politicians' words an aura of scientific respectability, which was to the government's advantage. They were able to give details on the medical and epidemiological arguments for government actions. The daily, direct communication with the public was relaxed after the coronavirus crisis became less acute during the summer, but resumed later in the year.

Relevant data on the pandemic was, in line with the United Kingdom's commitment to the principles of open data, publicized promptly and made available online throughout. This contributed to greater transparency, even if shortcomings in the government's reactions became more visible through that.

Public information campaigns involved frequent advertisements explaining through simple messages (e.g., "stay home, protect the NHS, save lives") what the government expected, but there was some criticism when these changed to more ambiguous slogans over the summer as infections appeared to fall. Ministers were also criticized for providing confusing messages or rapidly

changing messages. This was especially the case with respect to lockdown timings, both when they would be imposed and when they would be lifted. In December, the prime minister stated that schools would remain open only to close them the following day – with damaging consequences for families.

When the press uncovered that the prime minister’s main political adviser Dominic Cummings (controversial since his days as head of the Vote Leave campaign) had broken the government’s rules by making a cross-country car journey with his family in May, the resulting uproar damaged the credibility of the government’s coronavirus behavioral campaign considerably. The adviser’s tooth-and-nail defense brought accusations that there were different rules for different people and came at a high political cost.

Citation:

<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/communications-coronavirus-crisis-lessons-second-wave>

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23753234.2020.1824582>

### Implementation of Response Measures

Implementation  
of Response  
Measures  
Score: 6

The implementation of COVID-19 pandemic measures has had a patchy record in the United Kingdom. While much did go as planned – especially with regard to the emergency labor market measures and the provision of core medical services through the NHS – there were (sometimes persistent) problems in key areas which reduced their success. Major errors in implementation affected care homes where (especially in Scotland) patients were moved from hospitals to care homes without careful testing for COVID-19 infection, which aggravated the spread of COVID-19. By contrast, early and decisive action on vaccines paved the way for the rapid rollout of vaccines and must be considered a resounding success story.

Stocks of personal protective equipment (PPE) for carers and doctors, which had recently undergone cost-cutting measures and were calculated for an influenza pandemic, could not cope with the extraordinary and immediate demand created by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, government structures were overwhelmed in March 2020. The government, therefore, created a parallel supply chain to buy and distribute PPE, but it took a long time for it to receive the large volumes of PPE ordered, particularly from new suppliers, which created significant risks and multi-billion pound costs due to the extremely stretched situation of international markets. In spite of these problems, the UK government opted not to take part in the joint EU procurement initiative it had invited to join despite having left the European Union.

Early in the pandemic, a central element in the first (containment) aspect of the government's pandemic strategy – the tracing of infected people in order to quarantine those who have come into contact with them – was abruptly called off on 12 March due to capacity constraints. Through contracted firms and at a cost of £7 billion overall, the government hired and trained 21,000 contact tracers, with the prime minister promising a “world-beating system” by 1 June. However, it was not fully operational on the local level until the end of June and success rates were below what effective containment would require. It is notable that ministers now eschew variants on the expression “world-beating.” Rates improved toward the end of 2020, but another approach (the NHS COVID-19 tracing app for mobile phones) was significantly delayed after initial problems.

The timing of the lockdowns was another problem. Trying to avoid the economic costs of hard lockdowns incentivized the prime minister to delay them for as long as possible, resulting in abrupt changes of course (e.g., school closures 24 hours after they had been ruled out in early January 2021).

The government also came under criticism (and was even legally challenged) for its choice of personnel to lead parts of the emergency effort, and contract partners for goods and services. Several of the candidates seemed to be considered more for reasons of personal contact than previous professional experience, and among the final choices there were a large number of friends of Conservative politicians and businesses with no previous experience in the area for which they were contracted. Ironically, the person leading the vaccine task force was among those initially criticized, but her approach of treating vaccine procurement as – almost – an exercise in venture capital investment is now considered to have been crucial success factor.

The combination of very high costs in several of the aforementioned areas (e.g., NHS test and trace alone cost £22 billion in 2020) with rather limited success (testing, contact tracing and infection numbers) is unfortunate and a sign that implementation could have been improved, both in the design of governance structures and timing and handling. The Cabinet Office has already been told by the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee that “there are many lessons from ... the pandemic that the Government must learn,” especially in the fields of whole-of-government impacts, crisis command structures and clarity about funding for local authorities.

The vaccination program, largely rolled out through the NHS toward the end of the period under review, was well received and had very good delivery rates after the first four weeks. Yet at the same time, the NHS is – in the words of its chief executive – in the most precarious position in its history. While there are

bright spots, the overall implementation of the UK government's coronavirus pandemic policy can hardly be assessed as very successful.

Citation:

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/nov/21/boris-johnson-acted-illegally-over-jobs-for-top-anti-covid-staff>

<https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainers/uk-government-coronavirus-decision-making-phases>

### National Coordination

National  
Coordination  
Score: 7

Within the United Kingdom, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have devolved governments, which have responsibility for major public services, such as healthcare and education. England has no devolved government, though local authorities in England have responsibility for a more limited range of public services, including schools. The UK government thus operates at the UK level, but is at the same time the government of England.

Although there have been differences between these administrations in some key policy areas, the broad thrust has been similar. Some national coordination took place through COBRA emergency committee meetings, but even then there were tensions about the frequency with which the devolved governments were invited. The UK Treasury has been the primary source of funding for the most costly policy measures, such as the labor market furlough scheme, emergency health spending and vaccine R&D.

In both England and Scotland, the period after the summer saw the introduction of tiered, regionally differentiated rules and lockdown measures, whereas Wales and Northern Ireland have been treated as single areas. Debates continued about whether there should be a "four-nation" unified approach or greater differentiation according to infection rates. All devolved governments used their authority to issue differentiated rules for their territories and separate procurement mechanisms for medical items, such as PPE (part of the devolved competences), created further room for differentiation.

Another layer of conflict developed around defining areas subject to local lockdown. Leicester, which saw a surge in infections in the summer, was one such area. This was aggravated by demands for fiscal compensation from regional leaders confronted with restrictions they were not able to influence. For example, the mayor of Greater Manchester had a highly public dispute with central government over demands for greater sums than central government was willing to pay. Since these conflicts (like most of those on the level of the devolved governments) have no established resolution mechanisms and are essentially political in nature, there is little chance of permanently overcoming them.

Citation:

<https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/coordination-divergence-devolution-coronavirus.pdf>

International  
Coordination  
Score: 7

### International Coordination

The United Kingdom has always seen itself as a country with a global outlook, reflecting both its history and its ambition. As a country deeply rooted in global structures of cooperation – indeed, being the initiator of some of its central pillars – the United Kingdom has always striven to play a role in and have influence on the international level. Paradoxically, leaving the supranational integration of the European Union was seen by some as a way to play more of an international role as “global Britain.”

Given years of politically acrimonious debate about the implementation of the narrow popular mandate for Brexit, cooperating with EU neighbors immediately after formally leaving the organization on 31 January may not have been a popular political move so early in the coronavirus pandemic. The United Kingdom, therefore, declined an invitation to participate in joint EU procurement and funding activities (despite having formally left the European Union, the United Kingdom was still in the transition period).

International organizations like the United Nations or the WHO did not play a major role in the reaction to the coronavirus pandemic.

When there were international efforts such as the COVAX initiative, the United Kingdom was a willing contributor and Prime Minister Johnson hosted the Gavi donor conference (which secured pledges for vaccine funding for poorer countries) held in London in June 2020. Given the U.S. Trump administration’s hostility to the WHO, which culminated in the United States’ withdrawal from the organization, international coordination was generally lacking. The United Kingdom, nevertheless, played its part in supporting the WHO with additional funds and IMF emergency funding for over 100 poorer countries.

Citation:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-raises-1bn-so-vulnerable-countries-can-get-vaccine>

Learning and  
Adaptation  
Score: 6

### Learning and Adaptation

It is too soon to assess how well and through what means the United Kingdom will evaluate its response to the coronavirus pandemic, even if it is common knowledge that there will be an ex-post inquiry into the handling of the situation. One of the tasks of the Cabinet Office is to evaluate how efficient

and effective government policies have been. The definition of efficiency the government applied in its own planning was for a long time dominated by cost savings, in line with funding cuts for central government agencies throughout much of the 2010s. This was, among other things, done by making the civil service smaller, reforming civil service pensions, improving contracting and moving services online. In the original 2015 – 2020 planning, core goals included further multi-billion pound annual savings plus unspecified cuts to red tape of a similar magnitude.

After 2017, priorities changed, but “efficiencies” continued to be defined as “savings.” In the Cabinet Office’s “Single Departmental Plan – 2019,” the only concrete task to ensure that public bodies are well-governed, efficient and effective involves publishing “a refreshed Diversity Action Plan for public appointments, and update guidance and toolkits to support departments setting up and sponsoring Arm’s Length Bodies (ALBs).” While this may contribute to Sustainable Development Goal 16 (as the plan states), it would seem that broader, overarching goals (e.g., establishing an effective and efficient crisis management system) currently have a lower priority.

The criticisms brought forward by the Report of the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee on the Whole-of-Government Response to COVID-19 have been quite broad. The Cabinet Office has been asked to review its contingency planning for the most serious risks, look into whole-of-government impacts and review its crisis command structures, among many other things. Judging from the COVID-19 experience, the UK government has substantial room for improvement as far as a systematic evaluation of its crisis management system and realistic assessment of its preparedness are concerned.

Citation:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cabinet-office-single-departmental-plan/new-sdp>

### III. Resilience of Executive Accountability

#### Open Government

Open  
Government  
Score: 9

The UK government provides considerable information to its citizens through detailed websites, both at the core executive and the ministerial level, as do the devolved administrations. This flow of information has been enhanced in recent years. These websites contain general information, progress reports and

statistical data. As part of its online material, the government makes some effort to ensure that citizens use this information by targeting specific groups.

During the coronavirus pandemic, the government continuously updated its information, providing daily and rolling weekly numbers about infections, deaths, hospital admissions and, recently, vaccine rollout. These statistics are broken down geographically, making it possible to monitor infections at the local district level. An easily accessible website was published built as part of the comprehensive gov.uk website to host comprehensive information about the COVID-19 pandemic. In it, guidance and support, government announcements, and statistical data on the pandemic are presented as well as links to legislation and press conference statements.

UK citizens (like the UK press and UK members of parliament) therefore have timely and comprehensive ways to keep themselves informed and to try to hold the government to account. The frequent and sometimes hostile treatment of ministers and other government figures in the media make wide use of this data, and there has been no obvious attempt to hide basic information that shows the government in a bad light. However, some news management will inevitably occur.

Citation:  
<https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus>

### Legislative Oversight

Legislative  
Oversight  
Score: 10

Despite restrictions on how parliament operated during periods of the coronavirus pandemic, and the relatively modest financial resources provided to members of parliament and their equivalents in the devolved administrations, the Westminster and Edinburgh parliaments, and the Welsh and Northern Irish assemblies put great effort into controlling and monitoring the government effectively during the pandemic. There is a special website devoted to the topic, and committees have held inquiries and delivered reports summarizing their results. As many of these reports demonstrate, parliamentarians question government officials competently and critically, create transparency, and thus fulfill their tasks well in difficult times.

Parliaments and assemblies have adapted to the coronavirus pandemic. The House of Lords established a new COVID-19 committee to consider (in its own terms), “the long-term implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economic and social well-being of the United Kingdom.” Ministers continue to be subject to adversarial questions in the various parliaments and assemblies, and differing viewpoints on matters such as lockdown strategies

have been effectively articulated, often to the discomfort of government. Social distancing rules have meant fewer in-person meetings, but the use of Zoom has allowed all voices seamless access.

Citation:

<https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/coronavirus/>

### Independent Supervisory Bodies

Auditing  
Score: 9

The National Audit Office (NAO) is an independent office funded directly by parliament. Its head, the comptroller and auditor general, is an officer of the House of Commons. The NAO works on behalf of parliament and the taxpayer to scrutinize public spending and is accountable to the Public Accounts Committee (PAC). It has issued reports critical of, for example, the supply of PPE and would be expected to pursue similar studies on other aspects of the management of the coronavirus pandemic.

During the coronavirus pandemic, the NAO created a special website detailing its respective work. On the website, publications were collected in which the NAO looked at government preparedness for a pandemic, and spending on the direct health response and the wider emergency response, such as the measures aimed at protecting businesses and individuals from the economic impact. Even work in progress (e.g., the NAO study on the government's preparedness for the COVID-19 pandemic) has an entry and contact details for interested parties.

Outside the NAO, the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) is also doing detailed, independent and authoritative analysis of the government's work in the field of public finances. It is widely expected that the government will need to conduct a major inquiry into the management of the pandemic.

Citation:

<https://www.nao.org.uk/covid-19/>

[http://cdn.obr.uk/CCS1020397650-001\\_OBR-November2020-EFO-v2-Web-accessible.pdf](http://cdn.obr.uk/CCS1020397650-001_OBR-November2020-EFO-v2-Web-accessible.pdf)

<https://www.nao.org.uk/report/supplying-the-nhs-and-adult-social-care-sector-with-personal-protective-equipment-ppe/>

Data Protection  
Score: 9

The United Kingdom was among the early adopters of personal data protection legislation. The Data Protection Act 1984 set standards for the use of digital data by the government, private businesses and individuals. Since 1998 (following the Data Protection Act 1998), the data protection regime has been shaped by EU law. The United Kingdom adopted the European Union's General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) into primary law (through the Data Protection Act 2018), meaning that the approach to data protection and

information governance developed by the GDPR will be maintained after the United Kingdom leaves the European Union.

The central body authorized to enforce data protection legislation in the United Kingdom is the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). The ICO is a non-departmental public body which reports directly to parliament, and is sponsored by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). The office has a wide array of data protection responsibilities, which are defined by the Data Protection Act, the Freedom of Information Act and the General Data Protection Regulations, among other legislation. Given the devolution of powers, a similar function also operates in Scotland. The ICO publishes its actions and fines.

There were no attempts to reduce the level of data protection during the coronavirus pandemic. However, concerns about the dissemination of false information relating to the pandemic on social media have prompted the government to be proactive in cracking down on false information and misinformation about coronavirus. According to a government website, five to 10 incidents were tackled each day. As the vaccination rollout accelerated, specific efforts were made to counter the fears of BAME communities.

Citation:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-cracks-down-on-spread-of-false-coronavirus-information-online>

## Address | Contact

### **Bertelsmann Stiftung**

Carl-Bertelsmann-Straße 256  
33311 Gütersloh  
Germany  
Phone +49 5241 81-0

### **Dr. Christof Schiller**

Phone +49 5241 81-81470  
[christof.schiller@bertelsmann-stiftung.de](mailto:christof.schiller@bertelsmann-stiftung.de)

### **Dr. Thorsten Hellmann**

Phone +49 5241 81-81236  
[thorsten.hellmann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de](mailto:thorsten.hellmann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de)

### **Pia Paulini**

Phone +49 5241 81-81468  
[pia.paulini@bertelsmann-stiftung.de](mailto:pia.paulini@bertelsmann-stiftung.de)

Busch, A., Begg I. & N. Bandelow (2021).  
United Kingdom Report. Sustainable Governance in the Context  
of the COVID-19 Crisis. Bertelsmann Stiftung: Gütersloh.  
<https://doi.org/10.11586/2021109>

[www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de](http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de)  
[www.sgi-network.org](http://www.sgi-network.org)