

‘No way to run a country’: Why COVID-19 has exposed a key weaknesses in the British state

The crisis has shown just how fractured the relationship between local and national really is

“I laugh,” texted one senior council figure this week about their inability to get their own area’s Covid test results from government, “so I don’t kill anyone.”

They were joking. Hopefully. But the level of exasperation within town halls right now about their fractured relationship with the centre feels unparalleled in a sector that normally takes that as something of a given.

Many council figures seem at the end of their tether. You may not necessarily have sympathy with town halls in the usual run of things - many people don’t - but they have had to be front and centre during this crisis. From care homes to testing, distributing emergency food parcels to administering infection control, they have been carrying out the government’s orders on the ground.

But as time has gone on, the pandemic has exposed how broken many of the bridges between these two pillars of the British state really are.

While many local authority chiefs were willing to give the benefit of the doubt to ministers and their departments during the earlier phase of the pandemic, as we move into the next phase, that issue becomes critical.

With central government racing to organise a track-and-trace phone bank and app at a national level, local government has been tasked with doing the complex elements of that approach on the ground. Those two parts of the system will need to work together, sharing information.

Meanwhile councils will be expected to lead on containment of the virus wherever it surfaces, whether that’s in care homes, schools or the wider community.

Those town halls, slashed with glee by Eric Pickles back in 2010 and currently begging for further financial bail-out as a result of soaring costs and lost income during the pandemic - many of them seriously now talking about declaring bankruptcy, and not just Labour ones - will be crucial not only in protecting lives, but in shaping public opinion of what happens next.

The experience of recent weeks is not promising, according to multiple senior figures across Greater Manchester.

There has been a recurring theme while covering this crisis here. Time and time again, local authorities have warned they are not being meaningfully consulted, not getting correct - or sometimes any - information, not getting clear guidance. And not getting the funding they need.

At the beginning, for example, when ministers talked at the national press conferences about 'shielded' people, the councils tasked with actually dealing with them waited weeks to be given their details.

"Every day, we were asking where the people were," recalls one Manchester figure.

When it finally did arrive, the list was wrongly sent to Salford council. A senior figure in another borough said it then took them several more weeks to correct their data, as much of it was wrong anyway. If that sounds like initial teething problems, that's also what council people thought too. They decided to chalk it up to a crisis and move on.

But then there was the PPE 'sh**show', in the words of one senior councillor. Some of local government's story here during this pandemic has been one of giving up on central government and just doing things itself. When councils initially scrambled to pick up the limited numbers of masks and gloves they were fleetingly provided from the national stockpile in the early days, with no idea in advance what was coming or where it would appear, Greater Manchester Combined Authority took things into its own hands.

So far it has managed to get hold of 19m pieces of equipment itself, compared to the 5m provided by Whitehall.

Similarly some local authorities never actually stood down their community testing teams when they were told to do so by central government in March, judging that it was a bad idea. Others did, but waited in frustration at being unable to use them, before eventually standing them back up anyway.

Manchester and Trafford have additionally been testing patients on discharge from hospitals since day one, which appears to have helped keep Covid deaths comparatively low in care homes, even though they were not told to do that by Whitehall until much later.

At the start of April, Manchester was also left scratching its head over why its own private and higher education expertise and labs were not being used by national government, which was under fire at the time for failing to roll out enough tests. Then when testing was eventually ramped up, councils found themselves unable to get the results back from the central system.

That has created a bizarre situation in which local public health officials simply don't know how many people are testing positive for Covid here, or who they are. There seem to be no issues with the tests organised and processed locally - it's the nationally-procured ones, introduced onto sites with little consultation with officials on the ground, that are incapable of producing information that those tasked with infection control can reliably use. That's despite them also being told in recent weeks that testing in care homes is now officially their responsibility.

One senior town hall officer speculates that part of the problem during the pandemic has been inexperience at the top of central government, but says the examples above - and many more besides - point to serious problems ahead if they persist.

“The thing that’s being worked on now is how are the government going to deal with outbreaks,” they point out, highlighting the testing situation in particular.

“The lesson to be learned from the last few weeks is that if you don’t get this data sharing into local authorities, who have the responsibility, the response will be mangled.

“This has exposed the flaws between what’s done at government level, what’s done at regional level and what’s done at local authority level. That’s what’s fractured here.”

There is a secondary concern, too, about what happens over the summer as lockdown is eased.

“Our anxiety is they disappear into Westminster and think because it’s ok in London, they think it’s ok everywhere and take their eye off emerging outbreaks in Yorkshire or the North West, or the North East. We’re worried.”

Others believe the ground is being prepared for something else. “There’s a fear the blame is going to be outsourced,” says one officer.

Several senior town hall officials and politicians also say they feel more like they are being corralled than their expertise put to good use.

“It feels like we’re a stakeholder group to be managed rather than this pool of talent,” says one.

“So many people are saying ‘work with us’. Let us help!” they add, pointing out that if the government had run its Covid guidance for care homes past adult social care directors, they would have been able to explain that some of it wouldn’t work on the ground.

Councils also have extensive experience of monitoring everything from meningitis to TB, meaning they’re no strangers to this kind of scenario.

But many echo the same view of Whitehall: “They don’t actually know what we do.”

Others take a more fundamental view about the wider message this sends out about the British state.

“I think there’s a real issue here about the system of government,” says one former senior official.

“You can have a view about the size of government - whether it’s small or large - but fundamentally, whatever view you take, it needs to be effective. This has displayed fault lines that most of us have been articulating for a long time as being flawed.”

Part of the problem, they argue, is also that the Prime Minister and his aides didn’t get the right people to oversee various aspects of the response early enough.

“It’s not just a cultural problem about the system of government but it’s also a reluctance to open up government to people who are not part of that small cohort of political advisers to Johnson,” they say, adding: “The wrong model and the wrong people leads to poor outcomes. This is probably the most shambolic government we have ever seen, certainly in our lifetimes.”

Jess Studdart, deputy director of the New Government Local Network - which includes around 70 councils in its numbers - was also deeply critical of the flaws exposed by the crisis this week. "It is no way to run a country," she wrote. "It never was, but in the context of the crisis, the contradictions of our top-heavy system of governance are laid bare."

Central government - and particularly the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government - has grown in defensiveness over recent weeks, hitting back hard at criticism.

Coronavirus testing at Manchester Airport's drive-through (Image: Daily Mirror/Andy Stenning)

They would point out, legitimately, that Leeds council chief executive Tom Riordan has been recruited into the leadership of national testing in recent days, an appointment local government officials seem to view as both important and symbolic, because he understands their world.

Yet the concern on the ground remains real, especially where finances are concerned.

Rows over local government funding and power have been a consistent feature of the past decade, albeit one ministers have known they could comfortably dodge. But this crisis has exposed, as that former official says, the fault lines. It shows the fatal reality of treating this part of the state as a poor relation, particularly when it runs social care.

Failing to take local government seriously means failing, effectively, to take social care seriously too.

Councils are not perfect, of course.

The quality of their response to this crisis and others will vary. Some - including Manchester - were slow to get business grants out the door, for example.

They vary in effectiveness even outside of a pandemic and it's easy to see why, in the words of one official, central government would 'turn to what it knows' in this crisis, running everything in a top-down way and drafting in a Deloitte or a Serco to magic up a solution, but not necessarily attempting to meaningfully talk with hundreds of local authorities.

Even some council chiefs point out there is sometimes a reluctance within the sector to act on initiative, hoping to get it both ways: wanting the power but not the responsibility.

But Greater Manchester has also reverted to type. The region has at least tried to sit around the table and work out what to do together, regardless of which organisation is involved, because that's the culture. It may not be perfect, but perhaps there's something Whitehall could learn from it.

And the fact remains that the English schism between local and national has been a thread throughout this pandemic, as has the gap between what is being said by the centre and what has been happening on the ground.

It has also served to highlight all over again just how centralised we are - compared to, say, Germany - and how cumbersome that can end up being.

Yet as we move into the 'track and trace' phase of the pandemic, councils will become crucial, as the government's own strategy acknowledges. They will be more than a nuisance in charge of bins hundreds of miles from Whitehall.

So while this may on the face of it be a perennially tedious story of how England's local and national bureaucracies interact, the stakes of that going wrong are now far, far higher than anyone can remember.

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