

The future role of public health: Lessons from COVID-19, ‘a year like no other’

This webinar will begin shortly.

Tuesday 12 October 2021



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Directors of Public Health and the Covid-19 pandemic: 'A year like no other'

Shilpa Ross, Fellow, The King's Fund

Research team: Shilpa Ross, Deborah Fenney, Clair Thorstensen-Woll, David Buck

Tuesday 12th October 2021

Why this research is important

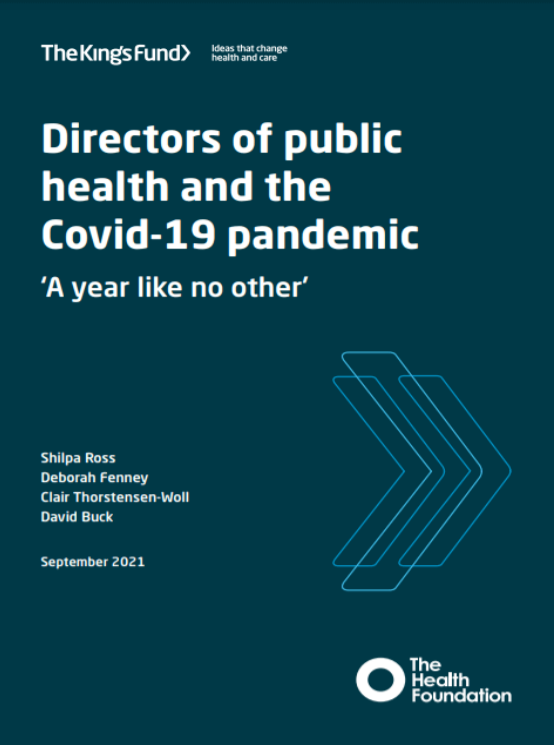
- A need for greater attention on the role of local systems in planning and responding to the Covid-19 pandemic
- Directors of Public Health (DsPH) are uniquely skilled and positioned to respond to pandemics, but there is a need for more understanding of their role and their teams to maximise system effectiveness
- Aiming to tell 'the story' over 12 months, not just a snapshot, and draw out lessons to support the future of public health beyond the pandemic.

I hope the history books just reflect the wider system response and not just focus on the NHS

The research

- Repeat interviews with 8 Directors of Public Health (England), plus a focus group discussion
- Two in-depth local system studies (England)
- Key informant interviews with key system leads in other UK nations and national leaders in England.

Key findings: What happened during the pandemic?



kingsfund.org.uk/publications/directors-public-health-covid-19-pandemic

Response at place: the local public health response to Covid-19

- Challenging circumstances in public health pre-pandemic (austerity measures and workforce shortages)
- Local public health teams heavily involved in infection control efforts, managing outbreaks and mitigating against the wider impacts of Covid-19
- Major focus on supporting local communities and supporting the vaccine roll-out
- Little time and energy to focus on 'business as usual' issues.

A big feature of that stage [of panic buying] was really identifying very early that as well as the infection control dimension... we were on the verge of a very significant humanitarian situation. Particularly in a place with high levels of poverty like [Area 04]. And so probably a few weeks before the national shielding programme was announced, we'd already started organising a humanitarian response focused on food delivery, befriending, prescription delivery

Relationships and community engagement

At a local level:

- Importance of DsPH local knowledge and taking a nuanced approach, as well as working with partners
- Importance of effective and consistent community engagement techniques
- Wide range of support and engagement activities discussed e.g. Community Champions
- Targeting testing and vaccine roll out to increase uptake in particular communities
- Importance of sustaining this engagement with the public now and into the future.

The experience of something like NHS Test and Trace has highlighted that really unless there's a reason to do things at that, kind of, scale that local is better

Barriers and challenges

- Opportunities missed earlier on to engage DsPH, even though they know the reality of implementing Covid guidance and national policy
- Lack of access to case-level data to carry out contact tracing
- Sustaining high workload
- Workforce shortages in public health
- Occasionally DsPH faced criticism from the public
- Covid-specific funding welcome and used to good effect *but* money not the only issue.

Opportunities

During Covid-19, DsPH have experienced:

- A growth in levels of trust in their leadership
- Wide support for the local public health system
- New relationships built and existing relationships strengthened.

Wider impacts of the pandemic (so far)

- Multiple opportunity costs - focus on immediate issues related to the pandemic.
- Economic impacts (and uncertainties of these) on their communities
- Rising mental health need and widened inequalities and impacts
- DsPH capacity to engage with wider/future focused conversations

...the big question right now is how we can build on this really. How we can build on the recognition of health inequalities as an important social issue... Defining social issue....How we can build on the centrality of the DPH as part of developing those systemic approaches to dealing with health inequalities and not... go back into our little box [as] the feisty upstarts, you know?

What are the implications? The future role of the local public health system

- Fallout from Covid is far-reaching: widened health inequalities; impact on education and employment; backlog for treatment and care; impact on the public health workforce
- Announcement to restructure Public Health England during pandemic (the pieces are still moving around DsPH as they face the task of planning recovery)
- Pandemic has shifted how public health is perceived, valued and recognised
- DsPH must be core players in future system leadership.

Thank you

Shilpa Ross
s.ross@kingsfund.org.uk
@ShilpaRoss

www.kingsfund.org.uk

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- Our next Health Foundation webinar: **NHS Recovery – how do we ‘build back better’?**
Thursday 21 October | 10:15-11:30
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