

The role of Public Health England

Public Health England set out the strategy for handling this pandemic in a document published on 3 March as the "Coronavirus Action Plan". So far Ministers have followed it.

This body conducts important research into disease, is advised by a scientific advisory committee, and spends £4.25 bn a year. It is run by an Executive team with six people paid more than £200,000 last year including pension benefits.

Its last Report and Accounts to June 2019 says on its cover that the organisation is "credible, independent and ambitious". On page 4 it states the aims of the organisation:

"PHE exists to protect and improve the nation's health and wellbeing, and reduce health PHE exists to protect..." (sic)

If you read on you discover it also exists to reduce health inequalities, but missed out the crucial last word in the first iteration of aims. Credibility and ambition do not it appears extend to proof reading a formal annual publication before going to press and putting it on the web.

Last year the body wrote off £207 million "in relation to counter measures held for emergency preparedness and vaccines past their shelf life". It had also written off money the year before in the same way. Some of this is inevitable when you are holding supplies for a purpose you hope does not materialise which then deteriorate in store.

On 3 March PHE told us that we "have planned extensively over the years for an event like this, and the UK is well prepared to respond in a way that offers substantial protection to the population". The Agencies that have to respond are properly resourced with "people, equipment and medicines they need". "The UK maintains strategic stockpiles of the most important medicines and protective equipment for healthcare staff." Do you agree? Tomorrow I will look at the evolving strategy.