

# Decision making in a crisis

First responses to the coronavirus pandemic

Sarah Nickson | Alex Thomas  
Erenie Mullens-Burgess

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## **Bringing representatives of those affected by a decision into the room compensates for imperfect information**

It is inevitable in a crisis that decision making is centralised to some degree, as ministers want to act quickly and take control. But bringing non-government partners inside the tent helps compensate for the uncertainty created by imperfect information in a crisis, as well as building trust and creating allies to explain and defend policy decisions. This is particularly true where these other groups share broadly similar goals with the government itself, as was the case when decisions were made about economic support measures.

On the lockdown, ministers used SAGE, an established structure, to seek expert scientific advice from outside the government. Bringing business groups and unions into decisions about key economic support measures gave the government on-the-ground intelligence about what would and would not work. It also built goodwill and trust, creating space to work out the fine details.

Bringing external perspectives into decision making is particularly important when the task is most challenging and levers for delivery are outside central government's control. The government initially ignored offers of help from private labs. Then, in an effort to boost testing capacity, a patchwork of central, local and non-government players were brought together. The 30 April deadline helped spur a break with the previous, centralised approach to implementation. But even then it was set without input from local public health officials, the diagnostics industry – or the testing co-ordinator himself. This led to problems with the roll-out, including confusing, overlapping schemes and poorly located test sites. It also alienated some non-government figures who might otherwise have been allies.

## **Government needs to find ways to get fast feedback, especially when acting under time pressure or in unprecedented circumstances**

High-quality evidence can help decision makers work out whether different policy options will achieve their goals. Supplementing this with feedback loops and a good grip on data can also tell decision makers if existing approaches are working or whether they need to change course. But at the same time, ministers need to recognise the limits of the evidence base and accept that they cannot outsource responsibility for their decisions.

The government rightly drew on the expertise of highly qualified scientists and real-time data and feedback, which helped it make decisions on lockdown. On testing, while there has been much focus on the testing numbers, it was not clear in the early weeks of the pandemic that the government was collecting and publishing the right type of data that would tell it how well the testing programme was working. That meant that feedback loops were less effective than they could have been.