

Medical Procurement Taskforce (March 2020) Lessons Learned Paper

01 June 2020

Overall Summary of Lessons Learned:

Throughout May 2020 we ran a lessons learned process featuring written feedback and in-depth discussions with 15 teams directly involved in the China Procurement Taskforce crisis operation. There were a lot of positive takeaways. The crisis work, though challenging, had demonstrated the resilience, solidarity, flexibility, expertise and dedication of the China Network. The overall breadth of the UK-China relationship, and the relationships built up by individual teams, played an essential role in securing urgent medical procurement. Colleagues brought their talents to areas different to their previous roles, backgrounds and grades. The large degree of positive feedback, and record of delivery, further reinforce the positive lessons from this crisis.

This exercise aims not just to identify our strengths, but also areas for improvement, so that we can be better prepared for any challenges lying ahead, on both this crisis and on future crisis responses. Working hours and remote working, the meaning and effective approach of management structures and oversight, and the challenges of IT were amongst some of the areas where we could have done things differently or better.

Below is a short summary of some of the main areas brought up in feedback that could have been done differently, both for the China Network and for London. The attached document has a fuller list of all the feedback we received across

Reflections for China Network Crisis Taskforce

Some of the strategic questions for the China Network raised in the lessons learned sessions for further consideration (without necessarily a clear answer) were:

- Should we have attempted to outsource from the start as most other Embassies did?
- Did the parallel procurement and logistics functions last too long; could we have moved to one unified structure earlier? Many felt a unified structure proved more efficient.
- Could we have been better in terms of London expectation management? Chase every lead helped manage the politics but had significant resource and wellbeing implications.

Some specific recommendations

- **Improve preparation** for newcomers to the crisis team by providing clear workflows and process in introductory documents to ensure they understand the purposes of the operation and functions of joining the crisis. People welcomed the procurement training session, showing it is worth taking time even when busy to ensure people have a good understanding of the basics.
- **Increase visibility of HR key messages** through sending out as separate message in addition to including in the HMA daily update.
- **Discourage colleagues from using personal contact information communicating with external contacts**, as we have in this operation experienced, in some circumstances, people being bothered by external contacts outside of core-working hours. Work phones or better remote IT would have made this easier.
- **Key documents should be captured and in place in preparation for any future crisis work**, including: strategy on information & communication, logistics, clear structure, roles & responsibilities and operation pack related to staff management. Start from the basis of the established crisis structure where possible, rather than cherry picking.
- **Identify clear roles and responsibilities** among the Post teams and record and circulate these.
- **Mainstream information function throughout the process**, recognise the importance of information team and involve information collection, analysis and reporting from the start of crisis operation to the closure of the crisis mode. The information team should not be treated as merely a reporting function, but a critical function in monitoring and overseeing the entire operation. Operations team likewise should have existed from the start.
- **Provide sufficient guidance on reporting and communication** processes to keep consistency and help information management. Do not use WeChat as an official communication channel (as this contributed to long working-hours culture and could not be treated as official communication). Keep formal records of exchanges and procurement approvals from the start.
- **Consider how to improve remote working and IT support**. The success of our remote working was despite, not because of, our IT facilities. Contradictory guidelines on the use of webmail (not allowed for official), difficulties in sharing large documents, problems editing documents on iPad, unreliable teleconferencing; all proved a challenge.
- **Aim for more consistent shift patterns**. Regular changes in SROs and joint heads could be challenging for those working within the structure, especially when management had different views.
- Lot of issues we faced were caused by a **slow-burn crisis** that is different from previously experienced crisis. It was harder to design and manage structures for a situation, which gradually developed in to a crisis, rather than starting as one. We suggest crisis committee considers how to ensure staff welfare from the beginning in a similar situation in future. We still need a systematic approach with well-designed workflows, expectations and sustainability of the organisation. We may in retrospect have declared a crisis sooner, and we should have looked to significantly reduced individual workload from the beginning.

Suggested lessons for London

- **Prepare short term, intermediary and long-term strategy at the start of crisis operation**. We struggled throughout with an absence of consistent long-term forecasting, leading to sudden increases of demand, sudden changes of team structure, waste of time and spending

inefficiencies. They could have considered bringing in external experts on the China market at beginning. Post often had to handle different forecast and different priorities came from different departments.

- **Share clear London structure with Posts and establish clear protocol between London and post at an early stage**, including organogram, points of contact for each team and function, roles and responsibilities. Changes and authorisation should be noted in writing and shared to relevant teams in a timely manner. While recognising relationships with individual product verticals generally worked well with procurement teams, it was still very difficult for China taskforce teams to get a clear and consistent steer level of prioritisation across departments, and consistent steers on standards and specs. Prioritisation of logistics was not always consistent with tasking for prioritisation of procurement.
- **Prioritisation for procurement vs. prioritisation of shipping**. The demand on shipping the procured production in the way that was demanded was unrealistic for the post to organise (particularly on timelines, P1 goods, and delay in authorising shipping/trains).
- **UPS failed to deliver**, hence the need for a logistics SRO.
- The post crisis operation welcomed the **clinically led approach**, but without technical knowledge on the ground (which was impossible given travel constraints), it took a relatively longer time for staff here to understand what specs to be procured. With the urgent and often short-noticed demand from London, and inconsistent risk appetite at different levels of seniority, many tasks were mission impossible. Therefore **an early enough mid- and long-term forecast** of demand could have helped the teams here to secure sufficient and high-quality required products in time, and before shortages increased difficulties in areas such as gowns and ventilators.
- An **intermediary approach failed to deliver**, particularly on ventilators. An approach reliant on a smaller number of specialist SOE suppliers' increases reliability and efficiency, and puts less emphasis on non-specialist taskforce volunteers to procure specialist equipment.
- It is valuable to have a **joint coordination function**, but the JACT value-add in the China context was unclear, and did not address sometimes-contradictory steers and messaging. On international procurement more broadly, **it would be useful to consult teams here before giving orders**, which could help to improve the understanding regarding the availability of products and realistic amount of the required production, not least as much production led back to China. This may also have helped to mitigate self-gazumping in the context of procurement not recommended, or even known about, by the China Network.
- **Public comms** in the UK at times affected our ability to procure and caused some political handling difficulties, particularly on ventilators and testing kits.