

Foundational Economy Collective

PRESS RELEASE: *When Systems Fail* report

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Fragility was built into the UK's hospital and public laboratory systems
What went wrong in the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic was an accident waiting to happen.

What went wrong in the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic? The ***When Systems Fail*** report is a substantial and broad ranging social science report produced by a team of academics with varied disciplinary backgrounds from critical accounting through political economy to science and technology studies.

The media and opposition politicians have offered two kinds of explanations for what went wrong. Their analysis is “we name the guilty men” or “arrow indicates defective part”. And both are partly true because there were policy mistakes and systems like track and trace have not been working effectively

When Systems Fail explores the deeper causes as failures in specific services proliferated into unanticipated and uncontrolled large scale breakdowns. This was an accident waiting to happen because fragility had been built into the systems. What science and technology studies would call a *normal accident*.

When Systems Fail shows that the first reason for fragility was that the hospital system was already so tightly stretched that it did not have the buffer capacity needed to absorb a pandemic surge. Hence hospital beds had to be cleared by discharging untested patients into care homes and most non Covid treatments had to be halted.

Second, the public health laboratory system lacked the organisational capacity to respond to unexpected circumstances. Public Health England had concentrated on maintaining centres of excellence while a network of organisational relations around distributed laboratory capacity had atrophied.

When Systems Fail shows that this double fragility was unintentionally caused by a combination of long-term funding shortages and a process that political scientists call *hyper-innovation*. Austerity was important, but so too was a 30-year period of continuing organisational churn imposed on the NHS and public health in the name of public sector reform.

Hyper-innovation hollowed out our health services and eroded their capacity to respond to emergencies in adaptable and resilient ways. Beyond this critique, the report addresses remedies and the question of how to rebuild so that we have more robust health systems and more generally can re-skill the state so that it does not default onto distress outsourcing whenever it wants quick results.

Recovering from a condition of chronic incapacity will be very difficult. The report shows that this will demand much greater funding than is recognised by any of the major political parties. It also argues that it will require a new approach, *the care-ful practice of policy*, which recognises the limits of the *control paradigm* – the top-down approach to policymaking that has been dominant for three decades.

Instead, in order to create effective and resilient healthcare, the UK will need to find ways of creating policy iteratively and consultatively. The report concludes by exploring what such care-ful policymaking might look like in practice.

When Systems Fail is a lengthy report because its key claims are empirically backed and because the argument is complex and broad ranging. Hence readers are at the beginning of the report offered a citizens' summary which presents the argument in steps with page references to the main report.

The authors and the *Foundational Economy Collective*

This is a public interest report based on independent research by British academics in the first three months of the UK lockdown between late March and late June 2020. The academics are based at the University of Manchester, Queen Mary University of London and the Open University. They all members of a European academic network, the *Foundational Economy Collective*, which early in the present crisis produced a ten-point platform for reform after Covid-19 now available in five languages.¹

For the media:

A copy of the *When Systems Fail* report can be downloaded from the foundational economy.com web site at <https://foundationaleconomy.com/covid-19-uk-nhs-report/>

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¹ *What Comes after the Pandemic* (March 2020) <https://foundationaleconomy.com/covid-19-report/>