

Beyond the headlines

Key lessons from the public sector's COVID-19 response

Words by: Simon Lipscomb

Under the extreme pressure and shared challenges of the last 18 months, the public, private, and academic sectors have come together to face a myriad of highly complex procurement challenges.

From the necessity of sourcing PPE under strict time constraints and setting up a system to test and trace, to the urgency of implementing a national vaccine rollout, public sector champions have stepped up and collaborated to deliver the best possible solutions for an anxious public, politicians, and world leaders clamouring for information, supplies ... and results.

We spoke to three such leaders in the public sector, who all worked on these vital projects with large-scale rollouts and extremely rapid turnaround times, to explore how the public sector stepped up to the challenge. Each of the three initiatives have carved out key lessons that procurement teams should look to embrace and learn from – in both the challenges and the successes – as we look to the future.

Amongst these leaders are Gary Horsfield CCO, UK PPE Department of Health and Social Care in NHS; Jacqui Rock, CCO of NHS Test and Trace; and Ruth Todd CBE, former Programme Director of the UK Vaccine Taskforce (VTF).

You can [listen to their stories on the Efficio podcasts page](#).

Controlling a PPE crisis through solid category management

One of the earliest challenges faced by the public sector in 2020 was the acquisition and distribution of personal protective equipment

(PPE) to the health and social sector. Since the start of the pandemic, 32 billion PPE items were purchased and 8 billion have been delivered to 58,000 locations across the UK.

The logistics alone presented a substantial challenge. "At the time, most supply was on the global marketplace," says Gary Horsfield. Shortages were inevitable and relationships were strained. The public sector committed to creating 70% manufacturing capability in the UK by the end of the year – an ambitious target, given it had previously been responsible for less than 1%.



**Gary Horsfield, CCO,
UK PPE Department of Health and
Social Care, NHS**

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The public sector’s approach to building a PPE manufacturing capability from scratch is nothing short of astounding. It’s also a masterclass in efficient category management. By segmenting estimated spend into related product categories, teams were able to focus on opportunities onshore that could consolidate and optimise the delivery of PPE across the UK, creating around 2,500 jobs in the process.

Procurement teams can emulate this success by refining their category management strategy, giving them the power to leverage negotiations to their advantage and manage suppliers in line with the wider business objections. Jacqui Rock from NHS Test and Trace also flagged the importance of continuing to feed insights into category management on an ongoing basis, saying, “We learnt an awful lot in the UK from the PPE supply chain journey, such as requirements, modelling, forecasting, and storing. Importantly, we really needed to develop a level of trust with our suppliers, during a project that changed on a 24-hour basis. We had to make sure the teams trusted us, and that collaboration was there. I made sure that all of those lessons learned came into our category strategies.”

Test and trace: building an organisation the scale of Sainsbury’s in four months

Data and trust are vital components of any procurement team’s work, as they strive to demonstrate value and deliver savings across functions in their organisations. When it came to the pandemic, being able to justify spend and supplier decisions became even more important.

“It is my responsibility to ensure every single penny of public spending is accounted for, is justified, has got the correct route to market, and has been done in a compliant way,” says Jacqui Rock, NHS Test and Trace. “It’s not just a government response – every supplier needs to be engaged and have good contracts, everything needs to be bought, and the contracts are vital so that everyone understands their individual roles.” Procurement teams should pay



Jacqui Rock, CCO, NHS Test and Trace

close attention to the supplier data at their fingertips to understand exactly how their money is spent.

Jacqui talked us through the importance of understanding the data and working closely with suppliers by developing a robust operating model. With just four months to build an organisation similar in both size and complexity to Sainsbury’s, there were bound to be significant hurdles.

While ramping up at speed, it’s essential to review the data to inform decisions on how the organisation needs to operate and what the model should be. For Jacqui, it was important to see the data to find out what had been spent, with which suppliers, and for what route to market. “We used the data to justify every step of the project,” comments Jacqui.

“An operating model was put in place within two weeks – under normal circumstances, this typically takes a year, but it shows how quickly you can accomplish the unimaginable in a crisis.”

Jacqui Rock, CCO, NHS Test and Trace

Managing risk when health is on the line

Risk management presents a whole new level of importance for procurement teams when dealing with projects where lives are on the line – particularly so in a period when supply chain disruption is impacted by external factors. This became acutely apparent in the search for viable vaccines and securing a sufficient supply. Identifying and managing risks before they had opportunity to present a threat was a key part of the work Ruth Todd undertook as part of the UK Vaccine Taskforce (VTF).

As Ruth highlights, when contracts were being created, the vaccines had yet to prove themselves effective. The VTF procurement team needed to evaluate both the effectiveness of the various vaccine specific suppliers, in addition to procurement-specific complexities, such as regulation and supply.

“We brought together a group of scientists, industry specialists and academics who looked at each of the data sets that were emerging for each of vaccine platforms and the suppliers who were developing them” says Ruth. This due diligence was crucial during the initial contract phase in summer 2020. “We got ahead of the curve; our tactic was to get the contract in place; but getting a contract in place doesn’t get you a vaccine. We had a very empowered team to deliver in collaboration with the supply chain.”

In terms of managing risk within the supply chain, “we had a big piece of work going to manage risk,” says Ruth. “We got good at mapping the supply chains so that we could anticipate shortages happening. Then we would work through every solution we could think of, whether that was ministerial, diplomatic, or through our industry contracts.”

“Planning for every scenario helped the procurement team highlight pinch points in the supply chain and find solutions, ensuring that implementation went as smoothly as possible.”

Ruth Todd CBE, former Programme Director of the UK Vaccine Taskforce (VTF).

Ultimately, Ruth credits the success of the project to the knowledge of the VTF’s rainbow team of industry, government, contractors, and scientists and the response from their supply chains. “We worked collaboratively, led that supply chain, built relationships, and problem-solved together, but the suppliers



Ruth Todd CBE, former Programme Director of the UK Vaccine Taskforce (VTF)

were the ones actually making everything happen,” said Ruth.

“The result we managed to achieve in the UK is born out of the work of all those suppliers and the success that they allowed us to all revel in. All those individuals’ efforts in industry and the task force have led to the very human outcome of seeing our mums and dads being vaccinated.”

To build those relationships and supply chains, the VTF team had to demonstrate trust at every stage of the process, giving the suppliers confidence in them and the UK Government’s ability to deliver vaccinations. And that all stemmed from a clear mission, vision, and transparency in collaboration. “That clarity of purpose was essential, along with empowerment, where every individual was really clear on what they had to make happen and didn’t have people looking over their shoulder and checking up on them.”

Public sector assembly: building a team from government and industry

The most crucial element of the last 18 months for the public sector has been the transparency and collaboration with the private and academic sectors to achieve successful outcomes. The pandemic demanded “all hands on deck” to find solutions, enabling people to work collaboratively across industries, which had a profound effect on the successful delivery of initiatives. “One of the things I’m most proud of ... is how we pulled the different groups together,” Gary Horsfield says, in reference to the PPE programme. “We’ve had people from Central Government and NHS, DHSC, different consultancies. One of the things

we’ve done is we’ve got the best out of all of them.”

Jacqui Rock points to the sheer scale of collaboration required for Test and Trace. “When you look at everybody involved, from myself to the people out there at the test centres, to the people that man the labs, to the technicians creating the app,” says Jacqui, “fifty thousand people is a lot of people working towards Test and Trace.” To collaborate effectively, Jacqui points to developing continued trust and productive partnerships with your key suppliers.

Collaboration also enabled further programmes, such as Test and Trace and VTF – that focused on the monumental challenge of sourcing a brand-new vaccine for millions of people – to learn from those successes and challenges. “There’s no heroism in reinventing the wheel,” says Gary. “The achievement is in delivering results, and if somebody has already shown you how to do it, there’s no need to go a different way.”



Delivering life-changing solutions through procurement

It has undoubtedly been an unprecedented time for procurement, but it has also been encouraging to see how public sector organisations came together to deliver life-changing and life-saving programmes for the UK.

What can be learned from the public sector's response that procurement teams can apply to their day-to-day operations?

- **Be open to collaboration from outside your sector**

The public sector projects over the past two years have shown that working with a wide and varied team allows you to deliver better results, whether that's with your suppliers or developing collaborative relationships with other functions within the business.

In the case of the UK Vaccine Taskforce, the project was so successful because of the level of collaboration from what Ruth Todd calls a "rainbow team". As Ruth says, "we had industry, consultants, contractors, civil servants. If we wanted a skill set, we brought it into the team, either working directly or in partnership with external companies. That's pretty unprecedented in public sector projects. Whatever we needed to do, we found a way of doing it, and we were proactive in our procurement."

- **Be agile and learn to work at speed**

Working with diverse teams brings a wider skill set to your projects, allowing you to pivot quickly as external factors demand it. All the projects highlighted in this article are characterised by an urgency untypical of the public sector. As Jacqui Rock highlights, speed was the key factor in getting the UK Test and Trace programme off the ground in less than four months. To do that they needed an insights-driven plan and a network of trusted partners.

- **Develop trust through data**

To build trust within your partner network, you need to use data to drive procurement decisions. A data-driven approach helps you build trusting and productive relationships with your suppliers, as well as justifying decision-making processes to the wider organisation.

- **Refine your category management**

A holistic understanding of supplier spend, segmented by similarity or relevance, will enable you to leverage better negotiations and consolidate spend where appropriate.

- **Map potential risks in the supply chain**

Managing risk is a key responsibility for any procurement team, but if the public sector response has taught us anything, it's how to pro-actively identify risk and prepare solutions before risks turn into threats.



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