

Public Accounts Committee

Oral evidence: Restoration and Renewal Recall, HC 1021

Thursday 2 February 2023

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Members present: Dame Meg Hillier (Chair); Mrs Flick Drummond; Mr Mark Francois; Nick Smith.

Gareth Davies, Comptroller and Auditor General; Emma Willson, Director, NAO; and Marius Gallaher, Alternate Treasury Officer of Accounts, were in attendance.

Questions 1-129

Witnesses

I: Sir John Benger, Clerk of the House of Commons; Simon Burton, Clerk of the Parliaments, House of Lords; David Goldstone CBE, Chief Executive, R&R Delivery Authority; and Dr Patsy Richards, Interim Managing Director, R&R Client Team.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sir John Benger, Simon Burton, David Goldstone CBE, and Dr Patsy Richards.

Chair: Welcome to the Public Accounts Committee on Thursday, 2 February 2023. Today we are looking again at the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster, which is proving to be an ongoing headache and challenge for the parliamentary authorities. Since we last reported, in June last year, the authorities have dissolved the Sponsor Body, which had been set up to oversee the works and particularly the work of the Delivery Authority. They have now brought the whole project in-house under the supervision of the Clerks of the Commons and the Lords and under the overall supervision of the Commissions of the Commons and the Lords.

This project has been discussed for around 40 years. The latest project and programme date back to at least the Joint Committee report of 2016, but there was a lot of discussion prior to that, although completion still feels no closer. Those of us who spend time in the building regularly see the challenges of this elderly building, including the ongoing maintenance costs and challenges. There have been life-threatening risks—fire risks, asbestos leaks and falling masonry—although, hearteningly, I see from the Clerk's recent letter that there has been no falling masonry since March

last year. So that is one positive, although it is possibly luck rather than anything else, but we will hear about that from our witnesses.

Our witnesses are Sir John Benger, who is the Clerk of the House of Commons; Simon Burton, who is the Clerk of the Parliaments, also known as the Clerk of the House of Lords; David Goldstone—welcome back—who is the chief executive of the Restoration and Renewal Delivery Authority, which has not been changed directly by any of the recent changes and is carrying on with its work; and Dr Patsy Richards, who is new to this Committee, and who is the interim managing director for the R&R Client Team, which is, effectively, taking over most of the responsibilities of the Sponsor Body. Without further ado, I will ask Flick Drummond MP to kick off.

Q1 Mrs Drummond: Thank you very much. I have had a basement tour, and I was pretty horrified. Is the building safe, Sir John?

Sir John Benger: The building is safe, and as corporate officers we have to assure ourselves of that; otherwise, we could not permit our staff to work in the building. So the building is safe, but it is in a condition of decay in certain key areas and badly in need of reservicing. In order to keep it safe from, for example, the risk of catastrophic fire, we have to do numerous fire patrols. We do not have robust systems to prevent fire from occurring and spreading, for example. In terms of fire safety, all we can guarantee is that we can clear the building and minimise the risk to human life, but we could not minimise the risk of, for example, catastrophic damage to a UNESCO world heritage site.

Q2 Mrs Drummond: While I was there, they put a new sprinkler system in place, which I think gives people 10 minutes to evacuate. There was a gutter to stop drips from going on an electrical substation. How much longer can we just keep patching the building up before it is no longer safe, and how long can you defer critical decisions before, as you said, there is further damage to the fabric of the building?

Sir John Benger: It is a really good question. I don't think I can give you a specific answer; David, who has investigated the building more than I have, can probably give you a more specific answer. But, underpinning your question, is a very fair point: if we just wait and wait, and defer and defer, eventually there will be catastrophic and irreversible damage to the Palace, which is part of a UNESCO world heritage site. I am very clear about that.

Furthermore, those of us who live and work in the Palace are all too aware of the poor state of large areas, and that is not restricted to the central site—the Palace itself—but also applies to large areas of the northern estate, as we have seen over the winter, when there have been numerous problems with heating, power and so on.

I think the building is steadily deteriorating in one sense, for the reasons you have suggested. At the same time, we are putting in place mitigating

measures and spending hundreds of millions of pounds on those measures—for example, in the areas of fire safety or mechanical and electrical infrastructure systems. So we are putting in measures to mitigate the risk, but, overall, your thesis is correct: ultimately, this building will fail. I dare say David could give you a little more forensic detail on that.

David Goldstone: Obviously, the existing condition and the safety are the responsibility of the corporate officers. I suppose it is worth starting with the decisions that have been made—the original Act and the new mandate that was agreed by both Houses last year. The commitment to restore and renew the Palace has been made clear more than once—on a number of occasions. That is a recognition that the way things have been managed so far is not going to be sustainable in the long term and that there are fundamental challenges that need to be addressed, which cannot be done just by doing things as they are currently.

It was very helpful that the mandate the Houses agreed last year called out the priority areas that really need to be the main areas of focus, which is where we are focusing our work. We are focusing on fire safety; as Sir John mentioned, there have been incidents. There are good arrangements in place around safety of life, but the building is clearly at risk, and compartmentation needs to be strengthened. It has been improved, but more could be done.

There was a recognition that the building services quite clearly need to be replaced; they are out of date and there are periodic failures. All the systems—heating, ventilation, drainage, electrical—are time-expired. Because there is one set of systems serving the whole Palace, and it is such an enormous site, it is enormously challenging to replace them—other than with a major programme of work of the sort anticipated by restoration and renewal. Those challenges are really significant.

Asbestos is prevalent through all the areas where the systems are. There are enormous amounts of asbestos on all the pipes, lagging and paint and all through many voids. There are issues with the building fabric, as well, as has been mentioned.

Those were the priorities, but there are a lot of other challenges. That is why I think the previous decisions have been that a new approach—a more fundamental programme to restore and renew—is needed. These challenges cannot really be addressed on this very busy, congested site with heritage and security constraints while it is in the continuous, busy use it is in at the moment. That is why there is a strong reason for a different approach.

Simon Burton: If I may, I will just make one small point. While John and I are separate and individual corporate officers for these purposes, we work seamlessly together on joint programmes of activity—funded jointly

by the two Houses—to make sure that safety is maintained, as described. There is a seamless approach between the two Houses.

- Q3 **Mrs Drummond:** Since 2016, there have been 44 fire incidents, eight asbestos incidents and 12 stonemasonry incidents, but there does not seem to be any central recording of health and safety incidents across the parliamentary estate. How can we be sure that those figures are absolutely accurate?

Sir John Benger: I think there is central recording. Those figures that I gave you are from a central register. The safety team is obliged to compile a record of serious safety incidents, which might be something that we see as a significant near miss. The figures I have given you are taken from a central source, which goes to the Parliamentary Safety Assurance Board, so there is a joint board tasked with safety across the estate.

That said, I have significant concerns—I think they are shared by Simon—over our overall approach to safety and whether we are doing enough. We have recently advertised for a new director of safety in Parliament at an SCS 1 grade—that is a very senior grade. That job advert went live last week, I think. That follows a series of consultations Simon and I have had, to say that we think safety governance is still a little confused. There is a separate safety team in Strategic Estates and a safety team within the Governance Office. We agree that there needs to be a single point for safety in Parliament, so we are about to appoint that person at a senior grade.

- Q4 **Mrs Drummond:** I am concerned because, according to a letter we got recently from you, one asbestos date was different from the one you had given us before.

Sir John Benger: Correct.

- Q5 **Mrs Drummond:** That indicates it is not a rigorous process and that we cannot just go in, have a look and see what has happened. That is what I was concerned about.

Sir John Benger: On that asbestos incident, I am very happy to go into more detail.

Mrs Drummond: That is my next question.

Sir John Benger: There are two asbestos incidents. Do you want them both?

Mrs Drummond: Yes, an update on both of them would be great.

Sir John Benger: Okay, I will take you through them. It is a slightly complicated picture, so just bear with me and come back to me if any of the detail does not square. I will take them in order of what I perceive to be the seriousness of the incidents.

The less serious incident, in terms of how it was dealt with, was the one in Norman Shaw North. That occurred on 18 October. Norman Shaw North,



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as probably all Members are aware, is essentially a building site at the moment; there are no Members in those offices at the moment. It is entirely handed over to the contractor team, and the contractors have obligations under the relevant directions. What happened was that there was work in a floor area in Norman Shaw North, where asbestos, or potential asbestos, was discovered. It was inappropriately handled by a member of the contractor team, who did not take appropriate precautions and who simply brought the asbestos to a desk and said, "We think this might be asbestos."

Chair: This is the least serious one.

Sir John Benger: In terms of the potential risk. The works were immediately stopped and an environmental clean was put in place. That member of staff was suspended by the contractor for not handling the incident correctly. The asbestos is meant to be double-bagged, labelled and sent away with appropriate safety gear. The incident was escalated a week or so later than it should have been from our side. In terms of risk, safety and life safety, that is kind of neither here nor there. The site was sealed, it was cleaned, it was safe, and it was subsequently inspected on an unannounced visit by the HSE. They pronounced themselves satisfied, so that is all fine.

That point of escalation recording should have been within 24 hours, under our protocol, but it was not, because the relevant member of our estates team—the project lead—went on annual leave. They may have thought, "It's perfectly safe, and I'll put it in the system when I come back so that everyone knows," but that is still not the right answer, and it should not have happened. That has been addressed internally within Strategic Estates, and I think that message was delivered appropriately, but this should not have happened—I want to be clear about that. It should have been put on the system within 24 hours so that we could assess the significance of the incident and make our own assessment.

The contractors' asbestos consultant, who is licensed by HSE, analysed the situation. Their view, which we share, was that because the material was bonded fibre and sodden, there was no realistic risk of release of asbestos fibres. We share that view, and we are confident that it was therefore not a RIDDOR event. The incident in North Thames was a RIDDOR event—that is to say it triggered a necessary alert and investigation. Their view, and our view, was that this was not a RIDDOR event.



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Q6 **Mr Francois:** I am not a structural engineer by training, but we had an incident in my constituency recently where an old block in a school was demolished and, unfortunately, some asbestos was released in the process. I had asbestos 101 as a result, so I now understand that there are different types of asbestos, and different colours of asbestos, and some are potentially much more dangerous than others. Obviously, there will be asbestos around the estate that will be of varying colours. Do we know what colour this asbestos was?

Sir John Benger: I have the information for the type of asbestos for the second incident, but I don't believe I have it for the first. I will come back to you in writing on that, if I may.

Q7 **Mr Francois:** But you take the point that some asbestos is not that dangerous, and other asbestos is very dangerous.

David Goldstone: Asbestos is dangerous when it is released into the air and people can breathe it in.

Q8 **Mr Francois:** Yes, but with respect, sir, I think it is important to appreciate that there are gradations of this.

Sir John Benger: I am advised that it was blue asbestos in this case.

Q9 **Mr Francois:** Not brown.

Sir John Benger: Not brown. The more general point you make is very interesting. I was talking to someone yesterday who is on the board of a large social housing firm, who pointed out that the discovery of asbestos—the presence of asbestos—is a daily fact for a large housing association. I think David could probably, not exactly assure you, but confirm that there are enormous quantities of asbestos within the estate. In other words, just because we are talking about two incidents today, that does not mean we are not dealing with asbestos on a practically daily basis.

Q10 **Chair:** We understand that, but Mr Francois is highlighting that there are different types of asbestos, and finding it gives you an idea of where it might be in the different eras of the building.

Sir John Benger: Absolutely right.

Q11 **Chair:** Are you developing an understanding of the risk across different parts of the estate—floors, ceilings?

David Goldstone: That is part of what we are doing with the activity we are taking on. The scale of the asbestos across the estate is enormous. We think there are something like 2,500 locations, including pipe lagging, paintwork, in the ducts and voids—all sorts of very inaccessible places. There are a number of vertical risers across the estate, and we think over half have asbestos linings.

We have an understanding, but this programme—the mandate last year confirmed this—has always assumed that all systems and services would need to be replaced. We know that that is an enormous challenge, and

when we discussed the initial costs and time for this programme, asbestos was a big driver. We think we would need something like 300 people for two and a half years to address that asbestos challenge. It is probably the biggest such thing there has ever been in the UK. We have looked at comparators and at other major buildings with extensive asbestos that have been demolished, and they were scales smaller than the asbestos—

Q12 Chair: That would be 300 people for two and a half years being able to access the building while it wasn't being used.

David Goldstone: Exactly. It is just that volume of work. The scale is enormous. You mentioned the basement, and the asbestos is extensive there, but services are obviously distributed across the Palace to rooms and—

Q13 Mr Francois: For want of a better term, do you have a "colour chart"? Do you know how much of it is all the different colours?

David Goldstone: We do not have a complete chart at the moment. We are surveying particular spaces where we think it is going to be relevant for the work we are doing, but we've always assumed—the mandate last year confirmed this—that when the time comes the whole lot will be replaced.

Q14 Mr Francois: The reason I asked the question, and I think this is probably quite important—asbestos 101—is that it is relatively benign if you don't disturb it. It is if you disturb it, and it crumbles and fibres— **David Goldstone:** Exactly.

Q15 Mr Francois: So we understand that. If you know that you've got asbestos across the building of a value of a 100, but in the end 2% of it is brown, then obviously you pay particular attention to that. It is not the same as if 100%—

David Goldstone: We were discussing the information sharing. There is a register of asbestos which is maintained by the Parliamentary Safety Team. When we carry out our survey work, if we come across any areas of asbestos—we haven't disturbed any—we will immediately notify the team.

Q16 Mr Francois: Could the Committee have a copy of that register?

David Goldstone: I think so. It is the Parliamentary Safety Team's, but I believe so.

Chair: Sir John had just finished talking about that first asbestos incident—

Mr Francois: Sorry.

Q17 Chair: No, it was absolutely helpful. We were notified originally that it was in December, but you have since notified us that it was actually 6 September.

Sir John Benger: That is right. That was an incident in Fielden House, which is owned wholly by the Lords. Just to be clear, our duties as the sort of overall client are to give what information we have in terms of survey conditions and the potential presence of asbestos. We fulfilled our duties in both cases, but in error the contractor cut a hatch in a roof in a lobby of Fielden House in the absence of appropriate survey work. It is their responsibility to make sure they have that, and they failed in that responsibility. It is not a very happy story.

It was confirmed to me yesterday that the incident occurred on 6 September. The original date, which I supplied to the Committee in good faith, was the date supplied to me. That date came from the contractor—I want to be clear that this is not a House Service team that has been sitting on a story and then saying, “Actually, we can’t get away with this. We’ve got to go back.” A revised date was given to us yesterday, on investigation. The actual date was 6 September and—this timeline is quite important—the first concerns were raised with our project team on 9

December, three months after the initial date. We demanded a survey on the same day to establish whether there was asbestos in that void. We received the results concerning the presence of asbestos on 21 December and, again, that is blue asbestos. The hatch was sealed on that date.

I will go through the reporting chain first, and then we will deal with the actual risk to life. In reporting terms—completely inappropriately—this was reported to our Parliamentary Safety Team by our trade union president; it was not reported through our internal escalations and our agreed safety protocol. That should not have happened, and the project lead is currently suspended, because their responsibilities are clear to them, and it is their job to escalate. This was not escalated through the appropriate route, so that member of staff has been suspended. Suspension is a neutral act while an investigation takes place, so I do not want to go beyond that. The incident was escalated in the normal, appropriate way through the Commission, the DG and the Clerks of both Houses.

In terms of the potential risk to life safety, that is actually less, because they did not cut into the asbestos at all. They cut a hatch, they noticed there was asbestos in the void, but they did not dislodge any asbestos at all. However, the risk was significantly greater because, had they drilled into the asbestos, they would potentially have disturbed it in quite a violent way, causing a very dangerous incident. So in risk terms, it is actually greater; in terms of the actual safety on site, there is not a significant issue. I think that is generally agreed; our asbestos consultant agrees, and the contractor’s asbestos consultant agrees. Therefore, we believe, again, that this is not a RIDDOR incident in terms of the actual safety.

Q18 Mr Francois: Can you just explain what a riddle incident is?

Sir John Benger: A RIDDOR is a formal requirement to notify the Health and Safety Executive when there is an assumption of a particular level of risk caused by a measure of asbestos in the environment, which is a very specific measure—I do not have the measure here, but we can apply that to you.

Q19 **Mr Francois:** It is called a riddle incident?

Sir John Benger: R-I-D-D-O-R—it is an acronym.

Mr Francois: I see. Thank you. Sorry for that—it is just my hearing.

Sir John Benger: So no fibre was released, but all sorts of things went wrong. The contractor did not notify us at an appropriate moment. When they did finally notify us, they did not give us the right date. When they notified us, our team did not escalate it appropriately. Now the contractor has come back and said that even the date they gave was wrong. The hatch was also not sealed at the moment when there were concerns and doubts. Admittedly, there was no real risk, as far as I can establish, from its being open, but best practice would have been to take a precautionary approach, as happened on the first incident, when the site was immediately sealed and environmental cleaning took place. So it is a very significant failure, as far as I am concerned.

Q20 **Mrs Drummond:** Are you confident that every contractor that comes here has a proper asbestos protocol? How can you make sure that that is the case, because this is really quite shocking?

Sir John Benger: The two firms involved are very major contractors—these are not little groups of half a dozen people—so they definitely have well-established company protocols for handling asbestos. I am confident that if they were here before you today, they would not seek to shirk that question at all. Equally, the House has an asbestos policy, which is made clearly available to any contractor on the site. We are confident that the policy was before them, and that they knew the requirements.

Dr Richards: We have, I am informed, an asbestos register. It is electronic, so we cannot hand it over, but we are happy to make it available, or give you screenshots.

Simon Burton: It is in database form, isn't it? We will work with you to work out the best way to make the information accessible.

Chair: That's fine; we are used to getting information that way.

Q21 **Mrs Drummond:** Moving forward, will there be really clear protocols that the House insists on, that every contractor signs up to, I and that every single person working with a contractor is aware of?

Sir John Benger: My problem is that they already exist, but clearly they are not working as well as we need them to. Yes, Simon and I will

definitely go back to this. We have a new head of Strategic Estates starting next month—

Simon Burton: And a director of safety coming in.

Sir John Benger—and a new director of safety coming in. Our efforts are not working well enough at the moment. A lot of effort has gone into this, but it is not yet delivering the level of performance that Simon and I need as corporate officers. That is the simple fact, I'm afraid.

Q22 Nick Smith: Sir John and Simon Burton, what have you said to the contractors responsible for this catalogue of errors?

Simon Burton: On Fielden House, an investigation by our safety team is under way; I am expecting a report in the next couple of weeks. We have to wait and see what the investigation says, but I was at Fielden House yesterday, saw the site, and have been assured that it has been made safe. There are no parliamentary staff there; it is still a building site—a contractor site. We are waiting for the results of the investigation before deciding what further action to take regarding the contractors.

I should stress that, as John indicated, under the regulations, the Commons is responsible for these matters; I have a memorandum of understanding that states that I have to be satisfied that John, as the corporate officer of the Commons, is doing everything that he should do to keep people at the Lords end safe. I will follow up on that when I have the results of the investigation, hopefully in no more than a couple of weeks.

Q23 Nick Smith: Have you lost confidence in the contractors after these incidents?

Sir John Benger: On the first incident, our head of safety on our estates team held a conference with the contractor to go through the safety protocols, because I think there had been an incident of material falling from a height as well; this was the second safety incident on the site. That led to a high-level conference. The mishandling was down to an operative not following instructions, but the contractor took all appropriate steps extremely speedily. They kept us informed in real time, and kept us right up to date. The failure to trigger our protocol was our failure, not theirs. They ordered an environmental clean straight away, and the HSE has been on site and pronounced itself satisfied, so I do not have significant concerns about the contractor's handling of the issue.

On the second incident, I am very, very unhappy not to have been given accurate information, but the investigation is live, and it involves a suspended member of staff. I need to be a little bit cautious before casting blame, because we are awaiting the outcome of the investigation. I undertake to write to the Committee with our overall assessment once the investigation is concluded. I am exceptionally unhappy to have been given, and to have to give the Committee, a different date 24 hours before giving evidence to it. That is not a comfortable position for a corporate officer to

find himself in, but I would rather give you a comprehensive account of what happened, when, and who is to blame, once we have that.

Q24 Nick Smith: On the bigger picture, are you confident that no one has been in danger because of these incidents?

Sir John Benger: Yes, but we would not be appointing a new head of parliamentary safety if I felt that our safety structures were robust enough. I am not confident at the moment that we are quite there, although we have made very real progress in this space. Simon and I have a kind of legal commitment, because we are legally responsible when things go wrong. It is not the Speaker or the House of Commons Commission that is responsible; it is us as corporate officers, so we have a very clear interest in getting this right. We are not where we need to be yet. We do not have a sufficiently embedded safety culture across the organisation; our structures are getting there, but are not there yet.

Simon Burton: Safety is the most important thing for both of us at the moment. We are here to talk about R&R, the long term, and how things will improve, but every morning, when we come to work, safety, safety, safety is our top priority, and we need to do more.

Mr Francois: Sorry to mention the school again, but it is germane. The asbestos has now been dealt with at The King Edmund School in my patch; I am delighted to say that it has reopened safely and that the pupils and staff are back.

I have to be careful about what I say now because there could be a legal action, but the essence of the issue seemed to be that before they demolished the block, they thought they knew where all the asbestos was and that they had removed it all; but when they actually knocked it down, they found that there was quite a lot of asbestos that they did not know was there. Suddenly, there was a problem and it all had to be dealt with. Again, safety was paramount, particularly given that they were dealing with young people. The problem was that they did not actually know what they were dealing with. I might come back to that because it is potentially very important in the case of the Palace as well. I just wanted to make that point.

If we talk a bit about costs—

Q25 Chair: Before we get on to costs, you said, Sir John and Mr Burton, that you are legally responsible. You talked a lot, Sir John, about this being a contractor site. Who is legally responsible if there is an accident or a release of asbestos on a contractor site?

Sir John Benger: Under the regulations, the contractor is responsible for safety on the building site. Our responsibility is to make sure that they are appropriately briefed in advance with the knowledge that we have and that we are supervising in an appropriate way. But supervising in an appropriate way does not mean going round every day with a clipboard;

that is not how it works. The regulations apply legal responsibility to the contractor. It is one of the things that we are contracting for.

Chair: But it feels a bit like “Groundhog Day”. We were here only last summer discussing another asbestos leak—again with a date that was wrong, and with a substantially different number of people affected. That was in Speaker’s House. We do not need to go through the detail; it is all on the record. Yet you are only just appointing a new head of safety for both Houses. Somebody has dropped the ball somewhere. This was not high enough up on the list of concerns. We have had a series of asbestos incidents that have been mishandled, in some cases involving large numbers of staff who are now on 40-year asbestos watch, which is very distressing for them and very significant. Who was responsible for not making the decision to have better safety mechanisms?

Sir John Benger: We are responsible. The corporate officers are responsible; there is no ambiguity about that.

Q26 Chair: So why are you only just appointing a new head of safety, a new structure, now?

Sir John Benger: There has been a ramping up of safety controls in this area. Relatively recently, Strategic Estates had its own safety expert, and we hoped that putting in place a head of safety in Strategic Estates, given that these are on construction sites, would be a significant boost.

You are right: we are unhappy about the treatment of several safety issues in the Palace. It is not just asbestos; I have fire safety concerns as well and I know Simon does too. We have consulted relevant experts and non-executives with huge experience in this area. Their view is that having a divided safety culture, with a central team in the Governance Office and a specific team on Strategic Estates, was in danger of causing ambiguity and uncertainty about where the buck stops, for the very reason you said. We have listened to their advice.

Simon Burton: We have also brought in more safety professionals over the last 12 months; we have not just waited for the new director to arrive. The new director will provide a new focus and new strategic leadership, but we have been bringing in other professional support over the past 12 months. We will be happy to write to the Committee with more details of that.

Sir John Benger: The second consideration is the sheer quantity of building and maintenance work on the Estate. There is a really staggering amount of that going on. There are something like 4,000 maintenance or reactive maintenance calls each month—around 48,000 maintenance events a year—on the Estate. There are 42 projects on the Estate, 27 of them in the Palace and another eight in the Northern Estate.

Historically, back when I joined the House service a long time ago, there would have been a handful of projects on the Estate. Now, the Estate

looks and feels like a building in urgent need of serious intervention and repair.

The way I look at it is that there are huge numbers of services provided in Parliament, generally to a very high standard. Some of those services have been honed and refined over centuries—look at our procedural advice services, our *Hansard*, our broadcasting and our Library services. They are world-class, and I don't think that is really in dispute. Where we are looking now, in this kind of commercial building space, is not something in which we have the same embedded expertise within the organisation. We are taking it seriously and we are definitely ramping it up, but we have been a bit slow to do that, I fully accept that. However, it is worth taking into account that this is a fantastically difficult site for all those projects to happen simultaneously.

Q27 Chair: Absolutely. You are both constitutional experts. You could probably get a professorship in academia on the detailed knowledge that you have of House procedures—I can see Mr Burton's eyebrow rising at the prospect of escaping. That might be a bit easy, but there is a serious point here: you are not trained in this. We see this in the civil service, so it is not a personal point to you two individually. You are in your elevated positions not because you have experience of project management and, as you say, 4,000 maintenance inquiries a month and all the rest of it. That is not what you went into the service for, so do you think that, long term, your successors should be people with different skills for this part of the job?

Simon Burton: Can I just say something briefly? Our jobs are very wideranging. We have the constitutional role, the procedural role and the accounting officer role, which we take very, very seriously, particularly in this forum. We have the corporate officer role, and I have—I do not think you have this, John—the privilege of being the employer of House support staff. That is an incredibly diverse, complicated and challenging job, and there is no way that I could do it on my own. Whatever skillset I had, there would always be something that would not be my core skill.

The way that I do it is to have a team of very highly professional people. I have an HR director, a finance director and, in the Lords, we have a

brand-new post of chief operating officer—somebody with experience of projects and programmes who has come in at a very senior board level, particularly to be the board-level lead in the Lords for R&R. So our jobs are very complicated.

Q28 Chair: Yes, but the chief operating officer is a new position, isn't it?

Simon Burton: It is indeed.

Q29 Chair: Remind us how long—

Simon Burton: Just over a year, so it is very recent. My arrival as Clerk was timed just before the arrival of the chief operating officer, which was a

new post that I very actively supported and helped to embed. I cannot do my job without the support of this wide range of incredibly competent, professional people. I think that applies across the board.

Q30 Chair: Sir John, it has been a bit different in the Commons. There was quite a tussle a few years ago about bringing in the equivalent of a chief operating officer.

Sir John Benger: There was indeed.

Q31 Chair: Where are you on that now?

Sir John Benger: We are now on our second Director General, and the title has changed to Director General (Operations). Marianne Cwynarski, our current DG (Operations), has been in post for just over a year. The creation of that post arose from the Straw Committee on Governance, following a problematic appointment of the Clerk, actually, and I completely endorse that Committee's findings.

Q32 Chair: Just remind us what her experience is.

Sir John Benger: She has about 20 years' experience in the House Service in a wide range of roles, ranging from communications to project management. She does not have formal engineering qualifications or anything like that, but I am confident when I say that anyone who has had dealings with our Director General (Operations) has been hugely impressed by her.

Q33 Chair: We are not really discussing her individually; it is about the skillset. Mr Burton, was yours an outside appointment?

Simon Burton: Yes it was, but there was an open competition—open to internal and external candidates.

Sir John Benger: Our first appointment was an external appointment. This appointment, which was in full, fair and open competition—

Q34 Chair: Open wide?

Sir John Benger: Yes, absolutely. It was an internal appointment, but what I would say about an internal appointment, which I think reflects the skills that Simon and I can bring to this job, is that this is an exceptionally complicated organisation. There are two Houses; it is a UNESCO world heritage site; it is a terrorist target; it is a mass caterer; and it is a visitor attraction, getting 1 million visitors a year. Understanding the stakeholder environment is critical to delivering anything in Parliament, so whether we do it well or not, that is something that both the Clerk and the DG or chief operating officer need to bring to the table. You have to be able to understand the very complicated governance mechanisms that apply in Parliament.

Q35 Chair: Or they could be reformed, but perhaps that is a discussion for another day. The danger is that there is MP exceptionalism, with 650 MPs



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all thinking they individually have control over this, which is where your operating officer and your COO role come in.

Before I go to Mr Francois on other issues, Mrs Drummond mentioned fire. The incidents that you highlighted in your most recent update to us, from October of last year, are really quite concerning, because they are such ordinary, everyday little things that can happen. The overheating AquaVac, the steam cleaning machine that caught fire on the scaffolding—these remind us of Windsor castle or Notre-Dame. An item of clothing was left on a portable heater; if the heating was working, we would not need so many portable heaters. Again, you can see a cyclist coming in or something and you can see what should not happen, but an ordinary, everyday mistake is made. And then there is an overheated fan belt. These are just the ones that were picked up. What keeps you awake at night in terms of fire safety? I would be very worried if I were in your position.

Sir John Benger: I think fire is our foremost risk. It is our biggest risk, first of all because of the scale of damage that fire can inflict, and the threat to life. We are confident that we have taken what mitigating measures we can within the current Palace; none the less, just to lose a UNESCO world heritage site that is such a cherished building—one of the most iconic buildings in the world—is not something we would want on our record. When the Palace burned down in 1834, it was through overheating of tally sticks in a boiler. That caused a catastrophic blaze that destroyed almost all of the Palace.

Q36 **Chair:** We know the risks exactly. With all of this, are you comfortable being in charge of a building where this is happening, and you have asbestos and work going on? We are living in a building site now. Mrs Drummond asked, "Is it safe?" You are going to great pains to say how you are making it as safe as it possibly can be, but is it a reasonable place to work when you've got this sort of risk—asbestos issues, holes in the floor that you can walk through, leaking toilets, sewage problems and everything else we can list? For those of us with the privilege of working in the old Palace, it is a living experience. Would you rather not be dealing with this right now?

Simon Burton: The building is safe for those who come into it—all of us, whether we are Members, staff or visitors—and that is our priority. If it wasn't safe, we would say so and we would do something about it.

Q37 **Chair:** Is it reasonable, though?

Simon Burton: It is the building that we have. It is safe for people to come in today, but what we need to do is make it better for the future, and hopefully, using David and others, that is where we can move the bigger project forward.

Sir John Benger: Sorry, Chair, can I just add one thing to that? Whatever your view of R&R, whether you are a decanter or a remainer or any of these things, it is not happening next week. We've got years and years.

Mr Francois: Did you say “remainder”?

Sir John Benger: I did.

Mr Francois: Sorry, just checking.

Sir John Benger: Sorry if that triggered a response. We are here for a good few years, absent any of these things, so we can either moan and groan and say it’s all very terrible, or we can do our best to mitigate risk. It is our job to mitigate risk.

Q38 **Chair:** Finally, before I pass to Mr Francois, if something were to happen—if one of us or a visitor to the Palace were to have an accident— you two are both legally responsible for that.

Simon Burton: Yes, we are.

Q39 **Chair:** And you could be taken through the courts for corporate manslaughter.

Sir John Benger: Correct.

Simon Burton: I have one final thought: it is very helpful in a public forum such as this, the Public Accounts Committee, to recognise that we are working on a building site. That is quite a big message that I think people will need to get.

Q40 **Chair:** And you are still responsible, even though it may be that a contractor has control of that building. I just want to be absolutely crystal clear.

Sir John Benger: Yes.

Chair: Thank you very much. Mr Francois.

Q41 **Mr Francois:** Dame Meg, thank you very much. Remainder—hmm.

As we are the Public Accounts Committee, can we talk about costs? How much public money has been spent on the restoration and renewal project to date?

David Goldstone: I can tell you how much has been spent. Following the Act, the organisations were set up. We were formed legally in May 2020—the early part of 2020—so we are coming up to completing three financial years. The total cost over that period for the Delivery Authority is around £270 million. We obviously had to form the Delivery Authority as a completely new entity in 2020—it was a completely new start-up.

Following the Act and the resolutions that led to us being established, we developed the schemes under the proposals that were then on the table and that led to the decisions a year ago. We worked on those plans for the first two years, and we have been working on the new approach since the Commissions’ decisions and the new mandate last year, so there has been a complete change of direction.

So that cost embraces, if you like, the period when we were working on the previous approach that led to us being formed, and then on a new approach—

Q42 Mr Francois: What is the total of all that?

David Goldstone: The £270 million I referred to is the cost up until the end of this financial year.

Q43 Mr Francois: All right. So we are talking about a bit over a quarter of a billion pounds of British taxpayers' money. What, exactly, have you got to show for all this—a quarter of a billion pounds on?

David Goldstone: As I said, there are two parts to it—

Q44 Mr Francois: We get that. That is the input. What are the outputs?

David Goldstone: We were working to a plan that the Houses decided last year was not the plan they now want to follow. In the first two years, we obviously had to form the entity and establish a whole new organisation. We conducted a strategic review in those first few months, supporting the then Sponsor Body. That looked at the whole future direction and approach for restoration and renewal, and was published in March 2021. That set the direction for the plan, and was agreed by the Commissions and published at that time.

We then started developing, as required under the Act, the detailed and costed proposals that could come back to the Houses for a vote. We were developing four schemes. We shortlisted two, and we were in really detailed analysis of two potential solutions to restoration and renewal—two different, alternative designs, one at a lower level, or what was essential, and one that was more ambitious.

We have something like 1,750 technical reports on all the different aspects of this building and what is needed to fix it. That is across about 15 different technical specialisms. We have been developing a BIM—a building information model—to record all the information we get from surveys about the condition of the Palace and potential design solutions. We have been carrying out the surveys. We did a report that was asked for by the House of Commons Commission, specifically, about the implications of doing the restoration and renewal work while the House of Commons was sitting through the works. We did that as an extra exercise last year.

That is the first two years. This time last year, approximately, when the Commissions made the decision to change direction, we stopped all that and started working on what would be a new approach and how we could come at things differently in the light of what were then the Commissions' decisions, which became, last July, the new mandate that the Houses agreed. We had to completely reset our organisation. We dramatically reduced our costs very quickly at that time. For the last 12 months, we have been developing—as we were asked to under the new mandate—a

wide range of different options by which restoration and renewal can be conducted.

There is a really important product coming—

Mr Francois: That would be good.

David Goldstone: Looking at this broad range of options, we have looked at a range of different outcome levels—what can be achieved from the work—and a range of different ways the work can be done, with different construction scenarios and solutions to deliver the work. We agreed a range of evaluation criteria, and we have been conducting detailed evaluation of all these options. That will now go through the new governance for the programme, which has been set up following the mandate and the statutory instrument, so that we can get new decisions on what the future direction is. That is all due to go through the programme governance in the first half of this year, and to come back to the Houses for a vote on the strategic direction by the end of the year. That is the change of direction we have been dealing with.

Q45 Mr Francois: You mentioned the figure of 1,750 technical reports—that is a very large number. Does that include having done deep, intrusive surveys into the condition of the buildings?

David Goldstone: We started our intrusive surveys last year. At the time, we could only really do intrusive survey work during the recess periods. We did about 6,000 hours of work over the summer and into the autumn recess periods. Yes, we have been carrying out detailed intrusive survey work on the ground conditions, the building structure, the structure and strength of walls, including vibration monitoring, and air quality testing—all sorts of areas.

Q46 Mr Francois: Just to save time—

David Goldstone: Yes, we are carrying out intrusive surveys.

Q47 Mr Francois: Right, you are carrying them out, or you have finished them?

David Goldstone: We are carrying them out. We won't finish them really. We will carry on doing them until the work starts. We won't have surveyed every bit of this building; we will carry on discovering while the work goes on.

Q48 Mr Francois: Forgive me, but isn't that part of the problem? Coming back to the example I gave earlier, unless you have done a really comprehensive set of deeply intrusive surveys, the risk is that when you actually start the work proper, it will cost far more than you thought because you will discover a whole bunch of nasties that you didn't know were there.

David Goldstone: The survey work we are doing is designed to informally answer exactly that question. It is helping us understand what are realistic estimates of the cost and the risk of doing that work.

Q49 Mr Francois: And there is more of that to be done this summer?

David Goldstone: There is more to be done, and there is some going on now. For the first time, we are doing intrusive survey work while the House is sitting, and we are monitoring the noise. We have some on at the moment.

Q50 Mr Francois: One of the reasons I ask the question is that, if you look at the work that was done on the Elizabeth Tower as a kind of small version of this, once the work began they found lots of problems that they didn't know were there before they started. As a result, the project was 176% above the original outline business case estimate, and it ended up costing, I think, £80 million. Can one of you confirm that that is right, or is it a bit more than that?

Sir John Benger: We will check that figure.

Q51 Mr Francois: That is kind of a microcosm of what we are talking about. They did some surveys and said, "It's going to cost x," and it ended up costing nearly 2x. It also took far, far longer than anybody anticipated. If you take that as a kind of down-payment on the bigger job, that suggests that, unless you have really done your homework, first, it will end up costing far more than you thought and, secondly, it will take far longer than you thought.

David Goldstone: Doing our homework and giving realistic estimates is absolutely what we are about and what we are doing. There have been questions, as we discussed previously, about the time it is taking to do this. That is because we are trying to get really detailed plans for tackling this massive challenge.

Q52 Mr Francois: Isn't the plan that, once you have done that, you are going to come to the House by the end of the year with a recommended option and an estimated cost? Is that about right?

David Goldstone: Yes, but it is a strategic direction point. We need to come back subsequently with the really detailed proposal. I am not saying that that will be a detailed budget. That will follow.

Q53 Mr Francois: Wait a minute, hang on, slow down. There is a fundamental problem with that. If you want the House to vote on whether to do what you recommend, we have to know realistically what it costs. Look at HS2. We can't do a finger-in-the-air guess, particularly after what happened on the Elizabeth Tower. If you are going to ask the Commons to approve a programme of n billion pounds over many years, before we go through the Lobbies one way or the other—leaver or remainer—we have got to be confident that we know exactly what we are signing up for.

David Goldstone: I absolutely agree with you.

Q54 Mr Francois: So how will you be able to do that?

David Goldstone: We won't be asking you to make that decision at the end of this year.

Q55 **Mr Francois:** What will you be asking?

David Goldstone: Let me come at it the other way. We will absolutely be asking you that question, with detailed, costed proposals that will also include allowances for risk and uncertainty on time and cost, based on all the analysis we have done on a small number of options, with a preferred and recommended way forward. That is going to have to follow. Because of the decisions that were made last year that stopped the route we were on, we need to get an agreement on the strategic direction for the programme—we have no agreement on that today. In terms of the decision we are going to bring back later this year with the Client Team, working with the Houses, we are asking the Houses to agree a strategic case that says, "Here's the direction," with a small number of preferred directions or—ideally, from my point of view—one preferred direction. We will reflect and we will have estimates based on the analysis we are doing across the wide range of options of what the cost and time will be. But they will be high-level estimates; they will not be the detailed proposals we will ask you to vote on later.

Q56 **Mr Francois:** If I were a slightly sceptical member of the public sitting down the pub, I would go, "So they spent a quarter of a billion quid of taxpayers' money and they still don't know what strategic direction they are going in."

David Goldstone: The strategic direction is not a decision for us; it is a decision for the political governance of the Houses.

Dr Richards: Can I come in on that, Mr Francois? We do know what the strategic direction is; we know how we are going to get to that. We have got a process for getting to that by the end of 2023, so that David has a

strategic direction to go away with and work up. The longer you spend on it, the more precise these costs become. If you are earlier in the project, obviously, you are having to add in risk and options and bias, so the figure looks bigger. We have learned lessons from the Elizabeth Tower. You are quite right that it was 176% over the original OBC, but perhaps that is because we have been coming out with these figures a bit too early in the process.

Q57 **Mr Francois:** What was the total cost? Just for the record.

Sir John Benger: The forecast final cost is about £86 million. The cost to date is about £83 million.

Mr Francois: So we have another £3 million to go.

Dr Richards: But that has told us that we should not rush to put figures out there. We should be doing more intrusive surveys. The problem with the Palace, as you said, is that you can almost do all the surveys you

want, but you will still be discovering things through the project, and that has to be reflected in what we ask the Houses to vote on.

Q58 Mr Francois: When we come to this vote at the end of the year, is the suggestion that the House will be asked to vote on one option, or will it be asked to vote on several options, even though there will probably be one recommended option?

David Goldstone: Basically, the latter. The proposal is a shortlist of options that have been considered by the new Client Board—which is the Commissions meeting jointly—supported by detailed work from the Programme Board that is now being established, and we will be asking the House to support a strategic direction with a shortlist of options.

Q59 Mr Francois: Sorry to hammer it out, but this is kind of fundamental to the whole thing. In other words, by the end of the year, you will come to us and say, “Right, we have done all this survey work. We think it is going to cost x. This is our recommended way of doing it, but if you wanted to do it a different way, here are the other options and here is what we think it would cost.”

Dr Richards: Not quite. That is the bit that the Client Team is leading on: getting that business case through. We will be going to the Programme Board, initially around Easter time, and starting to do this down selection and then we will get the Client Board—the two Commissions—to say, “Ideally, this is the option we want you to work up, and these are our strategic objectives.” We will then be spending the summer and the autumn working up that option—ideally one, or maybe one or two—and speaking to Members again in the autumn so that, when we come to the Houses, we are not really saying, “It is this choice, that choice or that choice, and these are the different costs,” because those indicative costs will have been considered earlier by the Programme Board and the Client Board, alongside the trade-offs for each way of delivering it. We really hope this strategic case that comes to the Houses will be saying, “This is the way that the Client Board recommends. Here are the counterfactuals. Here are the”—

Mr Francois: Forgive me, this is important. Unless all the options are costed in the same detail, you are asking the House to vote for a pig in a poke.

Chair: Except, as we have discussed in previous sessions, the cost of working up every option is a very big cost.

Q60 Mr Francois: Yes, but you understand that MPs are going to say, “Right, this is your recommended option—you think it costs x over y years—and here are the others, but this is really a finger-in-the-air exercise.” It is not a proper choice, is it?

Dr Richards: There will be indicative costs. In terms of the whole matrix of options that David’s team are currently working up, there are the

cornerstones, if you like, of the options that were worked up in great detail before. By comparing it to those, you can have indicative relative costs—
“This one will be a bit cheaper. This one will be more.”

Q61 Mr Francois: I think you might find this is an issue come the day. One last quick question, and then I must hand back. Do we have at least a rough estimate of the annual cost of maintenance of the estate at the moment, so we can compare that? What are we spending each year to keep the place maintained?

Simon Burton: The NAO has been involved in this. Estimates of repairs are approximately £2 million a week, or £1.4 million a week going forward from now over the next few years. So there is a significant cost.

Q62 Mr Francois: So about £100 million a year, very roughly?

Chair: Just to keep things patched up.

Simon Burton: This is a really important point. From where I am sitting, it is important to me and to John that, at the end of the year, Members are in the best possible place to take the best possible decision based on the options presented to them. In my mind, that has three elements. One is the evidence that David and his people will produce. Another is the rigour of the governance structure that will get those options to the Houses. They will go through the Programme Board, which has Members on it, and through the Client Board, which has Members on it. Crucially, throughout the year, Patsy and her team will be leading on engagement with Members. They will be finding out what Members feel, what they think might be acceptable and what matters to them. If we get all those three strands pulling together by the end of the year, we should be able to present Members with a good basis on which to take the decisions that they must take. It is up to Members to take them.

Q63 Mr Francois: Having been a Minister, I don't think the House will want to find itself in the position of being given those options. It's the old civil service mince-up, isn't it? “Here are three options, Minister, all of which are difficult, but this is the one we recommend. For the following nine reasons, including legal advice, the other two are completely impossible, so please sign now.”

Dr Richards: We are not going to recommend anything. We want the Members to make an evidence-based choice. If we put 30 options back to them—

Mr Francois: But you take my point.

Chair: To be clear, the Client Board, and the Programme Board particularly, are made up of people, including Members, to make a recommendation. It is not going to be a completely free and open vote of the House because there will be very tightly defined recommendations. We have gone round this block before. It is an interesting point that not many organisations have a few of their members—or 650 people—making all the

decisions. That is an interesting thing about the governance of the House, but it is completely beyond the reach of this meeting.

Mr Francois: The constitutional experts would say we have been doing it that way for quite a long time.

Q64 Chair: That might explain some of the problems we have with management of the House, but there we go.

Picking up on the points that Mr Francois has raised, Sir John and Mr Burton, if you are asked to deliver something that you don't believe is value for money, can you raise that? Do you feel confident to raise that with Parliament or to talk about it publicly?

Sir John Benger: You raise a really important point. The responsibilities placed on us as accounting officers are a result of the statutory instrument that came into force at the beginning of the year. We have assumed all sorts of significant responsibilities that were formerly the responsibility of the Sponsor Board. They include some really big things, such as engagement, strategic direction and so forth. I have asked myself that question. The House has endorsed the structures by which we deliver those things, which are the Client Board and the Programme Board that you just mentioned. That is really helpful. The Client Team, in whom I have great confidence, supports both of us in that role, and that is really important.

Is there a conceivable situation where we as accounting and corporate officers would believe that the direction of travel is either risky in corporate officer terms—that is, a risk to the safety of the people who work in Parliament—or represents disastrous value for money? What options are open to us? This stirs up memories of my four years as Clerk of PAC a terribly long time ago. An accounting officer in a Government Department can write letters of direction to the Secretary of State, saying, "I don't really see this as being right. Please instruct me to do this because I don't really think it is right." There is obviously no Secretary of State equivalent here, which is part of the problem.

Q65 Chair: The Speaker?

Sir John Benger: If it is not impertinent, I would invite the Committee to look at this area and perhaps make a recommendation. I think it would be helpful if we had the option of placing that moment on record, formally and transparently, should it ever arise. I believe we do have the option. Frankly, we will do it anyway.

I have been reflecting on this quite carefully, because we do take our statutory responsibilities very seriously. I had a word with the Speaker, who is one of the chairs of the Client Board, and chair of our Commission. I have asked him about the process that he and I agreed—whereby if I feel there has been a real abuse of procedure, I can place that on the record by putting a letter in the Library, which would be publicly available—and whether he would be happy to be the recipient of an

equivalent letter in the circumstances I have just described. It is a constitutionally separate business in the Lords, so I do not want to speak for Simon, but the Speaker has confirmed to me that he would be content with that procedure.

Q66 **Chair:** That would fall short of him giving you a letter of direction?

Sir John Benger: He has no authority to give me a letter of direction.

Q67 **Chair:** We have two constitutional experts in front of us, but that raises a very interesting constitutional point. You, as accounting officer, say "This is not good value for money," and do the equivalent of an accounting officer assessment—do you do those?

Simon Burton: We assess business cases.

Q68 **Chair:** So the accounting officer assessment process is very useful, and we sometimes see the private versions; the public ones are usually pretty candid. That then sets it out, and if there is a concern, they can seek a letter of direction. You could have concerns that do not meet your statutory responsibility.

Sir John Benger: Yes.

Q69 **Chair:** But you can't ask for a letter of direction. So where does that leave you in terms of your legal responsibility if something goes badly wrong?

Simon Burton: Briefly, on the difference between the Lords and the Commons, in the Commons the Commission and Mr Speaker have a statutory existence that does not apply in the Lords. That is not the point I wanted to make. The point I wanted to make is that we are, in this new Government structure, both embedded in the Programme Board and the client body.

I am not a member of our Commission; we did not have a Programme Board before. Both of us will be in the Programme Board, with our accounting officer and corporate officer hats on. We will also be on the client body with those hats on. We have opportunities in a forum with Members to lay out what we think. Indeed, the minutes of those will be—

Q70 **Chair:** The key thing is, what if they override you?

Sir John Benger: That is the point; there is nowhere else for it to go. Parliament is a constitutional entity separate from Government. No one in this room would think that was a bad thing.

Q71 **Chair:** The key thing is, what happens if you have made a very firm recommendation with those hats you wear and they override you?

Sir John Benger: It would obviously be an extreme situation, but we place on the record a letter indicating that we do not believe that this fundamentally represents value for money, or that it is causing such significant safety concerns—

Q72 Chair: So you put the letter in, but what are the consequences?

Sir John Benger: The consequences would be in the public domain. In other words, it would be political pressure. But there is no lever; there is nothing sitting above Parliament.

Q73 Chair: For example, a visitor has had an accident in the House, and you have said on the record that you didn't approve of the approach that was taken. Who then is legally responsible?

Sir John Benger: We retain corporate officer legal responsibility for health and safety.

Q74 Chair: So you could put on record that you don't think an approach is right, for safety and finance reasons, but if the accident happened, you would still be legally responsible. That does not put you in a very comfortable position, does it?

Sir John Benger: You are not wrong there. In terms of safety, if we got to a situation where I felt that it was no longer safe for my colleagues to work on the estate, I can direct them that they do not need to attend the estate. That is my legal responsibility. I have the legal power to say that, in my view, this no longer constitutes a safe workplace.

Q75 Chair: Is that the same for the public?

Sir John Benger: We can close areas that we don't believe are safe for the public.

Q76 Chair: What about, during covid, when decisions were made about Members of Parliament being present?

We would not have the authority to stop Parliament meeting.

Q77 Chair: If there is a safety or finance issue, it is basically still your legal responsibility even if you put on the record your concerns. You could be sued by somebody having an accident, or you could have the disapprobation of not managing money properly, but there is no recourse. Isn't that a mess?

Simon Burton: That is our responsibility, ultimately, as corporate officers.

Q78 Chair: What would make you resign? That still does not resolve the problem, but would you at some point resign if you were conflicted to that extent?

Sir John Benger: I would certainly consider that.

Q79 Chair: It would put you in an untenable position.

Sir John Benger: Absolutely.

Simon Burton: That is true today, with the existing responsibilities.

Sir John Benger: That is true today—I was going to say. It is not different from today.

Chair: My mind is boggling. I will hand over to Mrs Flick Drummond.

Q80 Mrs Drummond: My mind is boggling too, because I want to know what power you have over MPs to stop them coming in—none at all?

Sir John Benger: No. They are elected office holders.

Q81 Mrs Drummond: How are you guarding yourselves from any political interest or pressures from Members of Parliament?

Dr Richards: I think we have kind of given up trying to do that. That was why the sponsor body was set up at arm's length, following the Scottish Parliament model, to try to separate from the political. As we have seen, there was still a great amount of interest in the Commissions. The new system is actually intended to be closer to the political decision takers, and to have them on the actual governance. The governance has been slimmed down, especially for this programme, actually, because we have the Client Board and we have a Programme Board. The Client Board is the two Commissions, so that is as close as we can get, really, to the people who do run this place. By making it more like a proper, normal programme, we will have Programme Board deliberations with minutes, and minutes of the Client Board meetings, so it all should become much more transparent. If there is political interference, at least it will be clear, because there will be a decision taken by the Client Board, ultimately, and it will be minuted.

Q82 Mrs Drummond: My real question was going to be about the Client Board, how you are going to relate to the delivery board and how it is going to

work. Just looking at the structures, why is it different from before? Why will it be more effective than it was before?

Dr Richards: It does relate to that. We are closer to the people who are actually taking decisions and able to speak to and have an ongoing dialogue with the politicians and the people who live and work here. To Mr Francois's point, there shouldn't be any surprises for anybody, because we should be keeping everyone informed as we go through these selection processes.

All the engagement periods are timed to coincide with when we are asking the Programme Board or the Client Board to take decisions. There is a whole period of engagement up to Easter and then again in the autumn as we go to the debates in the Houses. We are thinking that by being closer and more transparent, the whole thing will come out into the fresh air a bit more. It was actually the Commissions who asked for this. It was the Commissions who took these decisions in the summer and recognised that they needed to have more transparency about the decisions that they were taking.

As a side effect, by coming back in-house, we are working much more closely with the in-house teams. Even the transition of my team into Parliament involved teams across Parliament working together, including the lawyers, the IT teams and so on. We can already say that we are working in a much more collaborative and integrated way.

David Goldstone: From the point of view of the body that will be responsible for delivering the works once those decisions are made, these governance changes are really important. To have key political decision makers in the room, at the Programme Board and when the Commissions meet jointly in the Client Board when the decisions are being made that will come through as the recommendations to the Houses, so they have that ownership, is really important for us in having the confidence that we have a programme that is resilient for the future and has backing and the right political support. Otherwise, there will be great uncertainty.

Q83 Chair: There were Members appointed to the sponsor body by the Speaker.

David Goldstone: There were Members, but it was more disconnected, if you like, from the Speakers and Leaders. Because the Commissions are meeting jointly as the Client Board, with the Speakers and Leaders of both Houses and, indeed, the Opposition leaders, I am not the constitutional person, but from a programme delivery point of view, I can see that there is much more political ownership in that structure and, therefore, behind the decision making.

Sir John Benger: Liz Peace, the outgoing chair of the sponsor board, wrote a reflection on what, in her view, had gone well and what had gone badly.

Chair: We have seen the letter.



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She said that one of the things that went badly was the client function. In the end, there were sort of two clients. There was the ultimate client, which was the Houses and all these forces you talked about, and then this arm's length body, which did not work for that reason. I think she acknowledged that that gap in client function in the end did not work.

David Goldstone: The reality is that we are working much more closely together. We are working much more as a joint operation.

Chair: The client function as originally set up—but there was then a later difference of position, although the Houses voted on it.

Q84 **Mrs Drummond:** The Programme Board has not met yet, I think. Do you have a timetable for that? It must be quite urgent.

Dr Richards: We have a date for that, which is 27 February. The nominations have been made, and that is just subject to approval by both Houses, I think, next week.

Chair: It is on the Order Paper.

Dr Richards: In anticipation of that we have started doing induction sessions with the Programme Board because we want them to hit the ground running on 27 February. We had an induction session this week and it was fantastic to have external members and some of our political Members in the same room and bring them all up to speed—bring the externals up to speed with the political situation and vice versa. We feel there has been really good progress there. Once we get the Programme Board running, the Client Board will be able to stand down a bit. That has been meeting monthly, and they will meet quarterly, which I think will be less painful for them.

David Goldstone: There does need to be a dedicated Programme Board to oversee a programme of this complexity and magnitude. It can meet regularly with the right expertise.

Q85 **Mrs Drummond:** Do you think the new governance has managed the inbuilt instability in political leadership? Do you think you are completely out of any political issues?

Dr Richards: We can never be in control. Obviously, it is the usual channels to some extent, but the Programme Board does have some Members nominated by dint of their office—for example, the Leader of the House of Commons and the shadow Leader of the House of Commons. That gives us a little bit more stability.

Q86 **Mrs Drummond:** On transparency, you talked about keeping the Members on board. Having seen big building projects in my own constituency, if you keep everybody on board all the way through, they tend to—apart from the minutes, which I know you are going to publish, are you going

to have regular meetings with Members of Parliament so that they can go through the journey with you, so that by the time you

get to the end, hopefully they will be on board completely?

Dr Richards: Absolutely. We recognise that probably the parliamentary engagement was an area where we did not do well enough—did not cut through enough—before. There have been lots of basement tours and activities and so on, but we are really now going to start hitting that. There will be a stand in Portcullis House at the top of the escalators—you might have noticed that that is empty now—and similarly in the Royal Gallery and the River restaurant in the Lords. We are going to be offering targeted one-to-one briefings for Members. We have some very high-level questions to try and gauge the mood of the House so that we can feed all this back to the Programme Board and the Client Board to aid their deliberations.

I went to the Liaison Committee this week. We are going to see the domestic Committees. We have not come to this Committee because of the possible conflict of interest, but we are going to the other Committees to keep them briefed, and some of the party groups as well in both Houses. We have a very targeted plan. It will be a lot of work. It is quite ambitious, but we are going to hit that, and we are being helped by the teams in the Houses such as the restoration and renewal teams and directors and some of the House engagement teams. That is another crucial difference from before. We are tapping into established networks within the Houses as well as trying to do it from an arm's length body.

Q87 Mrs Drummond: Sir John and Simon, you are on both Client and Delivery Boards. Is there a conflict in that? How are you going to make sure that one is working and the other is delivering?

Simon Burton: You are right. It is an unusual situation, but it is right for the reasons that you are hinting at, because we are there with our corporate officer and accounting officer. I see it as a strength because it means there is a link between the two bodies. We can represent one in the other, and vice versa. I see that as a strength. The governance will be as open and transparent in one body as we are in the other.

Q88 Mrs Drummond: How are you going to be open and transparent—

Sir John Benger: We have very clearly defined statutory responsibilities as well, which would make it impossible for us not to be on those bodies. I am sorry to have cut across you there.

Mrs Drummond: I was asking how you are going to be open and transparent.

David Goldstone: You referred to the Delivery Board. I want to be clear that we as the Delivery Authority have our own board that is independent. We are stand-alone.

Chair: You are accountable to the others.

David Goldstone: Exactly. Yes. There is a Delivery Authority Board, which Sir John and Simon are not members of, which oversees the work we do. What we will bring into the process we have discussed.

On the transparency point, there is a clear commitment on the part of both Commissions meeting as the Client Board to be as transparent as possible. That is important because this is a very hard sell. Restoration and renewal—your building, where you live, where these MPs want to live—is a hard sell to the public. Spending billions of pounds doing up your gaff will not play well, I predict.

Chair: It belongs to the public.

Q89 **Mrs Drummond:** I agree. I do not see it as mine.

Sir John Benger: You may disagree. I suspect it will be a hard sell unless we can bring everyone into the process and make it as clear as possible why this much-loved building—the public do love the building. They might not love all the inhabitants, but they do love the building. There is a process of saying, “Look, if you want this palace, this iconic building, Big Ben, the Elizabeth Tower, still to be here in 50 years’ time, this is what it is going to cost.” Spoiler alert: that cost will be a very high figure, and that will be a very hard sell.

Dr Richards: Our own public polling shows really high levels of support for the building—75% to 80%. People totally separate the Palace, Big Ben, the home of democracy and everything else from Government and politicians. I think that is quite an important thing; we will have to trust the public.

Q90 **Chair:** I just reflect that, during the second world war, Winston Churchill was keen to save St Paul’s because of the iconic nature of the building; buildings do have resonance. I just wanted to pick up on a couple of points to work out this issue. If you do not get approval from the Client Board, Sir John and Mr Burton, you can put on record your concerns, but beyond that, you are just emasculated at that point, aren’t you? If your professional view of safety and cost are overridden by the Client Board, you are still legally responsible, even if you do not agree with what the Client Board does. Does that not put you in an impossible position? Does there need to be some sort of system of ministerial direction, or something, that would put the legal responsibility elsewhere?

Simon Burton: John hinted earlier that what we are talking about are decisions for three or four—however many—years down the line. We still have our daily duties.

Q91 **Chair:** I am talking about when that crunch happens.

David Goldstone: I think it is very unlikely that work would go ahead in that situation. There will be somebody in my position. We would be the

client to contractors doing the work. If there were those sorts of safety issues, again, we would have those concerns. I am also an accounting officer, and it could be value for money related. It is quite difficult to imagine works of the scale of restoration and renewal going ahead—

Q92 Chair: They are not theoretical; these are real situations that could come to the fore. If as accounting officers you have safety concerns, and the Client Board disagrees, you are still managing a building. It is presumably not delayed, then, because Mr Goldstone would not be able to go ahead, but you are then corporately responsible for the safety of the building. The longer this goes on, and the more the building deteriorates without action, if there is an impasse, you are put in an impossible position, aren't you?

Simon Burton: That is a very fair point, because every day we not only look at the building as it is today but think ahead to the risks going forward. You are right: if things deteriorated fast or too much, we would, for example, have to start thinking about how we use the building. Are there parts of the building that we might not be able to use? Are there activities that we would want the Houses not to continue with? Those decisions are live and real now, and the R&R element of that is a big element for the future, but we have to make sure that we are taking those decisions in the right way.

Q93 Chair: Do you have any external assurance over the technical and value for money risks? Obviously, you have expertise of a degree, but—

Sir John Benger: I think this is more at Programme Board level than at Client Board level. For example, one of the external members of our Programme Board is Steve Hails, who is director of business services and health, safety and wellbeing and Tideway London. He is an authority in this area. We also have Paul Duffree, who is director of property for the Royal Household.

Q94 Chair: But they are not going to give you the technical and VFM assurance, are they? They are expert members of the board.

Sir John Benger: They are on there to give us their advice.

Q95 Chair: That's a different thing. They are not giving technical assurance over decisions. I guess would that be you, Mr Goldstone, or do you get technical assurance?

David Goldstone: We have technical teams, including health and safety, in all the various areas that we are talking about. We carry out our own assurance, if you like. In the three lines of defence sense, we have first and second-line assurance. We have recently, because of the options work we are doing, got technical and design panels to challenge the work we have been doing, and some construction, especially those who worked on this Estate, to challenge the work we have been doing at that level. By the time we produce the analysis on the options and their disruptions and cost, it will have gone through a lot of assurance. And the Client Team—

Q96 **Chair:** But it is really mainly down to you, in the Delivery Authority.

Dr Richards: But then further, in the Client Team, we are assuring their work on the Delivery Authority, and we will also be bringing in external independent assurance as well.

Simon Burton: If I may, I would like to briefly supplement my previous answer. As risk increases over time, mitigations will need to be enhanced, and that will come with a cost. The figure we have given you of £1.4

million a week is the figure today, but that may be a different figure next year or the year after if we are doing more to mitigate the risks as they increase. That is how we would have to approach that.

Q97 Chair: Absolutely. I just wanted to finalise one little point. You said that elected Members of the House or peers are able to do what they want, basically. They can come into the building. If that happens and there was—I don't know—an asbestos leak or another danger as they found their way through some work site, who is legally responsible if they had an accident? Does that responsibility fall on the Member? Have they effectively taken that responsibility on themselves?

Sir John Benger: We would still be legally responsible as corporate officers.

Q98 Chair: Wow. So you couldn't stop us; you couldn't bar my way, but if I then broke my leg, I could sue you. That puts you in an invidious position.

Sir John Benger: I think we would have quite a strong defence in court if people were ignoring—

Dr Richards: I think, under health and safety law, there is generally a personal responsibility, isn't there?

Q99 Chair: But it's all a bit grey. Well, personally, I will put it on the record that I won't put you in that position.

Sir John Benger: I think we will write to you on that. It might be helpful if we follow up with a letter on that.

Chair: It is a serious point.

Sir John Benger: I understand that.

Chair: There is a very big—there's a gap here.

Sir John Benger: Let's come back to you on that. I want to be sure—

Q100 Chair: Dr Richards, you have come into this role—you've picked up quite a hot potato. Can you just talk through how you have approached it and what you think you are going to bring to this from your background experience?

Dr Richards: Yes, sure. I have worked as lead in a number of teams in the House of Commons, the Scottish Parliament and the private sector, so I have fairly broad experience of the different services that Houses deliver, but, increasingly, I have worked in programmes—and, increasingly, complex programmes—so I think that's what I'm bringing. Somebody said the Client Team has to be able to speak both programme language and parliamentary language, so I am in that position of the interface, really.

I was asked to become the interim chief executive officer of the Sponsor Body, as it was, largely to bring the team in-house and oversee the transition programme. We have applied programme discipline to that, and

I am really pleased to say that that transition programme has now been closed because we have brought the team in-house. As I alluded to earlier, that is also thanks to a lot of hard work from teams in the Houses: getting the SI—

Q101 **Chair:** So most of those people have just TUPE'd over, effectively.

Dr Richards: They have TUPE'd in; it has been a lift and shift, and that was the direction we were given by the Commissions. I just want to make the point—

Q102 **Chair:** So the skills that were there have come over?

Dr Richards: Yes, they have. There is a big “but” there, because, for example, the entire leadership team that was there before I came have all left. I just want to say thanks to the team, right here and now, because the team who are left—there was a recruitment freeze for a while, because we didn't know what was happening last year—have stepped up, and many of them have been covering more than one full-time-equivalent role, really. So they have done really well.

We have lifted and shifted them in, so that organisational knowledge is still there; some fantastic people are still there. Part of my job has been to look after that team and reassure people that we are still carrying on with this programme. We are now able to start refilling posts. For example, I am really pleased that, just on Monday, our director of the strategy and business case joined us. I will give her a name-check—Jenni. She said she would be watching this on the live stream.

Chair: Hello Jenni!

Dr Richards: She is there, but these things do take a long lead-in time. We had an open, external competition for that, and Jenni has only just come on board. So we are starting now to rebuild that capability.

Also, I have started a piece of organisational design work—sorry to use that jargon—looking at the capabilities that a Client Team needs, to see whether we have any big gaps. We want to be lean, but we want to be really effective and have high-quality people so that we can hold David and his team to account, task them and make sure they are delivering—and that's exactly what David wants as well. So we have now decided what capabilities are needed, and the next step will be to look in more detail at the teams below that.

Q103 **Chair:** You are interim head of the Sponsor Body. Then there is the Client Board, so that will have someone in charge of it as well.

Dr Richards: The Client Board is chaired by the Speaker and the Lord Speaker.

Q104 **Chair:** Yes, but the two Clerks are the professional officers to the Client Board, so what is the equivalent role in the new structure for the Sponsor Body, because you have taken over the Sponsor Body, effectively?

Dr Richards: Well, I was Sponsor Body; I'm now Client Team. I'm now managing director of the Client Team— **Chair:** Okay. That's what I'm trying to—

Dr Richards: Having moved in-house.

Simon Burton: The Client Team is actually now a joint department of the two Houses—

Chair: Which is the first time—

Simon Burton: First time that has happened. John and I take our responsibilities in that regard very seriously. Within the first couple of weeks in January after the transfer, John and I both attended an in-person induction day for Patsy and her team, and we attended an online session for all of David's people. So we are taking our leadership responsibilities seriously towards our new colleagues.

Q105 **Chair:** So who is your line manager, Dr Richards? Is it John?

Dr Richards: It is John, yes.

Chair: But Mr Burton— **Simon**

Burton: I countersign—

Chair: You're in lockstep.

Simon Burton: Yes, we're in lockstep.

Dr Richards: I have absolutely regular meetings with Simon as well. Because my background is in the House of Commons, I am very conscious of trying to always think of both Houses.

Q106 **Chair:** One of the challenges—I will come to Mr Goldstone on this as well—when we have talked to you about this before is keeping skilled people. When a project goes bad or looks like it is being delayed, there are plenty of opportunities for skilled craftspeople to go and work around the world—indeed, this is a world heritage site. Are you finding it difficult to attract skills to your team, Dr Richards?

Dr Richards: We had a fantastic field, actually, for the one I mentioned—the business case director—so not yet, but we have had one or two failed recruitments. I think there was a head of assurance or risk that we could not fill. I am not going to say it is easy, and we have to be mindful of always benchmarking against those sectors to make sure that we are paying—

Q107 Chair: Are you getting any feedback from headhunters and others about why people might be reluctant to take up a big job like that?

Dr Richards: We do not use headhunters for our roles. We have done for the programme boards, and I can share that if you wish.

Q108 Chair: Is there any feedback you can give us about why it has been hard to recruit? Is it just a lack of applicants or people being put off because it is complex?

Dr Richards: Yes, that has been mentioned in one report from the executive search company that helped us with the Programme Board's external members. They did mention that some people were slightly put off by the uncertain nature of the programme and the political nature of the programme.

David Goldstone: I think I called out this risk this time last year. I was very concerned that, with the change of direction, we may lose people. A bit like Patsy has said, we put together a really outstanding team when we formed the Delivery Authority, with a lot of the right technical specialist backgrounds we need to deliver this programme, and I was concerned about the impact the reset would have on that.

I am pleased to say that the risk I described last year has not materialised in the way I was concerned about, which is testament to the progress we have made over the last 12 months jointly. When we paused, we then very quickly got into, "Okay, the new direction is going to look like this," and we were able to talk to you last year about that and describe how we saw a way forward to reset the programme. We have kept to that timetable and all the steps we anticipated then, and I think that has kept people's confidence. Therefore we have maintained momentum, and we have not had the level of attrition I was worried about last year.

Patsy used the phrase "not easy", which is absolutely right. It is a difficult employment market out there at the moment. It is quite candidate-driven. Obviously, a lot of people are concerned about cost of living issues. We have had a number of failed recruitments as well. Our turnover rate is higher than I would like and is probably a bit higher than the benchmarks. It is quite hard.

We have collected as much information as we can about the reasons. The uncertainty is definitely a factor, but the wider market issues are also factors, and it is very difficult to unpack. The risk I described last year did not materialise in the way I was concerned about. That is testament to the really good progress we have made and the momentum that has been maintained, but I would be very concerned looking forward if we don't go through the timescale and the steps we have described—

Q109 Chair: So further delay could be challenging.

David Goldstone: That would be really difficult, and I think the risk is still there.

Simon Burton: A tiny point. This Committee is obviously very concerned with propriety and regularity of process, and I should confirm that John and I have formally appointed Patsy as the SRO for the programme. That is an important step in terms of delegation and managing public money.

Chair: Thank you. It helps to have that clarity.

Q110 **Nick Smith:** Colleagues, I want to look at the current progress of the works and lessons for the future, but I am musing on Sir John's earlier phrase about the possibility of battles or divisions between remainers and decanters, and on how we are going to manage all that over the period ahead.

Anyway, Sir John and Simon Burton, what is your current version of what a restored Palace would look like? What would the new gaff look like now?

Sir John Benger: Fundamentally, a safe workplace trumps absolutely everything else. This building was rebuilt after a catastrophic fire in the 1830s. We want the restored Palace—the reserviced Palace—to be a safe building. But, also, for those of us who work in the Palace, goodness me, this building is showing its age. I think I have had a mice infestation on four occasions since I have been Clerk. It is not dangerous, but it is not ideal and it is not great. We have had heating problems in parts of the northern estate, not in the Palace, but we have problems in the Palace too. This building is in a really tired condition.

A comparison I make—it is nothing like the scale of Parliament—is the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. I lived in Oxford for 10 years, so I got to know the city well. I like pottering around art galleries, in classic airy-fairy Clerk fashion. The Ashmolean is a beautiful gallery and museum; I think it is the oldest museum in the country. I would always enjoy going in there. It was closed for a period of years while they restored it, and I remember thinking, "Oh, I hope they don't ruin it. I hope when it comes back, reserviced with beautiful new environmental controls and so on, it is not killing the atmosphere." It is so much better; it has been brilliantly redesigned. They are very subtle changes and shifts, but there is something about a building that has been restored and revived that actually lets the original building shine in a way that this building, in my view, is not currently doing to its full potential. But, fundamentally, the most important thing is that it should be a safe workplace.

The other point I would make is that there is a really difficult challenge around accessibility, which has not been sufficiently discussed. The House passed a resolution making bold claims for asbestos removal and accessibility, neither of which I think are realistic. You will not remove all the asbestos from this site. It would not be, by any means, best practice and it would cost a staggering amount of money to remove all of the asbestos. It seemed a reasonable proposition—"Let's get rid of all this dangerous asbestos"—but it is not realistic.



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Making the building fully accessible—that means the voids, the basement space and all the work spaces—would, again, be staggeringly, unimaginably expensive. But we must have a step change in accessibility: this is the Parliament that passed the Equality Act. We have an ageing population; I do not think it is unimaginable that we would have multiple wheelchair users in a restored Palace. We could come back to the Palace after a period of time with half a dozen Members in wheelchairs. Where are they going to sit? Are we going to say, “I am afraid you need to sit on the front row, because we are keeping this Chamber just as it was. Are you going to sit on the front row? I am really sorry you cannot sit with fellow members of your party, but there just isn’t room. We just cannot fit a wheelchair in; it is just too dangerous.”

I would like the Table, where I am, to be wheelchair-accessible. I would like a developing Table Clerk or Principal Clerk in a wheelchair to be able to sit at the Table. That will be a real challenge. For me, it is about safety, accessibility and reviving the thrill of the building.

Simon Burton: There are many things we do not know about the future. For example, we do not know the future constitutional nature of our Parliament, we do not know about the development of artificial intelligence—we do not know lots of things.

If I might, I will draw the Committee’s attention again to the parameters agreed by the two Commissions. As John said, the primary commitment was health and safety, so we want a building that is safe. We need to improve the mechanical and electrical essential systems. Crucially, one of the things David and his people are working on is that, whatever we do, we want it to be capable of being fixed in a better way than we are fixing it now. That is quite a technical thing, but it is quite important; we do not want to have to do this every 10 years.

Crucially, in terms of accessibility and other such things—and Sir John has outlined a view—there will be trade-offs here. As Sir John said, you have time, you have cost, you have accessibility and you have sustainability, and all those things will pull us in different directions. We should be having a realistic conversation about those trade-offs.

Finally, having the ability to integrate the building going forward in a sustainable way would be very important. We should say—and David will correct me if I am wrong—that if we make the building more sustainable in terms of the mechanical and electrical systems, they will take up space. Space that is currently not used—for plant and so on—must be diverted into those purposes if we are to make the building more sustainable. There are plenty of things in that vision, but it is a complex picture.

David Goldstone: It is really interesting to hear your personal comments. As I said earlier, we are looking at a range of different outcome levels in the options we are developing. They are absolutely enabling the decision makers, as we go through the governance, to make those choices about,

“What do you really want in those sorts of areas?” In the different outcome levels, there will be different levels of accessibility from the very low levels we have now. As Sir John said, it is almost impossible to get to 100%, but not to get a big step change and to make most of the Palace accessible with step-free access.

The ease of maintenance is a really important point to call out, because we can replace the systems to be like they are now, and it is really hard still—

Q111 Chair: So you are in agreement, really.

David Goldstone: What I am saying is that the work we are doing will enable those choices to come out and a vision to be developed out of the choices, because they will tell us what levels of accessibility, what ease of maintenance and what sustainability are wanted. The trade-offs will be visible around time, cost and delivery, and that is what we need to bring together in those decisions.

Dr Richards: Sorry also to be in violent agreement, but I should say that we are also bound by the Act. I think a lot of people do not realise how much our work is constrained, in some ways, by the Act. We have to have regard to all those factors as well.

David Goldstone: As well as visitors and education.

Q112 Nick Smith: Thank you, everybody, for those answers. It is clear that you have bent your head into it and given it an awful lot of thought, so thank you for that.

We then come back to persuading those of us around you to support your actions. Mr Burton and Sir John, how confident are you that the House of Commons and the House of Lords will support you in your endeavour?

Simon Burton: We are making every effort we can over the course of this year to put forward evidence-based propositions that Members can assess seriously. Value for money is an important part of it, but there are also all the other factors we have talked about. We will be ensuring that Members of both Houses have really deep engagement with colleagues, to help to understand what we are offering but also what Members wish to see. That is what we are spending the whole of 2023 doing, while David and his people are busy developing the options to be put through the governance.

If we get all those different strands pulling in the same direction, we should get to a place where the Houses are able to take a decision based on what they have received in terms of not only evidence but what Members understand, because things have been explained transparently and openly. We recognise that Members are busy—we cannot just inform you on a Thursday and assume things three weeks later—so we need to keep on doing it. We need to keep iterating and engaging with Members over the year. We have to do all these things to get the two Houses to a place where they can take the right decisions. That is what we will focus on.

Q113 Nick Smith: Sir John, we all know about the scars of the remainerversus-leaver debate. I remember late nights in the Labour Whips Office trying to get our tribe working together—it was really quite something. Where do you think this is going to go in the Commons to take MPs with it?

Sir John Benger: You asked me how confident I was, and I am not wholly confident. I cannot be wholly confident because, ultimately, a Parliament cannot bind its successor. There is nothing that Parliament can do, short of fixing the building and actually delivering, that will assure me it is going to be done, until it is done, but I do think this is a critical year.

I think we have got the governance in as good a place as we can get it. Personally, I think that bringing political decision makers into the process, although it may be a little ugly in pure governance terms, is much more likely to be effective than the predecessor arrangement. I have very high confidence in the Client Team and the delivery authority: I think we have the right people in the right roles. I also think that this is actually about momentum, and if we can get momentum this year, that can take us forward.

One possible project that is being mooted by the Client Board, and which I know David is supportive of, is a kind of pilot mini R&R project. Perhaps David could elaborate on that. I think that might be very helpful. It would be helpful from the perspective of the Delivery Authority in giving us a real insight into what it takes to take an unrestored part of the Palace and restore it, so there would be significant learnings from it. In terms of kind of winning hearts and minds, showing a “before and after” might be very helpful. Perhaps David could develop that point.

Nick Smith: Show us as well as tell us—come on, Mr Goldstone!

David Goldstone: I cannot show you the done thing at the moment, obviously. For all the reasons that Sir John mentioned, we are looking at whether there is a discrete part of the Palace that we could identify as an early project. There would be enormous benefits in terms of learning and addressing the multiple challenges that restoration and renewal needs to address. We have talked about accessibility and the systems; it would be enormously beneficial to do that to part of the Palace and really bring to life what it will involve, with us having a chance to learn from it and work with the House authorities on it. At the moment we are doing a feasibility piece of work to say, “Is there an area? Would it show the benefits? Would it be worth it?” If we can, we think it would be helpful.

Q114 Chair: One of the big challenges is that obviously the mechanical and engineering is all interconnected. In my own office in the main Palace, there are a lot of men in the roof all the time—it is nothing to do with me—because they have to crawl around. There are bits that you cannot just cut off. When the risers were redone, you had to replicate all the mechanical engineering for the risers as an external unit to carry that work on. That is quite expensive and challenging. Have you got any idea

which part of the Palace you could completely isolate? I can't think of one.

David Goldstone: The isolation point and the separability of the systems is one of the real challenges with what I just said. Actually, we were discussing this in the team earlier this week, and I made the point that we need to make sure from a value-for-money point of view and avoiding nugatory spend that we don't— One way to do that, and it might still be the right solution, is we might have to put in temporary services to serve an early restored and renewed part of the Palace, but if those have to be subsequently replaced anyway, we would want to satisfy ourselves that it is a value-for-money thing to do and not nugatory.

There may be a solution where we put that in, if you like, just to serve that area, but this is part of what we are looking at in the feasibility work. We need to satisfy ourselves that it is value for money, so we can go back to the Programme Board and the Client Board and say, "Does this look like the right thing to do?" There are clear potential benefits. We need a real proposal, and I don't want to overstate it but we are very seriously trying to see if that is beneficial.

Q115 **Nick Smith:** Back to you, Mr Goldstone, but also Dr Richards, how far progressed are your plans for providing alternative accommodation? I quite like the Richmond House idea, but I understand that it is a tad too small. What alternatives can you come up with that are safe, that allow us to work together, that allow us access to a Chamber that the public can see our work in and so on? Give us a really good fallback that we can work with, please.

David Goldstone: As we have said a number of times today, at the moment, we are looking at this wide range of different options for how the programme is delivered and what it delivers. Those actually have different impacts on what temporary accommodation is needed. It would be at different times. It may be one House at one time and the other at another, or a phased approach. Because we are looking at different options, we have different potential requirements. What we have had to do while we are looking at all these different options is say, "Look, what is the demand for temporary accommodation in each of those different options over different time periods?"—and it does vary. Then we can look at the supply. We are looking across the estate and saying, "What is the supply?" Really, that is what we can do in terms of the options.

Dr Richards: The thing is we were given a clear message by the Client Board not to let the decant tail wag the dog, so you have to decide what we are doing to the Palace first, but then an equal part of this is then how do you do that. That is the "what" and the "how".

Q116 **Nick Smith:** This is a Committee that likes the "how". We are practical people. We look for a clear path. That has got to be part of how you persuade us, at least.

Dr Richards: David's team have worked up five or six hows, and that will be what we are deciding this year. But, at the moment, we can't start developing, say, temporary accommodation until we are told, "We are going to need temporary accommodation." We do have the designs that have been done to date, and those are one of the other outputs of the programme so far. They are on the shelf in a ribbon at the end of RIBA stage 2, I think. They are all there, but we cannot just choose somewhere and start working that up until we know what the will of the Houses is as to whether we get out. Rest assured that David's team are working with the estates team on these supplier demand scenarios, so that we can see, "What does it mean if you take that building offline?"

Q117 Chair: But the danger is that then you just have a delay. For instance, if the Lords needed to move to the QEII centre for a while— I believe that has now been dropped as an option because you have got to have an option on those buildings.

Dr Richards: That will become the critical path soon if we don't get a decision and are able to start re-progressing those.

Simon Burton: A lot of good work was done by the Sponsor Body team working closely with the Lords. The Lords Commission in 2019 identified QEII as the place that the Lords could decant to, and a lot of work was done working out what that would look like. That work is still there. The QEII is not owned by Parliament; it is owned by the Government, so we would have to continue conversations if a decision was taken that the Lords were to decant and if a decision was taken that QEII was the right building. If those decisions are taken, we have a lot of good work all ready to go.

David Goldstone: We did six design options. We developed those. We had clear cost-benefit design solutions on each, and we have got that work.

Q118 Chair: So you were working on QEII?

David Goldstone: No, we stopped at the time.

Q119 Chair: But you have been?

David Goldstone: We have got all the work and could revive it if required. As you, Chair, and Patsy said, we are not denying that this is a significant risk. I don't want there to be risk on the availability of temporary accommodation solutions when we might need it. We need to make those decisions when we have clarity on the options.

Q120 Nick Smith: We will need a clear line of sight on where next for us to work in our roles. I want to leave that hanging with you. That prompts the question, Dr Richards and Mr Goldstone: what do you think the risks are that Parliament will not be able to make the decisions to reduce the scope in late 2023, which you really need?

David Goldstone: That question goes to the governance we have been talking about. We are going to bring the analysis. We are bringing information such that a structured decision-making process can be made—but I look to Patsy and the Clerk.

Dr Richards: That is our top risk on our risk register—the ability of politicians to take decisions, essentially.

Chair: We are a bunch of people who want to run the country, and yet we somehow manage not to make decisions.

Dr Richards: That is what we have been talking about for the whole meeting really. That is in there, but I would also say about David's analysis to date is that they have gone back to work up these 30 options, and we have learned quite a lot from that and that a big part of the cost is all this safety-critical work. That is about 80% of the cost, so when you are talking about the nice-to-haves on top, they are a relatively small part of it. So, there will be a big irreducible cost. Also, how we do it is a big driver of that overall cost as well; it is more than the—

David Goldstone: The range of options for how we do it has a much bigger impact on cost than what the outcomes are, what scope it is.

Dr Richards: I think that will be very useful in those evidence-based decisions to come in.

Q121 **Nick Smith:** A last question from me is to you all: for how long do you think you can defer the critical decisions that need to be made with this development? We don't want to be here in 10 years' time making the same decisions—I know you don't want that, or your successors.

Simon Burton: I can say that we are working really hard to make sure that Members of both Houses have the opportunity to take those decisions in the way that has been outlined today. It is only part of the process, but it is a very important process.

The word "momentum" was used earlier. There has been thinking in this space for a number of years—decades, in fact—and we have to keep that momentum up during the course of this year to get to the decisions that need to be got to by the end of this year, so that we can move forward into next year. That is what I am focused on.

Chair: Lots of talk about momentum remain—you are cleverly weaving in our political bêtes noires.

Q122 **Mr Francois:** You clearly had your media hooks worked out. Mr Goldstone, I understand the point of having a pilot programme and testing. That has merit, but in a sense, we have already had one—it is called the Elizabeth Tower. It looks great, but it took more than twice as long as anyone estimated, and nearly twice as much money. If that is your pilot, the results were distinctly suboptimal, weren't they?

David Goldstone: First, that was not a pilot for restoration and renewal, to be absolutely clear. That was a project that the House authorities took—

Chair: But you get what Mr Francois is saying—the equivalent.

David Goldstone: I appreciate the point—I absolutely take the point: if we did it and we came up with a solution that took far longer and cost far more than the eventual outcome, that would not be a good pilot. We are anticipating and looking into this—I called it a feasibility study—to learn and to help inform our understanding. We want to address the full scope of what restoration and renewal would be, which is a much broader thing than what the Elizabeth Tower was about. So, it would be addressing all the systems issues, the accessibility—which we have discussed—fire safety, the asbestos and the masonry safety, all the various aspects that we talked about. We would be doing a full-scope project in a small area. It would be an early project to do that.

Q123 Mr Francois: I think Sir John is right. In an era when some politicians use rhetoric such as “heating or eating” and there is a very difficult economic climate, I think this will be quite a tough sell to the taxpayer, to be honest. That said, whatever people think about politicians—we are under no illusions—the building, the Palace, still has a wow factor, and we see that when we get school parties, so I think that there would be some public support.

In order to maintain that, however, you would have to be able to persuade people that you knew exactly what you were doing and that you could control costs very tightly. Particularly if you look at inflation in building costs since covid, how can you reassure this Committee that you have very firm measures in place to stop the whole thing spiralling out of control, going years over, and keeping the whole thing really tight in time and cost? We ask, because we are called the Public Accounts Committee—the clue is in the name.

David Goldstone: Absolutely. I have appeared before this Committee over something like 15 years, involved in different projects and programmes in the public domain. There is a very important first building block, which is about the initial proposals where scope, cost and risk are aligned. By the time we start work, we will not have dealt with all the risks that this project will involve. Having appropriate risk funding built into the initial funding approval so that there is transparency about that, and about how risk and the funding are going to be managed, is key.

Some of the structure here was modelled on what happened for the 2012 games, where I was responsible for the overall budget. The transparency we had about how risk was going to be allocated, how it was funded, and how those decisions were being made, was a very powerful way in which there was public visibility of how that programme was managed within its budget. There needs to be a business case that sets the start and sets how those processes are going to work, and the adequacy of proper funding for risks that provides that visibility.

Transparency in reporting is a very powerful and important tool. Many people in projects and programmes find it difficult, but I think it is actually helpful and beneficial to have visibility and scrutiny, because if nothing else, it keeps us all very honest that we cannot—and should not ever—hide things. When we bring a business case for a vote under the legislation, we will bring you an estimate that is fully costed to the scope, with full allowances for risk. That is a big factor in why it might be a big number that is very politically challenging to agree, but I would not be doing my job properly if I did not tell you what I really thought it was going to cost.

Mr Francois: And also, as it were, fully costed in terms of time.

David Goldstone: Yes. Can I just say something about inflation? That is something totally outside the control of any of us in the programme, and none of us can anticipate—I certainly would not deem to estimate—longterm inflation over the period of this programme. We are going to have to bring an analysis that is done in prices of the day, without inflation, so you can see on a consistent basis what the cost would be.

But from a funding point of view, there obviously has to be a recognition of inflation as well, because the cash will be affected by inflation, so the business case will have to recognise those two things, as the funding decisions would have to. One of the other aspects that the mandate last year talked about was incremental decisions, which may be one reason why we need to come back periodically after the initial decision.

Q124 **Mr Francois:** There is an old Army saying, which is “Order and counterorder leads to disorder.” You could say there is a bit of that involved in this, but you are confident that by the time we get to the end of the year, you can recommend a very clear path with a pretty accurate set of costs, a pretty accurate set of times, and some viable alternatives.

Dr Richards: That is not this year; that is next year. This year will be the strategic case, which will be the preferred way forward. Give them another year and you will have the firmer costs.

Q125 **Mr Francois:** Sorry, I want to stop you there. I personally think that will not work, because if you try to take people down one particular path before the decision information and the data is available, I suspect you will fail. But we will see.

David Goldstone: We are not asking them to take a firm vote on it this year—that is the point. The actual vote, under the Act—

Chair: And this Committee, before your time, has had evidence on—

David Goldstone: When we ask through all my colleagues, in terms of the governance— But when we ask for a firm vote under the Act, we will have all the information you are describing.

Q126 **Chair:** One of the unknowns is the archaeology that you find. I was pleased to see that you had the Museum of London's archaeologists in to look at things, but do you have any idea—or will you have any idea—of what you might be uncovering? That is a cost that cannot really fall on the Delivery Authority, because you would not have an ability to predict that. That, presumably, will be a buffer that you will require.

David Goldstone: There will be an element of risk that we can anticipate, for example from surveys. With the first borehole we dug in the ground conditions in the summer, we came across part of the medieval river wall that was not quite where we had expected it to be. That was really interesting. Archaeologists from the Museum of London have been helping us enormously. We have people from the Museum of London archaeology team helping us with all those types of surveys. So we can mitigate the risk, but it will not have gone away.

Chair: That will add cost, because it could add delay.

David Goldstone: There will be a time and cost impact, but you can make allowances. It won't be—

Q127 **Chair:** Which bit funds the archaeologists? I have an interest, as they are based in my constituency—good people.

David Goldstone: I wasn't going to mention it.

Chair: Which budget does that come out of?

David Goldstone: It comes out of ours. They support our service.

Chair: So when the project is structured, that will be part of it.

David Goldstone: The funding decision would include any such cost.

Dr Richards: One point I would make is that we have been talking to counterparts around the world. We know it is hard to come up with costs for developing Parliaments. What we have been coming to the Houses with is an overall package for a strategic business case. As you know, you then come back with FBCs and more refined packages of work later, which are hopefully lower, as you will be able to develop those designs. We won't just come for a one-off, and then you give us all that money and we go off. We will obviously be coming back iteratively and continually for approval to proceed for each part of it.

Q128 **Chair:** Clearly, on a day-to-day basis, the Client Board and the Programme Board have pretty critical roles. What training and support is being provided to those Members? We know that Members come and go on the Commissions; there is a lot of turnover and office holders changing. Let's face it, we have seen rather rapid change in some of those positions in the past year. Will there be a requirement that they are actually properly trained and supported to make those decisions? These are critical decisions. You can't just rock up on the day, pick up a piece of paper,



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have a look at it and think you've made a decision; you have to be a bit more involved. I hope I'm only paraphrasing what has sometimes happened.

Dr Richards: There is an induction programme and we are strongly recommending that all the political members take part in that. As you know, we cannot force Members to take part in training.

Q129 **Chair:** Is there engagement with the usual channels to make sure that political parties are engaged?

Dr Richards: Yes.

Chair: Okay. It is an important point to make that this is not an amateur thing; it is one of the biggest heritage projects in the world. It is a UNESCO world heritage site. It is the heart and birthplace of democracy—well, we always say it is the birthplace of democracy, because no one will contradict us. I am sure other parts of the world would like to claim that too. It is an iconic building and we all want it to go well.

Thank you very much. It has been an interesting session. The Committee obviously has a responsibility to keep calling you back, so we will see you again in due course. You will collect your frequent flyer points with us. I'm not sure what the reward for that is—appearance in its own right, I should think. Thank you very much. We will be producing a report on this in the next couple of months.