



House of Commons
Public Accounts Committee

Restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster

Nineteenth Report of Session 2019–21

*Report, together with formal minutes relating
to the report*

*Ordered by the House of Commons
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The Committee of Public Accounts

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Publication

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Summary

The Palace of Westminster continues to be badly in need of repair. Failing mechanical and electrical systems, falling masonry and the constant risk of a catastrophic fire requires expensive round-the-clock remedial work to ensure the safety of the 5,000 Members, Peers and staff who work in the building, as well as the million visitors who come to the Palace in a typical year. For more than 20 years, Parliament has been talking about undertaking significant works to restore the Palace, but the building work has yet to begin. However, the Sponsor Body, responsible for overseeing the Restoration and Renewal Programme on Parliament's behalf, has only just been established and a business case to take forward the work is still almost two years away.

The Programme is made ever-more complex by the number of uncertainties which underpin it, including the condition of the building, interdependencies with other parliamentary building projects, the lack of consensus over where Parliamentarians and staff will relocate to while the work is undertaken, and what people want from a modern parliament building. This Committee has seen time and time again how these uncertainties can lead to increased costs and delays to projects. While making sure the Sponsor Body understands the opinions and needs of current Members of the House of Commons and the House of Lords is sensible, we are concerned that its decision to commission a formal review will reopen previous decisions and cause further delay. The Sponsor body must learn lessons from past projects and make use of existing expertise to reduce these uncertainties and so reduce the risk to taxpayer money. The current 'make do and mend' approach to maintaining the Palace is both unsustainable and does not constitute value for money. Every week of delay costs the taxpayer £2 million and puts the safety of employees and visitors at risk. Further delays are a risk to the Programme that it can ill-afford. It is essential that it now moves quickly to avoid further unnecessary costs to the taxpayer and ensures a safe, modern Parliament.

Introduction

After over 20 years of discussion, in January 2018, Parliament approved the Restoration and Renewal Programme (the Programme) to deliver the significant work needed to repair the Palace of Westminster, and to meet wider objectives such as improving accessibility and providing educational facilities. The Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Act 2019 (the Act) set out how the Programme would be managed from April 2020. It established a new Sponsor Body which is responsible for the strategic direction of the Programme and oversees a Delivery Authority, which is responsible for undertaking the works. Both the Sponsor Body and Delivery Authority are accountable to Parliament, which will continue to be the main user of the Palace once it is repaired but, under the Act, Parliament will not run the Programme itself. Instead, members of the House of Commons and the House of Lords will be asked to approve the business case presented by the Sponsor Body and will be responsible for approving and scrutinising the funding for the works. The Programme is at an early stage and is also dependent on other refurbishment projects across the wider Parliamentary estate also being delivered on time.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. **Progress on the planned restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster has been unacceptably slow and cannot afford any further delays.** For more than 20 years, Parliament has been considering significant restoration work to the Palace. After several reviews, surveys, and reports into the condition of the building, the Restoration and Renewal Programme was eventually established in 2012. In 2017 this Committee concluded that the condition of the Palace of Westminster had reached a ‘critical point’ that further delays and indecision would result in additional costs. Every week of delay increases the risk to life and the integrity of the building and costs £2million. The Sponsor Body now needs to ensure that it progresses work on the Programme as quickly as possible.

Recommendation: *The Sponsor Body should, within two months, write to us with an overview of the key milestones which need to be completed before building work can commence on restoring the Palace.*

2. **We are concerned that re-opening decisions made earlier in the Programme risks further delays.** In May 2020, the newly formed Sponsor Body announced a strategic review to re-examine options for the Programme to consider whether anything has changed, either politically, economically or environmentally since the Joint Committee report of 2016. But the Sponsor Body has not clearly set out what this review covers or what previous decisions may be re-opened. In 2016, the Joint Committee recommended that a full decant of Parliament was the best option to deliver the Restoration and Renewal Programme. We similarly recommended that this was the most economical, efficient and effective choice from the options available. In January 2018, the Commons voted in favour of the Programme and to fully decant from the Palace during the works. Some level of further deliberation in order to understand the opinions and needs of current Members is sensible. However, we are concerned that there is a risk that the review will re-open decisions and cause yet further delays to the Programme, with the resulting risks to personal safety, the Palace structure and taxpayer money.

Recommendation: *We would hope that the sponsor body in its forthcoming review will fully explain which issues have and are being re-examined, and why; and explain the basis on which decisions will be re-opened in the future.*

3. **Successful delivery of the Programme is heavily reliant on many factors which are still uncertain.** The Programme is at an early stage and there are many uncertainties yet to be addressed. The Sponsor Body and Palace authorities have limited information on the structural condition of the Palace. We have repeatedly seen examples where poor understanding of project requirements at the outset can lead to escalating costs. The Elizabeth Tower restoration project is now expected to cost £80 million, more than double the initial £29 million estimate, partly as a result of parliamentary estate team’s lack of understanding of the work required at the outline business case. There is likely to be waste as existing Palace maintenance projects are re-done as part of the Restoration and Renewal Programme. For example, the £140 million fire safety improvement works may be ripped out when the Palace is restored.

Recommendation: *The Sponsor Body should, within three months, provide us with a summary of the survey work planned on the Palace's condition, including timing, and where the significant uncertainties lie.*

4. **The Programme is also dependent on several factors outside the Sponsor Body's control.** The parliamentary estates team is currently responsible for the refurbishment of parliament's Northern Estate, which includes the planned Commons decant chamber at Richmond House. No decision has been made on whether some, all or none of the Northern Estate programme will come under the remit of the Sponsor Body. Although we were told no decision had been taken, on 21 September, the House of Commons Commission announced that Richmond House would be used as accommodation for Members.¹ Our previous examinations of large government programmes, such as Crossrail, have demonstrated the importance of managing the interdependencies between intersecting projects, and the risks in terms of delay and expense when this is not done effectively. While the Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA) has no formal role in scrutinising the Programme under the Act, we welcome the decision of the Sponsor Body to engage with the IPA to draw on its experience of large complex projects with interdependencies. We are keen that the Sponsor Body continues proactively to seek the IPA's advice on the Programme.

Recommendation: *The Sponsor Body should, within three months, write to us to:*

- *Provide us with details on the interdependencies with the Northern Estate Programme and identify projects which are critical to R&R that should be brought under the Sponsor Body's control.*
 - *Report back to us with details of its arrangements with the Infrastructure and Projects Authority to provide Programme assurance.*
5. **The Sponsor Body has not made it clear how it will balance Parliament's range of views on the Programme.** The Sponsor Body will have to balance a wide variety of views from groups of Members within both the House of Commons and the House of Lords on what the Programme should deliver, how, at what cost and timeframe. While it is important to take account of as many perspectives from Members as possible, excessive political interference may muddy the waters of the Sponsor Body's work and has the potential to make delivery of the Programme more difficult. The Sponsor Body is conscious of the need to establish a clear and structured process with Parliament to manage any suggestion of scope change and the need for a strong change-control process. Equally, both Houses must be disciplined to use the Act as intended in order to allow the Sponsor Body to get on and do its work. The Strategic Review has a challenge panel, which the Committee was told is used to test ideas and gather different views, however this has limited cross-party membership. It is to Parliament, rather than government, that the Sponsor Body reports and who will ultimately approve both what approach the Programme takes, and where Parliament will sit in the meantime. Our experience is that Parliament functions best when it works cross-party.

¹ <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/348/house-of-commons-commission/news/119341/house-of-commons-commission-decisions-14-september-2020/>

Recommendation: *The Sponsor Body should, within one month, publish details of what it considers are the main risks to building political consensus what is needed from the Programme and how it will mitigate these.*

6. **The Sponsor Body has not engaged sufficiently with the public and other Palace users to understand what they want from a modern parliament building.** The Palace of Westminster is symbol of British democracy. Around 5,000 people work in the Palace and it attracts over a million visitors in a typical year. The public will pay for the Programme and so are key stakeholders in any plans for the Palace. The Sponsor Body has not finalised its engagement strategy for the Programme and has yet to set out how it will engage with the public to understand what it wants from a modern Parliament building. Active communication with all stakeholders is central to ensuring that the Programme succeeds in delivering both a Parliament that meets the needs of all its users, and a home for British democracy that is fit for the future.

Recommendation: *Within one month, the Sponsor Body should publish an engagement strategy outlining how it will ensure that members of the public are properly informed about the Programme and are able to contribute their views on what they want from a modern parliament building.*

1 Progress with the Restoration and Renewal Programme

1. On the basis of a report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, we took evidence about the Palace of Westminster Restoration and Renewal Programme (the Programme) from the Sponsor Body, the Delivery Authority, the Clerks of both Houses and the Director General of the House of Commons.²

2. Following a catastrophic fire that destroyed many of the original buildings, the Victorian Palace of Westminster (the Palace), was completed in 1870. For years, much of the Palace's crucial infrastructure has been in urgent need of renewal. Many of the building's mechanical and electrical systems reached the end of their projected life in the 1970s and 1980s.³ There is asbestos in over 1,000 locations, there have been at least eight instances of falling masonry and in the past five years there have been 29 incidents that could have led to fire. There is a substantial and growing risk of either a single, catastrophic event, or a series of failures in essential systems which would require the immediate evacuation of the Palace. The Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster concluded in its 2016 report that without significant works to restore the Palace, it would soon become "uninhabitable."⁴

3. In 2018, Parliament agreed to restore and renew the Palace with Parliament moving out of the buildings for the duration of the works.⁵ The Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Act 2019 (the Act) established a two-tier Programme structure – a Sponsor Body having overall responsibility for the Programme and a Delivery Authority to deliver the work.⁶

Progress in recent years

4. For more than 20 years, Parliament has been thinking about undertaking significant works to restore the Palace.⁷ In 2012, both House Commissions established the Restoration and Renewal Programme to repair the Palace, and to meet wider objectives such as improving accessibility and providing educational facilities. The 2016 report by the Joint Parliamentary Committee on the Palace of Westminster recommended that the best option for the Programme was to fully decant Parliament for the duration of the construction work.⁸

5. In January 2018, the House of Commons voted to fully decant from the Palace during work and to create new governance arrangements for the Programme. In October 2019, the Act formalised a new Sponsor Body, responsible for the Programme, overseeing a Delivery Authority which manages the Programme.⁹

2 C&AG's Report, *Palace of Westminster Restoration and Renewal Programme*, Session 2019–21, HC 315, 24 April 2020

3 Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster, *Restoration and Renewal of the Palace of Westminster*, First Report of Session 2016–17, HL Paper 41/HC 659, 8 September 2016, summary

4 Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster Report, summary

5 C&AG's Report, para 1.1

6 C&AG's Report para 1.15

7 C&AG's Report, para 1.16

8 Q 40

9 C&AG's Report, para 2.23

6. The Sponsor Body was formally established in April 2020, and the Delivery Authority in May 2020. Both had previously existed in shadow form. The Sponsor Body will take responsibility for the Palace during the construction phase of the Programme and will pass responsibility back to Parliament once work is completed. The Sponsor Body will develop an outline business case which will include the Programme’s strategic objectives, requirements and estimated costs.¹⁰ At the time of the NAO’s report in April 2020, the Sponsor Body expected to have prepared the outline business case by Autumn 2021, however this has now slipped to early 2022 owing to the COVID-19 pandemic which has delayed some of the required survey work. The Sponsor Body told us that it hopes to present the outline business case to Parliament in 2022 to allow Parliament to vote on the proposals.¹¹

7. Since the establishment of the Programme in 2012, it has taken 8 years to the establishment of the Sponsor Body. Each year that passes increases the risk to life, failure of key utilities or irreparable damage to the building itself, such as from a catastrophic fire.¹² While waiting for the Programme to approve a more long-term solution, Parliament has taken a ‘make-do-and-mend’ approach maintaining the ageing Palace systems. This spend has increased from £62 million in 2015–16 to £127 million in 2018–19, totalling £369 million across the four-year period—an average of around £2 million per week.¹³

8. The Sponsor Body did not want to commit to when the Programme might commence construction work until the business case is complete.¹⁴ However, the Clerk of the House of Commons told us that “*doing nothing is very expensive*” and that any further unnecessary delay is costly to the taxpayer and puts the deteriorating building at greater risk from a catastrophic event.¹⁵

The strategic review

9. In May 2020, the Sponsor body announced a strategic review; it expects to report in the autumn.¹⁶ The Sponsor Body told us that the object of the review was to test whether the assumptions of the Joint Committee’s work have changed “*politically, economically or environmentally*” since its 2016 report.¹⁷ While this seems sensible to gather the opinions of new Members, we are concerned that the scope of the strategic review is wide and will allow for the re-opening of numerous decisions. The Sponsor Body told us that the review includes whether to uphold the previous decision to fully decant during the Programme.¹⁸

10. The continual re-opening of decisions risks delaying the Programme even further with the concomitant risks to personal safety, the Palace structure and taxpayer money. We asked the Clerk of the House of Commons on what basis decisions would be opened up once the business case had been put to Parliament, and were told that Section 7 of the Act allows only for intervention in the Programme for “*significant variations*” after

10 C&AG’s Report, para 1.18

11 Q 12

12 Q 93

13 C&AG’s Report, para 1.8

14 Qq 45, 46

15 Qq 93, 94

16 Q 16

17 Qq 21, 44

18 Q 7

its approval.¹⁹ We recognise the need for mechanisms to allow Parliamentarians and other stakeholders to reflect on, for example, how changes in technology might alter the Programme's requirements, but remain concerned that this has the potential to lead to the postponement of action in favour of further discussion.²⁰ There needs to be greater clarity in terms of the basis on which decisions are revisited in future in order to avoid an endless loop of reviewing the conclusions of previous reviews.²¹

19 Q 42
20 Q 41
21 Q 44

2 Managing the uncertainties within the Programme

11. The Programme is at an early stage with a large number of uncertainties. The actual condition of the Palace, for which there is a lack of documentation, is unknown.²² For Parliament to return to the refurbished Palace in the 2030s as planned, a series of interdependent projects, currently under the control of the parliamentary estates team rather than the Sponsor Body, must be delivered in sequence and on time, including decant arrangements for Members, Peers and staff.²³ In addition, as the Sponsor Body does not yet have agreement in the form of a business case for what the Programme is required to undertake, it is currently unable to produce cost and time ranges for the Programme delivery.²⁴

Palace condition

12. The Sponsor Body considers that the current biggest risk to the Programme is uncertainty on the condition of the building, meaning that it is currently unclear as to the scale of the work required.²⁵ The Sponsor Body told us that it is undertaking as much survey work as possible, however this has been delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁶ The Elizabeth Tower project, run by the parliamentary estates team, provides a useful example of the dangers of a lack of understanding of the work required at the outline business case.²⁷ Site surveys, including exploratory works on the roof exterior, the clock faces, and the external masonry had not initially been included in the business case, leading to an overly optimistic view of risk. As a result, although the project objectives did not change significantly between the outline and full business case, the estimated cost of the project increased from £29 million to £61 million; at February 2020 the estimate stood at £80 million.²⁸ The Sponsor Body told us that it was vital that the Programme learns the lessons of the Elizabeth Tower project and the Director General told us that “*exhaustive intrusive surveys*” were essential before putting together a business case.²⁹

Interdependencies with the Northern Estate Programme and other projects

13. The current expectation is that during the Programme, the Commons will decant to Richmond House. The project to develop Richmond House, which the Sponsor Body told us is “*absolutely key*” in terms of delivering Restoration and Renewal, is part of the wider Northern Estates Programme (NEP) which aims to bring several buildings on the wider Parliamentary Estate up to modern standard.³⁰ The parliamentary estates team is responsible for the NEP and spent £61.6 million developing it between 2015–16 and

22 C&AG’s Report, para 2.29

23 C&AG’s Report, para 2.22

24 Q 57

25 Q 51

26 Qq 18, 51

27 C&AG’s Report para 12

28 C&AG’s Report, Appendix Two

29 Q 49

30 Q 58

2018–19.³¹ The Director General of the House of Commons told us that the dispute over the Ministry of Defence carpark, which was proving a roadblock to the NEP’s progress, has been resolved.³²

14. The Sponsor Body told us that there is currently no clarity “*about whether some, all or none of [the NEP] comes across to the Sponsor Body*” and if it does, at what stage of the Programme.³³ It is vital that the independencies between projects are managed effectively in order for Restoration and Renewal to be completed on time and to budget. We have seen with Crossrail the risks inherent in managing the interfaces between multiple time-critical projects.³⁴

15. In addition to the NEP, the parliamentary estates team is currently managing other projects, such as the relocation of the archives from Victoria Tower, and the £100 million project to replace the Palace’s cast iron roofs.³⁵ Day-to-day maintenance of the Palace is also the responsibility of the parliamentary estates team, a responsibility that will transfer to the Sponsor Body for the duration of the Programme, and then transfer back once it is complete.³⁶

16. The Director General of the House of Commons told us that the House and the Sponsor Body were working together to avoid spending on projects that would subsequently be replaced by the Programme.³⁷ However, we heard from the Clerk of the House of Commons that the £140 million fire safety work may be a victim, to an extent, of the Programme’s works, and some of it will be ripped out when the Palace is restored.³⁸

Programme assurance, cost and timetable

17. As a Parliamentary rather than government project, the Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA) has no formal role in reviewing the Programme. However, in February 2020 the Sponsor Body and Parliament commissioned an independent review of the Sponsor Body’s readiness to become substantive. This involved reviewers accredited by the IPA and followed the IPA’s best-practice guidance.³⁹ The Sponsor Body told us that it had, in addition, sought the IPA’s advice on what lessons it could learn from the delivery of major infrastructure projects, in order to benefit from its UK-wide experience of complex projects with multiple interfaces. We welcome the Sponsor Body’s proactive engagement with the IPA and the assurance that the Sponsor Body will continue to consult the IPA throughout the life of the Programme.⁴⁰ We have seen how there can be a significant time lag between project inception, approval and start of works. Portcullis House was built to increase space for Members and was first considered in its current form in 1989 by a Sub-Committee of the House. It took a further three years until the House of Commons Commission approved the project, and six more years until construction began in 1998. We would not expect the Programme to take any longer than this between

31 C&AG’s Report, para 2.23

32 Q 92

33 Q 58

34 Q 59

35 Qq 17, 58

36 Qq 5, 17

37 Qq 17, 18

38 Q 93

39 C&AG’s Report, para 2.7

40 Q 32

business case approval and start of construction.⁴¹ Where there is political consensus and clearer governance arrangements programmes can often move ahead more quickly. In 2005, London was announced as the host of the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic games and construction work at the Olympic Park site began in 2008.⁴²

18. The Sponsor Body has not yet developed cost and time estimates as it is unclear what the Programme is delivering, or when. It expects to develop these as part of the business case, after building its understanding of uncertainties.⁴³ The Sponsor Body felt that the costs and timeframe relating to the Programme should be delivered as an evidence-based range rather than a fixed figure and date, given these inherent uncertainties.⁴⁴

41 Construction of Portcullis House the new Parliamentary building, Response of the House of Commons Commission to the Sixty-Third Report from the Committee of Public Accounts, House of Commons Paper 861 of Session 2001–02, and to the Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General, House of Commons Paper 750 of Session 2001–02, 30 October 2002.

42 Committee of Public Accounts, Fiftieth Report of Session 2007–08, *Preparations for the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games*, HC 890, 24 July 2008

43 C&AG's Report, para 2.28

44 Q 57

3 Engaging with stakeholders

Building consensus in Parliament on the Programme's requirements

19. While almost all Members of Parliament agree that restoration is necessary, there is not agreement on what should be done and how.⁴⁵ The 2018 motion agreeing to a complete decant during the works passed by 16 votes, and did not cover what the Programme was actually going to deliver. There have been subsequent press reports demonstrating that there is still great uncertainty in terms of what a new Palace of Westminster will look like, what functions it will provide, and the decant arrangements.

20. Most recently, in July 2020, the Prime Minister wrote to the Sponsor Body and the Delivery Authority to suggest that they consider York as a potential location for Parliament while the Programme is undertaken as the government was considering establishing a government hub in the city. In response, the Sponsor Body sought the views of the Speakers of both Houses, who expressed the view that they “do not consider it would be appropriate or advisable for the strategic review to consider an alternative location for Parliament outside London within its terms of reference.” The Sponsor Body and Delivery Authority subsequently communicated this to the Prime Minister.⁴⁶ The Act sets out the roles and responsibilities of the Sponsor Body, the Delivery Authority, the Estimates Committee, and Parliament.⁴⁷ The Act is clear is that the Sponsor Body reports to Parliament rather than government which the Sponsor Body confirmed during the evidence session.⁴⁸

21. The Sponsor Body told us that it has established a challenge panel, as part of its strategic review. We heard from the Sponsor Body that it is intended as a “mechanism for us to test ideas, to mitigate the risk of group-think among those of us who are slightly more involved in the detail, and to get some different views as we move through the review process.” However, its composition is heavily weighted towards the government.⁴⁹ It is our experience that the best work in Parliament is undertaken when the participants are cross-party. Ensuring that all stakeholders are engaged at the outset helps to prevent problems further down the line.⁵⁰

22. In May, the Sponsor Body published its Member consultation strategy as required under the legislation, to which Members, Members' staff and staff of both Houses were invited to contribute. However, the Sponsor Body acknowledged that consultation and the achievement of buy-in from all interested parties was “an area that we need to do more on”.⁵¹

Engaging with the Public

23. The Sponsor Body has not finalised its overarching engagement strategy and has yet to develop a plan of how it will engage with members of the public on the Programme. The Palace of Westminster is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, a symbol of British

45 C&AG's Report, para 9

46 Update on possible relocation of parliamentary functions, Parliamentary website, 19 August 2020

47 C&AG's Report, figure 6

48 Q 7

49 Q 24

50 Q 38

51 Q 64

Parliamentary democracy, and receives over one million visitors in a typical year.⁵² The British public is ultimately footing the bill for the Programme, and any cost over runs.

24. The Sponsor Body is currently considering how it might best approach a public engagement strategy.⁵³ As a key stakeholder, it is imperative that the public are involved as soon as possible in the discussion as to what a modern Parliament might look like in order to deliver the Programme's vision to "*transform the Houses of Parliament to be fit for the future as the working home for our Parliamentary democracy, welcoming to all, and a celebration of our rich heritage.*"⁵⁴

52 C&AG's Report, para 1.2

53 Q 65

54 C&AG's Report, para 1.14

Formal minutes

Monday 28 September 2020

Virtual meeting

Members present:

Meg Hillier, in the Chair

Gareth Bacon	Richard Holden
Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown	Sir Bernard Jenkin
Barry Gardiner	Nick Smith
Peter Grant	James Wild

Draft Report (*Restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 24 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Introduction agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Nineteenth of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned till Thursday 1 October at 9:15am

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Tuesday 21 July 2020

Sarah Johnson, CEO, Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body; **Ian Ailles**, Director General, House of Commons; **Dr John Benger**, Accounting Officer, House of Commons; **Ed Ollard**, Accounting Officer, House of Lords; **David Goldstone**, Chief Executive, Parliamentary Works Delivery Authority

[Q1–95](#)

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website. The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

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