



House of Commons
Committee of Public Accounts

The Nuclear Decommissioning Authority's Magnox contract

Twenty-First Report of Session 2017–19

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

*Ordered by the House of Commons
to be printed 21 February 2018*

The Committee of Public Accounts

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Publication

Committee reports are published on the [Committee’s website](#) and in print by Order of the House.

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Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Richard Cooke (Clerk), Dominic Stockbridge (Second Clerk), Hannah Wentworth (Chair Support), Ruby Radley (Senior Committee Assistant), Kutumya Kibedi (Committee Assistant), and Tim Bowden (Media Officer).

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Summary

The Nuclear Decommissioning Authority (NDA) completely failed in both the procurement and management of the contract to clean up the Magnox nuclear reactor sites—one of the highest value and most important contracts let by Government. Not only did this disrupt an important component of vital nuclear decommissioning work, but it also cost the taxpayer upwards of £122 million.

The NDA ran an overly complex procurement process, resulting in it awarding the contract to the wrong bidder, and subsequently settling legal claims from a losing consortium to the tune of nearly £100 million. The NDA also drastically underestimated the scale of the work needed to decommission the sites at the time it let the contract—another failure which ultimately led to the termination of the Magnox contract 9 years early. The NDA will now have to spend even more effort and money to find a suitable way of managing these sites after the contract comes to an official end in September 2019. If it is to be trusted with letting future contracts to clean up nuclear sites, it must have a proper understanding of the state of the sites before committing taxpayer's money to a contract, and then it must also monitor progress closely.

These failures have caused untold reputational damage to the NDA and raise serious questions about its credibility as a strategic contracting authority. But central government must also share the blame. Not only did HM Treasury and the Department approve the NDA's approaches to procurement and contract management, but there are clear failings in the Department's subsequent challenge and oversight of the NDA, through UK Government Investments.

Introduction

Between 2012 and 2014, the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority (NDA) ran a procurement exercise for services to decommission 12 sites: two nuclear research sites and 10 Magnox sites. The NDA awarded the 14-year contract to Cavendish Fluor Partnership (CFP). It was then taken to court after Energy Solutions, part of a consortium that bid for the contract but lost, lodged legal claims. After nearly two years of litigation, the High Court ruled that the NDA had wrongly decided the outcome of the procurement process, and the NDA settled legal claims of nearly £100 million.

While defending the legal claims, the NDA was going through a process of consolidation with CFP—a truing up between what the contractor was told to expect at the 12 sites and what it actually found on taking over responsibility for the sites. Contractually, this process had to conclude in 12 months, but it continued unresolved for over two and a half years. During this time, the expected costs of decommissioning the sites increased from £3.8 billion in CFP's winning bid in 2014 to £6.0 billion in 2017. In March 2017, the NDA decided to terminate the contract with CFP nine years early because there was a “significant mismatch” between the work it specified in the contract and the actual work that needed to be carried out on the sites. The government has commissioned an independent inquiry into these events which is expected to report its findings in early 2018.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. **The Nuclear Decommissioning Authority designed, and HM Treasury and the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy approved, an overly complex and opaque procurement process.** The evaluation process included over 700 evaluation criteria against which bids were scored. The Nuclear Decommissioning Authority (NDA) now acknowledges this was more complex than it should have been. Worryingly, the NDA could not confirm to us whether it had complied fully with the advice provided by its legal team on the evaluation process, but said that its evaluators believed they had the leeway to change bidders' scores against the evaluation criteria. The High Court found that evaluators knew that without changing those scores, Cavendish Fluor Partnership (CFP) would have been excluded from the competition, but had manipulated the evaluation to avoid that outcome. This resulted in the NDA awarding the contract to the wrong supplier and subsequently losing a court case brought against it by one of the losing bidders, Energy Solutions. These failures occurred despite six internal and external assurance and audit reviews of the process. These reviews only scrutinised parts of the process because the NDA had deliberately limited access to the evaluation proceedings to help ensure that bidders remained anonymous.

Recommendation: *The Cabinet Office, NDA and the Department should each set out how they have changed advice and guidance, as a result of the lessons from the Magnox procurement, on how best to evaluate bids to ensure that future procurements are fair, transparent and open to effective scrutiny.*

2. **The NDA may have further wasted taxpayers' money by paying its previous contractor for work that was not done.** The NDA cannot fully account for £0.5 billion of the £2.2 billion increase in the cost of the contract between September 2014 and March 2017. In particular, it does not know whether the £0.5 billion cost increase was due to its incorrect assumptions about the state of the sites when it let the contract or underperformance by the previous contractor. Indeed, the NDA's internal audit team reported in March 2017 that there was a possibility that the NDA had paid its previous contractor for work that was not completed on the sites. This is very concerning given the scale of the potential losses to the taxpayer. It also shows that the NDA does not adequately understand or monitor progress on its sites in the way that it should to account for the public money that it uses to pay its contractors. The NDA has started an independent investigation into this, and told us it has the legal rights to claw back funds from its previous contractor if it identifies work paid for but not completed.

Recommendation: *Within three months, the NDA should update us on its independent investigation into whether it overpaid its previous contractor and, if so, how it will seek to recover this money.*

3. **The NDA dramatically under-estimated the scale and cost of decommissioning the Magnox sites, which ultimately led to the early termination of the contract.** The NDA wanted to deliver savings to the taxpayer by using a target-cost incentive fee contract to decommission the sites. But this commercial strategy—approved by the Government's Major Projects Review Group—required the NDA to have a very good grasp of the state of the 12 sites before it let the contract. Instead, the NDA had

a staggeringly inaccurate understanding of the state of its sites, with work on half of the sites significantly behind schedule at the time it let the contract. Furthermore, the NDA did not independently assure the information it had before it tendered the contract. It instead relied on the new contractor, Cavendish Fluor Partnership (CFP), to review and fill the gaps in its understanding of what work needed to take place. There is an inherent conflict of interest in this approach. We are concerned about the NDA's lack of due diligence and apparent disregard for the need to independently assure itself of the state of the sites before committing taxpayer's money to a contract. CFP ultimately submitted nearly 100 requests to change the contract, resulting in the costs of decommissioning increasing from £3.8 billion in September 2014 to £6.0 billion in March 2017. This cost increase was beyond the limit that was legally defensible in court, leaving the NDA with no choice but to terminate the contract with CFP 9 years early.

Recommendation: *To address our concerns about NDA's oversight of taxpayers money on existing and future contracts, the NDA should set out clearly to us how it will develop and maintain the right information on the state of its sites. It should do so within 6 months of the publication of the government's Independent Inquiry.*

4. **The NDA did not have sufficient capability to manage the procurement or the complex process of resolving differences between what the contractor was told to expect on the sites and what it actually found.** In early 2014, the NDA decided to rid itself of the vital post of commercial director despite a cross-government review of the management of major contracts that supported the expansion of the scope of the commercial director role. The gap in the NDA's capability was then exacerbated by its lack of capacity to manage the contract after it was awarded. CFP had over 300 people in place to manage changes to the contract after it was let, vastly outweighing the resources and expertise of the NDA, which did not have the ability to review and agree CFP's requested changes to the contract. The process to agree changes suffered continuous delays and remained unresolved by the time the NDA terminated the contract in March 2017. The NDA's Board did not have the required expertise in place, including experience of managing nuclear operations and complex public procurement, despite it being the job of UK Government Investments (UKGI) to assess and advise on NDA Board capability on behalf of the Department.

Recommendation: *In 12 months, the NDA should report back to us on its work to improve the skills and expertise of its executive team and operational staff; and, in conjunction with the Department, work to ensure the NDA Board has the right combination of expertise.*

5. **The Department's oversight, through UKGI, failed to challenge and escalate issues as they emerged or to ensure that appropriate governance was in place at the NDA.** UKGI knew that the process to agree changes to the contract had been repeatedly delayed. It told us that it did not know the scale of the cost increases to the contract until August 2016, nearly two years after the contract was let. It is very concerning that, despite the size of the contract and the ongoing legal challenge, UKGI were not proactive in challenging the NDA on its failure to agree the changes, nor pressing for an understanding of the magnitude of cost increases sooner. The Department now acknowledges that a simplification and clarification of the governance structure surrounding the NDA is required. It must guard against the

risk of reacting to the failures of the Magnox contract by simply adding more layers of oversight; central government must strike a balance between effective oversight and ensuring the NDA is not so restricted that it cannot function effectively.

Recommendation: *The Department should report back to us by July 2018 on its work to review and strengthen its oversight of the NDA, ensuring it addresses the issue of having appropriate procurement and contracting expertise.*

6. **The catalogue of failures throughout the Magnox contract highlights key lessons to be learned by both the NDA and central government.** The NDA and the Department accept responsibility for the failure of the Magnox contract and say they have begun to implement the recommendations of the Independent Inquiry's interim report that was published in October 2017.

Recommendation: *Within 6 months of its publication, the NDA and the Department should submit a report to us on what progress they have made on implementing the recommendations of the Independent Inquiry.*

1 Failed procurement and contract management

1. On the basis of a report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, we took evidence from the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority (NDA), the Department of Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (the Department), and UK Government Investments (UKGI) about the failure of the NDA's Magnox contract.¹ We also took evidence from Cavendish Fluor Partnership (CFP), the successful bidder and current contractor undertaking decommissioning work on the 12 Magnox sites until the contract comes to an end in September 2019.

2. With a value of up to £6.2 billion, the Magnox contract is among the largest put out to tender by Government. The NDA's failure—in both procurement and managing the contract after it was let—is one of the most significant we have seen in public contracting, costing the taxpayer upwards of £122 million and disrupting vital decommissioning work at 12 nuclear and research sites. The latter comprise power stations that are at, or nearing, the end of their operational life.²

3. After running a competitive procurement exercise for services to decommission the 12 sites, the NDA awarded the contract to Cavendish Fluor Partnership (CFP) in April 2014. In response to a legal case brought forward by one of the losing bidders, Energy Solutions, the High Court found that the NDA had actively 'fudged' the evaluation and awarded the contract to the wrong bidder. The NDA agreed to settle legal claims worth £97 million with Energy Solutions and its consortium partner, Bechtel.³

4. The NDA also failed to manage the contract effectively after it was let, and announced in March 2017 that it had decided to terminate the contract 9 years early. This was because of a "significant mismatch" between the work tendered in the contract and the actual work that needed to be carried out on the sites. The NDA will now have to find a suitable alternative to managing the sites after the contract comes to an end in September 2019.⁴

5. The Department, which had devolved oversight of the NDA to UKGI, approved key decisions made by the NDA throughout the entire process of procuring, evaluating and managing the Magnox contract.⁵ The government has launched an independent inquiry into the events surrounding the contract's failure to establish the root causes and identify lessons. It is expected to report to the Secretary of State in early 2018.⁶

The NDA's procurement failure

6. In 2012, the NDA launched a competitive procurement exercise for services to decommission 12 nuclear sites. Four consortia submitted bids and each bid was then evaluated against over 700 criteria which included pass/fail criteria known as 'threshold

1 Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, [The Nuclear Decommissioning Authority's Magnox contract](#), Session 2017–19, HC 408, 11 October 2017

2 [C&AG's Report](#), paras 1 and 12

3 [C&AG Report](#) para 1.10, 1.11 and 1.15

4 [C&AG Report](#) para 7

5 Qq 49–51, [C&AG Report](#) para 3.1 to 3.3

6 [C&AG Report](#), para 4

requirements.⁷ These requirements exclude bidders from the competition if they fail to include specific details (such as graphics) in their bid.⁷ The Tender Evaluation Report, including these evaluation criteria, was approved by the Department and HM Treasury.⁸

7. We heard from CFP, the successful bidder, that the evaluation was very complex, and that the high number of evaluation criteria added a significant amount of complication to the bidding and evaluation process.⁹ The NDA told us that it now accepts that with hindsight, the competition was more complex than it needed to be.¹⁰ The NDA was not able to confirm however whether it had fully followed the advice provided to it by its legal advisors, Burges Salmon, during the evaluation process.¹¹ In written evidence, the NDA's former chief executive clarified that while he is unable to confirm with certainty the extent to which every piece of advice received from Burges Salmon through the procurement, the subsequent litigation and the consolidation process, was followed as he had not conducted an analysis of this. He added that the NDA's decision to defend the claims brought against it by Energy Solutions was with the support of the legal advice the NDA had received at the time.¹²

8. In July 2016, the High Court found that the NDA had wrongly awarded the contract to CFP. Had the NDA's evaluators applied the evaluation criteria correctly, CFP would have been excluded from the competition altogether. The High Court also found that NDA evaluators had incorrectly applied the pass/fail criteria (threshold requirements) to avoid eliminating CFP from the competition.¹³ We pressed the NDA on whether it purposefully manipulated the evaluation process and why. The NDA told us that their evaluators believed they had the discretion to lawfully change these scores. It added that it was probable that evaluators had changed some of the scores after recognising that with 300 pass/fail criteria in place, a strict application of that would have resulted in all bidders being excluded from the competition.¹⁴

9. These procurement failures occurred despite six internal and external assurance reviews, all of which rated the process as 'green' and 'amber green'.¹⁵ The Department told us that the NDA had deliberately designed the competition to limit access to the evaluation proceedings to a small number of individuals to help ensure that bidders remained anonymous. But this meant that scrutiny and oversight of the evaluation process may have been compromised.¹⁶

Failures in contract management

10. In designing its commercial strategy for the Magnox contract, the NDA aimed to 'do the same for less', by giving potential contractors a stronger incentive to deliver savings for the taxpayer, through the use of a target cost incentive fee contract (TCIF). In this type of contract, the contractor is incentivised to bring down the overall costs

7 [C&AG Report](#) para 1.7 and 1.11, Qq 5 and 62

8 [C&AG Report](#) Figure 12

9 Qq 5–6

10 Q 56

11 Qq 67–72

12 [Correspondence with Nuclear Decommissioning Authority, dated 15 December 2017](#)

13 Q62 and [C&AG Report](#), para 1.10–1.12

14 Qq 62–66

15 Q162 and [C&AG report](#) para 8

16 Qq162 and 168, [C&AG Report](#) para 3.9–3.10

of decommissioning because their fees go up if they are able to do so. Conversely, the contractor's fee goes down if the costs of decommissioning increase. Under the previous contract for the Magnox sites, the contractor was reimbursed for all its allowed costs, and paid a fee regardless of how large the costs of decommissioning were. Crucially, for a TCIF contract to be successful, the NDA needed to have a very good understanding of the work that needed to be carried out on the 12 sites.¹⁷

11. The NDA told us that when it started the competition in 2012, it believed it had a good grasp of the state of the sites at that time and of the work that needed to be undertaken as part of the contract; a good plan in place for delivering that work; and that performance on the sites was on track.¹⁸ However, when they let the contract in 2014, six of the 12 sites were behind schedule, and there was a significant gap between the amount of work the NDA expected the incoming contractor, CFP, to do and what was originally specified in the contract. The NDA concedes that their understanding of the state of the sites was, in retrospect, lacking.¹⁹

12. The NDA said it knew that the state of the sites would differ from the time it began the competition in 2012 to the time it let the contract in 2014. For this reason, it designed the contract to include a process it calls "consolidation"—a truing up between what the contractor was told to expect and what it actually found on taking over responsibility for the sites.²⁰ Contractually, this process had to conclude in 12 months, by September 2015. However, due to the significant differences between the NDA's understanding of the sites in 2012 and the actual state of the sites in 2014, this consolidation exercise continued unresolved into 2017. During this time, the expected costs of decommissioning the Magnox sites increased from £3.8 billion in 2012 to £6.0 billion by March 2017.²¹

13. Aside from the substantial increase in public funds required to decommission the sites, this increase in the contract cost was significant for two reasons. First, the significant cost increase and the changes to the required work were so significant that they materially varied from the contract the NDA awarded in 2014. This would have left the NDA vulnerable to legal challenge from parties who could claim that they would have bid, or bid differently, had they realised the larger scope and cost of the contract. This prompted the NDA to end the contract 9 years early.²² Second, the NDA is not yet able to fully account for £0.5 billion of the £2.2 billion cost increase. This implies either that the NDA's information about the state of the sites was incorrect before it tendered the contract in 2012, or the previous contractor underperformed while the competition was underway between 2012 and 2014, or a combination of the two.²³

14. In March 2017, the NDA's internal audit function reported that there is a possibility that the NDA may have paid its previous contractor for work that was not completed on the sites. The NDA confirmed that it has launched an investigation into whether it may have paid for work that was not undertaken.²⁴

17 [C&AG Report](#) para 1.5–1.6, and Q 53

18 Q 53

19 Qq 54 and 82, and [C&AG Report](#) para 2.8

20 Qq 78, 82

21 [C&AG Report](#) para 4 and 5, Qq 128, 152–153

22 Qq 33, 46, 83–84, 94, 127–129

23 [C&AG's Report](#) para 4

24 Qq 130–137

2 Capability and governance

The Nuclear Decommissioning Authority's capability

15. In late 2013, whilst the Magnox contract was still in competition, the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority's (NDA) Chief Executive Officer decided to remove the role of commercial director. He made this decision against a backdrop of failures in public sector contracting, and a cross-government review of the management of major contracts which supported an expanded scope of the commercial director role.²⁵ The NDA's chief executive officer at the time told us that he was confident that the executive team in place at the time had sufficient commercial skills. The NDA told us it now thinks that it would have benefited from having more commercial capability in place at the time it let the Magnox contract.²⁶

16. The NDA also faced capacity challenges during the consolidation process after the contract had been awarded. By March 2016, Cavendish Fluor Partnership (CFP) submitted 95 requests to change the contract.²⁷ We heard from CFP that after it found that the state of the sites differed so substantially from what the NDA told them to expect, they brought in 300 staff to manage the consolidation process.²⁸ The NDA had nothing close to that level of capacity in key areas including commercial and programme management. This delayed the consolidation process as the NDA found it challenging to review and agree the changes to the contract requested by CFP.²⁹

17. UKGI, which oversees the NDA on behalf of the Department, is responsible for ensuring that the NDA's Board has the right mix of skills and the ability to govern the NDA's executive team. Despite their involvement, and UK Government Investment's (UKGI) credentials as the government's experts in corporate governance, the NDA Board lacked sufficient expertise in key areas. We heard from the NDA's chief executive officer at the time that this included includes a lack of operational experience of managing nuclear or other hazardous materials.³⁰ UKGI confirmed that this is atypical, and that organisations with a technical role should have board members with the required level of technical expertise.³¹ UKGI was unable to explain to us whether, in its opinion, the Board lacked sufficient technical expertise, and whether this contributed to the failure of the Magnox contract.³²

Government oversight

18. A number of departments and government bodies were involved in the oversight of the NDA at the time that the failures with the Magnox contract unfolded. This included HM Treasury, the Infrastructure and Projects Authority, and the Department, which devolved oversight of the NDA to UKGI. It is not clear who is accountable for the failure to spot and challenge the now obvious risks to the contract as they materialised. We heard

25 Qq 155–157, [C&AG Report](#) para 3.25

26 Q 98

27 Q 99, [C&AG Report](#) para 2.3

28 Qq 16, 18, 99

29 Q 99

30 Qq 51, 52, 95, 104, 105–108

31 Qq 120–121

32 Qq 166–167

that despite having the primary role of overseeing the NDA on behalf of the Department, UKGI does not have any expertise in commercial procurement and contract management—both central to the NDA's role as a contracting authority.³³

19. Despite being aware of the repeated delays to the consolidation process and that the costs were increasing substantially, UKGI does not appear to have challenged the NDA sufficiently as to the volume of cost increases and reasons behind them. Crucially, UKGI did not bring this to the attention of ministers until August 2016—nearly two years after the contract was let. UKGI told us it used dashboards to report these issues to the Department on a regular basis but it is unclear that the emerging risks and the potential for wholesale failure was escalated effectively or with sufficient urgency. This is all the more surprising given the NDA was already in court defending legal claims against the award of the contract.³⁴

20. The Department accepted that it must understand the underlying causes behind its failure to effectively oversee the NDA. It acknowledged that the governance arrangements must strike the right balance between ensuring effective oversight and enabling the NDA to get on with the important job of decommissioning the UK's nuclear legacy facilities.³⁵

Learning the lessons

21. In March 2017, the Secretary of State for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy announced that the government had set up an independent inquiry to look into the root causes of the Magnox contract failure, and key lessons to be learned by all the parties involved. The Inquiry's final report is expected to publish in 2018.³⁶

22. We welcome the NDA and the Department's acceptance of their respective responsibilities for the failure of the Magnox contract. We heard from both parties their commitment to learn the lessons and the Department told us it was implementing the recommendations set out by the Independent Inquiry in its interim report published in October 2017.³⁷

33 Qq 51, 52, 80, 164, 165

34 Qq 140- 147, 151, 152

35 Q158

36 [C&AG Report](#) para 4

37 Qq 49, 50, 163

Formal minutes

Wednesday 21 February 2018

Members present:

Meg Hillier, in the Chair

Martyn Day	Stephen Morgan
Caroline Flint	Anne Marie Morris
Gillian Keegan	Lee Rowley
Shabana Mahmood	Gareth Snell
Layla Moran	

Draft Report (*The Nuclear Decommissioning Authority's Magnox contract*) proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

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

Paragraphs 1 to 22 read and agreed to.

Introduction agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Twenty-first 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 Monday 26 February 2018 at 3.30pm]

Witnesses

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

Thursday 23 November 2017

Question number

Simon Bowen, Chief Executive, Cavendish Nuclear Ltd

[Q1–46](#)

Alex Chisholm, Permanent Secretary, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, **John Clarke**, former Chief Executive, **David Peattie**, Chief Executive, Nuclear Decommissioning Authority, and **Mark Russell**, Chief Executive, UK Government Investments

[Q47–176](#)

Published correspondence

The following correspondence was also published as part of this inquiry:

- 1 [Correspondence with David Peattie, CEO, Nuclear Decommissioning Authority, dated 5 January 2018](#)
- 2 [Correspondence with David Peattie, CEO, Nuclear Decommissioning Authority, dated 15 December 2017](#)
- 3 [Correspondence from John Clarke, former CEO, Nuclear Decommissioning Authority, dated 15 December 2017](#)

List of Reports from the Committee during the current session

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.

Session 2017–19

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Third Report	Hinkley Point C	HC 393 (Cm 9565)
Fourth Report	Clinical correspondence handling at NHS Shared Business Services	HC 396
Fifth Report	Managing the costs of clinical negligence in hospital trusts	HC 397
Sixth Report	The growing threat of online fraud	HC 399
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Eighth Report	Mental health in prisons	HC 400
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