

House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts

Renewing the EastEnders set

Eighty-Seventh Report of Session 2017–19

Report, together with formal minutes relating to the report

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The Committee of Public Accounts

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Publication

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Summary

EastEnders is one of the BBC's flagship TV programmes. Its external set was built 35 years ago and is no longer fit for purpose. The completion of E20 will be critical if EastEnders is to compete successfully against rival shows and retain audiences in a context where fewer people are watching traditional linear TV. However, E20 is late and over budget due to the BBC's fundamental project management failures. We are concerned that E20 has gone off-track yet again after the 26-month delay that we heard about in 2016, and disappointed by the BBC's complacency in managing this project, particularly in its early stages. The project is now set to cost licence fee payers £87 million — £27 million more than budgeted. It is not set to be complete until May 2023, nearly five years later than originally planned.

Introduction

EastEnders is broadcast four times a week and had an average audience of 6.6 million in 2017. The EastEnders set, including 'Albert Square', was built in 1984 and the BBC originally planned for it to be used for just two years. It has never been rebuilt and is in poor condition. The BBC is replacing the external set and other core infrastructure at BBC Elstree Centre as part of a project called 'E20', which alongside other objectives, aims to improve audience engagement with EastEnders. A new external set is being built (on the 'Front Lot') using brick structures rather than the current facades that prevent filming in high-definition. The current set has also caused filming delays due to increased health and safety concerns. The BBC also plans to enlarge the site available for filming. The current external set will be demolished to provide new locations (on the 'Back Lot') to better reflect modern East-End London and allow a broader range of storylines. In 2013, the BBC planned E20 would cost £60 million and complete in August 2018. Subsequently, in 2015, it revised the scope of the project — planning for it to finish in October 2020 at the same cost. The BBC now forecasts that E20 will cost £87 million (a 45 per cent increase) and finish in May 2023 — nearly five years later than originally planned.

Conclusions and recommendations

Despite considering it crucial to the future success of EastEnders, the BBC has 1. managed its E20 project badly. EastEnders is a flagship programme for the BBC but is being outperformed by its soap rivals, such as Coronation Street, and its overall audience has reduced as fewer people watch traditional linear TV. Therefore, it is important for EastEnders that the BBC completes E20 so that the programme is best placed to not only succeed but to also secure its long-term future. However, since we last heard about a 26-month delay to the project in 2016, it has gone off-track again. The project is now set to cost £87 million — £27 million more than initially budgeted - and complete in May 2023, nearly five years later than originally planned in 2013. The costs have increased partly because of inflation in the construction industry, the effect of which has been exacerbated by delays — with the construction of the Front Lot only starting in October 2018 rather than August 2017 as planned in 2015. The BBC has also underestimated the scale and complexity of the project, including how it would age the new sets so that they either exactly replicate what viewers are used to, or look realistic where there are new locations. In addition, the BBC initially failed to allocate enough money to manage risks and contingencies. It has encountered problems including asbestos and obstructions in the ground, which have, to date, cost the BBC around £1.8 million and delayed works by around four months. Under its latest plans, the BBC has substantially increased its risk and contingency budget.

Recommendation: Commencing in October 2019 — one year into the construction of the Front Lot — the BBC should annually update the Committee on the progress, expected costs and completion date of E20. These updates should demonstrate how the BBC has learned lessons from previous project failings, and whether its revised risk and contingency budget has been adequate.

2. The BBC failed to get the right construction project management skills in place from the outset of the project. It is disappointing that the BBC failed to consider what skills it needed in critical roles in the E20 project team. The BBC accepts that as a result, it did not have enough construction project management expertise to plan and deliver E20 effectively. One of the impacts of this was that the project team did not introduce design development and change processes early enough. After the 2015 project business case had been approved, it took over a year for a design change process to be agreed between the E20 programme and EastEnders production teams. This led to a build-up of change requests after the design was supposed to be stable. This issue was exacerbated by the project and production teams failing to work together effectively in the early stages of E20.

Recommendation: By July 2019, the BBC should develop, and update us on, processes to make sure the right skills are in place from the outset for all of its critical projects.

3. The BBC's procurement approach for the Front Lot contract was ineffective and increased the cost of the project by £2.3 million. In 2016, the BBC carried out a single-stage open procurement for the Front Lot but this was unsuccessful owing to limited market interest. This led the BBC to move to a two-stage procurement through its Building Contractor Service Framework, which cost it £2.3 million and

delayed the project by six months. The second procurement, in which only two bidders met the BBC's requirements, led to Wates being awarded the contract at a cost of £24.2 million, £9.5 million more than budgeted. The BBC's cost consultants were unable to validate £3.1 million of the costs that were included in the final contract and concluded that limited market interest was likely to have inflated prices. In addition, the BBC's contract negotiations with Wates took six months longer than planned, partly because of discussions about what bricks to use for the set. The commercial problems the BBC has encountered on this project demonstrate its ineffective sourcing and negotiating approach, which may have implications for other contracts.

Recommendation: By October 2019, the BBC should provide us with evidence of how it ensures best practice in procurement and contract management across its diverse range of contracts — for E20 and other contracts.

The progress of the BBC's E20 project

- 1. On the basis of a report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, we took evidence from the BBC about the progress of its 'E20' project to replace and enlarge the external EastEnders set (including 'Albert Square') and related infrastructure at BBC Elstree Centre.¹
- 2. The first episode of EastEnders was aired in February 1985. The EastEnders set, including 'Albert Square', was built in 1984 and the BBC originally planned for it to be used for just two years. It has never been rebuilt and is in poor condition. As a result, the BBC developed plans in 2013 to build temporary and then permanent sets, which it budgeted would cost £59.7 million and complete in August 2018. Subsequently, owing to forecast cost increases, in 2015 the BBC revised the scope of the E20 project and planned for it to finish in October 2020 at the same cost, £59.7 million. This scope change accounted for the 26-month delay that we examined as part of our inquiry into the BBC's management of critical projects in 2016. Under the revised 2015 plans, the new external set is being built (on the 'Front Lot') using brick structures rather than the existing facades that prevent filming in high-definition and increase filming delays owing to health and safety concerns. The BBC also intends to enlarge the filming site. The current external set will be demolished to provide new locations (on the 'Back Lot') to better reflect modern East-End London and allow a broader range of storylines.²

The importance of the BBC's E20 project

- 3. EastEnders is broadcast four times a week and had an average audience of 6.6 million in 2017. However, it is being outperformed by rival shows such as Coronation Street, is struggling to retain audiences in a context where fewer people are watching traditional linear TV and is suffering from a decline in audiences for continuing dramas. Nevertheless, the BBC told us that EastEnders is popular, and performs well, with younger, and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) viewers. The BBC confirmed that it considered the successful completion of the E20 project important for EastEnders' future success.³ However, the project has been beset by increasing costs and delays and the BBC's plans are no longer achievable. It now forecasts that E20 will cost £86.7 million (£27 million, and 45 per cent, more than the original budget) and will complete in 2023 nearly five years later than originally planned in 2013.⁴
- 4. The BBC told us that the forecast cost of E20 had increased partly because of inflation in the construction industry, the effect of which had been exacerbated by project delays. For example, the construction of the Front Lot started in October 2018 rather than August 2017 as planned in 2015. The BBC asserted that £9.2 million of the project cost increases were the result of higher than forecast inflation and demand for construction services. However, it was unable to provide evidence to support this figure, beyond simply stating the difference between the original budget for the Front Lot contract and the final outturn in 2018.⁵

¹ C&AG's Report, E20: renewing the EastEnders set, Session 2017–19, HC 1782, 13 December 2018

² Qq 1–2, 7–8; C&AG's Report, paras 1.2–1.8, 1.12; Committee of Public Accounts, BBC critical projects, Eighth Report of Session 2016–17, HC 75, 8 July 2016

³ Qq 2-4; C&AG's Report, para 1.3

⁴ Chair's opening statement; Q5; C&AG's Report, paras 1.12 and 2.1

⁵ Q 1, 34–36; C&AG's Report, figure 6 and paras 3.20–3.21

- 5. The BBC accepted that it had underestimated the scale and complexity of the project, including how it would age the new sets so that they either replicated what viewers are used to (on the Front Lot), or look realistic where there are new locations (on the Back Lot). The BBC told us that it had originally planned to age the new sets while they were being constructed as part of the main Front Lot and Back Lot contracts, but that it now planned for this work to be done separately after construction has completed, as its original intentions added risk and complexity to the project. The BBC has now scheduled more time to age the set 13 months for the Front Lot and seven months for the Back Lot.⁶ The BBC told us that £3.5 million of the overall cost increases for the project related to ageing the new sets and additional resources to manage the Front Lot contract.⁷
- 6. The BBC failed to allocate enough money to manage the risks and contingencies of the project in 2015. It has since encountered significant problems such as asbestos and obstructions in the ground. These issues have so far cost the BBC around £1.8 million and delayed works by around four months. The BBC told us that contingency represented 18% of the project costs in the 2015 business case, and that as part of its latest plans, it had substantially increased its risk and contingency budget.⁸

Skills to plan and complete E20 successfully

- 7. For any project to be successful and deliver the intended outcomes, it is vitally important that from the outset the project team has enough staff with the right skills and experience. The BBC acknowledged that it failed to get the right construction project management expertise in place early enough in the project and that the blend of skills in the project team was too focused on the creative, rather than construction-focused, elements of E20. It similarly accepted that this absence of construction project management expertise was a particular problem for the key roles of Programme Director and Manager. This meant there was insufficient construction knowledge to manage design, procurement and construction activities, which led to, for example, Front Lot design coordination problems that meant that the BBC had to commission various internal and external reviews to rectify design problems and inconsistencies. It also meant the project decisions and documents were ineffectively reviewed and challenged. The BBC had, however, made improvements in this area recruiting a new Programme Director in September 2017 and a Front Lot Project Manager in July 2017, with both having construction experience.
- 8. The lack of sufficient construction project management skills also meant that the project team failed to introduce design development and change processes early enough. The BBC accepted that having a change control process for the design of the Front Lot was particularly important and that it should have managed it better. It told us that it had taken over a year after the 2015 project business case was approved for a design change process to be agreed between the E20 programme and EastEnders production teams. As a result, there was a build-up of change requests with associated costs of around £440,000 after the design was meant to be stable. It also told us that this was exacerbated by the project and production teams failing to work together effectively in the early stages of E20 with important members of the production team having poor quality working

⁶ Q 19; C&AG's Report, paras 1.7, 2.8 and 3.8

⁷ Q 35

⁸ Qq 1, 10-12, 16; C&AG's Report, paras 2.4 and 3.18-3.19

⁹ Qq 21–22; C&AG's Report, paras 3.4–3.6

¹⁰ Q 40

relationships with members of the E20 team. The BBC recognised that the project and production teams were too distant and told us that it had made improvements in this area.¹¹

Commercial approach

- 9. One of the most important elements of E20 is the Front Lot, which will replicate the existing external set using brick structures rather than the current facades. The contract for this work is the largest in a wide range of 42 contracts that have supported E20. In 2016, the BBC carried out a single-stage open procurement for the Front Lot but this was unsuccessful owing to limited market interest. Only one of the three bidders met the BBC's cost and quality requirements. The BBC attributed the lack of market interest to the bespoke nature of the project and the economic environment at the time making contractors more selective. The initial procurement failure led the BBC to change its approach and move to a two-stage procurement through its Building Contractor Service Framework, which cost it £2.3 million and delayed the project by six months. The BBC asserted that it was important to the success of the project that it had spent this money to ensure that its subsequent procurement process resulted in a better contract. It similarly claimed that, in all likelihood, had it not undertaken the initial procurement, it would have ended up with a contract with a higher cost and a lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities.
- 10. Owing to the limited market interest on the first procurement, the BBC adopted a new two-stage procurement approach for the Front Lot construction contract, using its Building Contractor Services Framework of six contractors, that began in March 2017. The BBC's second procurement, where there were only three bidders with two bidders meeting the BBC's requirements, led to Wates being awarded the contract. After an opening offer of £21.7 million from Wates, following clarifications and the confirmation of provisional sums and change requests, the cost of the final contract was £24.2 million, £9.5 million more than the BBC had budgeted. We were concerned that the BBC's cost consultants (AECOM) were unable to validate £3.1 million of the costs that were included in the final contract and concluded that limited market interest was likely to have inflated prices. The BBC told us that AECOM had struggled to identify relevant data that it could use to benchmark the increased costs of the project but had nevertheless concluded that inflation was driving the difference.¹⁴
- 11. The BBC's contract negotiations with Wates took 11 months six months longer than planned from October 2017 to September 2018. These lengthy negotiations were the result of the BBC receiving a more expensive contract offer from Wates than it expected, and partly because of discussions about what bricks to use for the set. The BBC told us that the process for choosing bricks had taken weeks and that it was important, consulting with production colleagues, to make the right choice. As part of agreeing the type and supply of bricks for the Front Lot, the BBC reviewed some £50,000 of sample brick panels that were produced by Wates. It explained that 'Albert Square' and surrounding scenery

¹¹ Qq 23-26; C&AG's Report, paras 3.13 and 3.16-17

¹² Q 27; C&AG's Report, paras 1.3, 3.22-3.24

¹³ Qq 27–29; C&AG's Report, paras 3.23–3.25

¹⁴ Qq 28-29, 35; C&AG's Report, paras 3.9 and 3.25-3.26

was in the style of the Victorian era and including multiple shades of both bricks and mortar, and replicating the "look and feel" of the set meant that it was not possible to buy bricks from standard commercial sources.¹⁵

Formal Minutes

Wednesday 13 March 2019

Members present:

Meg Hillier, in the Chair

Chris Evans Shabana Mahmood
Caroline Flint

Draft Report (*Renewing the EastEnders Set*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

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

Paragraphs 1 to 11 read and agreed to.

Introduction agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Eighty-seventh 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 18 March at 3:30pm

Witnesses

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

Wednesday 30 January 2019

Lord Hall, Director General, BBC, **Anne Bulford**, Deputy Director-General, BBC, and **Richard Dawkins**, COO, BBC Content

Q1-48

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliaments

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

First Report	Tackling online VAT fraud and error	HC 312 (Cm 9549)
Second Report	Brexit and the future of Customs	HC 401 (Cm 9565)
Third Report	Hinkley Point C	HC 393 (Cm 9565)
Fourth Report	Clinical correspondence handling at NHS Shared Business Services	HC 396 (Cm 9575)
Fifth Report	Managing the costs of clinical negligence in hospital trusts	HC 397 (Cm 9575)
Sixth Report	The growing threat of online fraud	HC 399 (Cm 9575)
Seventh Report	Brexit and the UK border	HC 558 (Cm 9575)
Eighth Report	Mental health in prisons	HC 400 (Cm 9575) (Cm 9596)
Ninth Report	Sheffield to Rotherham tram-trains	HC 453 (Cm 9575)
Tenth Report	High Speed 2 Annual Report and Accounts	HC 454 (Cm 9575)
Eleventh Report	Homeless households	HC 462 (Cm 9575) (Cm 9618)
Twelfth Report	HMRC's Performance in 2016–17	HC 456 (Cm 9596)
Thirteenth Report	NHS continuing healthcare funding	HC 455 (Cm 9596)
Fourteenth Report	Delivering Carrier Strike	HC 394 (Cm 9596)
Fifteenth Report	Offender-monitoring tags	HC 458 (Cm 9596)
Sixteenth Report	Government borrowing and the Whole of Government Accounts	HC 463 (Cm 9596)
Seventeenth Report	Retaining and developing the teaching workforce	HC 460 (Cm 9596)
Eighteenth Report	Exiting the European Union	HC 467 (Cm 9596)

Nineteenth Report	Excess Votes 2016–17	HC 806 (Cm 9596)
Twentieth Report	Update on the Thameslink Programme	HC 466 (Cm 9618)
Twenty-First Report	The Nuclear Decommissioning Authority's Magnox	HC 461 (Cm 9618)
Twenty-Second Report	The monitoring, inspection and funding of Learndirect Ltd.	HC 875 (Cm 9618)
Twenty-Third Report	Alternative Higher Education Providers	HC 736 (Cm 9618)
Twenty-Fourth Report	Care Quality Commission: regulating health and social care	HC 468 (Cm 9618)
Twenty-Fifth Report	The sale of the Green Investment Bank	HC 468 (Cm 9618)
Twenty-Sixth Report	Governance and departmental oversight of the Greater Cambridge Greater Peterborough Local Enterprise Partnership	HC 896 (Cm 9618)
Twenty-Seventh Report	Government contracts for Community Rehabilitation Companies	HC 897 (Cm 9618)
Twenty-Eighth Report	Ministry of Defence: Acquisition and support of defence equipment	HC 724 (Cm 9618)
Twenty-Ninth Report	Sustainability and transformation in the NHS	HC 793 (Cm 9618)
Thirtieth Report	Academy schools' finances	HC 760 (Cm 9618)
Thirty-First Report	The future of the National Lottery	HC 898 (Cm 9643)
Thirty-Second Report	Cyber-attack on the NHS	HC 787 (Cm 9643)
Thirty-Third Report	Research and Development funding across government	HC 668 (Cm 9643)
Thirty-Fourth Report	Exiting the European Union: The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy	HC 687 (Cm 9643)
Thirty-Fifth Report	Rail franchising in the UK	HC 689 (Cm 9643)
Thirty-Sixth Report	Reducing modern slavery	HC 886 (Cm 9643)
Thirty-Seventh Report	Exiting the European Union: The Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs and the Department for International Trade	HC 699 (Cm 9643)
Thirty-Eighth Report	The adult social care workforce in England	HC 690 (Cm 9667)
Thirty-Ninth Report	The Defence Equipment Plan 2017–2027	HC 880 (Cm 9667)
Fortieth Report	Renewable Heat Incentive in Great Britain	HC 696 (Cm 9667)

Forty-First Report	Government risk assessments relating to Carillion	HC 1045 (Cm 9667)
Forty-Second Report	Modernising the Disclosure and Barring Service	HC 695 (Cm 9667)
Forty-Third Report	Clinical correspondence handling in the NHS	HC 929
		(Cm 9702)
Forty-Fourth Report	Reducing emergency admissions	HC 795 (Cm 9702)
Forty-Fifth Report	The higher education market	HC 693 (Cm 9702)
Forty-Sixth Report	Private Finance Initiatives	HC 894
		(Cm 9702)
Forty-Seventh Report	Delivering STEM skills for the economy	HC 691 (Cm 9702)
Forty-Eighth Report	Exiting the EU: The financial settlement	HC 973 (Cm 9702)
Forty-Ninth Report	Progress in tackling online VAT fraud	HC 1304 (Cm 9702)
Fiftieth Report	Financial sustainability of local authorities	HC 970 (Cm 9702)
Fifty-First Report	BBC commercial activities	HC 670 (Cm 9702)
Fifty-Second Report	Converting schools to academies	HC 697 (CCm 9702)
Fifty-Third Report	Ministry of Defence's contract with Annington Property Limited	HC 974 (Cm 9702)
Fifty-Fourth Report	Visit to Washington DC	HC 1404 (Cm 9702)
Fifty-Fifth Report	Employment and Support Allowance	HC 975 (Cm 9702)
Fifty-Sixth Report	Transforming courts and tribunals	HC 976 (Cm 9702)
Fifty-Seventh Report	Supporting Primary Care Services: NHS England's contract with Capita	HC 698 (Cm 9702)
Fifty-Eighth Report	Strategic Suppliers	HC 1031 (Cm 9702)
Fifty-Ninth Report	Skill shortages in the Armed Forces	HC 1027 (9740)
Sixtieth Report	Ofsted's inspection of schools	HC1029 (Cm 9740)
Sixty-First Report	Ministry of Defence nuclear programme	HC 1028 (Cm 9740)

Sixty-Second Report	Price increases for generic medications	HC 1184 (Cm 9740)
Sixty-Third Report	Interface between health and social care	HC 1376 (Cm 9740)
Sixty-Fourth Report	Universal Credit	HC 1375
Sixty-Fifth Report	Nuclear Decommissioning Authority	HC 1375
Sixty-Sixth Report	HMRC's performance in 2017–18	HC 1526
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Sixty-Eighth Report	Defra's progress towards Brexit	HC 1514
Sixty-Ninth Report	Sale of student loans	HC 1527
Seventieth Report	Department for Transport's implementation of Brexit	HC 1657
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Seventy-Sixth Report	Local Government Spending	HC 1775
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First Special Report	Chair of the Public Accounts Committee's Second Annual Report	HC 347
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