

Finance and Public Administration Committee

15th Meeting, 2022 (Session 6), Tuesday 17 May 2022

SPCB Budget: Scottish Parliament's website

Purpose

1. The Committee is invited to take evidence from the following witnesses in relation to a letter from the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body regarding the costs involved in the development and launch of the Scottish Parliament's website:
 - Jackson Carlaw MSP, Member of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, and
 - Michelle Hegarty, Deputy Chief Executive; Alan Balharrie, Group Head of Digital Services; and Susan Duffy, Group Head of Engagement and Communications, Scottish Parliament.

Background

2. The Scotland Act 1998¹ provides for the creation of the Scottish Parliament and the establishment of the SPCB to oversee its administration. This Act places a duty on the SPCB to make arrangements for the Parliament to be provided with the property, staff and services which are required for its purposes and that any expenses incurred by the SPCB is payable from the Scottish Consolidated Fund¹.
3. In practice, the SPCB submits a budget bid for the next year for scrutiny by the Finance and Public Administration Committee annually, around the same time as the Scottish Government's Budget. The Committee hears evidence from the SPCB on its budget proposals, and reports to Parliament as part of its wider budget scrutiny. These arrangements are set out in the [Session 6 Written Agreement between the Committee and the SPCB](#).
4. The Parliament's web project began in 2017, with costs and delivery spanning subsequent years until project closure in 2021. The [SPCB budget submission 2017-18](#), considered by the Session 5 Finance and Constitution Committee, is the first to refer to the web project. It is also thereafter mentioned in the [2018-19](#), [2019-20](#) and [2020-21](#) budget submissions. In each year, no specific costs are provided against the web project; it is included alongside other projects as part of overall spend for 'Grouped Programmes – Business IT/Digital Services'. There is no further mention of the project in the SPCB's latest budget submissions for [2021-22](#) and [2022-23](#), the latter bid being considered by this Committee on [21 December 2021](#).

¹ The Scottish Consolidated Fund is the funding pot from which all Scottish Government expenditure stems and comprises an annual block grant from the UK Parliament's Consolidated Fund along with the Scottish Government's operational receipts, for example, revenues from the fully devolved taxes.

5. The total cost of the web project was reported in the media on 15 March 2022, with both The Times² and Daily Express³ newspapers quoting a figure of £3.038m.

Correspondence with the SPCB

6. The Committee wrote to the SPCB on 30 March regarding the costs and delivery of the Parliament’s new website, “as part of our scrutiny role in relation to SPCB budget bids and, given the significant sums of public money involved in this project”. The Committee’s letter is attached at Annexe A. The SPCB’s response of 27 April, provided at Annexe B, notes that the original estimated cost of the project was £2.9m (compared to the actual sum of £3.024m) and that the project was completed by 2021, “in line with the estimated timescale put forward in 2018”. The SPCB also notes that:

- Specialist technical staff were procured through existing “framework contracts” and the technology behind the site (Content Management System) was also procured through an existing contract in place at the time.
- The Parliament’s Digital Strategy Board⁴ approved the web project. The budget for the project was provided to the SPCB as part of the annual budget bid from 2017/18. ‘High-level project updates’ were included in quarterly performance reporting to Leadership Group⁵ and SPCB.
- Annual licencing and support costs are £86,000 compared to around £54,000 for the previous system.
- The length of the project was in the line with expectations for a project of this size and similar website projects. The new website was launched in 2021 “which was in line with the estimated timescale put forward in 2018”.
- Consultation involved the public, Members and their staff, and Parliament staff and “ongoing feedback we receive will help determine where further improvements to the website are needed”.
- Measures achieved within the spend are set out in detail in the letter, along with a list of the costs of UK Government departmental websites from 2012/13 for comparison.
- The website “should not and cannot be the only information source for Members and their staff ... therefore, officials have planned to undertake this year a wider review of information [on which] Members’ input and feedback will be sought”.
- The closure report for the project indicates that “key lessons learned were about managing such a significant change better [and] more specifically making sure the potential scale and impact of the change is understood at the start of the project and having a dedicated change and communications role to support change across the organisation”.

² [Holyrood’s £3m website condemned | Scotland | The Times](#)

³ [Scottish Parliament spent £3 million on new website that leaves constituents complaining - Scottish Daily Express](#)

⁴ This Board is comprised of parliamentary officials.

⁵ Leadership Group is made up of senior parliamentary officials, including the Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive and Group Heads.

7. Finally, the letter states that “officials have also recognised the need to provide increased detail on major multi-year project costs as part of the annual budgeting process to the SPCB and the Finance and Public Administration Committee”, and that the project is scheduled for review as part of the SPCB’s internal audit programme.

Next steps

8. The Committee will consider any next steps at a future meeting and is expected, as part of the budget process, to consider the SPCB’s budget bid for 2023-24 towards the end of the year.

Committee Clerking Team
May 2022

Letter from the Committee to the SPCB regarding the new website

Dear Presiding Officer

The Finance and Public Administration Committee has recently become aware through media reports that the cost of the new website to date is £3,038,000. As part of our scrutiny role in relation to SPCB budget bids and, given the significant sums of public money involved in this project, we would welcome a response from the SPCB to the following questions:

- how the figure of £3,038,000 has been arrived at, including breakdowns for each financial year, and by phase, and details of capital and licensing costs and other relevant details,
- how this figure compares to the projected costs in the original business case/project bid and, if there has been slippage, how this has impacted on other budget areas or programmes,
- what tendering process was in place for the project,
- what the trigger point for SPCB approval is and what sign-off procedures are in place,
- when the development phase ends, what are the ongoing costs of maintenance and improvement, and whether the Parliament is continuing to use external consultants (at what day rate and by role type), or if this is managed internally only,
- the reasons why the project has taken so long to complete,
- what consultation was undertaken, including of MSPs, on how the website should look and the information it should contain,
- what the spend has achieved and whether the SPCB considers this project to be value for money,
- how the SPCB is addressing concerns raised by MSPs regarding the functionality of the website, and
- how the SPCB has assessed the benefits of the new website, whether a 'lessons learned' exercise of the project has been undertaken and, if so, what is the outcome.

We look forward to receiving a comprehensive response to the issues raised in this letter by 26 April. Please do get in touch if there are any concerns around this timetable.

Yours sincerely

Kenneth Gibson MSP
Convener
Finance and Public Administration Committee

Response from the SPCB to the Committee regarding the new website

Dear Convener

Thank you for your letter of 30 March 2022 to the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body (SPCB) about the new website.

As background, work began on a project to build a new website in 2017 and the project was completed in 2021. This work was required because the previous website was built on technology that was over 10 years old. It was outdated, no longer supported by the manufacturer, could not be developed, and was increasingly unreliable. It required significant support from parliament staff simply to keep it running. These factors increased the risk of ‘catastrophic’ failure which would have resulted in a prolonged period where the website was not available. This ageing platform presented an increased cyber risk.

Please find the following responses to each of the questions asked by your Committee:

How has the figure of £3,038,000 been arrived at, including breakdowns for each financial year, and by phase, and details of capital and licensing costs and other relevant details?

The total cost for the web project was £3.024m. The final figure has reduced slightly because of financial year end reconciliations. The breakdown of expenditure by financial year and phases is set out in Table 1 and area of spend in Table 2.

Table 1: Costs broken down by year and by phase

Year	£k	Phase
17/18	222	Discovery (analysis, planning and initial consultation)
18/19	904	Alpha (prototype and further consultation)
19/20	931	Beta (early iterations of the new website with minimal content and services – dual running with the old website)
20/21	943	Beta (continued to build services and content on to the new website – dual running with the old website)
21/22	24	Live Service (switch to the beta becoming the Parliament’s main website)
Total	3,024	

Table 2: Areas of spend

Area of spend	17/18	18/19	19/20	20/21	21/22	Total
Technical (IT) Contractors	82	432	398	331	5	1248
Non-technical Contractors (e.g. user researchers, content designers)	140	313	360	349	19	1181
Backfill for Parliament staff to allow them to work on the project		67	170	260		497
Software		92	4	2		98
	222	904	932	942	24	3024
	Discovery and Alpha		Beta		Live service	

In line with accounting standards our website development costs are not capitalised.

How does this figure compare to the projected costs in the original business case/project bid and, if there has been slippage, how has this impacted on other budget areas of programmes?

The original project documentation specified this would be a multi-year project with a number of different phases. The 'discovery' phase for the project began in August 2017 and it was estimated that the project would complete in early 2021 and cost £2.9m (compared to actual of £3.024m). During the project, the actual expenditure changed from the initial estimate as a result of factors such as the immediate disruption of the Covid pandemic on our operations, including the lack of capacity within parliamentary business areas to undertake activities, and the unforeseen need to divert resource to other work such as the voting application development. Within the Parliament's budget there is a constant reprioritisation of delivery against available resources across the financial year as part of overall financial management. The additional cost associated with the website was part of this ongoing reprioritisation.

What tendering process was in place for the project?

The project procured specialist technical staff for skills we did not have in-house and a new content management system. The external expertise was procured through existing contracts already in place including the Digital Services Contract (ICT-SER-100b) and the Temporary and Interim Staff Services Contract (NIC-SER-422). These contracts are framework contracts which have been let by the Scottish Parliament or through the Scottish Government Procurement Services. The new Content Management System, the technology on which the site was built, was procured

through the Software and Related Services contract (ICT-GS-82C) which was in place at the time of purchase.

What is the trigger point for SPCB approval? What sign-off procedures are in place?

The project was approved by the chair of Digital Strategy Board, with the advice of the officials on the Digital Strategy Board, under relevant delegations from the Clerk/Chief Executive. The web project budget was put forward by the Digital Strategy Board, as part of the overall project portfolio bid which comprises part of the SPCB's annual budget bid from 2017/18. SPCB approves the Parliament annual budget bid and its indicative bid for the next financial year, on the advice of its senior officials. The project bid is set out in Schedule 3 of the submission to the Finance and Public Administration Committee by SPCB. Once the budget, and associated project portfolio is approved by Parliament, delivery of specific digital projects such as the web is via normal project governance reporting, currently monitored by the Group Head of Digital Services with the advice of the Digital Strategy Board. High level project updates are included in quarterly performance reporting at Leadership Group and SPCB.

When the development phase ends, what are the ongoing costs of maintenance and improvement? Whether the Parliament is continuing to use external consultants? At what day rate and by role type, or if this is managed internally only?

One of the main objectives of the web project was to build a site that could be maintained and developed by in-house staff, and to develop this capability thus avoiding having to employ external contractors and to minimise the need for any future large scale redesign projects. This has been achieved.

The annual licencing and support cost of the new content management system on which the website is built is £86k. The annual licencing costs for the previous system were around £54k and so there is an increase, however this reflects the current market cost and a much improved system, with additional functionality around personalisation, marketing and reporting to help us achieve our public engagement aims.

The reasons why the project has taken so long to complete?

This was a large and complex project, a decade on from the last website completion, in a very different technology landscape externally and internally. The roadmap and discovery exercise which began in August 2017 and finished in March 2018 estimated that there was three years of development effort required, giving an estimated project closure of 2021. Officials recognised that this was in line with the time taken to develop similar websites (e.g. UK Parliament Website took over two years and cost approximately £3.6m in 2008).

The technical platform itself is the largest and most complicated solution that the Parliament has delivered and, as mentioned earlier, new processes, skills and structures needed to be put in place by officials to maintain the integrity of the website and avoid the need for major redevelopment of it in the future. This involved moving to a new operating model and ensuring the transfer of skills and knowledge to internal staff to be able to develop and support the website going forward. Aside from the complexities of the project, the restrictions due to the Covid pandemic impacted on the delivery of the project, as it did on many other operational activities. Apart from the challenges of managing and co-ordinating a large team virtually and members of the team dealing with issues such as childcare and home schooling, team members had to be redeployed onto projects that were critical to the Parliament operating on a hybrid basis (e.g. the development and testing of the remote digital voting system).

The new website was launched in 2021 which was in line with the estimated timescale put forward in 2018.

What consultation was undertaken, including of MSPs, on how the website should look and the information it should contain?

A number of different groups use the website including the public, Members and their staff, and Parliament staff. The project recognised the importance of engaging with these different groups. Engagement started at the end of 2017 and included a survey on the Parliament's website to understand why users visited the website and what information was important to them. Members were emailed to make them aware of the survey and to encourage them to complete it or to engage directly with the project with specific feedback. There were 504 responses to that survey, including 87 from Members or their staff.

Around the same time there were drop-in sessions specifically to engage Members, to gather their views and feedback about what was important. Again, Members were emailed to let them know that was happening and offering other opportunities to get involved. In addition to the survey and drop-in sessions, another 11 Members engaged directly with the project and were interviewed to understand their views and how they thought the site could deliver better outcomes.

There were also several face-to-face sessions with different groups of external users to understand what they wanted from the Parliament's website.

From all of the information that was gathered, a further survey was run in February 2018 to validate what we had learned and to inform what information would be delivered to the new website and in what order. There were over 1,100 responses to that survey with 32 of those being from Members or their staff.

Following that period of initial engagement, a prioritised list of what services and information should be delivered on the new website was agreed; the top three were: Legislation, what was said in the Parliament, and Parliamentary questions and answers. This led to the first iteration of the new website and there was an

opportunity on that new site, as there continues to be, for all users to give feedback to help to continue to improve the site.

The ongoing feedback we receive will help determine where further improvements to the website are needed. We will also be reviewing, and consulting on, all the information sources Members use.

What has the spend achieved? Whether the SPCB considers this project to be value for money?

This investment has achieved:

- A more resilient, stable, flexible, and robust website; including a significant reduction in the risk of a successful cyber-attack on our website.
- A website that makes it easier for users who are less familiar with Parliamentary processes, such as the public, to find and understand information, and engage with the Parliament; this includes making it
- accessible from mobile devices; also, language that is easier for the public to understand.
- Technical compliance with information and accessibility regulations for websites.
- Improvements for the management, retention, and archiving, of the content on the website.
- The ability to reuse technology from the new site to accelerate other projects such as the Festival of Politics and Business in the Parliament in 2021.
- Improved methods, knowledge, and skills within SPCB staff workforce. These were used to help deliver the Digital Voting system used by the Parliament and the new Public Petitions System and will continue to be used in the development of other new services.
- In addition, the investment achieved the delivery of a new site which will bring longer term value as we have built the capability to continue to develop our website in-house; thus, avoiding the need for a significant project spend in future.
- A report from the UK Government in 2013 detailed the costs of various departmental websites before the creation of gov.uk (see Annex). This is meant only to give some context as it is not possible to make direct comparisons as projects differ in their requirements, size and complexity.

How is the SPCB addressing concerns raised by MSPs regarding the functionality of the website?

Members have raised some issues and concerns about the new website and officials are addressing these. A number of changes to the website have been made in response to feedback, for example, making the Business Bulletin easier to find and adding functionality to the What's On section. Officials have pro-actively sought feedback by holding drop-in sessions and by placing feedback forms across the building. These drop-ins will be held quarterly to help prioritise changes to develop

the site. All Members (and their staff) who have said they are willing to speak to officials and provide more detailed feedback will be contacted.

The website is the main platform for engagement and information and so when it was being redesigned it had to be easy to access for people who are less familiar with the way the Parliament works. But it also has to serve the needs of other users, and, in particular, Members. It is recognised that the website should not and cannot be the only information source for Members and their staff. Therefore, officials have planned to undertake this year a wider review of information. Members' input and feedback will be sought, as this will be key to ensuring this is a success.

**How the SPCB has assessed the benefits of the new website?
Whether a lessons learned exercise of the project has been undertaken and, if so, what is the outcome?**

As part of normal project governance, a full closure report was produced which included assessment of the benefits achieved by the project against those defined in the business case. At the point where the project closed it was agreed by the Project Board that the core benefits had been successfully achieved to a level that supports the service. These are outlined in the section above dealing with outcomes and value for money.

The closure report also contains a lessons learned section. The key lessons learned were about managing such a significant change better. More specifically making sure the potential scale and impact of the change is understood at the start of the project and having a dedicated change and communications role to support change across the organisation.

Reflecting on the project, there are other areas where lessons have been identified, in particular how digital projects can ensure the right level of engagement with Members and their staff, and this will be critical in considering the wider work around what information Members need. Officials have also recognised the need to provide increased detail on major multi-year project costs as part of the annual budgeting process to the SPCB and Finance and Public Administration Committee. The Committee may wish to note that as one of the Parliament's larger investments, the project is scheduled to be reviewed as part of our internal audit programme.

I hope this response is helpful.

Yours sincerely

Rt Hon Alison Johnstone MSP
Presiding Officer

ANNEX TO SPCB RESPONSE – Extract from Annual report on Central Government Websites (2012/13)

Table: Reported costs of central government sites summarised by department (2012/13)

Department	Total no. of reports received/ expected	Non staff costs	Staff costs	Total reported costs
Attorney General's Office (AGO)	7/7	£90,736	£93, 484	£184,220
Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)	63/68	£9,711,510	£3,553,916	£13,265,435
Communities and Local Government (DCLG)	10/18	£2,232,058	£1,746,329	£3,978,387
Cabinet Office (CO)	33/45	£14,868,081	£8,292,454	£23,160,535
Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)	11/25	£417,358	£580,361	£997,719
Energy and Climate Change (DECC)	21/21	£964,560	£470,246	£1,434,806
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)	22/59	£422,203	£683,272	£1,105,475
Education (DFE)	19/21	£4,832,677	£489,307	£5,321,984
International Development (DFID)	4/4	£233,858	£370,388	£604,246
Transport (DFT)	19/22	£1,240,391	£635,564	£1,875,955
Health (DH)	29/36	£18,054,572	£3,475,499	£21,530,071
Work and Pensions (DWP)	19/20	£1,220,715	£1,236,397	£2,457,112

Department	Total no. of reports received/ expected	Non staff costs	Staff costs	Total reported costs
Foreign and Commonwealth (FCO)	8/16	£8,384,809	£4,449,916	£12,834,725
Treasury (HMT inc HMRC)	4/19	£567,982	£5,135,538	£5,703,520
Home Office (HO)	3/27	£14,000	£-	£14,000
Defence (MOD)	27/30	£769,452	£683,872	£1,453,324

Department	Total no. of reports received/ expected	Non staff costs	Staff costs	Total reported costs
Justice (MOJ)	3/26	£54,000	£55,000	£109,000
The National Archives (TNA)	3/3	£1,546,788	£787,306	£2,334,094
UK Statistics Authority (UKSA - incl ONS)	5/5	£9,632,553	£3,092,354	£12,724,907
Miscellaneous (inc Regulators)	4/36	£1,800	£8,400	£10,200
Totals	314/508	£75,260,103	£35,839,603	£111,099,715

[source: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/central-government-websites-reporting-on-progress-2012-2013/annual-report-on-central-government-websites#costs-of-central-government-websites>]