House of Commons

Science and Technology Committee

Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

Seventh Report of Session 2014–15

HC 866

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Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

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Report, together with formal minutes relating to the report

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Science and Technology Committee

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Publications

Committee reports are published on the Committee's website at www.parliament.uk/science and by The Stationery Office by Order of the House.

Evidence relating to this report is published on the Committee's website at www.parliament.uk/science.

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Contacts

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Summary

The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew announced that financial problems would result in them having to implement a programme that would make over one hundred scientists redundant. This impact, while not entirely due to Government budget reductions, has been exacerbated by how the Government manages the funding of the organisation, something we regard as a recipe for failure. Sudden changes in funding forced a more rapid change in scientific personnel than may otherwise have been necessary causing a public outcry at the risk posed to the Gardens and its world class science functions.

We heard that the management of the Gardens consider the current process provides them with little leeway to deal with unexpected expenses and unable to properly plan for the future. There is an urgent need for the management at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew to be given more freedom in how they manage their budget and an indication of funding over the longer term to enable better planning for future problems.

The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew has a similar mix of issues as the Natural History Museum (mixing the management of heritage buildings and being a visitor attraction while delivering world class science) and we recommend that the triennial reviews of these institutions should inform each other to ensure more consistency of treatment and funding from their respective Government sponsors.

1 Introduction

1. Kew Gardens, originally established by the Royal Family for private use, were funded as a philanthropic enterprise through the 18th and 19th centuries and developed into an increasingly popular public destination with the rise of the railways in Victorian England. During this time, the gardens grew in size and buildings were commissioned to meet a number of functions, not all of them related to botanical pursuits. The current gardens include not just the land and buildings at Kew but further holdings at a secondary site at Wakehurst Place.[1]

2. The management of Kew Gardens was devolved from the Government to a Board of Trustees through provisions within the National Heritage Act 1983. Under that Act, the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (as it is now formally known) is a Non-Departmental Public Body with exempt charitable status.[2] The Board of Trustees do not, however, hold title to the land or buildings within the Gardens except for the Wellcome Trust Millennium Building and adjacent land at Wakehurst Place. The land and buildings at the Kew Gardens site are owned by the Crown and the National Trust owns the freehold of the remaining land at Wakehurst Place. The Board of Trustees is liable to maintain and replace all the buildings that they use.[3]

3. These complex arrangements were thrown into sharp relief when it was announced that, because of a funding shortfall, scientists would have to be made redundant to balance the books.

4. Our interest has been to discover the facts behind the financial shortfall and what threat botanical and mycological research faced as a result. We announced our evidence session on 12 November 2014 intending to speak to scientists, unions and management at Kew as well as the relevant Government Minister. Despite not putting out a formal terms of reference or requesting evidence to be submitted, we ultimately received 65 pieces of correspondence in advance of the evidence session.

5. We thank all of those who took the time to write to us and especially thank the staff at Kew who facilitated our evidence session at the Gardens.

[1] http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1084

[2] http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1983/47/contents

[3] KEW 026

2 Concerns raised with the Committee

Public amenity

6. The most obvious use for a garden is amenity. Botanical gardens are able to exploit this amenity use to raise revenue necessary for the upkeep of both plants and infrastructure. Charges at Kew were first introduced at Kew during World War One as a means of raising money.[4] That penny admission cost rose to 15p[5] by 1983 when the current status of the Gardens as a Non-Departmental Public Body was established by the National Heritage Act 1983 to the current adult ticket price of £15. The proceeds of charging for entry help fund the maintenance of the Gardens as a public amenity as well as supporting the scientific programme. Charges, however, put off sections of society who might choose, instead, to attend the Natural History Museum which has no such entry fee.

7. The link between amenity, education and the potential for stirring an interest in fundamental botany and mycology featured in much of the correspondence we received in advance of the Committee session.

Heritage site

8. The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew achieved UNESCO World Heritage Site status in 2003.[6] The UNESCO listing of the qualifying criterion for the Gardens demonstrates the mix of science, amenity and architectural heritage represented by the site.

> **Criterion (ii):** Since the 18th century, the Botanic Gardens of Kew have been closely associated with scientific and economic exchanges established throughout the world in the field of botany, and this is reflected in the richness of its collections. The landscape and architectural features of the Gardens reflect considerable artistic influences both with regard to the European continent and to more distant regions;
>
> **Criterion (iii):** Kew Gardens have largely contributed to advances in many scientific disciplines, particularly botany and ecology;
>
> **Criterion (iv):** The landscape gardens and the edifices created by celebrated artists such as Charles Bridgeman, William Kent, Lancelot 'Capability' Brown and William Chambers reflect the beginning of movements which were to have international influence;

9. The edifices and gardens that qualified the Gardens as a heritage site also present a significant maintenance cost. That maintenance was initially met directly by public funds even after the National Heritage Act 1983 created the Board of Trustees. When the Board assumed financial responsibility for all building and maintenance work in 1986-87, annual accounts indicate that the grant-in-aid increased from just under £6m to just over £11m

[4] HC Deb 20 December 1915 vol 77 cc11-2

[5] HC Deb 24 February 1983 vol 37 cc1064-115

[6] http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1084

suggesting that additional maintenance costs were in the order of £5m. Using the Office for National Statistics GDP deflator information[7] and assuming a similar proportion of grant in aid is required for maintenance, it is possible to see that the £24.4m that the Government told us was provided to Kew for 2014-15 would equate to £4.8m in 1986-87 terms. However, £24.4m was down from a high of £32.5m in 2012-13.

10. Many of the correspondents to us cited the National Heritage Act and the requirement for Government to "Keep the collections as national reference collections, secure that they are available to persons for the purposes of study, and add to and adapt them as scientific needs and the Board's resources allow"[8] as proof that the Government, by allowing a shortfall to occur, was failing to meet the requirements of the legislation.

Scientific excellence

11. The relationship of Kew with world class science began early on when King George III appointed Joseph Banks, who later held the Presidency of the Royal Society for 41 years, as advisor. Banks had been a botanist on Captain Cook's first voyage of discovery and funded many botanists on similar voyages, all of whom sent samples from those voyages to Kew.

12. Science at Kew has continued, including core research on taxonomy, propagation and conservation which provides the foundation upon which other plant and mycology related research can build. The character of the work and its justification for direct Government funding rather than competing for research money like universities was outlined to us by John Wood, a senior research associate in the Department of Plant Sciences at the University of Oxford:

> Kew cannot and should not compete for short-term grant money with a view to producing high impact academic publications. Instead it should provide taxonomic services of the highest international quality to catalogue the world's plant diversity and support other areas of biodiversity and ecological research.

13. ***We have seen that austerity in Government has posed more risk to fundamental long term research than other types of research which are better able to compete for research council funding. The Government needs to protect this kind of world class research in the UK and ensure it receives proper recognition within Research Excellence Framework assessments.***

14. We also received submissions from mycological associations from across the world regarding the potential loss of expertise and research within this field. The President of the International Society for Fungal Conservation captured the key concerns:

> The internal re-organization provoked by Kew's current crisis has resulted in mycology at the Gardens losing its separate identity. New and different teams have been set up defined by function as viewed from a botanical standpoint.

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[7] https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/394588/GDP_Deflators_Qtrly_National_Accounts_December_2014_update.csv/preview

[8] National Heritage Act 1983, Section 1(e)

> The few mycologists remaining after job losses are to be redistributed, scattered, throughout some, but not all of those teams.

15. Science at Kew has been subject to periodic independent review. The scientific review of Kew in 2010, led by Professor Neil Chalmers, concluded that there was a need for a science strategy:

> RECOMMENDATION 1. Kew should focus its research on the objectives of the institute's research strategy and avoid spreading itself too thinly.
>
> RECOMMENDATION 2. Kew should develop a science research strategy comprising explicitly defined, costed and prioritised research programmes.

16. The Government commissioned a further independent science report of Kew, completed in February 2012, that also commented on the need for a science strategy:

- Both the previous independent science review of Kew in 2006 and the Chalmers Report in 2010 identified a need for Kew to evaluate its scientific work and science teams. We have not seen evidence that this recommendation has been implemented.
- We recommend that the Science and Conservation Committee should develop indicators of science quality, success, and impact.
- We recommend that Kew reviews the current cross-directorate science teams, in particular to close or re-structure less effective teams and ensure all teams have a clear role, critical mass and resources to deliver specific outcomes derived from the science strategy.
- If Kew is to achieve its potential, it is important that it should develop a clear science strategy.

17. Richard Deverell, the current Director was appointed in September 2012, the first non-scientist to be appointed to that post, and Professor Kathy Willis, was appointed as Director of Science in November 2013 with the remit of managing all of Kew's science and whose "first priority will be to establish, and then implement, a clear and cohesive science strategy".[9]

18. Defra told us that Kew was due to produce a science strategy "to be publicly available in early 2015" and that Defra was working with Kew "and ensuring the greatest possible alignment with its own research programmes going forward (for example in the areas of plant health and biodiversity), in line with the Defra Network Evidence Investment Strategy".[10] The direction of that science strategy was broadly outlined, by Kew, as focussing on the areas where Kew might make a unique contribution:

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[9] Annual Report of Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, 2012-12, http://www.kew.org/sites/default/files/assets/KPPCONT_080464_Primary.pdf

[10] KEW 025

- To document and understand global plant and fungal diversity and its uses for the benefit of humanity;
- To provide data-rich evidence from RBG Kew's unrivalled collections to address the critical challenges facing humanity today;
- To disseminate our scientific knowledge of plants and fungi, maximising the impact of RBG Kew's scientific research in education, science, policy and management.[11]

19. The Royal Society considered that "stop/start funding risks eroding RBG Kew's value and effectiveness. RBG Kew needs ongoing, stable operating and capital investment within which to develop a long-term strategy to enable it to deliver",[12] a position supported by the UK Plant Science Federation that stated "Kew's scientific role requires secure, long-term funding that will ensure its sustainability and relevance".[13]

[11] KEW 026

[12] KEW 030

[13] KEW 031

3 Funding the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

20. In April 2014, The Guardian and several other news outlets reported that a reduction in grant-in-aid from Defra would contribute to the loss of 125 jobs at Kew and potentially threaten its ongoing status as a leading research institution. According to the Guardian:

> the cuts were approved against the advice of consultants for Defra, who told ministers in 2010 that Kew would lose its world class status and see its research decline below a critical level if its operating grant was not maintained from 2012 onwards.[14]

21. Kew confirmed in May 2014 that it faced a £5m "hole" in its 2014/15 budget "as a result of unavoidable rising costs, and reduced operating budget funding from Government and our charitable partner, the Kew Foundation".[15] Evidence from the trade unions at Kew highlighted that the "unexpected removal of Defra 2014-15 funding for several 'in-flight' capital projects added further financial burdens, as staff previously seconded to these projects reverted to revenue budget adding £500K of unexpected annual expense".[16] The management of this shortfall has been complicated by two interventions by the Government, one in September 2014 when the Deputy Prime Minister announced an additional £1.5 million and then again, when, the day before we held our evidence session, a further £2.3 million was announced.[17] Evidence of how poor communication was, with regard to ad hoc funding, was demonstrated as the Minister, when pressed, admitted even he had no foreknowledge that it would be forthcoming.[18]

22. Richard Deverell, the current Director of Kew, explained that:

> a number of factors came together. When we were putting to bed the budget for the current financial year in January and February of this year, we had to consider a number of changes. The first was that funding from DEFRA had fallen. [...] Secondly, for a number of years Kew had received a growing grant from its philanthropic arm...but they had, in effect, been handing over more money to Kew than they could sustain and their reserves had been depleted. They...had to reduce the grant that they were giving Kew. Thirdly, some costs, of course, rise. Staff costs rise, pension costs rise and utility costs rise. Those three things together added up to this hole of about £5.5 million, which is about a 12% hole in our total budget.[19]

23. He explained that the additional funds announced by the Deputy Prime Minister had not changed the management strategy "because it would have delayed the issue rather than

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[14] http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/apr/24/budget-cuts-threaten-kew-gardens-world-class-status

[15] http://www.kew.org/about/press-media/press-releases/financial-challenges-kew-update

[16] KEW 042

[17] http://www.kew.org/discover/news/deputy-prime-minister-commits-over-2-million-support-kew

[18] Qq 84-85

[19] Q40

avoided it. This additional funding is for one year only".[20] Both Professor Kathy Willis, head of science at Kew, and Richard Deverell were confident that Kew would be able to fulfil its functions in science and as both a public amenity and a World Heritage Site but Professor Willis told us that "We are now at the bones; we can't go back".[21] Richard Deverell expanded on that "I would further stress that if there was an equivalent reduction in Kew's resources, for whatever reason in future years, we would face some extremely unpalatable decisions, and they would have to include closing the garden for part of the year and they would have to include considering closing the schools' programme".[22]

24. Richard Deverell indicated to us that the strategy adopted by management would not just reduce current costs but "most of the changes we are implementing this year at Kew are to do with making Kew fit for purpose and effective in the 21st century[23]... I stood up in staff meetings in February and said that we would need to make significant changes in restructuring across the whole of Kew irrespective of the funding. We would be doing this even if our funding was rising".[24]

Relationship with government

25. Professor Georgina Mace of the Royal Society (and the chair of the most recent review of science at Kew) told us "One of the things that our review found was that DEFRA was not terribly clear with Kew about what they wanted for the funding. They were clearly proud of Kew as a jewel in the crown but were not very clear about what they expected for the money. It was a rather overcomplicated funding relationship—a continual to and fro about what money was wanted for what" .[25]

26. Richard Deverell also expressed some frustration with the funding process.

> This year nearly half of our total funding comes in the form of unrestricted income. You have to bid for that each year. You do not know whether you will get it next year or not. It also means, in effect, that our colleagues in DEFRA rather than at Kew are deciding whether a path is restored or a bit of science equipment is bought and so on. It seems to me, as Sir Neil Chalmers said, that those are decisions best made by people within Kew. It is not the funding model enjoyed by the Natural History Museum. They received £44 million this year, and 96% of that is unrestricted. They have the freedom to choose how that money is spent and they are held to account properly on how they spend that money.[26]

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[20] Q43

[21] Q48

[22] Q76

[23] Q44

[24] Q73

[25] Q25

[26] Q58

27. The Minister, Lord de Mauley, was supportive of the current management restructuring at Kew, indicating that it had "the full backing of Ministers".[27] He expected the forthcoming triennial review of Kew to address the issue of "long-term" confidence. He did not accept that the Government was failing to provide funding and indeed indicated that "the level of funding has been historically relatively high and relatively consistent, although I absolutely acknowledge the concerns that management have voiced".[28]

28. We were impressed by the current management at Kew who appear to be competent to manage both the scientific and financial challenges currently facing the organisation. However, we are disappointed that the restructuring of the organisation, and the resultant job losses, have occurred before any clear science strategy was published. The strategy is long overdue and its absence is likely to have exacerbated concerns about how the loss of staff would impact Kew's ability to continue contributing to fundamental botanical and mycological science.

29. We are convinced that the current pace of change is a consequence of how Kew is funded by the Government. Management has had to implement cost cutting measures more quickly than its strategy may have required to ensure the organisations ongoing financial security. The additional funds found by the Government at the last minute, had they been made available much earlier, may have allowed management to assure staff and outside observers about the security of Kew's fundamental science capabilities prior to losing staff.

30. We consider the current financial arrangements for funding to be a recipe for failure. Tactical, short term funding, will not encourage strategic, long term thinking in management or science. We note that the Government signs off on a five year rolling management plan for Kew but does not, at that time allocate funds to support that plan. *We therefore recommend that the Government writes to our successor Committee to provide an update on how funding will be changed to provide longer term security to both the management of Kew and its contribution to world class science.*

31. We agree with Richard Deverell that Kew suffers by comparison to the Natural History Museum with respect to its ability to adapt its spending to its immediate priorities. *We recommend that the Government ensures that future funding to Kew has a far greater proportion that is unrestricted. The forthcoming triennial review of Kew should provide an opportunity to consider whether Kew's funding should be more consistent with that of the Natural History Museum. We would expect that the triennial review teams for Kew and the Natural History Museum work closely to ensure more consistency of treatment.*

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[27] Q115

[28] Q87

Formal Minutes

Wednesday 25 February 2015

Members present:

Andrew Miller, in the Chair

Dan Byles
Jim Dowd
Stephen Metcalfe
Stephen Mosley
Pamela Nash
Graham Stringer

Draft Report (*Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

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

Paragraphs 1 to 31 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Seventh Report 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 2 March at 4.00 pm

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the Committee's inquiry page at www.parliament.uk/science.

Wednesday 17 December 2014	*Question number*
Professor Mary Gibby, UK Plant Sciences Federation, **Professor Georgina Mace**, Fellow, The Royal Society, and **Sir Neil Chalmers**, Chair of a 2010 independent review of Kew Gardens, commissioned by DEFRA	Q1–37
Richard Deverell, Director, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, **Professor Kathy Willis**, Director of Science, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, **Julie Flanagan**, Full-time officer, Prospect, and **Ken Bailey**, Trade union side lead for PCS, Prospect and GMB	Q38–83
Lord de Mauley, Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Natural Environment and Science, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	Q84–124

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the Committee's inquiry web page at www.parliament.uk/science. KEW numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

1	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra)	KEW0025
2	Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew	KEW0026
3	The Royal Society	KEW0030
4	UK Plant Sciences Federation	KEW0031
5	Joint trade unions	KEW0042
6	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra)	KEW0071

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the Committee's website at www.parliament.uk/science.

The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

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First Special Report	Communicating climate science: Government Response to the Committee's Eighth Report of Session 2013–14	HC 376
First Report	Ensuring access to working antimicrobials	HC 509 (Cm 8919)
Second Special Report	Government horizon scanning: Government Response to the Committee's Ninth Report of Session 2013–14	HC 592
Second Report	After the storm? UK blood safety and the risk of variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease	HC 327 (Cm 8940)
Third Special Report	Ensuring access to working antimicrobials: Research Councils UK Response to the Committee's First Report of Session 2014–15	HC 643
Third Report	National Health Screening	HC 244 (Cm 8999)
Fourth Report	Responsible Use of Data	HC 245
Fifth Report	Advanced genetic techniques for crop improvement: regulation, risk and precaution	HC 328

Session 2013–14

First Special Report	Educating tomorrow's engineers: the impact of Government reforms on 14–19 education: Government Response to the Committee's Seventh Report of Session 2012–13	HC 102
First Report	Water quality: priority substances	HC 272–I (HC 648)
Second Special Report	Marine science: Government Response to the Committee's Ninth Report of Session 2012–13	HC 443
Third Special Report	Bridging the valley of death: improving the commercialisation of research: Government response to the Committee's Eighth Report of Session 2012–13	HC 559
Second Report	Forensic science	HC 610 (Cm 8750)
Fourth Special Report	Water quality: priority substances: Government response to the Committee's First Report of Session 2013–14	HC 648
Third Report	Clinical trials	HC 104 (Cm 8743)
Fifth Special Report	Clinical trials: Health Research Authority Response to the Committee's Third Report of Session 2013–14	HC 753
Fourth Report	Work of the European and UK Space Agencies	HC 253 (HC 1112)
Fifth Report	Pre-appointment hearing with the Government's preferred candidate for Chair of the Natural	HC 702

	Environment Research Council (NERC)	
Sixth Special Report	Forensic science: Research Councils UK Response to the Committee's Second Report of Session 2013–14	HC 843
Seventh Special Report	Clinical trials: Medical Research Council Response to the Committee's Third Report of Session 2013–14	HC 874
Sixth Report	Women in scientific careers	HC 701 (HC 1268)
Seventh Report	Pre-appointment hearing with the Government's preferred candidate for Chair of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)	HC 989
Eighth Special Report	Work of the European and UK Space Agencies: Government Response to the Committee's Fourth Report of Session 2013–14	HC 1112
Eighth Report	Communicating climate science	HC 254 (HC 376, Session 2014–15)
Ninth Report	Government horizon scanning	HC 703 (HC 592, Session 2014–15)
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Session 2012–13

First Special Report	Science in the Met Office: Government Response to the Committee's Thirteenth Report of Session 2010–12	HC 162
First Report	Devil's bargain? Energy risks and the public	HC 428 (HC 677)
Second Report	Pre-appointment hearing with the Government's preferred candidate for Chair of the Medical Research Council	HC 510–I
Second Special Report	Engineering in government: follow-up to the 2009 report on Engineering: turning ideas into reality: Government Response to the Committee's Fifteenth Report of Session 2010–12	HC 511
Third Report	The Census and social science	HC 322 (HC 1053)
Fourth Report	Building scientific capacity for development	HC 377 (HC 907)
Fifth Report	Regulation of medical implants in the EU and UK	HC 163 (Cm 8496)
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Fourth Special Report	Building scientific capacity for development: Government and UK Collaborative on Development Sciences Response to the Committee's Fourth Report of Session 2012–13	HC 907
Fifth Special Report	Proposed merger of British Antarctic Survey and National Oceanography Centre: Natural Environment Research Council Response to the Committee's Sixth Report of Session 2012–13	HC 906
Seventh Report	Educating tomorrow's engineers: the impact of Government reforms on 14–19 education	HC 665 (HC 102, Session 2013–14)

Eighth Report	Bridging the valley of death: improving the commercialisation of research	HC 348 (HC 559, Session 2013–14)
Sixth Special Report	The Census and social science: Government and Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Responses to the Committee's Third Report of Session 2012–13	HC 1053
Ninth Report	Marine science	HC 727

Session 2010–12

First Special Report	The Legacy Report: Government Response to the Committee's Ninth Report of Session 2009–10	HC 370
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Seventh Special Report	Astronomy and Particle Physics: Government and Science and Technology Facilities Council Response to the Committee's Fourth Report of Session 2010–12	HC 1425
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Eighth Special Report	UK Centre for Medical Research and Innovation (UKCMRI): Government Response to the Committee's Sixth Report of session 2010–12	HC 1475
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Ninth Special Report	Strategically important metals: Government Response to the Committee's Fifth Report of Session 2010–12	HC 1479
Tenth Special Report	Peer review in scientific publications: Government and Research Councils UK Responses to the	HC 1535

	Committee's Eighth Report of Session 2010–12	
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Fifteenth Report	Engineering in government: follow-up to the 2009 report on Engineering: turning ideas into reality	HC 1667 (HC 511, Session 2012–13)

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