# Sellafield clean-up delays and leaks escalate costs and risks, warn MPs



Waste retrieval operations at the Sellafield nuclear site in Cumbria are facing increasing scrutiny as a recent report from the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) emphasises alarming inefficiencies and mounting costs. The clean-up, projected to hit an estimated £136 billion, has been marred by delays and what MPs describe as “intolerable” risks. A central focus of the report is the Magnox Swarf Storage Silo (MSSS), which has been leaking approximately 2,100 litres of contaminated water daily since 2018, enough to fill an Olympic-sized swimming pool every three years. This situation exacerbates concerns surrounding the safety and environmental integrity of one of the UK's most hazardous sites.

The National Audit Office (NAO) has corroborated the PAC's findings, indicating a significant decline in waste retrieval efforts. Since 2020, Sellafield has retrieved far less waste than expected, and the construction of an underground Geological Disposal Facility (GDF), crucial for long-term waste isolation, has seen its completion date pushed from 2040 to the late 2050s. The NAO has warned that further delays could impose an additional cost burden of £500 million to £760 million per decade, compounding the financial strain already felt at this critical site.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, chair of the PAC, stated that the conditions at Sellafield present “world-class” hazards, underscoring the necessity for a sophisticated and effective management strategy. Critically, he urged the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ) to implement robust accountability measures for both the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority (NDA) and Sellafield Ltd, which has consistently missed waste retrieval targets. There are also reports indicating that issues regarding the site’s culture may hinder operational efficiency, with whistleblowers highlighting inadequate handling of internal grievances and potential mismanagement.

While the NDA’s chief executive, David Peattie, acknowledged the challenges, he also pointed to recent improvements in project management that have seen better performance in a number of major initiatives. However, critics remain sceptical, particularly given a £127 million setback associated with a poorly managed refurbishment project for an onsite laboratory. This project was halted after its mismanagement was revealed, illustrating a broader need for enhanced asset oversight as facilities are reaching the limits of their operational lifespan.

Despite these improvements, apprehensions linger regarding the adequacy of funding. The NDA recently reported that its anticipated budget of £2.8 billion for the upcoming fiscal year falls short of the estimated £3.1 billion needed to effectively manage site operations. The PAC previously raised concerns about these funding challenges in light of escalating costs, pushing for an urgent review of financial resources allocated to Sellafield.

The complexities of managing Sellafield were underscored by an earlier decision to remove the site from special measures concerning physical security, reflecting some positive movement in operational oversight. Yet, the Office for Nuclear Regulation continues to express concerns about cybersecurity, highlighting the longstanding difficulties in fortifying the site against potential threats.

As such, the latest findings compel a call for immediate remedial action across numerous fronts. The committee expects Sellafield’s management to formulate a credible strategy that not only addresses the existing backlog of waste but also ensures the site operates within a framework of rigorous safety and efficiency standards for the foreseeable future.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.newcivilengineer.com/latest/136bn-sellafield-clean-up-too-slow-costs-are-rising-and-risks-are-intolerable-mps-warn-04-06-2025/), [[4]](https://eandt.theiet.org/2024/10/23/sellafield-not-achieving-value-money-intolerable-risks-are-persisting-finds-spending)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.newcivilengineer.com/latest/136bn-sellafield-clean-up-too-slow-costs-are-rising-and-risks-are-intolerable-mps-warn-04-06-2025/), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/business/2024/oct/23/sellafield-cleanup-cost-136bn-national-audit-office), [[5]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/feb/24/sellafield-nuclear-site-cuts-funding-union-spending)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cumbria-26124803), [[6]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/feb/19/sellafield-nuclear-site-taken-out-special-measures-physical-security)
* Paragraph 4 – [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/business/2024/oct/23/sellafield-cleanup-cost-136bn-national-audit-office), [[7]](https://www.nao.org.uk/press-releases/sellafield-nuclear-site-not-yet-achieving-value-for-money/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[5]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/feb/24/sellafield-nuclear-site-cuts-funding-union-spending), [[6]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/feb/19/sellafield-nuclear-site-taken-out-special-measures-physical-security)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.newcivilengineer.com/latest/136bn-sellafield-clean-up-too-slow-costs-are-rising-and-risks-are-intolerable-mps-warn-04-06-2025/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2024/oct/23/sellafield-cleanup-cost-136bn-national-audit-office> - The Guardian reports that the cost of cleaning up Sellafield is expected to rise to £136bn, with projects running years late and over budget. The National Audit Office (NAO) questions the value for money, highlighting tensions with the Treasury due to the site's vast spending. The NAO found that Sellafield has retrieved much less waste than planned since 2020, and the Magnox Swarf Storage Silo is leaking 2,100 litres of contaminated water daily. The report also notes that the construction of an underground Geological Disposal Facility has been delayed from 2040 to the late 2050s, potentially increasing costs by £500m-£760m per decade of delay. The NAO emphasizes the need for improved project management and accountability to address these issues.
3. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cumbria-26124803> - BBC News reports that the estimated cost of cleaning up the Sellafield nuclear reprocessing site in Cumbria has risen by almost £2.5bn in a year, reaching £70bn. The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) criticizes the poor progress and missed targets, calling the situation 'astonishing'. The PAC recommends that the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority (NDA) terminate the contract of the private consortium Nuclear Management Partners (NMP) if performance does not improve. The report highlights the need for clear leadership and strong management to address the escalating costs and delays.
4. <https://eandt.theiet.org/2024/10/23/sellafield-not-achieving-value-money-intolerable-risks-are-persisting-finds-spending> - Engineering and Technology Magazine reports that ongoing concerns over project management, delivery pace, and staffing at Sellafield mean it is not yet achieving value for money, according to a new National Audit Office (NAO) report. The NAO found that four major projects are significantly over budget and behind schedule, with costs expected to be £1.15bn more and delivered 58-129 months later than previously forecast. Despite progress in removing hazardous waste, the NAO states that facilities used to treat the waste may not reach the end of their useful lives before all the waste is retrieved, posing 'intolerable risks'.
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/feb/24/sellafield-nuclear-site-cuts-funding-union-spending> - The Guardian reports that Sellafield has stated that nearly £3bn in new funding is 'not enough', prompting bosses to examine significant cuts, raising concerns over jobs and safety at the nuclear waste site. The Cumbrian site, home to the world’s largest store of plutonium, was awarded £2.8bn for the next financial year, but internal calculations forecasted at least £3.1bn would be needed to meet spending requirements. The Public Accounts Committee has previously highlighted the escalating costs and poor performance at Sellafield, calling for improved management and accountability.
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/feb/19/sellafield-nuclear-site-taken-out-special-measures-physical-security> - The Guardian reports that Sellafield has been taken out of special measures for physical security by the Office for Nuclear Regulation (ONR) after demonstrating 'significant and sustained security improvements'. However, concerns remain over cybersecurity management, with the ONR stating that collaborative work is ongoing to achieve the required improvements in this area. Last year, Sellafield was fined £332,500 for cybersecurity failings, with the chief magistrate describing the situation as 'bordering on negligence'. The ONR's decision reflects progress in physical security but underscores the need for continued vigilance in cybersecurity.
7. <https://www.nao.org.uk/press-releases/sellafield-nuclear-site-not-yet-achieving-value-for-money/> - The National Audit Office (NAO) reports that ongoing concerns over project management, delivery pace, and staffing at Sellafield mean it is not yet achieving value for money. The NAO found that four major projects are significantly over budget and behind schedule, with costs expected to be £1.15bn more and delivered 58-129 months later than previously forecast. Despite progress in removing hazardous waste, the NAO states that facilities used to treat the waste may not reach the end of their useful lives before all the waste is retrieved, posing 'intolerable risks'.