

NHS National Programme for IT

NHS National Programme for IT: What Was Delivered, What Was Abandoned and Why the Programme Was Dismantled

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Key Facts

Cost: GBP 12.7B

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Executive Summary

The NHS National Programme for IT was meant to revolutionise healthcare technology. Instead, it became one of the largest and most costly public-sector IT programmes of its era. The NAO estimated the programme's total cost at GBP 12.7 billion; by its dismantling in 2011 some GBP 6.4 billion had been spent, with limited delivery against the core care-records objective. The lessons about user adoption and governance remain essential.

Executive Lessons

- Do Not Replace All Systems at Once

The NHS tried to replace every IT system across every hospital simultaneously. This "big bang" approach did not reflect the reality that different hospitals had different needs, different legacy systems, and different levels of digital maturity. Phased rollouts allow learning and adaptation.

- User Adoption Is More Important Than Technical Capability

The system was technically sophisticated but clinically unusable. Doctors and nurses found it slower than paper records. When users actively avoid a system, the best technical specification in the world is worthless.

- Vendor Lock-In Creates Structural Weakness

The NHS signed exclusive contracts with major vendors that locked them into proprietary systems. When those systems failed to deliver, there was no alternative. Competition and modularity are governance safeguards, not procurement luxuries.

Timeline

- 1998: The NHS 'Information for Health' strategy sets the policy groundwork for national electronic patient records.
- 2002: The National Programme for IT (NPfIT) is launched by the Department of Health to deliver integrated care records and supporting systems across the NHS in England.
- 2003-12: Framework contracts worth billions of pounds are signed with local service providers including BT, CSC, Accenture and Fujitsu, plus national suppliers for N3, Spine, Choose and Book and NHSmail.
- 2006-06: NAO reports (HC 1173) that the programme is on track in parts but that deployment timescales for care records are slipping and staff engagement is a major risk.
- 2006: Accenture withdraws from NPfIT contracts with a reported write-off of around 260 million dollars, an early sign of supplier failure.
- 2008-05: NAO progress report (HC 484) puts the programme's estimated cost at GBP 12.7 billion and says the care records service is about four years late.
- 2008-05: Fujitsu's GBP 896 million local service provider contract for the South of England is terminated, fragmenting delivery further.
- 2009-01: Public Accounts Committee reports weak value for money, supplier dependence and poor clinical engagement on the programme.
- 2011-05: NAO reports (HC 888) that the GBP 2.7 billion spent on detailed care records systems does not represent value for money and the core aim of an electronic record for every patient will not be achieved.
- 2011-07: Public Accounts Committee concludes the Department of Health is in 'damage-limitation mode' on the programme.

- 2011-09-22: The coalition government announces it will dismantle the National Programme for IT, replacing centralised delivery with locally led systems following the Major Projects Authority review.
- 2013: NAO reviews the final benefits statement for the former NPfIT programmes, scrutinizing claimed benefits against roughly GBP 12 billion of total spend.

Sources

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