

## GOVERNMENT IT

## SURVEY

Reform the way government IT projects are approved – we put the case for change

# MPs should scrutinise big IT schemes early on

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A report published today by MPs of the three main parties vindicates some of the harshest criticisms by academics and others of the £12.7bn NHS National Programme for IT (NPfIT).

The attack on the NPfIT by the Committee of Public Accounts reaches even into the questioning of policy, which is normally a no-go area for the committee.

The report questions whether it was a good idea for the Department of Health to have awarded £6.2bn worth of national contracts for suppliers to deliver systems to the NHS as a whole.

If the report of the committee were the result of consultants scrutinising a big project on behalf of directors of a private company, the NPfIT would probably be declared a failure by the board and radical action taken. Possibly the project would be stopped, reduced in scope or greatly revised.

But in central government there is no such thing as an IT disaster: project names are usually changed or the failed scheme continues indefinitely. A project to deliver unified systems for magistrates has continued for about 17 years, complete with name changes.

So it is unclear whether the well-informed criticisms of the Public Accounts Committee will make any difference. Nearly a quarter of a century ago, the committee was criticising failing IT projects and programmes. In its report on centrally-controlled computer schemes in July 1984 the committee criticised the £6m wasted on the aborted “Camelot” scheme to computerise welfare benefits.

It warned of over-optimism – as have many of the committee’s reports since. Only this month the committee published a report which showed how officials at the Ministry of De-



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fence were illogically optimistic over the simplicity, timescale, scope and cost of the £7bn Defence Information Infrastructure (DII).

## Parliamentary debate

So how is it that seemingly impossible projects – such as DII and the NPfIT – get approved? The answer is that there is no proper approvals process. Papers unearthed as a result of a request by Computer Weekly

under the Freedom of Information Act show that the NPfIT was approved after a short chat in Downing Street with potential suppliers and other enthusiasts. NPfIT was the product of the so-called “sofa” style of government.

The NPfIT and the DII were announced without any genuinely independent challenge to the schemes – and no parliamentary debate.

This flaw in the approvals process for big IT projects and programmes has been accepted by Tory and La-

bour governments alike. Computer Weekly believes that nothing will change until parliament debates the spending on projects which cost billions of pounds before the schemes are approved.

MPs are not IT experts and they do not need to be. They could challenge assumptions made in the enthusiastic period before contracts are awarded, test whether officials understand fully the commitments they want to make, and find out if they have underestimated the complexity of the programme and the task of implementing it.

MPs could seek public assurances from named officials. They could ask for independent pre-contract assessments of the project’s feasibility and the likely reactions of those who would use or refuse to use the new systems.

Congressional-style oversight of big government investments needs to come to Whitehall. ●

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