Scope Management in NHS National Programme for IT (NPfIT)

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Launched in 2002, the National Programme for IT (NPfIT) was the largest public sector digital programme undertaken by the UK government, aimed at modernising the National Health Service (NHS) with integrated electronic patient records (EPRs), an electronic booking system, an electronic prescription service (EPS), and an assured national broadband network (N3). The programme involved around 50 million citizens and up to hundreds of millions of health care interactions and records every year, and was intended to digitise health care services and transition towards patient-centred care. Key stakeholders included the UK Government and Department of Health (providing funding and direction), NHS leaders and managers (as implementers), IT suppliers such as BT and Accenture, clinicians (as daily end users) and patients (as end users of the health care system more broadly). The National Audit Office and the House of Commons Health Select Committee, ultimately provided checks and balances on NPfIT operations. Although, ambitious in the best of intentions, the considerable size and complexity of National Programme for IT (NPfIT) resulted in unfortunate challenges which subsequently led to NPfIT failing.

Scope Definition

At first, the scope of the project was broadly stated: the aim was to design a national IT system but with a common functionality across every NHS entity. But the scope lacked detail and specificity. As time progressed, political leaders and policy makers added new objectives to the vision, such as adding data on patients who did not attend their appointments, and including enhanced security requirements, etc., the scope expanded significantly. And given the number of changes over time, the project was in a state of scope creep, where requirements were added without understanding the full impact of the cost, feasibility and timelines for completion.

Scope Planning

Planning processes for the formal scope were confined and overly regulated using a top-down structure, with governance from central government and IT professionals. Global IT suppliers were favored for procurement, however, there was little evidence of structured scope workshops or systematic stakeholder engagement throughout the planning process. As a result, scope planning was insufficient and relied solely on technical ambitions without consideration for local NHS organizations, or their variances of need.
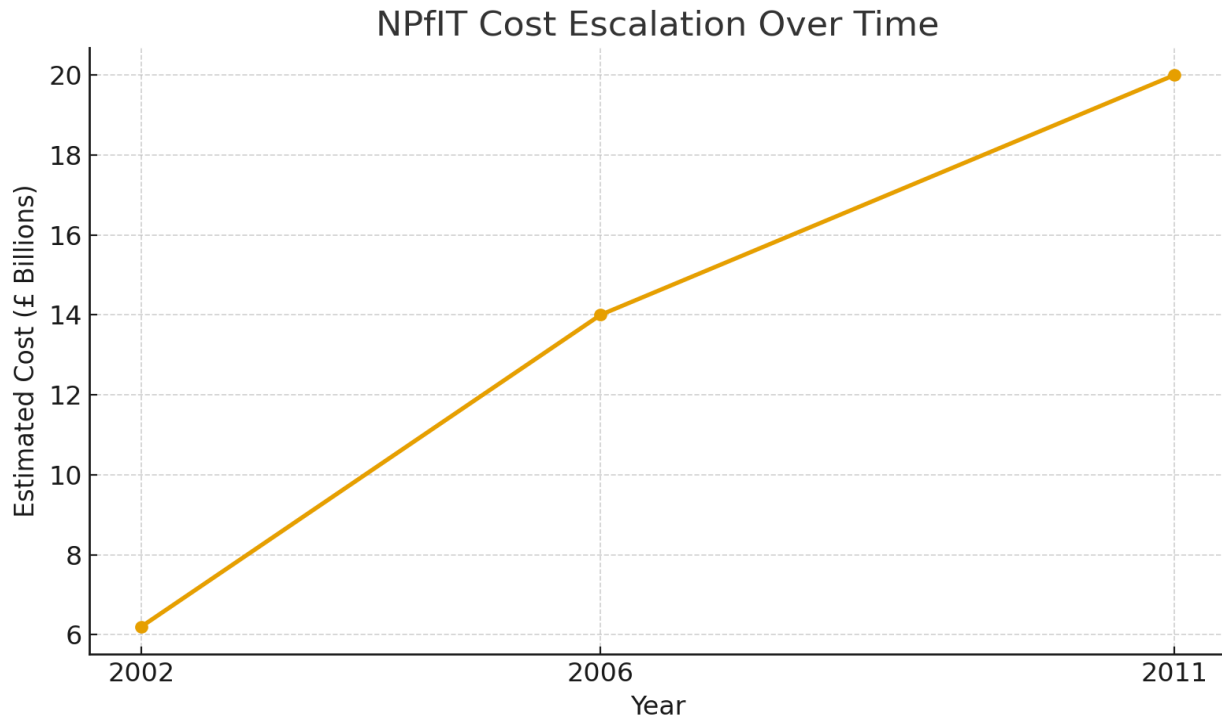
Scope Control

The processes to manage scope were ineffective. While plans stressed the importance of project milestones and target costs, baseline requirements were rarely assessed as part of a change in scope. Running against unrealistic deadlines and political pressure, agencies operationalized systems that were either partial or incomplete before the system roll-out date. By 2006, the cost rose to £14 billion, around twice what was originally estimated, and later costs were estimated to be around £20 billion. Inadequate change control, along with elegant pieces and multiagency scope cuts, exacerbated further scope creep and uncontrolled changes.

As documented in Figure 1, these crescendoed costs illustrate the impact of poor scope management and uncontrolled scope creep in the NPfIT.

Figure 1

Estimated NPfIT program costs over time, showing scope-related escalation (2002–2011)

Stakeholder Management

      One of NPfIT's greatest weaknesses was engagement with stakeholders. Clinicians, patients, and local NHS organizations had little input into the definition of the project's scope. In many respects, their expectations were disregarded in favor of the political and IT-industry view. For example, there were disputes between the government and doctors over the issue of patient consent to share records (opt-in compared to opt-out), which delayed roll-out, and local trusts found it difficult to implement mandated systems that did not fit their operational needs.

Lessons Learned

The NPfIT offers many significant lessons for managing project scope. These include the need for more specificity in scope definition, better stakeholder engagement, incremental delivery and improved scope control measures. A summary of these challenges, their associated scope challenges and responses for improvement are included in Table 1.

Table 1
Lessons Learned from NPfIT Scope Management

Challenge	Scope Issue	Lesson Learned
Unclear definition of scope	Vague and broad objectives enhanced scope creep	Define project scope and measurable boundaries
"Big bang" implementation	Aimed to roll out nationally all at once	Utilize incremental, modular delivery and have pilot projects
Limited stakeholder engagement	Complete consultation with clinicians and patients not part of scope	Proactively include stakeholders in scope definition and validation
Inadequate scope control	Scope creep without a structured evaluation of impacts	Formal change control will be in place and any additions will be evaluated for their impact
Governance overly centralized	National objectives imposed as a generic solution with no regard for local context	Balance national goals with local flexibility and autonomy

Recommendations for future projects

From the lessons learned in the NPfIT, it is possible to offer some broad recommendations for how to think about future large-scale public sector IT projects.

1) Clear Definition of Scope - Define narrow focus and observable deliverables.

2) Deliver in Phases - Multi-phase or pilot testing rather than broad scale implementation.

3) Stakeholders Engagement - Involve clinicians, patients and managers throughout the cycle of work.

4) Strong Control of Scope - Strong change management in order to mitigate scope creep.

5) Balanced Governance - National strategy aligned with local latitude.

6) Continuous leadership - Stable leadership to minimize changes in leadership and loss of knowledge.

Summary

The NHS National Programme for IT (NPfIT) demonstrates that scope management can be failed in a well intended project. Poor scope definition, weak planning, lack of control of scope creep, and poor stakeholder engagement all contributed to its collapse and increasing costs. Future projects need to ensure that scope is clearly defined, uses an incremental approach, engages key stakeholders and has clear governance to avoid making the same mistakes. If adopted, these behaviours can increase the chances of delivering transformative outcomes in complex, ambitious and largescale programs of work in the public sector, and potentially in other settings.

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