Northern Ireland Audit Office

Major IT projects in Northern Ireland

Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General

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This report has been prepared under Article 8 of the Audit (Northern Ireland) Order 1987 for presentation to the Northern Ireland Assembly in accordance with Article 11 of the Order.

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She certifies the accounts of all Government Departments and a wide range of other public sector bodies; and she has statutory authority to report to the Northern Ireland Assembly on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which departments and other bodies have used their resources.

Dorinnia Carville
Comptroller and Auditor General

Northern Ireland Audit Office
04 July 2025

Contents

List of Abbreviations

ABBACUS	Assessment Billing Benefit and Collection Update System
AFBI	Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute
ALB	Arm's Length Body
BSO	Business Services Organisation
BTP	Business Transformation Partner
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CoPE	Centre of Procurement Expertise
CDDO	Central Digital and Data Office
CDG	Commercial Delivery Group
CMU	Contract Management Unit
CPD	Construction and Procurement Delivery
DAERA	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
DE	Department of Education
DfI	Department for Infrastructure
DoF	Department of Finance
DoH	Department of Health
EdIS	Education Information Solutions programme
EA	Education Authority
ERP	Enterprise Resource Planning solution
ETS	Education Technology Services
EU	European Union
FBC	Full Business Case
HSC	Health and Social Care
HR	Human Resources
ICF	Intelligent Client Function
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IDP	Integr8 Delivery Partner

List of Abbreviations

IPA	Infrastructure and Projects Authority
ISLAND	Information System for Laboratories in AFBI, NIEA and DAERA
IT	Information Technology
LPS	Land & Property Services
NIAO	Northern Ireland Audit Office
NIEA	Northern Ireland Environment Agency
NICS	Northern Ireland Civil Service
NICS HR	Northern Ireland Civil Service Human Resources function
NIFAIS	Northern Ireland Food Animal Information System
NIPP	Northern Ireland Planning Portal
NISRA	Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency
OBC	Outline Business Case
P3O	Departmental Portfolio, Programme and Project Offices
PAC	Public Accounts Committee
PAS	Payroll Administrative Services
PfG	Programme for Government
RAG	Red, Amber and Green
RPA	Risk Potential Assessment
SOC	Strategic Outline Case
SIMS	Schools Management Information System
SMS	Schools Management System
SPSMS	Strategic Partner and Schools Management System
SRO	Senior Responsible Officer
T&M	Time and materials
TOM	Target Operating Model

Key facts in the period April 2022 to March 2025

29

The number of major IT projects across NICS departmental portfolio

£5.2 billion

Current estimated whole life cost of delivering major IT project portfolio

Almost half

of projects

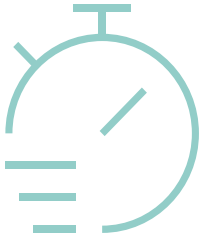
Over two-thirds

of the estimated cost

relate to the Department of Health and the Department of Finance

58 per cent

Over half of live major IT projects with value of £2.2 billion have a Red or Amber project status

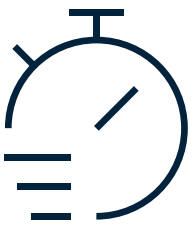


Almost 6.5 years

Average length of time for a major IT project to be designed, procured, implemented and become fully operational

24 out of 29

Major IT projects undertaken to replace legacy IT systems



Almost 8 years

Average length of contract extensions required for legacy systems to ensure continuity of service while replacement systems are being commissioned and implemented

Executive Summary

Executive Summary

1. Pressures on public finances, evolving expectations and end user needs bring a drive for greater efficiencies in the way new and existing services are delivered, both in terms of speed and costs. The successful implementation of new IT systems and IT-enabled programmes and projects presents opportunities to improve services, deliver efficiencies and enable transformation in the public sector. However, the difficulties in effectively managing these projects are consistently highlighted across the United Kingdom and beyond.

2. This report presents an overview of the portfolio of major IT projects across Northern Ireland central government and the progress in delivering the projects. In the period April 2022 – March 2025, Northern Ireland departments, and their arm's length bodies (ALBs), managed 29 major IT projects with a current total estimated whole life cost of £5.2 billion. For the purposes of the report, we defined major as over £25 million in whole life cost.

3. In recent years these projects have been set against a background of an uncertain operating environment including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, inflationary increases, long periods without Ministers, systemic capacity and capability issues, and the ongoing difficulties presented by both single year budgets and delays in budgets being agreed.

4. Many of the major IT projects are facing significant issues. The latest assessments by project teams show that the majority of live projects have a Red or Amber rating – almost 60 per cent of projects with a value of £2.2 billion. It is vital that these programmes and projects are well managed to ensure successful delivery and value for money.

There is no consistent approach to planning for major IT projects, or collating data on existing IT systems across Northern Ireland departments

5. We found that there is no consistent process in place to identify, manage and report on IT systems, or to appraise each system and set priorities for new or replacement systems. There is no overarching portfolio view of major IT projects, or existing IT systems, across government and the approach within individual departments varies. The previous Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) IT strategy ended in 2021. It was not fully implemented and has not been evaluated.

6. There is currently no NICS-wide IT strategy and we were told there is no authority to mandate the implementation and delivery of a NICS IT strategy across departments. Whilst we recognise that each individual department is a separate legal entity, they must find ways to work and plan collectively to: establish priorities for investment and the delivery of efficiencies; ensure best use of skills; better understand the interdependencies and risks across IT systems both within departments and across the NICS; and ensure compatibility and synergies in the IT solutions.

7. We were unable to ascertain the cost for all IT systems across departments and their arms' length bodies (ALBs) as there was little information readily available on the annual costs of IT systems and costs to date. Cost information should be readily available as accurate financial information is essential to support informed decision-making and regular monitoring.

Continued contract extensions are too often a necessity due to a lack of strategic planning and delays in implementing new systems

8. Most of the programmes and projects (24 of 29) within the portfolio of major IT projects are to replace legacy systems and for almost all those projects, the legacy contract has been extended multiple times, and the systems are operating well beyond their intended life. Whilst not all legacy systems will require replacement at contract end, and there can be valid business decisions to extend contracts and maintain existing systems, many of the extensions were a necessity to maintain continuity of service, as opposed to a strategically planned choice. On average, across the portfolio, legacy system contracts were extended by almost eight years. Approximately a third of these contracts were extended for 10 or more years, with the longest contract extension being 18 years.

9. Continued contract extensions may come with a significant cost – both financial costs as well as benefits foregone or a negative impact on quality of service. As part of this report, we examined progress on five programmes/projects and found that all experienced delays in project initiation, resulting in reliance on contract extensions to maintain legacy systems. The value of these contract extensions is in excess of £573 million. Extending contracts without competition limits the extent to which the Accounting Officer can be assured that value for money has been achieved.

10. It takes close to six and half years for a major IT project to be designed, procured, implemented and become business-as-usual across the NICS. Proper planning is essential to make the best use of limited resources and to mitigate the challenges being presented by multiple IT systems reaching end of life at the same time. However, departments told us that one of the main reasons for continued contract extensions is pressure on resources, meaning that the focus is on business-as-usual and day-to-day delivery. This, combined with single year budgets and capacity and capability issues, results in plans to implement new IT programmes and projects starting late and legacy systems being extended well beyond their intended life.

11. Both the NIAO and the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) have previously highlighted the risks associated with ongoing contract extensions and the need for strong contract management controls and strategic planning. Whilst we recognise the need to maintain continuity of service, the level of reliance on contract extensions to maintain legacy systems, many of which are no longer efficient, is extremely concerning. The focus, and spend, on contract extensions is often to maintain the system, prevent operational failure and reduce the risk of cyber-attacks, as opposed to enhancing functionality and performance. Over time the gap between functionality and need widens, the systems become increasingly inefficient, as does the citizen experience. This represents very poor value for money and missed opportunities to have modern, more efficient systems in place at an earlier stage.

There must be comprehensive planning at the project initiation stage to set projects up for successful delivery

12. Each of the case studies experienced delays or issues at the project initiation stage. The reasons included: a lack of clarity on the scope and intended outcomes; no clear project plan; no target operating model; and insufficient suitable resources. Appropriately skilled staff were not always involved in developing the business case, resulting in the complexity of the project not being fully understood and unrealistic costs and timescales for the project being estimated. Time must be better invested at the early stages of projects to provide the best chance of successful delivery, including clearly defining and understanding the intended outcomes and benefits of the new system.

Effective governance and assurance structures are essential to support effective delivery

13. The principal governance mechanism is often the programme or project board. In three of the case studies, issues with governance arrangements were identified including infrequent meetings and membership that was not sufficiently representative of stakeholders. Effective governance arrangements must be in place to provide oversight, challenge and support decision-making. Membership should be tailored throughout the life of a project, to ensure the appropriate skills mix and value is added by the appropriate stakeholders at the best time.

14. In addition to internal assurance and reporting processes within departments and project teams, the Gateway review process provides an independent source of assurance on programmes and projects. We saw examples of constructive engagement with the Gateway review process, and the value to be gained from the process, especially when that engagement is completed at an early stage.

Having people with the right skills and experience in place from the outset is essential

15. People with the right skills, experience and time are crucial at every stage of an IT project life cycle. In addition to project and contract management skills, in IT projects there is a need for specific technical skills including digital skills such as software development, and cyber security. The majority of the projects in the major IT portfolio are IT-enabled business change and transformation, and therefore skills in business change and user/ stakeholder engagement are essential.

16. Capacity and capability issues impact from the very outset of projects in Northern Ireland and hamper the ability to undertake comprehensive planning, understand the complexities of the projects, estimate realistic costs and timetables, be intelligent customers, and engage effectively with stakeholders. Projects are often initiated with smaller teams than are needed, key roles are not adequately filled with skilled staff and often staff do not have the capacity required to fulfil their roles as they continue with their normal day to day responsibilities.

17. Whilst there has been some progress, led by the Department of Finance (DoF), to develop project delivery capacity and capability and the NICS Project Delivery Profession, overall progress to address this long-standing systemic issue has been much too slow. There remains a clear and urgent need to develop and enable a NICS-wide approach to build the capacity and capability needed to successfully deliver major projects. The NICS must implement previous recommendations in this area at pace.

Conclusion and recommendations

18. Major projects, including major IT programmes and projects, are complex. Delivery problems are not unique to Northern Ireland and are compounded by an uncertain operating environment. Many of the same issues that have been known for a long time persist. The lessons are known and have been widely reported, yet often projects are still not set up for success. Action is needed at pace, to address issues, including significant skills gaps impacting at every stage of a project lifecycle, at a system level.

19. The cost of ongoing contract extensions and the risks posed by maintaining legacy systems well beyond their intended lives is not value for money. This must be recognised and addressed across the NICS and wider public sector. Strategically planned, procured and well managed longer-term partnerships with innovation and continuous improvement built into the contract term can bring opportunities to ensure value for money for longer.

20. Reform and transformation of public services is one of the nine priorities for the 2024-2027 Programme for Government, with digital transformation highlighted as an enabling action. The current approach to major IT projects, if continued, will result in continued risk to value for money and missed opportunities to realise the benefits that can be delivered through ever changing and evolving technologies. A NICS-wide approach is needed in order to deliver on the ambitions of the Programme for Government and deliver real public service IT transformation.

Recommendation 1

In the next 12 months, each department should undertake a review of the maturity and adequacy of the support provided by its Portfolio, Programme and Project Offices (P3Os). The review should determine the impact and value of having a P3O and identify areas for improvement. DoF should drive the completion of these reviews and report the outcomes, including recommendations for improvement, to the NICS Board.

Recommendation 2

We recommend that all departments and ALBs establish a rigorous framework to identify legacy IT systems, and those soon to become legacy, and assess the risks associated with the systems. This assessment should be used to drive the prioritisation of investment decisions and enable risk-based succession planning to manage and maintain, or to replace, systems well in advance of current contract expiry. This is essential to deliver efficiency savings and ensure value for money.

Recommendation 3

A NICS-wide IT strategy should be put in place within the next 12 months. It must be collectively owned by all NICS departments and applied across the NICS to drive consistency in approach, including the application of common standards, and deliver more compatible systems which drive cost efficiencies and assist in delivering on the public service transformation ambitions of the Programme for Government.

Recommendation 4

Departments must ensure that there is accurate and timely contract management and cost information available to enable regular monitoring and reporting and to support decision-making by the relevant governance mechanisms.

Recommendation 5

Departments should ensure that sufficiently skilled staff are available from the early stages of a project to allow full consideration of the complexity of the project, enabling realistic timescales, costs and internal resource requirements to be included within business cases to support more robust decision-making on the affordability and feasibility of the project.

Recommendation 6

To maximise value for money it is crucial that Accounting Officers and DoF ensure that the benefits to be achieved by investing in new systems are clearly defined in business cases. Benefits should be measurable and there must be clarity on how they will be realised. Benefits must be monitored and reported on once systems are operational to ensure that the intended benefits are delivered and value for money is achieved.

Recommendation 7

All projects and programmes with a value over £5 million are required to engage with the Gateway process by completing a Risk Potential Assessment. We recommend that Accounting Officers put in place project reporting arrangements to ensure that programmes and projects within their remit actively engage with the assurance process, particularly at the early stages of a project. Accounting Officers, Senior Responsible Officers and Project Boards must also satisfy themselves that the recommendations of the independent Gateway reviews, including the timing of the next recommended reviews, are actioned.

Recommendation 8

Governance structures, such as the project or programme board, should be a key component to the successful delivery of projects. They must be active and include key stakeholders with an appropriate mix of skills and experience. This should be tailored and strengthened throughout the life of a project as necessary.

Recommendation 9

The NICS must urgently address, at a system level, the adequacy of project management and delivery skills. This should include identifying the skills gap and putting clear plans in place to develop a mature NICS Project Delivery profession and ensure that sufficiently trained and skilled staff are available throughout the project life cycle. This is a service-wide issue that needs to be taken forward across the NICS. DoF should take the lead on implementing this recommendation with the support of NICS Human Resources.

Recommendation 10

The NICS Board should take the lead in identifying recurrent issues impacting on the delivery of major IT projects and the lessons to be learned. A clear, timebound action plan to address these issues must be developed.

"The current approach to major IT projects, if continued, will result in continued risk to value for money and missed opportunities to realise the benefits that can be delivered through ever changing and evolving technologies."

Northern Ireland Audit Office

Part One:
Introduction and background

Part One: Introduction and background

Major IT projects can play an important role in changing how services are delivered including improving efficiency, reducing costs and designing services to meet user needs

1.1 Information technology (IT) plays an ever-increasing role in the provision of public services - whether it is accessing benefits, the provision of education or healthcare, or the day-to-day interactions between government and citizens for services such as obtaining a new driving licence or making a planning application. Pressures on public finances and evolving expectations and end-user needs bring a drive for greater efficiencies in the way new and existing services are delivered. In February 2025 the Executive agreed a Programme for Government (PfG) 2024-2027 'Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most'. One of the nine priorities is the Reform and Transformation of Public Services. The successful delivery of major IT projects can play an important part in transformation and is essential for improving public services.

1.2 IT projects were traditionally defined as a type of project that focused primarily on the delivery of a new or improved technology solution dealing primarily with technical components such as IT infrastructure, information systems or computers. Examples included: web development; software or applications development and implementation; network configuration; hardware installation; and database management.

1.3 Over the years IT projects have evolved and become more complex. The term 'IT-enabled business change' is now widely used throughout the NICS and the vast majority of current major IT projects (26 of 29) are considered by departments to be IT-enabled projects. An IT-enabled business change project uses the technology as a catalyst to implement and support significant changes in how a service is delivered to customers or an organisation's business processes, structures or strategies. The successful delivery of IT-enabled business change requires not just better technology but an understanding of the needs of different users and the potential for service improvements and efficiencies.

1.4 For the purposes of this report the term IT projects should be considered to also refer to IT-enabled business change projects.

Scope and structure of the report

1.5 This report presents an overview of the portfolio of major IT projects across Northern Ireland central government and the progress in delivering the projects. We defined major as over £25 million whole life costs. Whole life cost is the total cost of a project over its whole life and takes account of both capital costs and revenue costs, including staff, operational, maintenance, repair, upgrade and eventual disposal costs. Our methodology is set out in **Appendix 1**.

1.6 The majority of the programmes and projects within the portfolio of major IT projects are necessary to replace legacy systems. The Central Digital and Data Office (part of the UK Government's Department for Science, Innovation and Technology) defines the term 'legacy IT' as outdated and often obsolete technology systems, software, and hardware that have been in use for a considerable period of time. Whilst these systems served their purpose effectively when first implemented, over time they can present challenges and risks. These challenges may include higher maintenance costs, limited scalability, reduced agility, increased susceptibility to cyber threats, and difficulties in integrating with newer, more advanced systems.

1.7 There are significant costs associated with contract extensions for legacy systems to maintain continuity of service until new systems are up and running. The report includes five major IT projects as case studies, all of which replace legacy systems. The projects were selected as case studies due to their size and importance to their sector. The Land & Property Services (LPS) NOVA Programme includes the Land Registration project, which is the replacement for the Landweb project, and the Revenue and Benefits project, which is the replacement for the ABBACUS system, both of which were previously reported on by the NIAO and the Public Accounts Committee. The total cost of contract extensions to maintain the legacy systems beyond the original contract end date across the case studies (excluding encompass) alone is approximately £573 million (see **Figure 5 at paragraph 4.2**).

- Department of Health – encompass programme (**Case Study 1**)
- Department of Finance – Integr8 programme (**Case Study 2**)
- Department of Finance – LPS NOVA programme – specifically the Revenue and Benefits project and the Land Registration project (**Case Study 3**)
- Department of Education – Education Authority's Education Information Solutions programme (EdIS) (**Case Study 4**)
- Department for Infrastructure – Planning Portal (**Case Study 5**)

1.8 The structure of this report is as follows:

- **Part One** sets out the roles and responsibilities for the commissioning and delivery of major IT projects in Northern Ireland. It also includes findings from our other work which are relevant to the successful delivery of all major projects.
- **Part Two** considers the oversight and assurance arrangements in place for major IT projects, including the identification and management of legacy systems.
- **Part Three** provides an overview of the departmental major IT portfolio as at March 2025.
- **Part Four** includes the case studies as listed in **paragraph 1.7**.
- **Part Five** considers the common themes and issues arising in the delivery of major IT projects.

A number of public bodies have a role to play in the commissioning and delivery of major IT projects in Northern Ireland

1.9 Individual departments are responsible and accountable for the commissioning, delivery, and management of major IT projects under their responsibility. They will work with a range of other bodies that have responsibilities for the policy, strategy and guidance on procurement and project delivery in Northern Ireland. The roles and responsibilities of the bodies involved are summarised below.

Departments and arm's length bodies (ALBs)

- Individual departments and ALBs are the key commissioning, delivery and management agents for their respective major IT projects.

The Department of Finance (DoF)

- DoF, as well as maintaining responsibility for managing its own projects, has a central role in providing guidance on and facilitation of the Gateway review process which provides Senior Responsible Owners and Accounting Officers with assurance on the progress of their major projects (see **paragraph 2.5**).
- DoF's 'Better Business Cases NI' provides guidance on expenditure appraisal, evaluation, approval and management of policies, programmes and projects within the public sector.

DoF Supply Division

- DoF (through its Supply Division) is required to approve the expenditure set out in project business cases where departments intend to incur expenditure on:
  - IT projects over £5 million; and
  - other capital projects involving over £5 million central government expenditure unless other departmental specific delegations allow.

(Note: at the time of this report these thresholds were under review.)

Construction and Procurement Delivery (CPD)

- Provides policy advice on the NI Executive's Procurement Policy to Northern Ireland departments and ALBs.
- Assist its clients with preliminary market engagement with relevant suppliers and industry bodies.
- Provides best practice guidance. For example, the Sourcing Toolkits applies the themes contained within the Cabinet Office's Sourcing Playbook guidance to procurements in Northern Ireland, with the aim of improving commercial focus.
- The Commercial Delivery Group (CDG) within DoF is working to develop the NICS Project Delivery profession alongside leading and championing project delivery across all NICS departments.

Centres of Procurement Expertise (CoPE)

- Public bodies rely on the specialist skills and specific market knowledge of staff within Centres of Procurement Expertise (CoPEs) to ensure that procurement processes are designed to achieve the best possible outcomes and comply with all relevant legislation and public policy objectives. There are nine CoPEs across the public sector in Northern Ireland.

Previous reports highlighted areas for improvement in the delivery of all major projects

1.10 In June 2020 our update report on the LandWeb Project found that poor strategic planning by DoF gave rise to a series of extensions to its service contract and that mechanisms were not put in place to secure value for money such as benchmarking, market testing and open book accounting. The continuous need for contract extensions remains an issue across the current major IT portfolio. (See **paragraphs 3.10-3.11**).

1.11 Our November 2020 report on Capacity and Capability in the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) noted that many specialist activities in the NICS, such as project management and contract management, are carried out by general service staff without specific skills or qualifications. The report concluded that more needs to be done to prioritise the identification and development of the skills, knowledge and experience which are key to the delivery of modern public services. It is extremely concerning that issues with capacity and capability across the NICS remain and continue to impact on the successful delivery of major IT projects. It is essential that the right people, with the right skills, are in place from the outset of a project. This must be addressed with urgency. (See **paragraphs 5.16-5.26**).

1.12 In April 2023, our report on Public Procurement in Northern Ireland examined the arrangements in place to ensure the overall effectiveness of procurement across the public sector. The report acknowledged recent action taken to improve how procurement works including: the reconstitution of the Procurement Board with a new membership; the development of new procurement policies, including social value; and changes to the training and guidance available to public sector staff involved in procurement with new commercial training and new toolkit guidance introduced. However, we concluded that the structures and arrangements to provide leadership, governance and accountability in public sector procurement are not working effectively.

1.13 In June 2023, we reported on the Northern Ireland Food Animal Information System, a project within the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs designed to replace the legacy Animal Public Health Information System (APHIS) system, the contract for which initially expired in 2007. At each stage there were significant delays requiring contract extensions totalling 18 years to ensure continuity of service. The process to replace the system did not start until a year after contract expiration and took eight years before the contract was awarded in 2016. The new NIFAIS system was expected to be fully implemented and operational by December 2018 but there were further delays, with NIFAIS now expected to be fully operational from December 2025. This major IT project is included within the departmental portfolio at **Appendix 2.** Our report highlighted some key issues and lessons which are applicable to all major IT projects:

- **Succession planning** - a strategy for replacing a computer system (or service) was not established well in advance of the expiry of current contractual arrangements.
- **Intelligent Customer** - the need for the correct expertise to identify business needs and to evaluate proposals from suppliers; and sufficient experience of the competitive dialogue procurement process.
- **Demonstrating commitment** - The Department took decisive action on the results of the 2019 Gateway Review. This was an important factor in re-building confidence amongst the key stakeholders. However, earlier intervention at a senior level in the Department may have prevented the project from drifting into failure in the first place.

- **Team resources** - The Project team should have the right skills, experience and capacity to manage the project.
- **Partnership** - A shared commitment and constructive co-operation was essential to advancing the project's prospects.
- **Flexibility** - Being prepared to stop, re-evaluate and proceed with a different approach is often overlooked in favour of pressing on with added vigour when projects don't go to plan.
- **Finances** - internal costs escalated, along with the continued costs of supporting the legacy system and the business risks this posed to the Department and its customers.
- The **lost opportunity of utilising scarce staff time** on other departmental work and **unrealised benefits of having a modern system in place for all its stakeholders**, represents very poor value for money.

1.14 Most recently, our report on Major Capital Projects in February 2024 which followed up on our previous report in December 2019 concluded that fundamental reforms are needed to the commissioning and delivery system for major capital projects. The report found that capacity and capability issues remain a risk to the successful delivery of projects, including issues with recruitment and retention both within the NICS as a whole but also within project teams over the life of a project, with a lack of expertise at the early stages impacting on project specifications, costings and timetables.

Part Two:

The strategic oversight and assurance of major IT projects and legacy IT systems

Part Two: The strategic oversight and assurance of major IT projects and legacy IT systems

Internal reporting arrangements for major programmes and projects vary across departments

2.1 In Northern Ireland, departments are separate legal entities under the direction of their Minister and responsibility for the delivery of all projects, including major IT projects, rests with individual Senior Responsible Officers (SROs), the Permanent Secretary and Minister.

2.2 Across individual departments, reporting arrangements vary in terms of frequency and nature, but overall, the scrutiny of major programmes and projects by individual Accounting Officers and Boards has increased in recent years. Revised policy and guidance on best practice in project delivery has included the establishment of Departmental Portfolio, Programme and Project Offices (P3Os). P3Os are intended to ensure visibility, and provide support for governance, oversight and reporting on programme/project delivery and assurance. A P3O forum assists departments to share best practice, develop learning, support the project delivery function and strengthen reporting.

2.3 DoF guidance suggests that a P3O will mature over time and services provided should grow as staff skills and experience develop. A mature P3O should aim to provide support across the following areas:

- **Governance** – support for governance through scrutiny and challenge, maximising return on programme/project investment through oversight of delivery and risk.
- **Transparency** – relevant, accurate and timely data and information (single-source) to support decision making.
- **Delivery support** – helping programme and project SROs, managers and teams to do the right things and to do them in alignment with overarching policy and best practice.
- **Reusability** – embedding best practice, establishing standards, sharing knowledge and lessons learned.

2.4 Whilst every Northern Ireland department has a P3O (or equivalent) how they are resourced, their role, maturity and the extent of support they provide varies across departments, depending on the skills and experience of the P3O team and the size of the portfolio of programmes or projects within the department.

Recommendation 1

In the next 12 months, each department should undertake a review of the maturity and adequacy of the support provided by its Portfolio, Programme and Project Offices (P3Os). The review should determine the impact and value of having a P3O and identify areas for improvement. DoF should drive the completion of these reviews and report the outcomes, including recommendations for improvement, to the NICS Board.

All programmes and projects valued over £5 million are required to engage with the Gateway review process

2.5 The Commercial Delivery Group (CDG) within DoF is responsible for facilitating Gateway™ Reviews and other assurance processes across NICS departments and their ALBs. The Gateway review process is a series of independent peer reviews undertaken at key stages of a programme or project lifecycle. It is an assurance mechanism designed to provide an objective view of the ability to deliver on time and to budget and provide assurance that programmes and projects can progress successfully to the next stage. Engagement with the Gateway review process is mandatory within all public bodies (excluding local councils) for all programmes and projects valued at £5 million and above. It is important to note that it is complementary to, and not a replacement for, internal assurance processes within departments and project teams.

2.6 The first step is the completion by the programme/project team of a Risk Potential Assessment (RPA). Following revised guidance issued in November 2023, programmes and projects which are assessed as high risk will be subject to the Gateway review process until programme/project closure. (Prior to the change in guidance all medium risk programmes and projects were also subject to the Gateway review process). Whilst not mandated, departments can choose to continue to use the Gateway review process for medium or low risk programmes and projects. Guidance recommends that all low and medium risk projects have an internal peer review carried out by someone independent from the project team.

2.7 The Gateway review process is anchored to the five-case business model and seeks to examine programmes and projects at key decision points. The process emphasises early review for maximum added value. Gateway review reports will give the programme/project a Stage Gate Assessment (red, amber or green) and recommend the date the next assurance review should take place. See **Appendix 3** for further details.

There is central reporting to the NICS Board on the assurance status for major programmes and projects

2.8 Since June 2022, a report on major projects, including IT projects, has been brought to the NICS Board every six months. The reports received by the NICS Board are based on assurance reporting and include the latest gateway assurance RAG status (red, amber, green) and the latest highlight report status (this is a standard template developed by DoF and used by project teams to record their internal assessment of progress twice a year) for Major programmes and projects that were categorised as high risk following completion of the initial RPA. In January 2025, 12 of the 56 major programmes and projects categorised as high risk (almost 20 per cent) were major IT projects.

2.9 The reporting arrangement to the NICS Board does not add scrutiny or challenge, as accountability rests with individual departments, but it was intended to increase transparency and identify common themes or issues in projects. There is little evidence to date as to the impact of this reporting arrangement.

The most recent NICS ICT strategy ended in 2021 and has not been evaluated

2.10 The NICS ICT Strategy 2017-21 aimed to deliver better, high quality public services through the use of modern IT. The strategy was to provide direction for investment across government and was to be managed and driven by a new Strategic Design Authority. It included goals to reduce the burden of legacy software by moving away from using out-of-date or redundant software and further reduce dependency upon aging legacy systems. However, DoF told us that due to budget constraints and each department being accountable for their individual major IT projects, a Strategic Design Authority was not established, and the strategy was not fully implemented. There was no evaluation of the NICS ICT Strategy.

2.11 Whilst there is an acceptance by departments that a more strategic approach to supporting digital delivery is needed, there is currently no NICS-wide IT strategy, and we were told there is no authority to mandate the implementation and delivery of a NICS IT strategy across departments. Whilst we recognise that each individual department is a separate legal entity, they must find ways to work and plan collectively to: establish priorities for investment and the delivery of efficiencies; make the best use of resources including skills; better understand the interdependencies and risks across IT systems both within departments and across the NICS; and ensure compatibility and synergies in the IT solutions.

There is no consistent approach to collating data on IT systems across departments

2.12 We found that there is no consistent process in place to identify, manage and report on IT systems, or to appraise each system and set priorities for new or replacement systems. Whilst all departments had some form of register for their IT systems, there was considerable variation in terms of what was included on the registers and a lack of clarity and consistency as to how the information was used for reporting, decision-making and strategic planning purposes.

2.13 Accurate financial information and regular monitoring are essential to support informed decision-making. However, we were unable to ascertain the cost of IT systems across departments and their ALBs as there was little information readily available on the annual costs of IT systems and costs to date.

2.14 Departments have arrangements in place to look ahead and identify IT systems and applications which need replaced, upgraded or for which the contract is due to expire. This forward look was usually 6-12 months into the future. However, we found that on average, it takes almost six and a half years for a major IT project to be designed, procured, implemented and become business-as-usual across the NICS. There needs to be a much greater focus on succession planning to enable all options to be appropriately considered – and thereby avoid contract extensions being the only option that can be pursued due to time pressures and the need for continuity of service. (See **paragraphs 3.10-3.11** in **Part Three** of this report).

The majority of the current major IT programmes and projects in the departmental portfolios are to replace legacy IT systems

2.15 Twenty-four of the current major IT programmes and projects in the departmental portfolios are to replace legacy IT systems. Whilst these systems served their purpose effectively when first implemented, they can over time present challenges and risks. According to the Central Digital and Data Office (CDDO), indicators that a system is considered as legacy include:

- Software out of support
- Expired vendor contracts
- Too few people with required knowledge and skills
- Inability to meet current or future business needs
- Unsuitable hardware
- Known security vulnerabilities
- Recent problems/downtime

2.16 In 2022, the UK Government published Transforming for a digital future: 2022 to 2025 roadmap for digital and data which included a commitment to define and identify all 'red-rated' legacy systems through an agreed cross-government framework and put agreed remediation plans in place. Following this the CDDO developed the Legacy IT Risk Assessment Framework which is a tool for identifying legacy IT assets and those which are classed as 'red-rated' systems (the highest category of risk). The Framework provides a structured approach for evaluating and prioritising the risks associated with outdated IT systems within UK government departments and enables informed decision-making. All UK government Ministerial departments are mandated to provide all their legacy IT assessments to the CDDO each year, thereby ensuring that the government has an accurate overview of the state of legacy IT in UK government. In Northern Ireland there is no such overview, either centrally or for each individual department. DoF told us that a key challenge in addressing legacy from a central perspective is that responsibility rests with each individual department, and there is no central responsibility or mandate.

Conclusion

2.17 More needs to be done to strengthen the framework for the strategic oversight and assurance of major IT projects, including planned projects and current IT systems. There is a lack of strategic planning for major IT projects across departments, including a lack of readily available information on the cost of IT systems. The previous NICS IT strategy ended in 2021. It was not fully implemented and has not been evaluated. There is currently no NICS-wide IT strategy and were told there is no authority to mandate the implementation and delivery of a NICS IT strategy across departments.

2.18 Legacy IT has a number of potential risks including higher maintenance costs, limited scalability, reduced agility, increased susceptibility to cyber threats, and difficulties in integrating with newer, more advanced systems. It is essential that the NICS gathers and maintains robust data to identify and manage the risks associated with IT systems and that all major IT projects are prioritised and planned according to strategic importance. Proper planning is essential to make the best use of limited resources and to mitigate the challenges presented by multiple IT systems reaching end of life at the same time.

Recommendation 2

We recommend that all departments and ALBs establish a rigorous framework to identify legacy IT systems, and those soon to become legacy, and assess the risks associated with the systems. This assessment should be used to drive the prioritisation of investment decisions and enable risk-based succession planning to manage and maintain, or to replace, systems well in advance of current contract expiry. This is essential to deliver efficiency savings and ensure value for money.

Recommendation 3

A NICS-wide IT strategy should be put in place within the next 12 months. It must be collectively owned by all NICS departments and applied across the NICS to drive consistency in approach, including the application of common standards, and deliver more compatible systems which drive cost efficiencies and assist in delivering on the public service transformation ambitions of the Programme for Government.

Recommendation 4

Departments must ensure that there is accurate and timely contract management and cost information available to enable regular monitoring and reporting and to support decision-making by the relevant governance mechanisms.

Part Three:

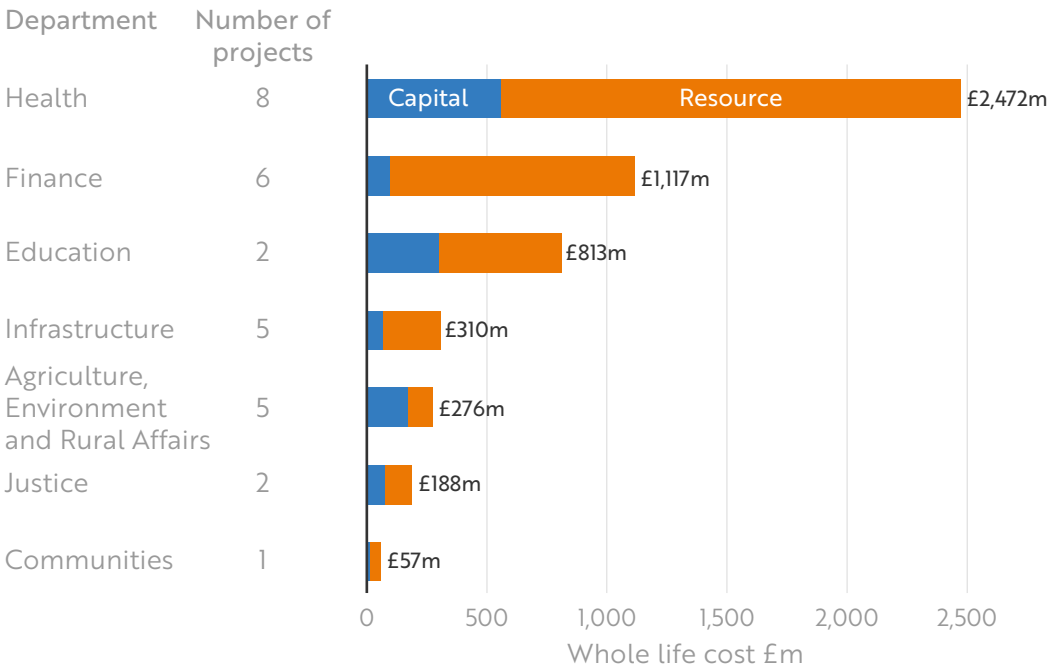
The major IT projects portfolio in Northern Ireland government departments

Part Three: The major IT projects portfolio in Northern Ireland government departments

There were 29 projects in the major IT projects portfolio at March 2025, at an estimated cost of £5.2 billion

3.1 The major IT projects portfolio, as provided by departments, includes details of 29 projects with an original estimated whole life cost of £3.9 billion (see **Appendix 2**). Departments told us that the scope and final solution of IT projects can change considerably as projects evolve, particularly during the design and development phases. The latest estimate of total whole life costs has increased by £1.3 billion to £5.2 billion, an increase of almost a third. The encompass programme in Health accounts for the majority (£947 million) of the increase in estimated costs. Of the 29 projects, 26 are considered by departments to be IT-enabled projects. **Figure 1** shows the number of projects and the estimated whole life cost across the NICS departments. The majority of whole life cycle costs in IT projects are resource costs which account for approximately 75 per cent of estimated costs.

Figure 1: Departments' Major IT projects portfolio for the period 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2025



Source: NIAO analysis of information provided by departments summarised at Appendix 2

3.2 The Department of Health (DoH) has the greatest number of programmes/projects (eight), accounting for almost half the total whole life cost (£2.5 billion) across the portfolio. The majority of this cost (£1.9 billion) relates to the encompass programme (see **Case Study 1**).

3.3 The DoF portfolio is the second largest by size and value. It includes six programmes/projects at a combined expected total cost of £1.1 billion, three of which have been included as case studies in this report:

- Integr8 (see **Case Study 2**)
- Land & Property Services NOVA Revenue and Benefits project; and
- Land & Property Services NOVA Land Registration project (see **Case Study 3**).

The Integr8 and NOVA programmes account for £1 billion – just over 90 per cent of the total whole life cost in the DoF portfolio.

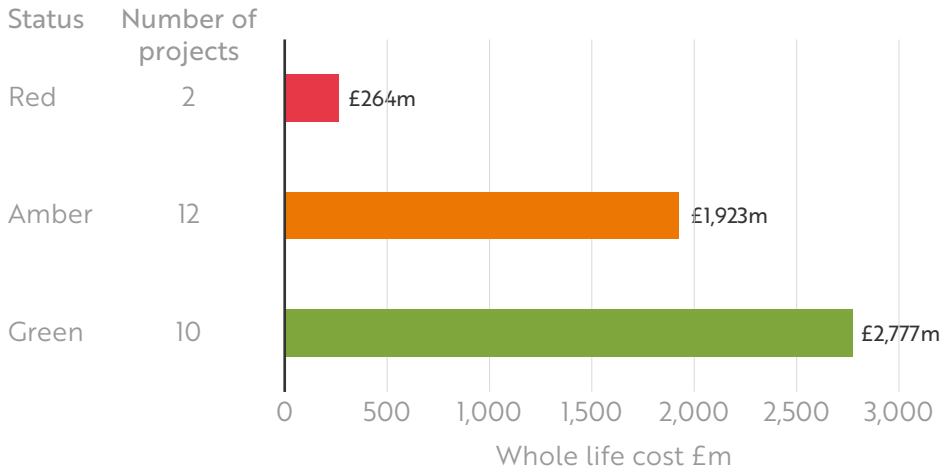
3.4 Whilst there are only two programmes/projects in the Department of Education's portfolio, it is the third largest portfolio by value at £812.9 million. Both programmes/projects are the responsibility of the Education Authority (EA), with the largest being the Education Information Solutions Programme (EdIS) with an expected total whole life cost of £734.4 million (see **Case Study 4**).

3.5 Almost all of the projects in the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) portfolio (four out of five projects) are the responsibility of its ALBs. The fifth project is the Planning Portal. It was fully implemented in July 2023 at a total cost of £43.1 million (see **Case Study 5**).

The latest project team assessments show that the majority of the portfolio are facing significant issues

3.6 Based on the latest internal assessments completed by the project teams, the majority of live projects, 14 projects or 58 per cent, with a value of almost £2.2 billion, in the major IT projects portfolio have a Red or Amber RAG status as shown in **Figure 2**. Half of the live projects have an Amber RAG status, defined as "*successful delivery of the programme or project to time, cost and quality appears feasible but significant issues already exist requiring management attention; these appear resolvable at this stage and, if addressed promptly, should not present a cost or schedule overrun.*"

Figure 2: Major IT projects portfolio by current RAG status



Source: NIAO analysis of information provided by departments summarised at Appendix 2

On average, it takes almost six and a half years for a major IT project to be designed, procured, implemented and become business-as-usual across the NICS

3.7 For the purposes of this report, we have categorised the major IT projects into lifecycle stages as follows:

Stage 1 – Initiation - This stage involves scoping and discovery work with stakeholders to clarify the requirement and need. Project structures are established, and a Strategic Outline Case (SOC) may be required depending on the size of the project, in accordance with Better Business Cases NI. The initiation stage is completed when the Outline Business Case (OBC) is drafted and approved.

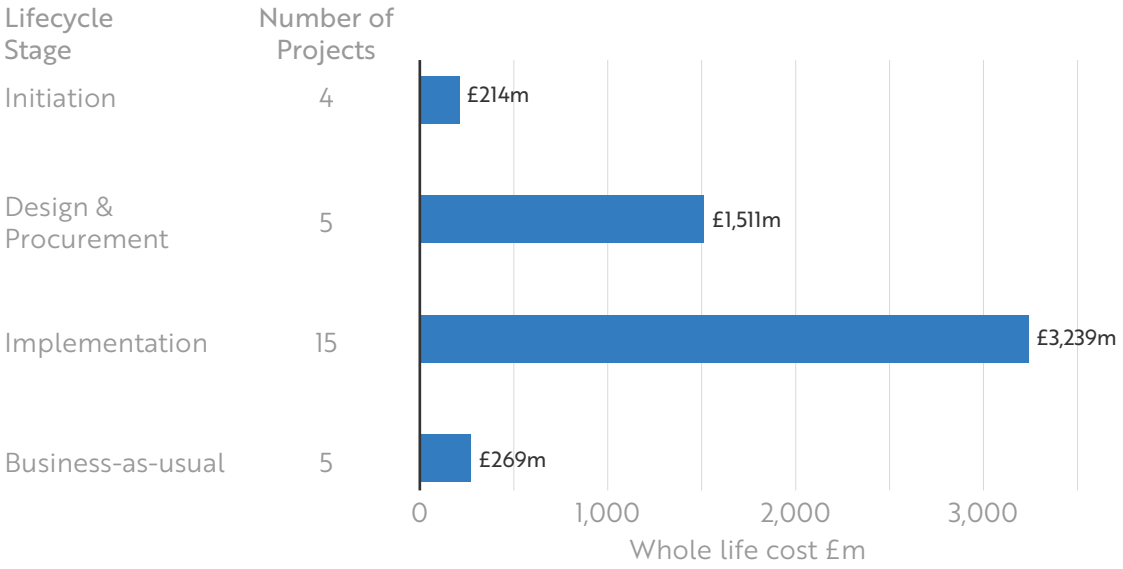
Stage 2 – Design and Procurement – detailed planning and procurement completed with contract signed.

Stage 3 –Implementation, Delivery and Transition - system configured, testing complete, initial training, and ready to go live.

Stage 4 – Business-as-usual – the service is up and running and has become business-as-usual.

3.8 A summary of the portfolio information provided by departments shows that the majority of major IT projects are at Stage 3 (Implementation) of the life cycle (see **Figure 3**).

Figure 3: Major IT projects portfolio by lifecycle stage



Source: NIAO analysis of information provided by departments summarised at Appendix 2

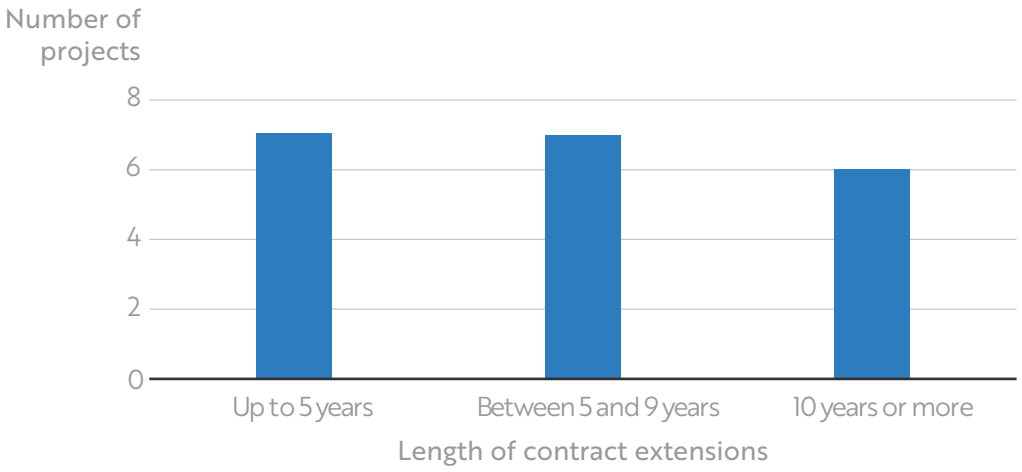
3.9 Based on the information provided by departments, from OBC approval to a new system becoming business-as-usual is an average of 77 months – almost 6 and a half years:

- The design and procurement stage (i.e. from OBC approval to contract award) takes on average 28 months (ranging from 4 months to 114 months).
- It then takes on average a further 49 months from contract award for the new system to be fully implemented and business-as usual (ranging from 4 months to 112 months).

Continued contract extensions are too often a necessity due to a lack of strategic planning

3.10 The majority of projects included within the major IT projects portfolio are to replace an existing system and for almost all those projects the legacy contract has been extended multiple times to maintain continuity of service while a new system is delivered. On average across the portfolio, legacy contracts were extended by almost eight years. Whilst we recognise that not all legacy systems will require replacement at contract end, and there can be valid business decisions to extend contracts and maintain existing systems, many of the extensions were a necessity as opposed to a strategically planned choice. **Figure 4** summarises the contract extensions. The longest contract extension was for 18 years and relates to the Northern Ireland Food Animal Information System which was the subject of a separate NIAO report.

Figure 4: Summary of contract extensions across the portfolio to ensure continuity of provision for legacy IT systems while replacement IT projects are being implemented



NOTE
The number of projects included in Figure 4 above is 20. This differs from the total number of major IT projects in the overall portfolio as not all 29 projects included in Appendix 2 replace existing systems/contracts. In addition, some replace significant numbers of legacy systems and details of each extension was not collated.

Source: NIAO analysis of information provided by departments

3.11 Continued contract extensions of this nature, well in excess of the original contract expiry, and use of legacy systems expose the NICS to numerous risks including:

- business failure from its dependence on old technology;
- breach of procurement legislation and inability to demonstrate value for money of the contract;
- increased costs for maintaining old technology;
- reduced agility and difficulty integrating with newer, more advanced systems;
- unrealised benefits of having a modern system in place for all its stakeholders; and
- increased susceptibility to cyber threats.

Part Four:

Case studies from the major IT projects portfolio

Part Four: Case studies from the major IT projects portfolio

4.1 We conducted a high-level review of five programmes/projects. Each of the programmes and projects has been impacted by the uncertain operating environment including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, inflationary increases, long periods without Ministers, systemic capacity and capability issues, and the ongoing difficulties presented by both single year budgets and delays in budgets being agreed.

4.2 Each of the projects included as a case study replaces a legacy system(s). We found that there were delays in all cases in moving from the legacy system to a new system, primarily due to a lack of strategic planning, the pace of planning, and capacity and capability issues. Some projects also experienced delays due to procurement and post contract award issues. The contracts for the legacy systems have been extended well beyond the original intended life. **Figure 5** summarises the contract extensions and the costs which are in excess of £573 million.

Figure 5: Length and cost of contract extensions for the legacy systems associated with the case studies

Programme/ project	Expiration of original contract	Extended to	Length of extensions	Value/Cost of extensions[1] £million
EdIS	March 2017	March 2027	10 years	£312.9
Planning Portal	September 2014	December 2022	6.25 years	£14.2
LPS NOVA[2]: Land Registration	July 2019	July 2028	9 years	£76.7
LPS NOVA: Revenue and Benefits	January 2013	January 2030	17 years	£42.4
Integr8	HR Connect: March 2021 Account NI: March 2018	HR Connect: March 2027 Account NI: December 2027	6 years Further extension required 9.75 years	£86.6 £40.0
Encompass	Replaces approximately 45 systems. Cost details of all extensions have not been collated. However, the cost of the legacy systems per the FBC is approximately £6.5 million a year.			

Source: NIAO analysis of information provided by departments.

Notes:

1. The value of the contract extension relates to the contractual value increase agreed in the contract modification/extension process and is the value up to which the Department can spend during the extension. The actual cost incurred may be lower.

2. The LPS NOVA programme includes three projects for the main line of business systems (Revenue and Benefits; Land Registrations; and Valuations) in addition to an Integration project. In this report we have focused on the two largest projects in the programme – Revenue and Benefits project, and Land Registration project.

Case Study 1 – Department of Health – encompass programme

The encompass programme is key to supporting Health and Social Care (HSC) transformation. The encompass programme represents whole-system transformation and modernisation, enabled by IT infrastructure. It involves developing a single, real time and up-to date digital care record for every patient in Northern Ireland which is accessible to all HSC primary and secondary care staff and patients.

It will fundamentally reshape clinical workflows, business processes, and service delivery models across all Trusts and is the largest change management and digital health initiative ever undertaken in Northern Ireland.

Overview

Background

Initial pre-procurement activity on a single electronic patient record system commenced in early 2015. Business Services Organisation (BSO) assumed responsibility for overseeing progress. In November 2017 BSO developed a procurement strategy for what had become known as the encompass programme.

The successful design and implementation of encompass is critical to supporting much needed transformation of the local HSC sector and to enable it to work more efficiently and effectively. The encompass programme involves using cutting edge digital technology to develop a single, real time and up-to-date digital care record for every patient in Northern Ireland which will ultimately be securely accessible to all HSC primary and secondary care staff and the patients themselves. A linked Patient Portal will also allow patients and service users to book appointments, review test results and letters and communicate with HSC care providers. It is the single largest and most ambitious digital project ever delivered within the local HSC sector and will also incorporate social care.

Reliance on legacy systems

HSC staff have long been dependent on various electronic and paper-based legacy record systems. Many of these systems are close to being obsolete. They are expensive to maintain and present major upgrading and interfacing challenges.

Encompass was originally intended to replace around 70 HSC patient legacy systems. The legacy systems range from small systems unique to individual trusts to the Patient Administration System which has long been the principal software solution through which the five trusts have recorded, stored and viewed patient information. The encompass OBC and FBC documents both referred to the urgent need to replace these legacy systems to avoid their catastrophic failure. Due to the number of legacy systems being replaced we have not collated data on contract extensions required to maintain continuity of service.

The Department told us that further work in relation to data quality and clinical need for historical data, and the change in landscape from early planning to implementation, has meant that the number of main systems to be replaced reduced to 45 as the roll-out of encompass has progressed.

Some of the remaining legacy systems such as Healthcare in Prisons, Child Health Services and Children's Social Care, are scheduled for future integration into encompass and go-live by November 2025, February 2026 and December 2026. Other legacy systems will continue to run in parallel with encompass to meet specific diagnostic and clinical requirements, whilst others cannot be replaced as encompass does not fully replicate or replace certain customised functionalities.

Cost and timeframe

The estimated costs of delivering encompass have increased considerably since the initial 2017 OBC estimate of £982.5 million. The FBC Addendum in December 2022 estimated full programme costs of £1.95 billion. The latest available estimate of full programme costs is £1.93 billion.

The implementation was originally planned on a phased go-live approach across the Trusts, commencing in April 2022 in the South Eastern Trust and the Western Trust planned to be the last to go live in April 2024.

Current position

Go-live in the South Eastern, Belfast and Northern Trusts was achieved in November 2023, June 2024 and November 2024 respectively – approximately 19 months behind schedule. A combined go-live in the Southern and Western Trusts was achieved in May 2025, 20 months and 13 months behind schedule respectively.

While the roll-out of encompass was completed across all Trusts in May 2025, there remain a number of important components to be developed to enable the future integration of critical services including Children's Social Care, Healthcare in Prisons and Child Health Services. The timeframe for these future integrations is uncertain.

To date, none of the legacy systems replaced by encompass have been switched off and the costs of maintaining the legacy systems continue to be incurred. The cost of the legacy systems per the FBC is approximately £6.5 million a year.

The encompass Business Case did not include data archiving which is required to fully support the decommissioning of legacy systems. While the implementation of encompass facilitates the transition from 45 legacy systems, legacy system contracts are held by individual Trusts and BSO with Digital Health and Care NI commissioning and overseeing the data archiving programme. A mandate for the data archiving programme has recently been approved with anticipated costs of around £10 million. This aims to ensure that legacy system data remains accessible for clinical, legal, and audit purposes, whilst enabling the eventual decommissioning of legacy systems and replacement by encompass.

The target date for implementing a Centralised Archiving Solution is currently December 2028. Following data migration and validation, the target date for formally decommissioning legacy systems is March 2029.

Issues and Challenges

Progress at the programme initiation stage was slow

Initial pre-procurement activity on a single electronic patient record system commenced in early 2015 when a DoH working group began assessing how its development could be progressed. BSO then assumed responsibility for overseeing further progress and compiled a Strategic Outline Case in December 2015. It took almost a further two years (November 2017) before BSO developed a Procurement Strategy. An OBC for encompass was submitted in 2017 and approved in May 2018.

Procurement challenges and a sole supplier situation

In August 2018, following assessment of 12 Selection Questionnaires received from bidders, BSO shortlisted the four highest scoring bidders, the top two of which would be brought through to the next stage. Although the third placed bid was closely behind the second ranked bidder, BSO's stated intention had been to only shortlist two bidders to the final procurement stage, with its legal advisors considering that this would deliver more focused dialogue and better final bids. However, this also significantly risked undermining competitive tension if one of the two remaining bidders withdrew, which did subsequently happen when Supplier B (the bidder ranked second) withdrew from the procurement process on 25 February 2019.

Supplier B's withdrawal left BSO and DoH with major difficulties as a sole supplier situation had considerable potential to reduce the competitive tension previously present and undermine the value for money achievable. It was also significant because Supplier B had indicated it was trying to develop a fixed cost bid, which offered greater price certainty, and which had been adopted by BSO at an early stage as one of the Key Commercial Principles for encompass. The situation was further complicated as the procurement process was well advanced with BSO already having incurred major costs. Restarting the procurement process would bring additional expense, with no certainty of attracting new bidders.

After considering procurement and legal advice, DoH and BSO opted to enter final negotiations with the remaining sole supplier. In deciding to continue with sole supplier negotiations, DoH and BSO had taken steps to try and demonstrate that this could still deliver value for money, including obtaining assurance on the validity of the procurement process and over potential cost variables within the final tender. Around this time, BSO's legal advisers also concluded that the final tender represented a significant shift in the HSCNI's favour from Supplier A's original negotiating position and was at least as beneficial as could have been achieved from a multi-bidder situation.

The bid from the sole supplier was accepted and the contract was signed in May 2020.

It is important to acknowledge that DoH and BSO clearly had to make hard decisions when the sole supplier situation arose at a critical and advanced stage of the procurement and did take steps to try and demonstrate that value for money could still be achieved from this situation. However, Supplier B's withdrawal ultimately removed competitive tension from the process and potentially damaged the prospects of achieving best value. It is also difficult to see how anyone could definitively conclude that a single tender situation produced at least as beneficial an outcome as that achievable from a multi-bidder situation as the legal advisors could not be sure what Supplier B's final bid might have looked like.

The estimated costs of delivering encompass have increased significantly

The 2017 OBC estimated the costs of delivering encompass at £982.5 million.

Following acceptance of the final bid, BSO submitted the FBC to DoF in December 2019. Total cost estimates had risen by 64 per cent to £1.61 billion over a twelve-year period between 2019-20 and 2030-31.

BSO then continued working with the successful contractor to better understand the supplier methodology and the pathway for implementing encompass across the HSC sector. By late 2020, BSO had identified that the FBC had considerably under-estimated the costs of encompass. In early 2022, it recognised that costs would exceed approved FBC levels by more than 10 per cent, therefore further DoF approval of expenditure was required. An addendum document submitted to DoF in November 2022 outlined that total FBC costs would increase by £334.4 million (20.7 per cent) from £1.61 billion to £1.95 billion. DoF approved the FBC Addendum in December 2022.

The encompass contract was signed on a time and material basis rather than a fixed cost model

A key commercial principle which BSO had established for encompass had been to agree a fixed implementation price with the contractor to help bring price certainty. Supplier B had been working to try and compile a bid on this basis before it withdrew from the procurement process, and in final negotiations with BSO, Supplier A had also indicated its willingness to submit a fixed cost bid. However, BSO instead formed the view at this stage that a time and materials (T&M) model[1] would secure better value for money.

In explaining when and why its preferred option for implementation costs had changed from fixed price to a time and materials basis, BSO told us that Supplier A's approach to implementation costs had been consistent throughout the procurement and that the detailed information available to it on implementation costs against estimates provided it with sufficient oversight to help mitigate the risk of cost overruns. It also stated that it had negotiated heavily on payment profile during final negotiations, and that whilst Supplier A was willing to offer a fixed price it considered that the premium likely associated with this meant that a T&M model would secure better value. However, as BSO did not also request a fixed price quote for comparison purposes, it is difficult to meaningfully conclude that this would have been the case.

COVID-19 and capacity and capability constraints mean that go-live was behind schedule in all five HSC Trusts

Challenges emerged in late 2020, including the significant impact of COVID-19, and difficulties in recruiting the large numbers of people and skills sets required to progress implementation of the programme.

Go- live in the South Eastern, Belfast and Northern Trusts was delayed. To try and minimise overall delays, the encompass programme board decided to combine go-live at the Southern Trust and Western Trust by May 2025, rather than separately as initially planned. The position is summarised in the table below.

1 A time and materials contract is a legal agreement that sets costs based on the time and materials used by the contractor as a project or programme proceeds. This differs from a lump sum contract which is a fixed fee agreed before the work begins.

Milestone	Envisaged date in FBC	Actual date achieved/ scheduled date	Actual/ anticipated delay
South Eastern Trust go-live	April 2022	November 2023	19 months
Belfast Trust go-live	October 2022	June 2024	19 months
Northern Trust go-live	May 2023	November 2024	18 months
Southern Trust go-live	September 2023	May 2025	20 months
Western Trust go-live	April 2024	May 2025	13 months
Post-live and optimisation	Up to June 2026	August 2025 – September 2027	15 months

Key HSC performance information which was previously routinely generated has been heavily caveated since encompass went live

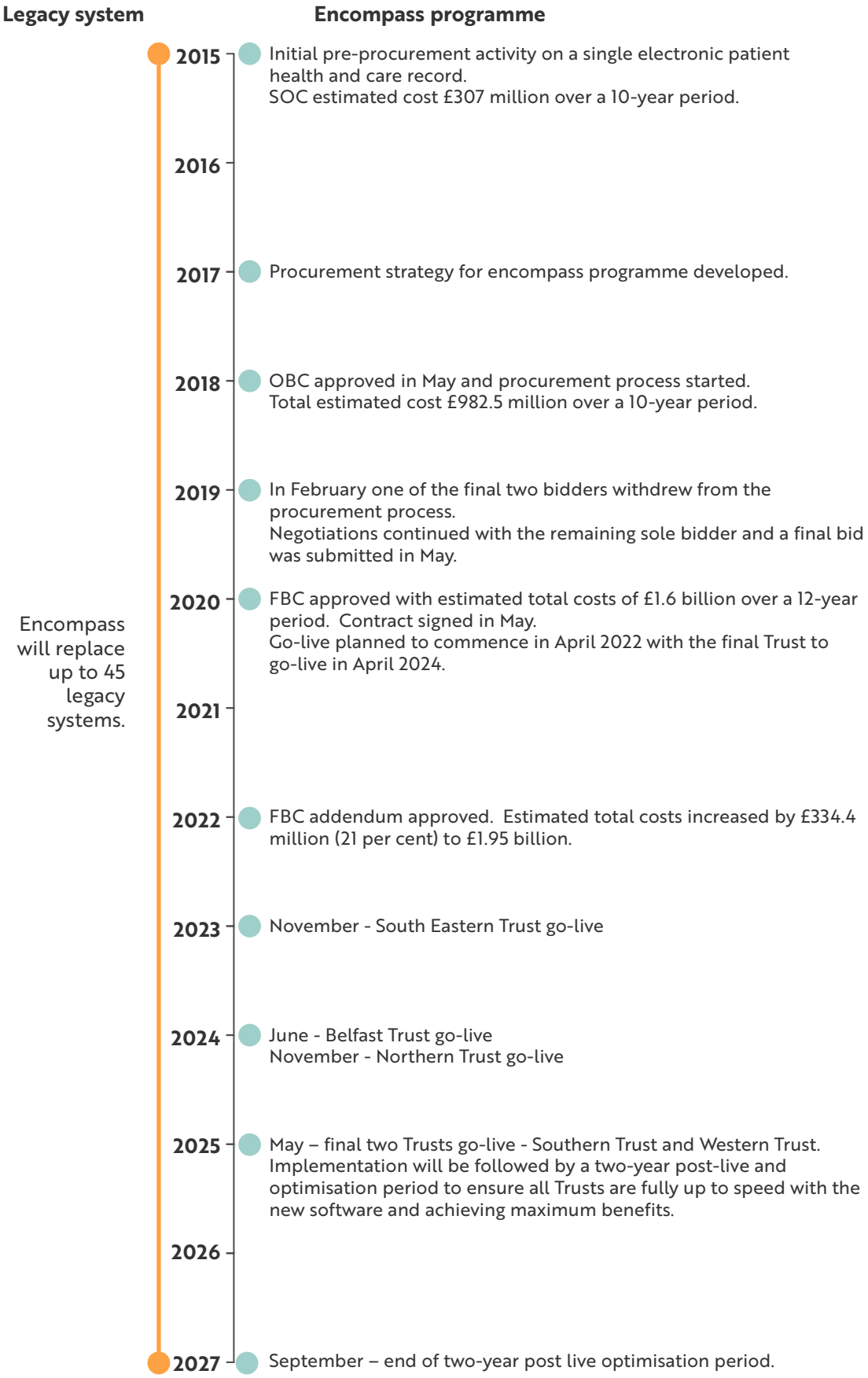
The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) has not yet been able to formally endorse the quality and robustness of data generated by encompass. Key performance data which was previously routinely available has been heavily caveated as 'provisional official statistics in development'. This includes information on the number of people waiting for outpatient assessment, inpatient care and diagnostic tests and associated waiting times, and performance against the three key HSC cancer care waiting time standards. DoH told us that while formal validation of encompass-generated data for official statistics is ongoing, Trusts continue to access and use a wide range of operational data to manage services.

DoH has been working closely with encompass stakeholders to achieve full and formal publication of this data but cannot yet provide a firm date. Until NISRA has been able to complete the required checks on data quality, any statistics which are published from encompass, will continue to be caveated. In addition, as encompass is further rolled out, the need to monitor, review and validate data initially produced across each Trust and to obtain NISRA assurance for this brings uncertainty over the extent to which non-availability of data will recur across other trusts, and how long this might endure.

Lessons to be shared

- The need to have the right people with the right skills in place in project teams.
- The importance of taking all possible steps to maintain competitive tensions throughout a procurement process. Particular caution should be exercised over only shortlisting two bids to final procurement stages.
- The need for a suitably detailed understanding of a programme/project to inform a robust FBC and cost and time estimates prior to contract signature.
- The need for a clear understanding of the nature, extent and costs of legacy systems to be replaced and a clear plan to achieve this.

Figure 6: Encompass programme timeline



Case Study 2 – Department of Finance – Integr8 programme

Integr8 is a central government IT-enabled transformation programme, led by the Department of Finance. It aims to transform how Finance and Human Resources (HR) shared services are delivered across the NICS and will replace the existing HR Connect and Account NI systems with a single cloud-based solution. It will also establish a new organisational structure within DoF to replace existing shared services provision for both.

Overview

Background

The Public Sector Shared Services Programme (PSSSP) was established in 2016 to examine the potential development of next generation HR, Payroll, Finance, IT and Procurement and Logistics shared services for all public sector organisations in Northern Ireland. The aim of the PSSSP was to look more strategically across traditional public sector boundaries at the potential to implement next generation shared services which provide efficient, cost-effective and high-quality services.

The Central Government Transformation Programme (CGTP) within DoF was established in 2018 in response to the recommendations of the PSSSP. The CGTP focused on transforming the future delivery of Finance, HR & Payroll services for central government bodies in Northern Ireland. The CGTP was rebranded to Integr8 in November 2021.

Integr8 is leading in the design and development of an integrated operating model. The scope includes procuring the following services:

- Integrated, cloud-based Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) solution.
- Systems implementation partner, known as Integr8 Delivery Partner (IDP).
- IT service management software.
- Managed service provision.
- Payroll Administrative Services (PAS).
- Client-side advisory support, known as Business Transformation Partner (BTP).

Each procurement will have a FBC. Each FBC submitted for approval will include updates on all key changes and developments since approval of the OBC, and the preceding approved FBC. The iterations will cumulatively provide the complete FBC for the programme once the procurements are completed.

Other key activities required to deliver the new operating model such as HR policy and delivery, are outside the scope of Integr8.

Contract extensions for legacy systems to maintain continuity of service

A significant driving force for the Programme was the need to replace the existing HR Connect and Account NI systems, which are increasingly outdated, expensive to sustain and no longer fit for purpose. The CGTP was established in September 2018. That is after the original contract expiration dates had passed for both HR Connect and Account NI.

The NIAO previously expressed concerns on the lack of progress in preparing for replacement Finance, HR and Payroll systems and in our annual audits highlighted the need to develop and agree concrete plans to ensure replacement services are procured and developed which are best fit for purpose and bring transformation.

The HR Connect contract was for 15 years to March 2021. It has been extended for six years until March 2027 to ensure continuity of service. The value of this extension is £86.6 million. It is anticipated that a further extension will be required.

The Account NI contract, awarded in 2006 for 12 years, has been extended for almost ten years until December 2027 to ensure continuity of service. The value of this extension is £40 million.

Cost and timeframe

OBC1 was approved in August 2021. The Business Transformation Partner (BTP) was appointed shortly afterwards to work alongside the internal Integr8 programme team to develop the future operating model, for both Finance and HR, and prepare for the launch of various procurements required to support the investment decision.

OBC included estimated costs of £294 million over the lifetime of the whole programme including the Integr8 programme team, replacement finance and HR systems, and associated contracts. The implementation date for Finance was expected to be October 2025, with HR and Payroll following a year later in October 2026.

Following programme reset and rebranding, OBC2 was approved in March 2023. The estimated total cost of the programme was unchanged, but implementation timescales were revised to May 2027 for Finance and November 2027 for HR and Payroll.

£93 million of the estimated overall costs reflect the cost incurred by DoF to deliver the bulk of the programme from 2022 until go-live in 2027-28 and includes: internal Integr8 programme staffing; BTP advisers; and the design/build/test elements of the technology solution (ERP) and the Integr8 Delivery Partner (IDP).

Current position

The contract was awarded for the enabling ERP technology in May 2024 for a period of 10 years with no extensions. In line with the Integr8 Procurement Strategy, a further two FBCs are required to support the investment decision for a Payroll Administrative Services contract and a Systems Implementation Partner.

The FBC for the Payroll Administrative Services contract is expected to be completed late 2026 or early 2027.

The FBC for the Systems Implementation Partner, known as the Integr8 Delivery Partner (IDP) is underway and is expected to be finalised subject to Gateway 3 in summer 2025. The contract is expected to be awarded by September 2025, and a final implementation plan will then be agreed.

The Department is planning for a phased roll-out of finance and HR services with all go-lives completed within an overall implementation period of 30 months from contract award and transitioning into steady-state business-as-usual by March 2028. This is dependent on the outworkings of the IDP procurement.

Issues and challenges

There were delays at the programme initiation stage and a Gateway review recommended a reset

Although the CGTP was established in September 2018, it was March 2020 before a Strategic Outline Case was prepared.

A Gateway review in May 2020 resulted in a very Red rating. The review found that the programme had made little progress and was not on course for successful delivery. It highlighted critical issues including:

- The principal governance mechanism, the programme board, was ineffective and not representative of functions/departments beyond DoF.
- Despite having been in existence for almost two years at that point, there was a lack of clarity on the scope of the programme, outcomes, the preferred approach and procurement route options.
- There were capacity and capability issues.

The Gateway review recommended that the programme be reset.

The Assurance of Action Plans Gateway review which followed in 2021 found there had been a robust and extensive response to all the recommendations made and the Delivery Confidence had improved to Amber.

There are ongoing capacity, capability and funding challenges

The programme has continued to face resourcing challenges. The 2020 Gateway review highlighted issues with capacity and capability as a result of resource constraints across the NICS and the impact of COVID-19. Particular areas of expertise considered to be lacking at that time included business change management, project management, communication, technical knowledge and business case development.

The recruitment, development and retention of suitably skilled and experienced team members continues to require ongoing focus. Challenges also include ensuring that the SRO is able to dedicate the time required by the programme.

Insufficient budget and funding uncertainty associated with in-year funding resulted in key activities having to be delayed and the need for replanning, changes to timelines and funding profiles. For example, delayed and reduced budget allocation meant some of the expert resources recruited to the internal team could not be retained in one financial year, but then a round of re-hiring was needed in the following financial year. Progress on the programme had to be significantly slowed down between February and December 2023 due to insufficient funding. This involved the Business Transformation Partner being stood down and recruitment for the internal team being paused during this period. This impacted on the programme in terms of cost and delayed timescales.

Resourcing issues outside the Integr8 team also present risks including a lack of capacity across other departments to provide subject matter experts to engage with the Integr8 team, and the ability of departments to manage the additional work that programme implementation will bring along with delivery of business-as-usual.

Driving standardisation across multiple organisations will require significant engagement, communication and change management

Deviations from the standard processes in the procured solution will incur change costs and will likely be more costly to maintain. Therefore, the Programme has recognised the need to drive standardisation across integrated services to maximise the benefits of the cloud-based ERP solution, and 'Adopt not Adapt' is a key element within the Programme's design principles. This is reflected in cost estimates which assume that there will be limited changes to the core 'off the shelf' product.

The Programme has undertaken stakeholder engagement including co-design workshops with stakeholders, established a change network, and a change management team is in place. However, change can be met with resistance and there remains a risk that the potential transformational nature of the Integr8 programme is not fully accepted by all users. Continued engagement and change management will be essential to help maintain buy-in.

The transformational nature of the programme requires a collaborative programme governance structure

Governance issues originally identified in 2020 were addressed as part of the programme reset. As the programme has progressed there has been a need to further change and strengthen the governance framework. There are significant interdependencies between the Integr8 programme, HR and Finance that must be managed. In 2024 the Gateway review found that the programme and delivery within supporting functions across the NICS were not operating in an integrated way and wider HR delivery partner representation on the Integr8 Programme Board was needed. The programme team agreed there was a need to align plans across the Interg8 Programme, HR and Finance and that an integrated approach to governance, planning and delivery needed to be implemented. This required enabling action and support from the DoF Permanent Secretary. DoF told us that action has been taken to strengthen a more integrated governance structure.

We also note that Integr8 has made use of 'critical friends' and sought to learn from others. This engagement includes the appointment of two critical friends to the Programme Board from UK Government, who have significant experience of ERP technology-enabled change.

Annual savings of £14 million are expected but the delivery of wider benefits is outside the control of the Integr8 programme team

Benefits, including efficiency savings, were identified in the OBC, with anticipated savings of £14 million per year across service delivery for Finance and HR based on more efficient delivery across departments. DoF advised that the annual savings may improve when change has been fully implemented.

In addition to the benefits that can be realised through the new Integr8 service and solution, including the opportunity to reduce overall effort and cost to run Finance functions, there are significant potential benefits to be gained through leveraging synergies between Finance and HR which are currently being missed due to the disaggregated nature of delivery, and improvements in the effectiveness and user experience across both Finance and HR delivery. However, these wider benefits have not been quantified.

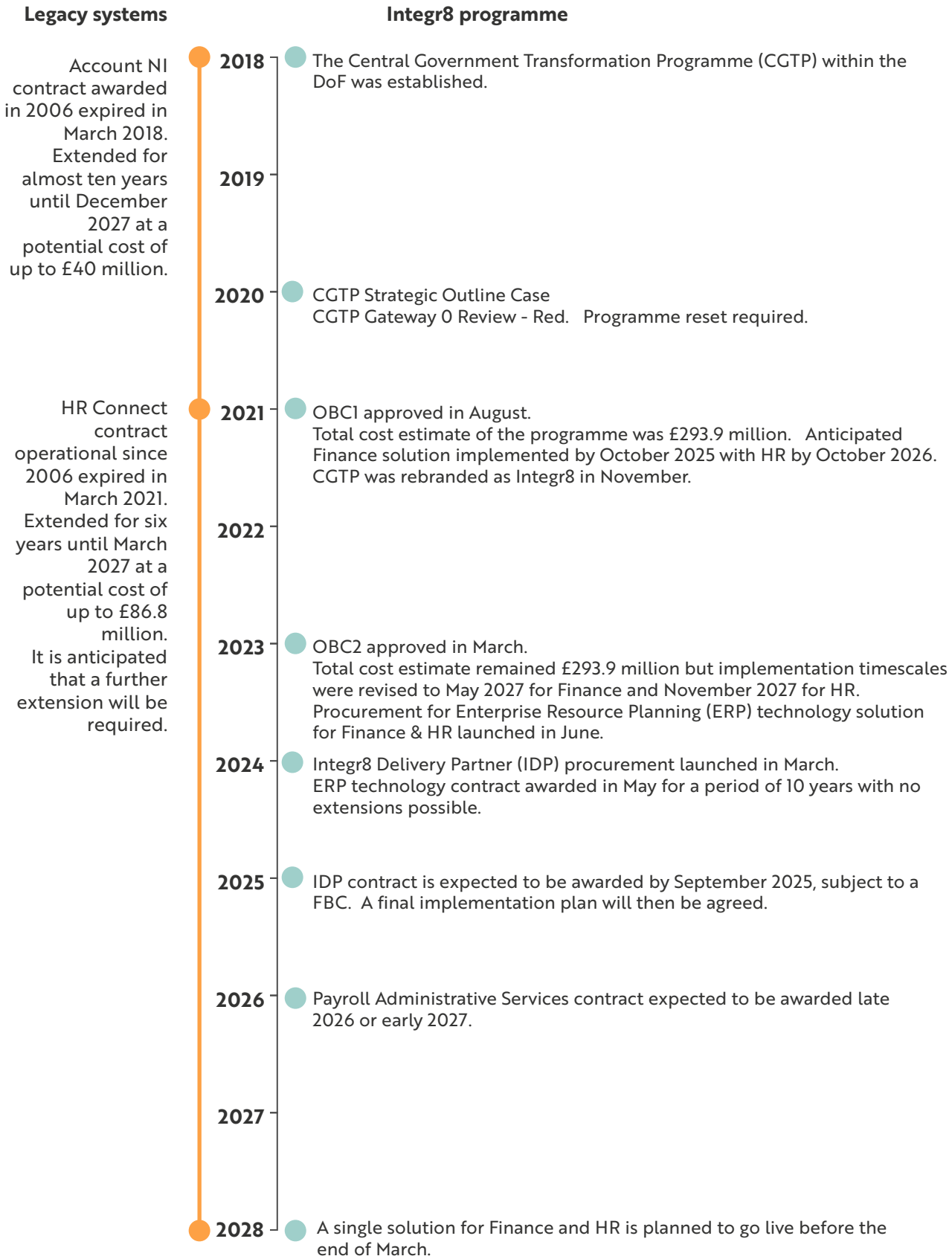
These wider changes, many of which will support Integr8 delivery, fall under the remit of the relevant NICS finance and HR functions and as such, do not form part of the scope of the Integr8 Programme.

In order to ensure that all benefits are realised and value for money is maximised over the lifetime of the contracts it is important that mechanisms are in place to identify, monitor and report on these wider benefits across NICS departmental finance teams and HR. DoF told us that strategic governance mechanisms are being established by Integr8 to manage this relationship and allow the impacts from these wider changes to be factored into the Integr8 benefits taken forward for measurement.

Lessons to be shared

- The importance of having the right people with the right skills throughout the programme/project lifecycle.
- The scope of a programme/project needs to be clearly determined and set at the project initiation stage, along with clearly articulating the intended outcomes/benefits and how they will be achieved.
- The importance of communication throughout IT-enabled change and transformation programmes.
- Need to ensure appropriate governance arrangements are in place and change as necessary throughout the programme life cycle.
- The impact of funding uncertainty for long-term programmes/projects including delays and increased overall costs.
- The importance of ensuring a benefits realisation plan, management strategy, and governance arrangements are in place to manage the collective set of benefits associated with a programme or project.

Figure 7: Integr8 programme timeline



Case Study 3 - Land & Property Services' NOVA programme

The NOVA programme was established to replace multiple legacy systems for revenue and benefits, land registrations and valuation assessments. The aim of the programme is to provide a Digital First approach based on the needs of LPS customers with a focus on improving the customer experience and optimising service integration.

Overview

Background

Land & Property Services (LPS) was formed in 2009 from a number of legacy agencies, each with its own IT systems. Those systems have remained in place, largely unchanged, and are at the end of their useful lives. LPS is currently working with a mix of ageing and overly complex business systems, which were designed and implemented in isolation from each other; designed with limited automation and are labour intensive; provide a slower service by comparison with similar systems in other jurisdictions.

The NOVA programme, established in 2017, aims to transform how LPS services are delivered. The NOVA programme Business Case was approved in October 2018. The programme Business Case was intended to provide the strategic context for all subsequent investments and facilitate the production of individual project business cases. The programme Business Case was to be maintained as a live document and updated as each NOVA project progressed.

It was subsequently agreed between the then Programme Director and the Departmental Economist that spend would be tracked against the individual project business cases and the Programme Business Case was not updated.

The programme is being delivered through four separate projects which will deliver digital solutions for Revenue and Benefits, Land Registration, and Valuation Services, as well as an Integration project which provides independent strategic advice to ensure that the business areas operate on a common set of data built around common standards and operate on a common technical infrastructure.

Contract extensions for legacy systems to maintain continuity of service

A significant driving factor for the programme was the need to replace the existing, outdated systems.

Revenue and Benefits – the new digital solution for rate collection will replace the current system which was due to expire in 2013 but has been extended four times until January 2030, at an estimated cost of £42.4 million, to allow the replacement system to be implemented.

Land Registration – the new digital solution will replace the current LandWeb system, LandWeb Direct and the Ground Rents Register which expired in 2019 and has been extended until 2028, at an estimated cost of up to £76.7 million, to allow the replacement system to be implemented.

Valuation services – a digital solution for Valuation services which will replace the current Assessment Office system which expired in 2017 when third party support for the system ended. Since then, the system has been hosted and maintained in-house. Associated satellite valuation systems will be incorporated into the new digital solutions.

Cost and timeframe

The NOVA programme as a whole is estimated to cost approximately £730 million and be fully completed by 2029.

Revenue and Benefits - The OBC in September 2018 envisaged full implementation by August 2021 at an estimated cost of £173.5 million. The FBC was approved in 2021 at a cost of £269.6 million. LPS told us that the increase in costs of almost £100 million was largely overheads which had previously been omitted from the OBC and was not additional funding required. Implementation was planned to be completed within two years, by August 2023.

Implementation has now been further extended by almost three more years and is expected by October 2026 – that is almost five years for implementation compared to two years expected in the original contract. DoF told us that an FBC addendum is urgently being developed. This delay in implementation has required contract extensions with a value of over £42 million.

Land Registration- The OBC in November 2021 envisaged full implementation by March 2026 at an estimated total cost of £296.6 million. The FBC in March 2025 estimated total costs of £334.1 million. DoF explained that the increase in costs was largely due to a change in accounting treatment which increased depreciation.

Following delays, including a legal challenge, a three-phase implementation commenced on 1 April 2025 and is planned to take place over two and a half years, with completion expected by October 2027.

Valuation services - the OBC in November 2023 envisaged full implementation by April 2029 at a cost of £113.5 million. The procurement is ongoing and LPS is currently selecting bidders to proceed to the next stage of the competition.

Integration Project – The contract with the Integration Partner was signed in June 2021 with scope to spend up to £13 million. There was a 15-month delay in appointing the Integration Partner due to the length of time taken to complete the Business Case appraisal process and disruption to timelines as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The first optional two-year extension to the Integration Partner Contract has been exercised to extend the contract to June 2026. There is a final optional extension available to LPS which could extend the contract to June 2028 if required.

Scope of this case study

Below we have identified issues and challenges at an overarching NOVA programme level as well as issues and challenges in the two largest projects within the programme – Revenue and Benefits and Land Registration.

The legacy Revenue and Benefits and the Land Registration IT systems were the subject of previous NIAO and Public Accounts Committee reports. Many of the previous findings and recommendations remain relevant today. Further details are included in the final section of this case study.

Issues and challenges at a NOVA programme level

Capacity and capability

During the early stages of the programme, key positions were not filled by those with skills and experience in the management of a complex programme. Often positions were filled purely on the basis of available staff, and there were several months when there were no programme or project managers in place.

The NOVA Programme Board did not always operate as an effective oversight and decision-making forum

There were long periods when the Programme Board did not meet regularly, increasing the risk that each of the projects within the NOVA programme continued with insufficient oversight and central strategic direction of the programme as a whole.

In 2023 the governance arrangements were reviewed and strengthened through the establishment of a Transformation Directorate and Transformation Board. This has recently evolved into a Strategic Change Board which meets monthly, comprises wider membership and has a greater emphasis on strategic oversight and decision-making of the LPS change agenda including the projects under NOVA.

A Target Operating Model was not developed for the programme and there was a lack of focus on business transformation

All three NOVA projects are cross-cutting initiatives and were intended to be part of an overall programme. However, at the earlier stages of the programme and projects there was no Target Operating Model or clear plan for how the projects would shape business activities in the future.

Target Operating Models have since been agreed at divisional level and whilst it has not been fully ratified, an LPS Target Operating Model has been developed. With three major IT-enabled change projects ongoing at the same time within LPS, the need for an agreed overarching Target Operating Model, and the importance of managing LPS business transformation, should have been recognised and actioned at the outset.

A recurring theme in Gateway reviews was that the programme was driven primarily by the end of current system contract dates. They highlighted the need to focus more on the transformation and business change aspects of the programme. LPS recognised the need for greater focus on the transformation and business change aspects of the programme and as outlined above strengthened the governance and oversight structures in 2023.

There was a delay in appointing an Integration Partner

The overall NOVA programme Gate 0 review in September 2017 highlighted the need for an Integration Partner. It was agreed that the Integration Partner, providing technical and digital expertise, was a clear requirement and needed to be progressed to ensure continuity through the technology procurements across the programme. An Integration Partner was not appointed until June 2021 at which stage the OBC for the Land Registration project was being approved, and the FBC for the Revenue and Benefits project had been approved.

The programme and one of the projects did not comply with the Gateway review process

The overall NOVA programme Gate 0 in September 2017 had an Amber assessment. It expected a Gate 2: Delivery Strategy for the Revenue and Benefits procurement and a further Gate 0 for the programme at a critical stage the next year but neither was carried out.

In January 2018 the Revenue and Benefits project was given a Medium Risk Potential Assessment which at that time, should have required the project to be subject to the whole Gateway review process. This did not happen. A Gate 3: Investment decision was carried out in February 2021 ahead of contract award for the Revenue and Benefits project. No previous reviews had been conducted for the project.

The next Gateway review was expected in two years on completion of project delivery but given the long timescale for the delivery, the Review Team recommended an annual review of the project. The Review Team also proposed that following the completion of NOVA Programme governance and management changes, a review of the overall NOVA Programme should take place. Neither of these happened. To date no further NOVA programme Gateways have been carried out.

There has been a lack of communication regarding the anticipated outcomes of the programme

LPS accepts there is much to do to inform stakeholders, including citizens, on what the programme and its individual projects are intended to do, and the potential impact on them.

Issues and Challenges in the Revenue and Benefits project

Project overview

The Assessment Billing Benefit and Collection Update System (ABBACUS) is the main system used to support the Revenues and Benefits Directorate and collect around £1.5 billion per annum in rates revenue. It is used by over 700 staff. It was a bespoke system designed and built for the former Rates Collection Agency and has been operational since September 2006.

The Revenue and Benefits project aims to deliver a digital solution for rate collection to replace the current ABBACUS and associated satellite systems.

There was a lack of succession planning and to ensure continuity of service it was necessary to retain the legacy system for much longer than anticipated

The seven-year contract for the ABBACUS system expired in January 2013. The process to replace the legacy system did not start until 2017. The contract for the legacy system has been extended four times to December 2026 with further options available to take the service through to March 2030, at a cost of £42.4 million, to enable continuity of service until the new system is implemented.

Optimism bias relating to project timelines, as well as lack of resources, resulted in delays in the early stages of the project

Planning was too optimistic and unrealistic from the outset and the availability, capability and capacity of resource was an issue throughout. The procurement process took much longer than anticipated (32 months as opposed to the 10 months estimated at OBC) and there were delays in appointing an Integration Partner.

Issues arose post contract award requiring three contract variations which delayed full implementation

It became apparent that key milestones could not be met for the new RAPID application that was to replace the existing legacy application, ABBACUS. This resulted in the rectification process in the model contract being invoked to find a solution. A rectification solution could not be agreed therefore detailed 'without prejudice' discussions were held between the parties. This resulted in contract variations on two occasions (June 2023 and April 2024) and a change to a three phased delivery approach delaying full implementation from August 2023 to February 2028.

In December 2024 the development of the new RAPID application was paused by LPS due to an assessment of significant risk relating to data migration. This required a third contract variation. The contractor developed a new proposal based on retaining ABBACUS and building a series of external modules that will connect to it. This new approach is considered by LPS to mitigate the risk as it eliminates data migration but still delivers the original benefits over an 18-month period.

In April 2025 the new approach was approved by the LPS Strategic Change Board. There will be phased delivery of the solution from August 2025 through to October 2026. This is now three years later than originally contracted. The contractor has commenced work.

Issues and Challenges in the Land Registration project

Project overview

LPS is responsible for collecting, processing and managing land and property information for Northern Ireland. The services provided by LPS include maintaining Registers relating to land ownership i.e. the Land Registry, the Registry of Deeds, the Statutory Charges Register and the Ground Rents Register; providing up-to-date and accurate Land Information services; and supplying mapping information for Northern Ireland.

LPS entered into a concession agreement with British Telecommunications plc (BT) in 1999 for a £46 million PFI project called LandWeb to improve efficiency and customer service. BT was responsible for the development, installation, testing, operation and maintenance of this Information Computer Technology infrastructure and managed service.

There was a lack of succession planning and to ensure continuity of service it was necessary to retain the legacy system for much longer than was anticipated

The original contract was for 17 years from 1999 to 2016. The contract included a break option in 2014. This was not used and instead the contract was extended to July 2019. DoF had to negotiate three further extensions to ensure continuity of service until 2028 when the replacement system is planned to be fully implemented. The total value of extensions required is over £76.7 million.

Optimism bias relating to project timelines as well as lack of resources were key factors in delays in the early stages of the project

Planning was too optimistic and unrealistic from the start and the availability, capability, and capacity of resource was a feature throughout the project from initiation and it is a continuing risk as the project moves into implementation. Some roles within the project team were not filled which impacted on capacity to take forward project activities and lead the various work streams. Staff moves have required training and upskilling for new team members.

Contract award and the start of implementation was delayed by a year as a result of a legal challenge by one of the unsuccessful bidders

The Preferred Bidder was announced before Christmas 2023. LPS had planned for FBC approval and a Gate 3 (Investment Decision) prior to award of contract by 1 March 2024 with expected implementation at the start of April 2024.

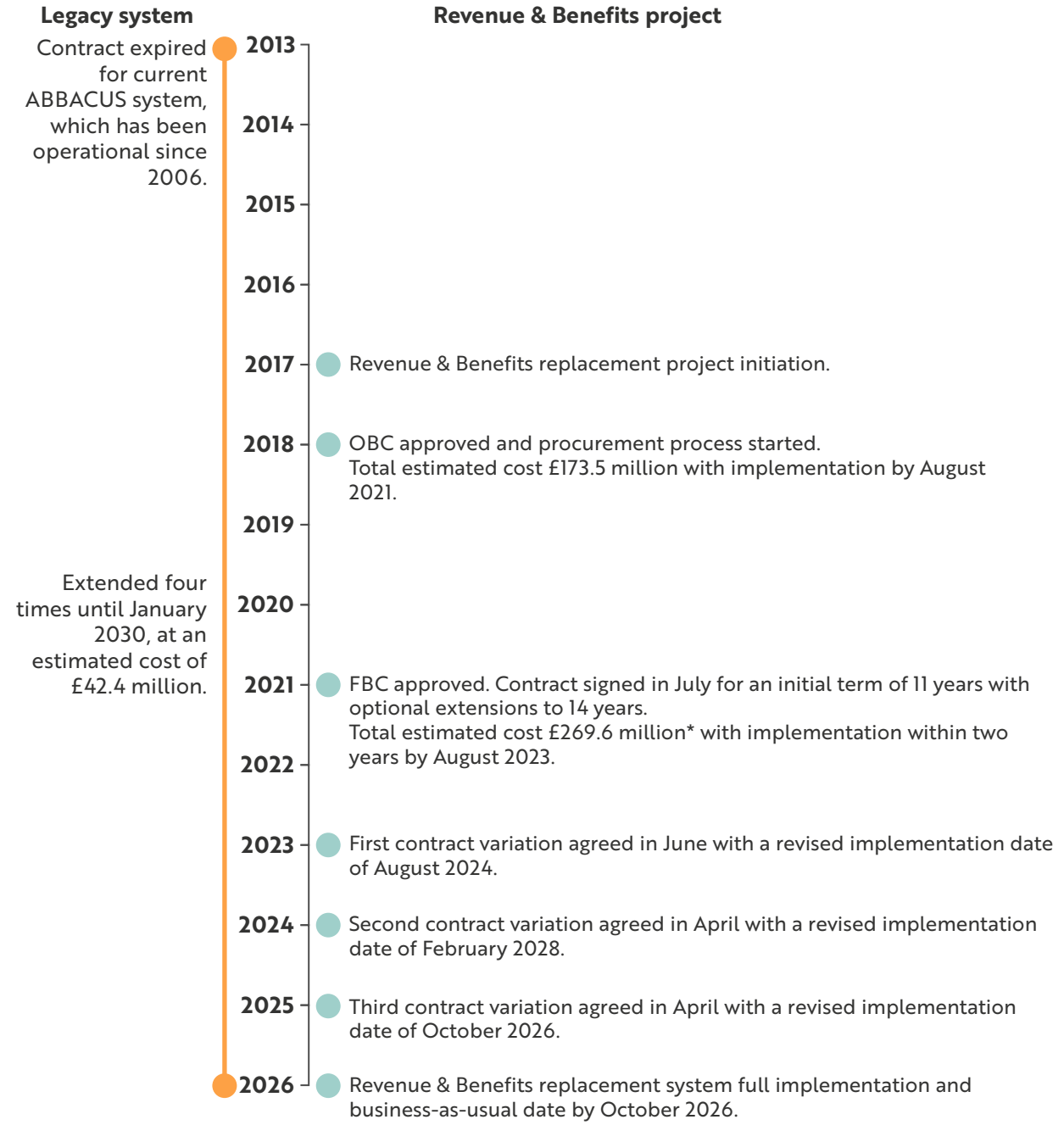
However, the award of the contract was significantly delayed for a year as a result of a legal challenge to the procurement decision being made on 21 December 2023 by one of the unsuccessful bidders. This prevented LPS proceeding to contract award as planned. A settlement was reached by the parties in September 2024. Implementation is now expected to commence on 1 April 2025 and take two and a half years (September 2027).

As a result of the delay due to the legal challenge and the need to maintain service continuity, a further contract extension had to be put in place. The new extension, signed in December 2024, runs until January 2028, with an option to extend until July 2028. Agreed costs are £1.4 million for a new technology refresh, as an enabler for the new extension period due to the existing IT being extremely old, followed by annual support costs of £2.2 million per annum.

Lessons to be shared

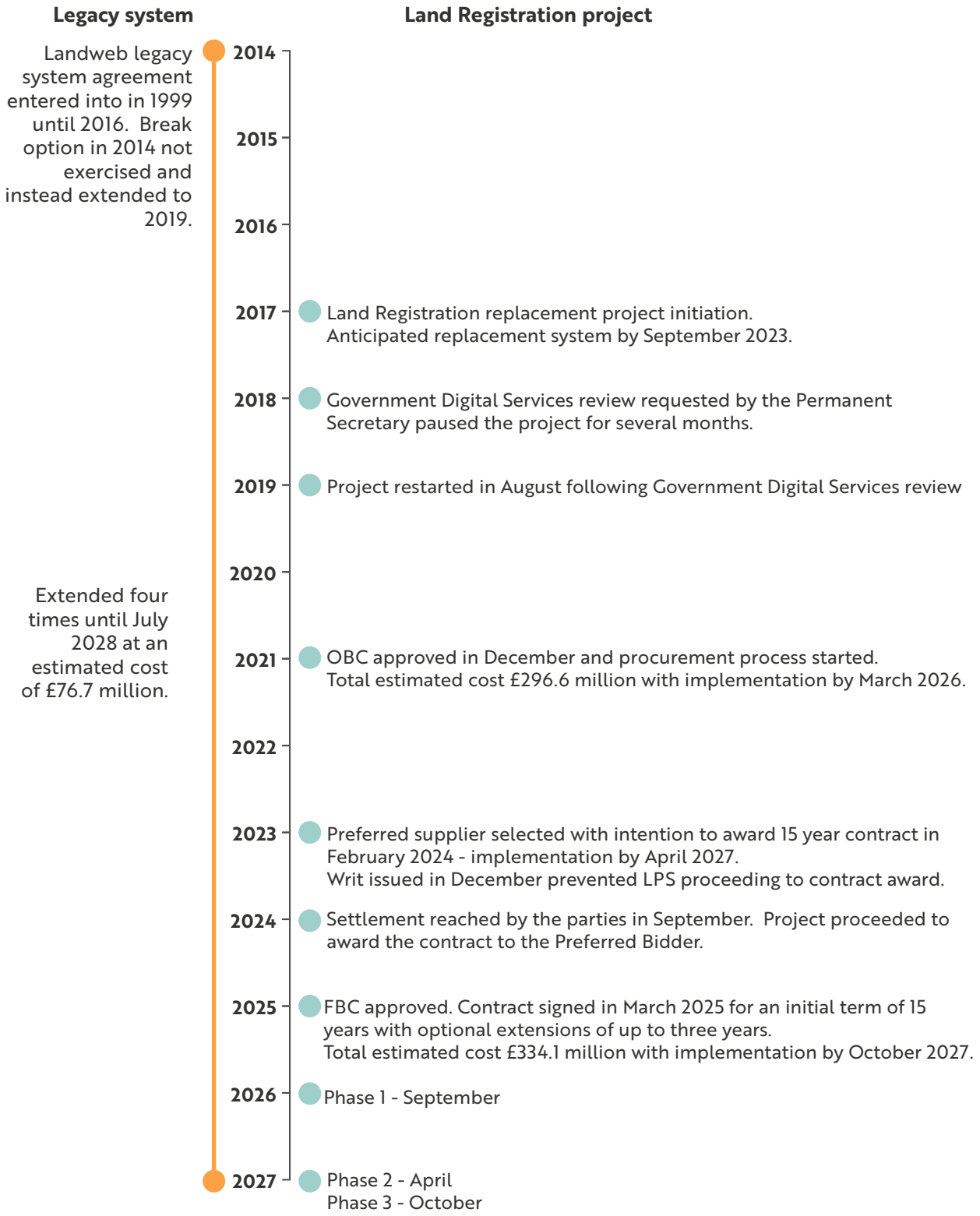
- Stronger contract management and succession planning is necessary to ensure value for money.
- Post contract award dispute and contract variations can have a significant impact on costs and timetables.
- Business Change and Transformation should be part of the programme/project from inception to ensure a greater emphasis on managing the transformation of the organisation to meet its evolving needs.
- The importance of communication with stakeholders.
- Effective governance arrangements are needed at both programme and project level, to support successful delivery.
- There must be clarity from the outset on the purpose of projects and target operating model.
- Programmes and projects should recognise the benefits of the Gateway process and engage as required.
- LPS developed an Activity and Resource Plan for internal use. It includes an estimate of the resources needed for implementation on a monthly basis. It allowed LPS to understand its estimated resource commitment to meet obligations prior to contract signature. This was designed to complement the detailed implementation plan which is linked to delivery and payment milestones.

Figure 8: NOVA Revenue & Benefits system project timeline



***Note:** LPS told us that the increase in business case costs is largely overheads previously omitted from the OBC rather than additional funding required.

Figure 9: NOVA Land Registration system project timeline



Previous NIAO and PAC interest in the legacy Revenue and Benefits and the legacy Land Registration projects

In our July 2008 report, Financial Auditing and Reporting 2006-2007 we highlighted issues in the implementation of the Revenue and Benefits legacy IT system (ABBACUS). In November 2008, the PAC published its Report on Statement of Rate Levy and Collection 2006-07 (3/08/09R) which also considered the implementation of the Revenue and Benefits system. The Committee's overall conclusion was that the implementation of the IT system was very poorly managed.

In 2008 we published a report on Transforming Land Registers: The LandWeb Project. This report examined the background to the project, the reasons for extending the original Agreement, the project management and governance arrangements and whether the system was delivering the expected benefits. The report was considered by the PAC in 2010. The NIAO then followed up on Landweb in June 2020 and this was again considered by the PAC.

LPS made a number of changes and implemented recommendations following the previous reports, including ensuring that open book accounting arrangements are in place in the NOVA programme contracts. The new contract open book accounting arrangements will allow for a more robust value for money mechanism to adjust cost and margins.

Following the scrutiny of the quality of contract management capabilities by PAC, LPS set up a dedicated multi-disciplinary contract management unit (CMU) to support LPS to better manage its current and future contracts starting with the NOVA contracts. The CMU comprises of a multi-disciplinary team bringing together procurement, legal, financial, technical and economic skills. The CMU was initially set up in June 2021 and is still developing due to staffing shortages and other significant work pressures.

However, issues have persisted with continued contract extensions and project teams not having the skills and experience to successfully deliver these complex projects. Many of the issues and recommendations arising from previous reports on the implementation of LPS IT systems remain relevant to the current NOVA programme:

- The importance of considering the full range of services to be delivered in a major business transformation project including interdependencies between systems.
- The importance of ensuring that departments have access to suitably qualified and experienced individuals who can effectively manage the procurement, negotiation, implementation and operation of such complex projects.
- The need for strong contract management controls to be in place to ensure any procurement process is completed before an Agreement expires.
- Strong and realistic leadership from the Programme Board is essential.

Whilst not specifically related to major IT projects we noted a PAC recommendation on fees has not been implemented

PAC recommended in 2020 that a new Fee Order with the appropriate level of fees should be introduced urgently for LandWeb Services. Initially it was expected that the LandWeb project would achieve significant reductions in the fees charged by LPS for its services. However, from 2006-07 to 2018-19 a net surplus of approximately £39 million income recovered by Land Registration had been achieved. DoF advised that new fees would be in place for April 2021, however this did not happen.

During the COVID-19 pandemic DoF engaged the Ulster University to provide an analysis of the NI economy and the likely impact on the property market of a Fees Order. Following consideration of the advice DoF decided to defer bringing forward a revised Fee Order until the next mandate of the Assembly, by which time it felt that the trajectory of the market should be clearer. The aim was to bring a new fees regime into operation from 1 April 2023. However, this was not possible due to the absence of a fully functioning Assembly following the collapse of the Northern Ireland Executive in October 2022. A revised target date of 1 October 2024 was then proposed and has since been revised to March 2026.

Since 2019-20 until 2024-25 there has been a further surplus of approximately £40 million. It is not anticipated that there will be any surplus in the next financial year.

Case Study 4 - Education Authority (EA) - Education Information Solutions (EdIS) programme

The EdIS programme includes the development of a new school system to replace C2K. The primary goal of the EdIS programme is to ensure ongoing provision of high quality, sustainable, core education technology services to schools and that this provision is appropriate to meet the current and future needs of teachers and pupils in schools, as well as the needs of the EA and other key stakeholders.

Overview

Background

The EA provides a managed technology service for education in Northern Ireland – this is known as C2K and was established in 1998. C2K is underpinned by the Education Network for Northern Ireland contract (EN(ni)), which includes managed service provider, schools' management information system (SIMS), curriculum applications, news desk, Irish language news desk network infrastructure, libraries service, finance and payroll, and technical support (including helpdesk).

The EN(ni) contract was awarded in 2012 on an initial five-year term to 2017. It provides services to 1,100+ schools, including pupils, teachers and non-teaching staff.

In 2017, the same year the EN(ni) contract was due to end, an Education Technology Services (ETS) programme was established to consider Digital Transformation including the development of a new school system to replace C2K.

In 2021 the Programme was reset and rebranded as the Education Information Solutions (EdIS) Programme.

The EdIS programme has 30 projects across five separate workstreams. It includes several projects which have been delivered such as the new Northern Ireland Substitute Teachers Register (NISTR), and EA Connect which digitised a number of services including school admissions; the school appeals process; Free School Meals and Uniform Grants; Transport Applications; and the Special Education Needs Statutory Assessment Process and Annual Reviews.

The largest and most significant element of the EdIS programme is the Strategic Partner and Schools Management System (SPSMS) project which will replace the EN(ni) managed service including SIMS. The requirements to be delivered by the Strategic Partner include transition of EN(ni) services from the current supplier, a School Management System (SMS) solution and security services. The Strategic Partner will also provide a data integration platform and analytics tools to facilitate data sharing and insight from across the programme deliverables to provide a holistic view at pupil, school, sectoral and regional levels.

The procurement delivery approach involves several major procurement strands, and each will have an FBC. Each iteration of the FBC submitted for approval will include updates on all key changes and developments since approval of the OBC, and the preceding approved FBC. The iterations, submitted as FBC addendums, will cumulatively provide the complete FBC for the programme once the procurements are completed.

Extended reliance on legacy systems

The EN(ni) contract has been extended six times to ensure continuity of service since April 2017 until March 2027 at a cost of £312.9 million. There is an option to further extend up to March 2029 if needed.

Costs and timeframe

The OBC for the Education Technology Services programme was approved in December 2020 at an - estimated total cost of £681.2 million, forecasting implementation by July 2022 and full provision by February 2023.

An OBC addendum was approved in September 2022 following the reset of the programme (now known as the Education Information Solutions (EdIS) Programme). This amended the date of full provision to December 2024 and reflected cost increases of 8.7 per cent, to £740.8 million – Capital £255.6 million and Revenue £485.2 million.

The latest FBC estimated total costs of the programme to be £734.4 million including inflation, including SPSMS estimated costs of £309.8 million and forecast implementation by December 2025.

Current position

Following a procurement process which lasted almost two years the SPSMS contract was awarded in December 2023. The contract included a main contractor for the Strategic Partner and a subcontractor for the SMS solution. Subsequently, due to unresolvable post-contract award issues, the contract with the Strategic Partner was terminated by mutual agreement.

The subcontractor for the SMS solution to replace the existing SIMS application, novated to EA following termination of the SPSMS contract. Full implementation of the SMS is expected by March 2026.

The EA has commenced work to retender for a new Strategic Partner through an open procurement. It is anticipated that the contract will be awarded by June 2026 and all existing EN(ni) services will transition to the new strategic partner by March 2027.

Scope of this case study

Below we have identified issues and challenges at an overarching EdIS programme level as well as issues and challenges identified in the largest project within the programme – the Strategic Partner and Schools Management System.

Issues and Challenges

The programme exhibited many of the causes of project failure at an early stage and was reset

A Programme Assessment Review for the programme was commissioned in April 2021 – within four months of the OBC being approved. The review team found that the programme exhibited a number of the common causes of project failure including:

- Lack of a clear project plan that covered the full period of the planned delivery and all business change required.
- Lack of realistic programme timescales and arrangements to handle any delays.
- Lack of clear governance arrangements.
- Lack of engagement with and understanding of how stakeholders will be managed to ensure buy-in, overcome resistance to change and allocate risk to the party best able to manage it.
- Lack of sufficient resourcing and a suitably skilled and experienced project team with clearly defined roles and responsibilities.
- Too little attention to breaking development and implementation into manageable steps, with the approach resembling a "Big-Bang" IT-enabled programme.
- Too little contact with the supply industry at senior levels in the organisation.

The decision was taken to reset the programme. The main priorities focussed on Change Management, including engagement and communication with stakeholders, including the business-as-usual team who were to be more closely aligned and involved with the programme team.

The programme was rebranded as the Education Information Solutions (EdIS) Programme in October 2021.

An addendum OBC was prepared and approved in September 2022. This projected an increase in total programme costs of 8.7 per cent. Full transition to the new solution had originally been planned for February 2023 and was now anticipated to be December 2024.

The procurement timetable for the SPSMS was overly optimistic and did not recognise the complexities of the project

The EdIS Programme Board approved a new Procurement Strategy in February 2022 which recommended a combined procurement of a Strategic Partner offering a single, exclusive SMS solution to replace the existing SIMS application provided through the EN(ni) contract within the C2k service by 31 December 2024.

The procurement strategy envisaged contract award within 12 months by December 2022. The OBC (A) pushed the contract award date back to May 2023 and then subsequently FBC1 revised it to a 21-month timescale to contract award in January 2024. As a result, a further extension of the existing EN(ni) contract was required to at least March 2025 to provide sufficient time for transition to the new strategic partner.

The actual time taken was almost 24 months with contract awarded in December 2023.

Post contract award issues resulted in contract being terminated by mutual agreement

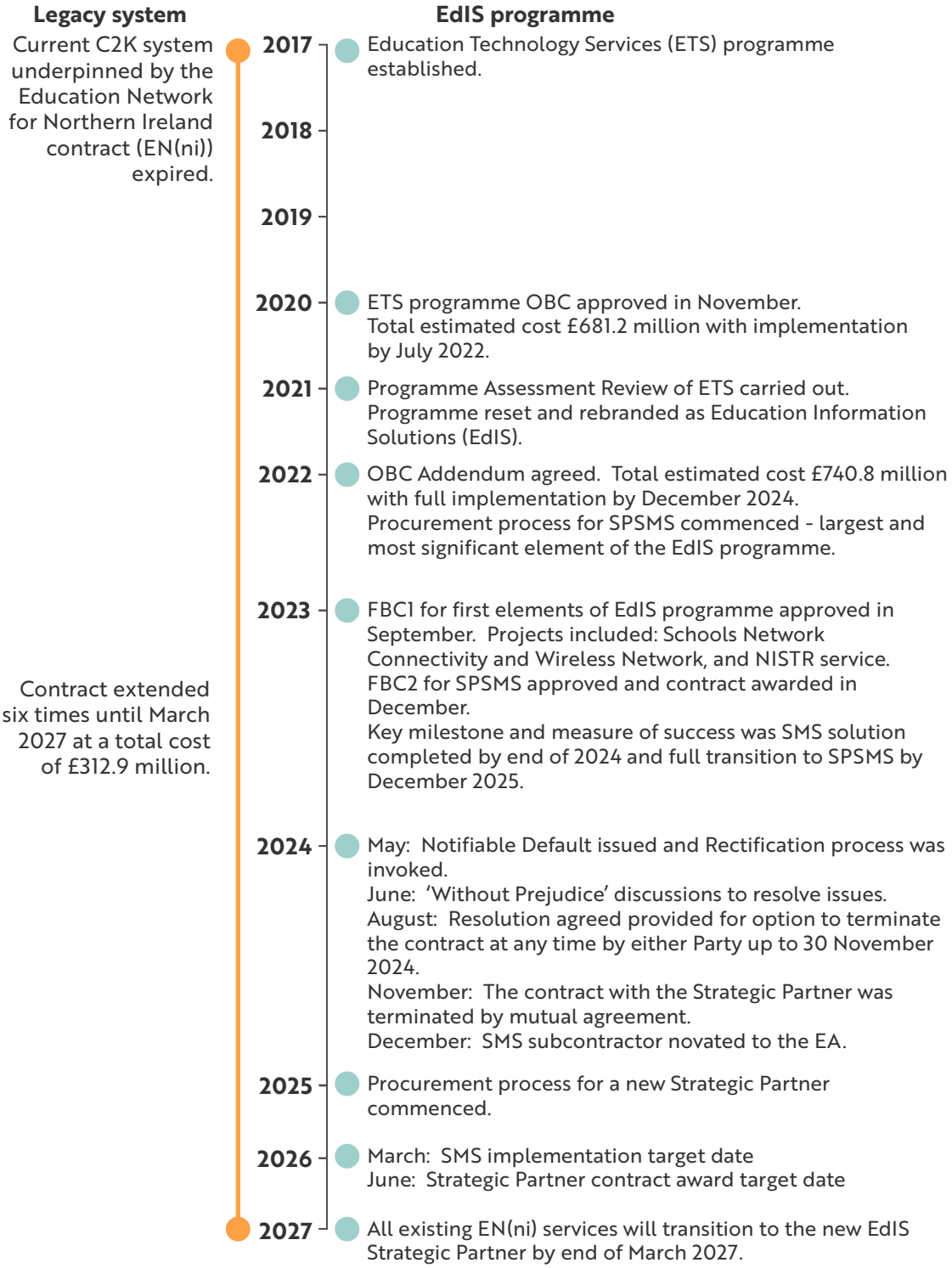
Following the SPSMS contract award, a detailed planning period began. A detailed implementation plan was due 20 days after contract start date, however the deadline was extended several times to give the contractor more time. A detailed implementation plan could not be agreed, and it became apparent to both parties that Key Milestones were not going to be met by the required dates.

In May 2024 a notice of a Notifiable Default was issued to the contractor by EA. The necessary contract rectification procedures were followed and 'without prejudice' discussions were also held however a resolution could not be agreed. The contract with the Strategic Partner was subsequently terminated by mutual agreement on a no-fault basis. The agreed terms of this termination option are based on the principle of each Party bearing its own costs in relation to the inability to successfully implement the Contract. The EA will bear no costs in respect of the contractors work to date on the EdIS programme.

Lessons to be shared

- The value of the Gateway Review and making the decision to reset at an early stage.
- The importance of having the right people with the right skills available when needed throughout the whole project lifecycle. This includes subject matter experts.
- The importance of recognising IT projects in the context of delivering wider business change rather than just delivering technology i.e. IT enabled change, and the need for Change Management skills.
- The need for extensive user/stakeholder engagement and communication.
- Teams developing the user-facing front end programmes need to work closely with the business-as-usual users working on back-end administrative processes.
- Data Migration – the importance of ensuring data is cleansed and managed throughout a contract. EA made use of experts and ensured arrangements were in place early.

Figure 10: Education Information Solutions (EdIS) programme timeline



Case Study 5 – Department for Infrastructure (DfI) – Planning Portal

The new Planning Portal system replaced the previous Northern Ireland Planning Portal which had been implemented in 2010. The aim of the new Planning Portal project was to implement a new shared regional Planning IT system that would support the delivery of high quality, effective and efficient planning services across Northern Ireland.

Overview

Background

The previous Northern Ireland Planning Portal (NIPP) was implemented in 2010 as a single Planning Authority solution. It was later updated to reflect the devolution of planning services to local councils in April 2015. A significant weakness in NIPP was that it did not allow for applications to be submitted electronically. It was overly complex, attracted a lot of criticism from stakeholders, and was a significant impediment to delivering an excellent planning service. Deficiencies of the NIPP included: public access issues such as the inability to receive online planning application submissions (England had this capability since 2002); functions not allowing local configuration to meet individual Council needs; and its limited flexibility leading to poor customer service and inefficient processes.

Extended reliance on legacy systems

The original contract for the system came to an end in March 2014. It required £14.2 million in contract extensions to ensure continuity of service until a replacement system was implemented in December 2022.

Costs and timeframe

The OBC for the new project was approved in June 2019 with estimated costs of £26.8 million. The contract was expected to be awarded within 12 months with go-live in April 2022 and full implementation of the system by no later than June 2022. Costs per the FBC were £39.6 million, with go-live pushed back to October 2022 and full implementation by March 2023.

Direct comparisons between the OBC and FBC do not compare like with like as by FBC stage the contract term had increased from 10 to 20 years and one council dropped out of the joint procurement. DfI told us that taking into account these two adjustments, the FBC showed that the pro rata estimated costs were slightly less for both capital and revenue than in the OBC.

Current position

The actual costs of the project were £43.1 million with revenue costs higher than expected due to inflation and an increase in the central team costs at the Intelligent Client Function (ICF). The new Planning Portal went live in December 2022 and was fully implemented and business-as-usual by July 2023. In April 2023 Belfast City Council, on behalf of all the planning authorities, assumed full responsibility for the ICF. This includes both the day to day running and management of the system and management of the contract with the supplier. It commenced the monitoring of benefits starting from 1 April 2024. It is important that all councils, and DfI, undertake a structured approach to benefits realisation measurement and reporting.

Issues and challenges

There were significant delays initiating the project and the time required was underestimated

The contract for the legacy NIPP ended in March 2014, however work to develop and procure a new system did not commence until 2016. In our report Planning in Northern Ireland, we reported that there were difficulties in getting all 11 councils to agree a preferred replacement system, including how it was to be funded.

The new system was initially expected to go live in 2019 however the time required to initiate the project and complete the business case process was underestimated and the OBC was only approved in 2019. At the early project initiation stage, we were told that key staff, including subject matter experts, were not available, and as a result, developing and agreeing the business case took longer than expected – development and approval of the OBC took 20 months from November 2017 to June 2019.

The OBC envisaged the Planning Portal to be operational in early 2022 with project closure and business-as-usual by June 2022. The transition of all planning authorities from the legacy system to the new platform was to be undertaken using a phased approach. There was to be a period of parallel running in several of the planning authorities prior to rollout to all. The project plan included two Transition Waves:

- Wave 1 from August 2021 to November 2021 - the first four Local Council Planning Authorities, DfI Planning Authority and the Regional Property Certificate Office would go live; and
- Wave 2 from November 2021 to April 2022 - the remaining six Local Council Planning Authorities would go live.

The approach to implementation was later amended in November 2021 to a "big bang" approach to implement the IT system to all planning authorities at the same time in July 2022. The main driver was the impact of delays, particularly due to data migration. From a risk perspective it was also considered a less technically challenging approach. The target go-live date was subsequently pushed back a further four months to November 2022 and then again to December 2022, when the system went live to all planning authorities, agents and the public.

The potential savings of implementing the system could not be quantified

One of the drivers of the project was to support transformational change and deliver benefits including the potential to reduce the cost of delivering Planning services through greater digitalisation and automation of workflows and processes. However, the OBC or FBC did not include any specific monetary benefits. At the time of developing the business cases, DfI and local councils were unable to quantify these potential savings as the full change associated with the new IT system could not be fully understood. A Benefits Realisation Plan has since been developed to capture the benefits, including any financial benefits, from implementing the new system. This work is still on-going at the time of this report.

Major issues with data integrity and migration impacted on the planned delivery and cost of the project

The legacy contract did not have a retention and disposal element built into the system and the contract extensions were limited to maintenance only. DfI had identified the need to complete a data cleansing exercise, but the decision was taken by DfI and the councils to delay the implementation of the data cleansing exercise due to contractual, technical and staff resource issues, until after the new system was in place.

Data migration had been identified as a complex task and was included on the risk log but still became an issue at the start of 2021 within six months of contract being awarded:

- The size of the data needing migrated from NIPP was almost eight times the original size estimated during pre-procurement specification - 8TB compared to 1.1TB. The additional data required more data storage space and associated processing throughout the data migration phase.
- There were delays in getting data from the incumbent supplier. No pilot data was ever provided, and the actual data was provided late. This resulted in significant delays with the data migration process and had a direct impact on other activities, such as configuration workshops, sprints and infrastructure development.

The combination of these two data migration issues led to the overall project plan being elongated and transition to the new system would no longer be possible before the NIPP system became unavailable in December 2022. Go Live could not be further deferred. As a result, following an assessment of risks, the decision was made to implement the new Planning IT System to all authorities at the same time, rather than in two waves as per the contract. We were told this approach also reduced the complexity of the implementation and the need to operate two systems in parallel.

Another data issue was that the old NIPP system contained historic data from the predecessor IT system that had not been cleansed. This resulted in additional cost for storage, request for change and additional effort to manually check and cleanse.

In total, change controls associated with data issues, increased costs by £854,000.

The project received a Red Gateway review shortly before go-live

The project was subject to a series of gateway reviews. The Gate 4 – Readiness for service – Gateway review three months before go-live provided a Red rating. It concluded that despite strenuous efforts by all concerned, there were a significant number of critical issues and uncertainties which need to be resolved prior to a system go-live. It highlighted:

- A lack of confidence by Planning Authorities and users.
- Poor communication between the project team and planning authorities.
- Poor quality of training and training scheduling.
- A need to complete end-to-end user testing with satisfactory results.

The final report from the review team lead to an action plan that consisted of 16 actions which were addressed and ensured the system went live in December 2022. We note that Gateway 5 Benefits Realisation review was undertaken in April 2024 and provided a Green rating.

The system had to go live before it was fully ready on 5 December 2022

External stakeholder engagement and staff training had not been as effective as planned due largely to the urgency in getting to go-live. Time constraints meant that the decision was taken to delay delivery of some important functionality until post go-live. There were significant issues following go-live with complaints from stakeholders around a lack of testing and training which impacted on performance, user confidence and attracted negative media coverage. This required a seven-month period of heightened customer support and attention to address these issues as quickly as possible. The system has been in steady state since July 2023. Since February 2023, 99 per cent of all property certificates and over 60 per cent of all planning applications have been submitted online.

Business-as-usual and the Intelligent Client Function (ICF)

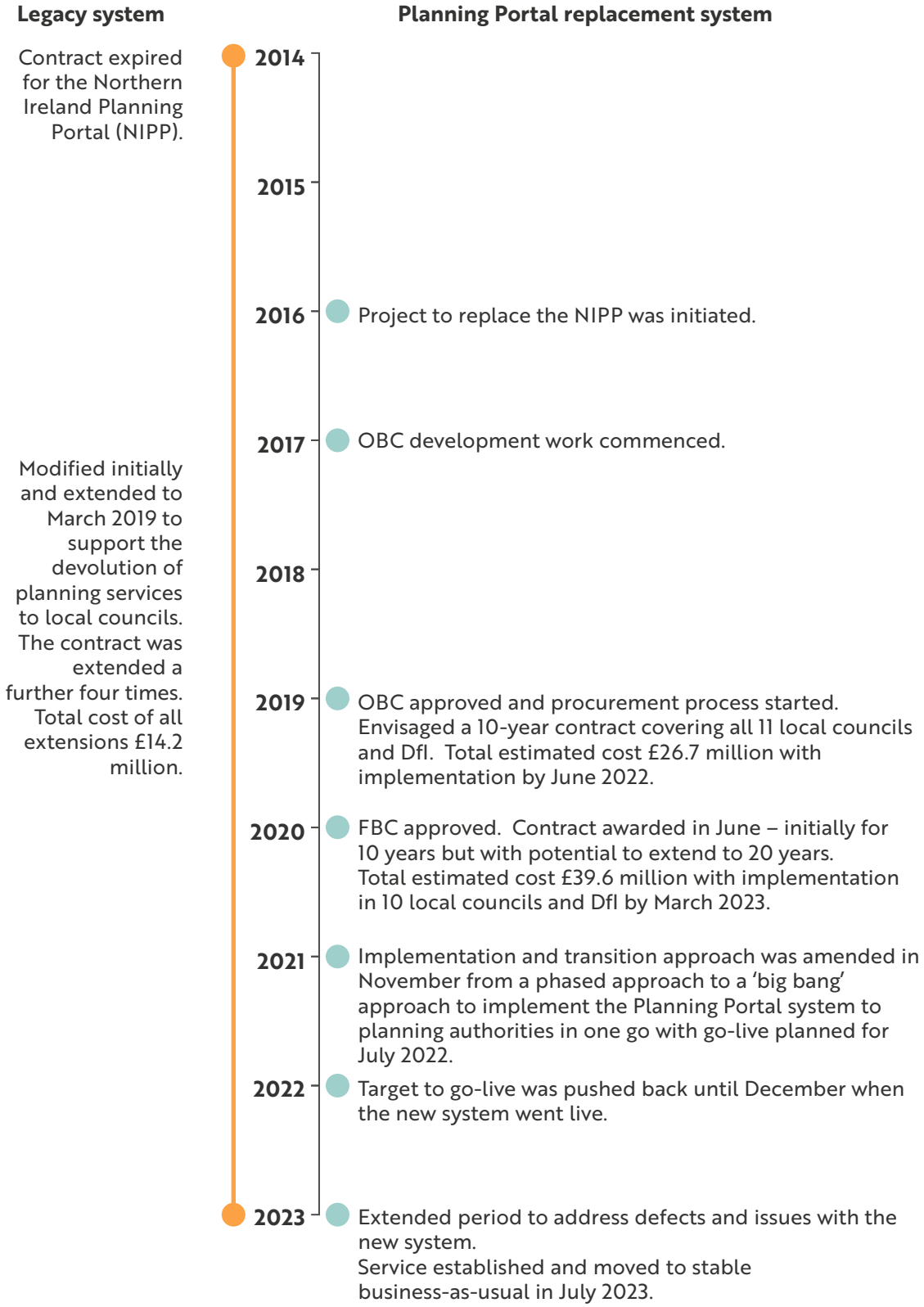
Belfast City Council has responsibility for the contract management of the new Planning Portal – ICF – on behalf of the 11 Planning Authorities. The ICF was established within Belfast City Council in September 2021 prior to go-live and was involved in the latter stages of implementation, testing and launch. In April 2023 they assumed full responsibility for both the day to day running and management of the system and management of the contract with the supplier. This will include taking a lead role in the continuous improvement of the system.

A benefits tracker is in place and started monitoring of benefits from 1 April 2024. To ensure value for money it is important that each of the planning authorities demonstrate the benefits and savings arising from the new portal and from back-office efficiencies and report on these as part of ongoing benefits monitoring.

Lessons to be shared

- Lessons learned from the various stages of the project were used to inform subsequent stages of the project and the full lessons from the project have been shared within the Department and with local authorities.
- The project team should be adequately resourced and include the appropriate range of skills and expertise throughout the lifetime of the project, such as a recognised data. The lack of a data specialist impacted on the team's ability to effectively engage with supplier.
- Ensure there is a clear understanding of the data held on the incumbent system and if necessary, use a data specialist to provide this confidence.
- Carry out necessary data cleansing in advance of migration of data to minimise the risk of data compatibility issues.
- Ensure a robust exit strategy and plan has been agreed in terms of roles and responsibilities and what is required by all parties– as well as timescales and cost.
- The importance of good communication and meaningful engagement with stakeholders throughout the project.
- The importance of timely and adequate training for users.
- The need to identify, clearly articulate, and manage benefits to ensure they are realised.

Figure 11: NI Planning Portal replacement project timeline



"We found that there were delays in all cases in moving from the legacy system to a new system, primarily due to a lack of strategic planning, the pace of planning, and capacity and capability issues. Some projects also experienced delays due to procurement and post contract award issues."

Northern Ireland Audit Office

Part Five:

Recurring themes and issues arising in the delivery of major IT projects

Part Five: Recurring themes and issues arising in the delivery of major IT projects

5.1 This part of the report collates key issues and lessons arising from our case studies. It also draws on our previous reports and the work of other audit agencies and government bodies.

There is a lack of strategic planning for major IT projects across NICS

5.2 Both the NIAO and PAC have previously reported on the need for strong contract management controls and strategic planning for legacy contract succession. However, information provided by departments shows the extent of contract extensions being relied upon across NICS (see **Figure 4** in **Part Three** of this report). Good contract management requires sufficient time to explore, negotiate and consider options well in advance of contract expiry. In some cases, contract extensions may be a valid decision, however in many cases contracts are extended as there is no other option due to a lack of strategic planning.

5.3 The focus, and spend, on contract extensions is often to maintain the system, prevent operational failure and reduce the risk of cyber-attacks, as opposed to enhancing functionality and performance. Over time the gap between functionality and need widens, the systems become increasingly inefficient, as does the citizen experience.

5.4 Departments told us that one of the main reasons for continued contract extensions is pressure on resources, which means that the focus is on business-as-usual and day-to-day delivery. This, combined with single year budgets and capacity and capability issues, results in plans to implement new IT programmes and projects starting late and legacy systems being extended well beyond their intended life:

- **Budget constraints and uncertainty**. Replacement systems require a significant investment in terms of funding.
- **Legacy system transitions and project implementations take considerable time**. Staff allocated to these projects are often also working on business-as-usual activities, and there are challenges in balancing operational needs with project schedules. Capacity issues result in insufficient time being available for teams to undertake discovery, design, specification, tender and test new systems.
- **Many systems are coming to end of life at the same time**. This combined with **staffing and funding pressures**, makes it increasingly difficult to deliver major replacement programmes as originally intended.

5.5 Continued contract extensions weaken the negotiating position of the public sector contracting authority and bring an increased risk of poor value for money, as there becomes an overriding need to retain the systems and ensure continuity of service. The heavy reliance on contract extensions to maintain legacy systems, some of which are no longer efficient, represents very poor value for money and wasted opportunities for efficiency savings.

The importance of comprehensive planning and getting projects right at the start

5.6 The importance of the early stages of project development are widely reported. The National Audit Office has previously reported that the quality of project initiation is highly predictive of success; the Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA) has highlighted that projects that focus enough attention on the early phases of development are more likely to deliver the intended benefits; and HM Government Sourcing Playbooks focus on getting projects right at the start. There is no shortage of guidance, yet issues persist.

5.7 Each of the case studies experienced delays or issues at the project initiation stage for a variety of reasons including: a lack of clarity on the scope and intended outcomes; no clear project plan; no target operating model; and insufficient suitable resources. Appropriately skilled staff were not always involved in developing the business case, resulting in the complexity of the project not being fully understood and unrealistic costs and timescales for the project being estimated. We were also told that the time needed to prepare a business case is often underestimated.

5.8 Whilst costs and timescales will be further refined and subject to greater certainty following completion of the discovery phase, market engagement and detailed planning as the project evolves, time better spent at the early project initiation stage, by suitably skilled and knowledgeable staff, would result in business cases that are more robust, more accurately reflect the complexity of the project and are clearly linked to the organisational objectives and future intended outcomes.

Recommendation 5

Departments should ensure that sufficiently skilled staff are available from the early stages of a project to allow full consideration of the complexity of the project, enabling realistic timescales, costs and internal resource requirements to be included within business cases to support more robust decision-making on the affordability and feasibility of the project.

The intended outcomes and benefits should be clearly defined in business cases

5.9 The investment of significant funds into more capable systems is normally expected to be accompanied by a number of benefits, notably financial benefits due to efficiency savings. Across our case studies the projects are to replace legacy systems. Delays in delivery increase the risk of additional costs arising and anticipated cost savings not being fully realised.

5.10 Our review found that more needs to be done to clearly identify the benefits to be achieved and ensure there is clarity on how those benefits will be measured and monitored. In the Planning case study the potential savings of implementing the new system could not be quantified. Neither the OBC nor FBC included any specific monetary benefits. At the time of developing the business cases, DfI and local councils were unable to quantify these potential savings as the full change associated with the new IT system could not be fully understood. In relation to Integr8, it is anticipated that significant benefits can be achieved through leveraging synergies between the Finance and HR functions which are currently being missed due to the disaggregated nature of the existing delivery. However, these benefits have not been quantified. Strategic governance mechanisms are being established by Integr8 to enable the impacts from these wider changes to be measured.

Recommendation 6

To maximise value for money it is crucial that Accounting Officers and DoF ensure that the benefits to be achieved by investing in new systems are clearly defined in business cases. Benefits should be measurable and there must be clarity on how they will be realised. Benefits must be monitored and reported on once systems are operational to ensure that the intended benefits are delivered and value for money is achieved.

For the most beneficial impact, programmes and projects should engage early with the Gateway review process

5.11 As noted at **paragraphs 2.5-2.7**, the Gateway review process is an assurance mechanism designed to provide an objective view of a programme or projects ability to deliver on time and to budget. We were told that it is at the earlier stages of a project when independent expertise and assessment, such as Gateway reviews, can have most influence – as a programme/project further progresses the strategic direction of the project can be more difficult to change or influence. Both the Integr8 and EdIS programmes were reset following Red Gateway reviews early in the project initiation and set up stages. The Red rated assessment enabled refocus and actions were taken to address the issues identified.

5.12 We found evidence of active engagement with the Gateway review process and meaningful action taken to address Gateway findings. However, in the LPS NOVA programme we found non-compliance with the Gateway process on a number of occasions. This independent assurance mechanism, in addition to regular internal scrutiny and oversight, can identify the need for corrective action in projects. It is important that all programmes and projects recognise the benefits of the Gateway process and engage as required.

Recommendation 7

All projects and programmes with a value over £5 million are required to engage with the Gateway process by completing a Risk Potential Assessment. We recommend that Accounting Officers put in place project reporting arrangements to ensure that programmes and projects within their remit actively engage with the assurance process, particularly at the early stages of a project. Accounting Officers, Senior Responsible Officers and Project Boards must also satisfy themselves that the recommendations of the independent Gateway reviews, including the timing of the next recommended reviews, are actioned.

5.13 **Figure 12** summarises the importance of comprehensive planning at the outset of major IT projects and highlights some useful resources.

Figure 12: The importance of comprehensive planning at the outset of major IT projects

Investing sufficient time at the early phases of the project lifecycle can ensure:

- complexity and risks are recognised;
- desired outcomes and benefits from a new system are considered and defined;
- a clear link between the project and the organisation's key strategic priorities including agreed measures of success;
- procurement options are considered and explored;
- clear understanding of the capacity and capability needed to deliver the project; and
- robust and well-informed decision-making based on realistic time and cost estimates.

Useful resources:

HM Government Sourcing Playbooks focus on the importance of getting projects right at the start, regardless of whether the project is being delivered in-house, outsourced or a combination of both.

Project Routemap is the IPA's support tool for novel or complex major projects. It helps sponsors and clients understand the capabilities needed to set projects up for success, incorporating learning from other major projects and programmes.

The Digital, Data and Technology Playbook highlights the importance of investing time to get things right from the start.

Effective programme and project boards are essential to support successful delivery

5.14 Governance arrangements should be in place to provide oversight, challenge and decision-making. Regular reporting and monitoring arrangements should be in place within projects and programmes and clear structures through which risks can be escalated. The principal governance mechanism is often the programme or project board. In three of the case studies the need for clear and effective governance arrangements was identified by Gateway reviews. Issues included infrequent meetings and membership that was not sufficiently representative of stakeholders.

5.15 It is important that people with the right skills and experience are on the programme/project board, at the right time, to help ensure effective scrutiny of the project. Membership should be reviewed and amended as the project evolves to ensure best use of skills mix and the value that can be added. We note that the Integr8 programme board includes critical friends from UK Government, with significant experience of technology-enabled change.

Recommendation 8

Governance structures, such as the project or programme board, should be a key component to the successful delivery of projects. They must be active and include key stakeholders with an appropriate mix of skills and experience. This should be tailored and strengthened throughout the life of a project as necessary.

Insufficient skills and experience across project teams continues to impact on the design and delivery of all major projects

5.16 People with the right skills, experience and time are crucial throughout a project life cycle. We have previously reported that many specialist activities in the NICS, such as project management and contract management, are carried out by general service staff without specific skills or qualifications, and more needs to be done to prioritise the identification and development of the skills, knowledge and experience which are key to the delivery of modern public services.

5.17 Promotion routes for individuals are largely via a generalist pathway rather than as a project delivery specialist, meaning that reinvestment in project management training is frequently required. Project and programme management capability needs to be managed strategically across NICS to make best use of these skills, with career and promotion routes that retain these capabilities rather than through generalist pathways which divert programme and project management expertise into other areas.

5.18 In addition to project and contract management skills, other skill sets are required to successfully design and deliver major IT projects. These may include digital skills such as software development, cyber security, data and technology. Most of the projects in the portfolio are IT-enabled business change and transformation, and therefore also require skills in areas such as business change, service design, and user/ stakeholder engagement. Case studies, including the NOVA, Integr8 and EdIS programmes, highlighted the need for change and transformation to be recognised as a key part of the programmes from the outset.

5.19 Throughout this report we found that pressures on resources, as well as budget availability and a lack of capacity and capability in key skill areas, has resulted in planning for major IT projects starting late. Projects are often initiated with smaller teams than are needed, key roles are not adequately filled and often staff do not have the capacity required to fulfil their roles as they continue with their normal day to day responsibilities. Across our case studies we were told there were periods when the project team members needed to be allocated on a full-time basis but it was not possible due to competing demands. There is also a need for staff from the business-as-usual team to have the opportunity for meaningful, timely engagement with the project team to ensure knowledge transfer from a user perspective and help achieve buy-in. A lack of skills and capacity, at the right time, hampers the ability of bodies to be intelligent clients and it can also impact on the contractor's ability to achieve milestones due to unavailability of client staff. Examples drawn from our case studies included:

- delays in producing key documents, and the quality of those products, such as project initiation documents, specifications and business cases;
- lack of understanding of the complexity of the projects resulting in unrealistic timescales;
- frequent underestimation of the staffing resource and skills needed throughout the project life cycle; and
- the development of an activity and resource plan by LPS, allowed a clearer understanding of the potential resource commitment and importantly when that resource is needed.

5.20 The Strategic Investment Board (SIB) recently reported that cost estimates at the project initiation stage are consistently inaccurate; project teams consistently overestimate their own expertise; end-to end the business case process is often slower than should be necessary; and approval processes are often more complicated than in other jurisdictions. Whilst the SIB work was specifically focused on major capital infrastructure projects there is commonality in some of the key findings to major IT projects in Northern Ireland. Most notably it concluded that a lack of expertise is a main cause of these issues.

Plans to upskill staff and develop a project delivery profession have been slow

5.21 As far back as 2010, the PAC recommended that a register of public sector staff with project and programme management skills and experience be put in place to ensure that future projects would benefit from an experienced pool of staff. Fifteen years later this has not been fully implemented. In 2017 and 2019 the NICS Board provided support for the implementation of a NICS Project Delivery Profession, including the establishment of a new Project Delivery Profession business unit. Whilst Permanent Secretaries were supportive, we were told that there needed to be a lot more consideration as to how it would work in practice, how it would be funded and managed. The Assembly was suspended, and discussions did not progress.

5.22 In response to reports highlighting capacity and capability issues within the NICS, DoF established a Commercial Delivery Group (CDG). In June 2020 a Commercial Director, whose remit includes Head of Profession for Project Delivery in NICS, was appointed. Their role includes helping to develop capacity and capability in terms of project delivery by working to develop the NICS Project Delivery profession alongside leading and championing project delivery across all NICS departments. CDG promotes and signposts training and development opportunities for SROs, project and contract management staff and has also developed networks and communities to enable shared learning. CDG has developed relationships with the Cabinet Office's Government Commercial College, enabling NICS staff to gain access to high quality accredited commercial training to increase commercial and project delivery expertise and capability.

5.23 The UK Government's Infrastructure and Project Authority developed a Government Online Skills Tool to enable users to assess their skills, identify gaps, provide learning solutions to address them and build personal development plans. CDG has promoted the use of this to members of the Project Delivery profession within the NICS and associated ALBs. Currently around 360 people have self-identified as Project Delivery professionals.

5.24 Whilst these developments are welcomed, progress has been disappointingly slow. Despite the need for project and contract management skills being well-rehearsed, much still needs to be done and barriers to progress remain:

- CDG is limited in what it can do as it has no authority or remit over other departments. We were told that it can encourage and promote various training opportunities and events, but it cannot mandate staff across departments to avail of these opportunities and it cannot ensure that project teams across departments comprise of the best skills mix. Each department manages its own staff development and project teams manage their own recruitments through a mixture of Departmental Interest Circulars, general service postings, trawls or external recruitments.
- There is still a lack of understanding of both the skills available across NICS and the skills needed to successfully deliver major projects i.e. the extent of the skills gap remains unknown.
- There is no policy in place to support and enable the development of a project delivery profession across the NICS, including grades, job roles, competencies and career paths. This is in stark contrast to the formalised Project Delivery profession in place at the Infrastructure and Projects Authority under the UK government Cabinet Office. Clearly defined roles and competencies would allow more transferability of project delivery professionals across departments and the wider NICS.
- Recruiting and retaining talent from the private sector is challenging as remuneration is typically lower in the NICS.

5.25 There needs to be a greater focus across departments and the wider public sector to develop Intelligent Client Functions. To be an intelligent client, and ensure successful contractual outcomes, all departments need sufficient expertise. Project teams must be able to identify and clearly understand the project complexities, requirements, risks and benefits; engage and negotiate effectively with the market; and develop effective partnerships.

5.26 There remains a clear and urgent need to develop and enable a NICS-wide approach to identifying and building the capacity and capability needed to successfully deliver major projects, including, but not limited to, procurement, project management, contract management and change management skills. This must be actioned across the NICS as a whole, with the support of NICS HR, as opposed to being addressed on a piecemeal basis across individual departments. The NICS must implement previous recommendations in this area. The NIAO is currently undertaking a follow-up report on Capacity and Capability.

Recommendation 9

The NICS must urgently address, at a system level, the adequacy of project management and delivery skills. This should include identifying the skills gap and putting clear plans in place to develop a mature NICS Project Delivery profession and ensure that sufficiently trained and skilled staff are available throughout the project life cycle. This is a service-wide issue that needs to be taken forward across the NICS. DoF should take the lead on implementing this recommendation with the support of NICS Human Resources.

Data must be managed at each stage of an IT project

5.27 The NICS holds large volumes of data, however the quality of the data can vary quite considerably – it may be incomplete, inconsistent, difficult to process, and not easily shareable. We were told there can be limited understanding of data management and the time needed to resolve issues such as cleansing and migration, security and integration is often underestimated. There are risks that an incumbent supplier will not provide the resources needed to enable planning and transition to a new supplier. To mitigate this risk there should be a clear plan to manage data throughout the life of an IT contract, through to an exit strategy. The requirements and expectations from all parties, along with timescales and cost, should be clearly set out, reviewed and updated throughout the contract. Data was one of the main issues identified in the Planning Portal case study, which resulted in delays and increased costs. We note that the Integr8, NOVA and EdIS programmes recognised the importance of managing data, and the challenges it can bring, and have established specific data strategies and/or workstreams in relation to data.

5.28 DfI identified several lessons to be learned in relation to data migration following the issues experienced in the Planning Portal:

- Ensure that the project team is adequately resourced and includes the appropriate range of skills and expertise throughout the lifetime of the project, such as a recognised data specialist. The lack of a data specialist impacted on the team's ability to effectively engage with supplier.
- Ensure there is a clear understanding of the data held on the incumbent system and if necessary, use a data specialist to provide this confidence.
- Carry out necessary data cleansing in advance of data migration to minimise the risk of data compatibility issues.
- The client to confirm dates of data transfer as early as possible.

There must be regular and meaningful engagement with stakeholders

5.29 In a similar vein to the importance of gaining social licence in the successful delivery of major capital projects, there is a need to earn the ongoing acceptance and buy-in of stakeholders in major IT projects. Good communication with users and other stakeholders should be regular and sustained throughout each stage of a project. This is particularly important for IT-enabled change projects. Ensuring all stakeholders understand the planned changes, the benefits they will bring, how they will impact them, and providing appropriate training and support is key. The importance of the need for meaningful communication was a common issue across our case studies.

Ensuring contracts are developed and managed to keep pace with new developments in technology

5.30 In the fast-paced world of technological changes, there is a risk that new IT systems can quickly become outdated. In addition to managing existing legacy IT there is a need to prevent new IT systems becoming legacy. This can be achieved through incorporating requirements for innovation and continuous improvement into contract specifications – and reviewing and managing compliance with that requirement throughout the life of the contract. We found that across all the case studies, project teams had recognised the importance of continuous improvement and innovation in contract specifications.

Overall conclusion

5.31 As far back as 2008 in its Report on Statement of Rate Levy and Collection 2006-07 (3/08/09R) the Public Accounts Committee commented that '*all public bodies need to think realistically and carefully about the number of complex change management or IT projects that they can manage and resource at the same time, particularly given the short supply of skilled and experienced project managers and specialists*'. It highlighted several lessons in implementing complex IT projects many of which based on our findings remain equally relevant today. These include:

- Strong and realistic leadership is needed to recognise what is and what is not achievable given the available timescales and resources.
- The completeness and accuracy of specifications for large, complex IT systems are essential if a system is to be successful.
- Roles and responsibilities must be clearly defined.
- Project teams must have the skills and experience proportionate to the size, complexity and importance of the project.
- Sufficient planning, time and resources must be given to the quality of data transfers and the adequacy of data testing before a system goes live.

5.32 Difficulties in successfully delivering major IT projects and keeping pace with change are not unique to Northern Ireland. The cost of ongoing contract extensions and the risks posed by maintaining legacy systems well beyond their intended lives must be recognised and addressed across the NICS. This represents very poor value for money and missed opportunities to realise the benefits that can be delivered through evolving technologies.

5.33 DoF has developed and published on the CDG website a Lessons Learned repository from major projects 2021-24. The lessons are known and have been widely reported, yet often projects are still not set up for success. Action is needed at pace to address issues, including significant skills gaps impacting at every stage of a project lifecycle, at a system level.

Recommendation 10

The NICS Board should take the lead in identifying recurrent issues impacting on the delivery of major IT projects and the lessons to be learned. A clear, timebound action plan to address these issues must be developed.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Study Methodology (paragraph 1.5)

The main elements of our review methodology were as follows:

- We engaged with staff in the Department of Finance (DoF) on a number of areas including the role of the NICS Board; the role of the Commercial Delivery Group within DoF; and the assurance procedures in place e.g. Gateway reviews and internal project team assurances.
- We issued questionnaires to each department to gain an understanding of what arrangements are in place across departments with regards to IT systems and exit plans, particularly those considered to be "legacy".
- We obtained information from government departments on the major IT projects portfolio covering the period April 2022 – March 2025.
- We obtained information from the relevant project teams on each of the case studies. Case studies were picked following consideration of a number of factors including projects which were known to us to have encountered challenges, previous NIAO and Public Accounts Committee reports and value and importance to the relevant sector.

Appendix 2: Major IT programmes and projects (in excess of £25 million whole life cost) ongoing from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2025 (paragraph 1.13)

Major IT Project	Original expiration date of legacy contract	OBC Total estimated costs £million	FBC Total estimated costs £million	Actual / latest total estimated costs £million	Increase/ (decrease) estimated costs from OBC £million	Implementation completion date	Stage project currently at	Latest project highlight report RAG status
Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs								
NIFAIS	Jun-07	58.0	75.0	75.0	17.0	Dec-25	Implementation	**Amber**
ISLAND Implementation of Laboratory Information Systems across DAERA/AFBI	May-12	58.7	69.4	69.4	10.7	Mar-27	Implementation	**Green**
SPS/Windsor Framework - EU Exit (IT Systems)	N/A - developed in-house	26.5	33.0	33.0	6.5	Mar-33	Implementation	**Green**
CAP (IT Systems)	N/A - developed in-house	43.6	63.4	63.4	19.8	Dec-25	Business-as-usual	**N/A**
Farm Sustainability Programme (IT Systems)	N/A - developed in-house	35.2	35.2	35.2	-	Not yet known	Design & Procurement	**Amber**
Total		**222.0**	**276.0**	**276.0**	**54.0**			

Major IT Project	Original expiration date of legacy contract	OBC Total estimated costs £million	FBC Total estimated costs £million	Actual / latest total estimated costs £million	Increase/ (decrease) estimated costs from OBC £million	Implementation completion date	Stage project currently at	Latest project highlight report RAG status
Department for Communities								
e3 - replacement for e2	Apr-18	71.8	57.3	57.3	(14.5)	Aug-25	Implementation	**Green**
Total		**71.8**	**57.3**	**57.3**	**(14.5)**			**Green**
Department of Education/Education Authority								
EdIS (Education information Solutions Programme) See **Case Study 4**	Mar-17	740.8	734.4	734.4	(6.4)	Mar-27	Design & Procurement	**Amber**
EA One - Oracle Integrated System	Mar-17 Mar-18	Original - 49.5 Addendum1- 60.0 Addendum2 - 78.5	78.5	78.5	-	Sep-24	Business-as-usual	**N/A**
Total		**819.3**	**812.9**	**812.9**	**(6.4)**			

Major IT Project	Original expiration date of legacy contract	OBC Total estimated costs £million	FBC Total estimated costs £million	Actual / latest total estimated costs £million	Increase/ (decrease) estimated costs from OBC £million	Implementation completion date	Stage project currently at	Latest project highlight report RAG status
Department of Finance								
LPS NOVA programme: Valuation services Services Project	Sep-17	113.5	113.5	113.5	-	Apr-29	Design & Procurement	**Amber**
LPS NOVA programme: Land Registration Project See **Case Study 3**	Jul-19	296.6	334.1	334.1	37.5	Oct-27	Design & Procurement	**Amber**
LLPS NOVA programme: Revenues & Benefits Project See **Case Study 3**	Jan-13	173.5	269.6	269.6	96.1	Oct-26	Implementation	**Green**
Integr8 Programme See **Case Study 2**	Mar-18 Mar-21	293.9	293.9	293.9	-	Mar-28	Design & Procurement	**Amber**
Digital NI Contact Centre Project	Oct-19	44.0	55.0	59.0	15.0	Oct-22	Business-as-usual	**N/A**
Civil Service Pensions Systems Project [1]	Apr-22	46.2	Not yet known	46.2	-	Not yet known	Initiation	**Red**
Total		**967.7**	**1,112.3**	**1,116.3**	**148.6**			

1 Civil Service Pensions System project - Project procurement failed due to bidder withdrawal. DoF advised that all available options are being considered to reset the project. The OBC, including estimated costs and timescales, will be revised.

Major IT Project	Original expiration date of legacy contract	OBC Total estimated costs £million	FBC Total estimated costs £million	Actual / latest total estimated costs £million	Increase/ (decrease) estimated costs from OBC £million	Implementation completion date	Stage project currently at	Latest project highlight report RAG status
Department of Health								
Northern Ireland Picture Archiving and Communication System	Sep-18	136.5	130.4	130.4	(6.1)	Dec-25	Implementation	**Green**
Northern Ireland Digitial Identity Service	Sep-21	38.2	38.1	39.3	1.1	Mar-26	Implementation	**Green**
Encompass See **Case Study 1**	Multiple contracts	982.5	1,950.0	1,930.0	947.5	Sep-27	Implementation	**Green**
Equip Programme	Oct-21	145.1	218.2	218.2	73.1	Sep-26	Implementation	**Red**
Core Laboratory Information Management System	Replaces 7 existing systems	44.0	44.0	57.8	13.8	Mar-26	Implementation	**Amber**
Regional Blood Production and Tracking Solution	Jun-23	36.0	38.9	38.9	2.9	Sep-27	Implementation	**Green**
ePharmacy Project 1 - GoPharmacy NI *Note: OBC not yet submitted, figures are estimated.*		19.4	19.4	19.4	-	Subject to funding	Initiation	**Amber**
ePharmacy Project 2 - Electronic Transfer of Prescriptions *Note: OBC not yet submitted, figures are estimated.*		38.4	38.4	38.4	-	Subject to funding	Initiation	**Amber**
Total		**1,440.1**	**2,477.4**	**2,472.4**	**1,032.3**			

Major IT Project	Original expiration date of legacy contract	OBC Total estimated costs £million	FBC Total estimated costs £million	Actual / latest total estimated costs £million	Increase/ (decrease) estimated costs from OBC £million	Implementation completion date	Stage project currently at	Latest project highlight report RAG status
Department for Infrastructure								
Planning IT System See **Case Study 5**	Sep-14	26.8	39.6	43.1	16.3	Jul-23	Business-as-usual	**N/A**
Translink Future Ticketing System	Jan-11	108.6	129.8	129.8	21.2	Mar-26	Implementation	**Green**
NI Water Telecoms Managed Service Contract Tender	Feb-24	27.5	25.1	25.1	(2.4)	Mar-24	Business-as-usual	**N/A**
NI Water Customer Contact & Billing Contract Renewal	Jul-21	79.6	79.6	79.3	(0.3)	Nov-25	Implementation	**Amber**
NI Water Future Corporate Systems	Dec-20 Nov-22	32.0	32.8	32.8	0.8	Nov-25	Implementation	**Amber**
Total		**274.5**	**306.9**	**310.1**	**35.6**			

Major IT Project	Original expiration date of legacy contract	OBC Total estimated costs £million	FBC Total estimated costs £million	Actual / latest total estimated costs £million	Increase/ (decrease) estimated costs from OBC £million	Implementation completion date	Stage project currently at	Latest project highlight report RAG status
Department of Justice								
Causeway	Mar-29	110.0	Due Dec-26	110.0	-	Apr-29	Initiation	**Amber**
Themis	Dec-23	48.9	78.1	78.1	29.2	Aug-29	Implementation	**Amber**
Total		**158.9**	**188.1**	**188.1**	**29.2**			
Totals for Major IT project portfolio		**3,954.3**	**5,230.9**	**5,233.1**	**1,278.8**			

Source: All information has been provided and verified by departments (Department for the Economy and the Executive Office had nil returns)

Notes:
Not all projects have an FBC. Where that is the case, we have included the estimated figures for costs per the OBC for both the OBC and FBC.

Changes between OBC and FBC - Departments told us that the scope and final solution of IT projects can change considerably as projects evolve, particularly during the design and development phases and the current business case approach does not reflect this more agile methodology.

Appendix 3: Outline of Gateway review process and corresponding business cases (paragraph 2.7)

The following table highlights the Gateway™ milestone/gate that corresponds with each business case stage.

Business Case Stage	NI Gateway™ Review milestone/gate
High-Level	0 Strategic Assessment
Strategic Outline Case (SOC)	1 Business Justification
Outline Business Case (OBC)	2 Delivery Strategy
Full Business Case (FBC)	3 Investment Decision
Implementation	4 Readiness for Service
Benefits Realisation	5 Benefits Evaluation

Gate 0 applies only to programmes and may be repeated at key stages throughout the programme. Typically Gate 0 reviews are carried at the start of the programme, during programme delivery, and at programme close. This Review investigates the direction and planned outcomes of the programme, together with the progress of its constituent projects.

Gateway review reports will give the programme/project a Stage Gate Assessment (Red, Amber or Green) and recommend the date the next assurance review should take place. The assessments are defined as:

GREEN - successful delivery of the programme or project to time, cost and quality appears highly likely and there are no major outstanding issues that, at this stage, appear to threaten delivery significantly.
AMBER - successful delivery of the programme or project to time, cost and quality appears feasible but significant issues already exist requiring management attention; these appear resolvable at this stage and, if addressed promptly, should not present a cost or schedule overrun.
RED - successful delivery of the programme or project to time, cost and quality appears to be unachievable; there are major issues which, at this stage, do not appear to be manageable or resolvable, the programme or project may need re-baselining and/or its overall viability to be re-assessed.

Source: Department of Finance

NIAO Reports:
2024 and 2025

NIAO Reports 2024 and 2025

Title	Date Published
Tackling the Public Health Impacts of Smoking and Vaping	30 January 2024
Major Capital Projects: Follow-up Report	27 February 2024
Child Poverty in Northern Ireland	12 March 2024
Access to General Practice in Northern Ireland	20 March 2024
Water Quality in Northern Ireland's Rivers and Lakes	25 March 2024
Funding water infrastructure in Northern Ireland	27 March 2024
Budgeting and Accountability	24 May 2024
Review of Waste Management in Northern Ireland	05 July 2024
Continuous Improvement Arrangements in Policing	05 July 2024
Public Bodies' Response to Misrepresented Soil Analysis	05 July 2024
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