Government has still a great deal to learn about how to use IT effectively – a new select committee inquiry aims to discover ways to improve the Government's poor track record

Government's procurement and management of large IT projects has been patchy in the last decade, with criticisms of long delays and cost overruns from many quarters. In light of the current government's push for greater efficiencies and need for cost savings, **Bernard Jenkin MP***, Chair of the Public Administration Select Committee will be investigating how government develops and implements IT projects.*

The public sector is perhaps the biggest single purchaser of IT systems in the UK today; it spent around £16 billion in 2009. Government is a knowledge intensive business, so having IT systems which deliver is essential to ensure that citizens receive high quality public services.

Over the past 20 years there have been a number of high cost IT initiatives which have run late, under-performed or failed; overshadowing successful projects. In 2004, the National Audit Office reviewed the Government's delivery of major IT-enabled projects. It noted that "*The history of [IT] procurements has not been good, with repeated incidences of overspends, delays, performance shortfalls and abandonment at major cost.*" With Government departments being expected to make efficiency savings across the board, this poor record has damaging implications.

But there is also a great deal of scope for cost savings and improved public services if Government can get this right.

The Public Administration Select Committee (PASC) has launched an inquiry looking at how the Government uses and procures Information and Communication Technology (ICT) We are particularly keen to investigate how the Government can use IT to transform how it delivers public services; and the potential of Open Source, Cloud Computing and Agile Development to revolutionise the way Government uses and thinks about IT.

Part of the problem appears to be the panoply of overlapping government organisations responsible for ICT strategies in certain areas. While the Cabinet Office has the ultimate responsibility for government ICT policy and strategy, there are still no fewer than nine government departments that are responsible for getting more people online. There have been at least 30 cross government ICT initiatives since 2000; government departments have had to keep abreast of these and have implemented them with varying levels of success over the years.

And the civil service has sometimes been short changed because it has lacked relevant expertise. The introduction of the Chief Information Officer Council to disseminate best practice was supposed to counter this. And Government also tried to create greater ownership of projects within departments through the role of the Senior Responsible Owner. However, these roles have been beset by high turnover and sometimes the individuals have lacked project management and technical skills.

In terms of IT procurement, the UK government is clearly not using its substantial buying power to achieve cost savings. Government bodies often do not collaborate in procurement and enter into separate agreement with major ICT corporations.

There is also a lack of competition in the market for government contracts. 80 per cent of government work is undertaken by only 18 suppliers. We welcome the Government's intention to open IT contracts to more SMEs; the challenge is finding way to make this happen

Changes to Government IT are already underway. In June 2010, the Cabinet Office formed the Efficiency and Reform Group, with the aim to enable better delivery and improve procurement across government. This group has since introduced a moratorium on new ICT contracts greater than £1 million across government, reviewed all projects over £1 million in value, and has begun negotiations with key ICT suppliers aimed at reducing contract costs in the future.

The Cabinet Office business plan, published last November, also lists a number of actions on IT designed to "to drive efficiency and effectiveness in government". These include integrating IT infrastructure across government and improving value for money; improving rules for designing and running IT initiatives and increasing online service delivery. Even at this early stage, savings of £1 billion have been reported – and these may total £3 billion by year's end.

It is clear that major reforms are needed in this area, and there is a great potential for savings and efficiencies to be made, while revolutionising how public services are delivered. Our inquiry into the effective use of IT in government is therefore very timely.

Helen Margetts and Ian Brown of the Oxford Internet Institute, and Dr Edgar Whitely of the LSE will be giving oral evidence to the Public Administration Select Committee's inquiry into the Government's use of IT, from 10:30am on 8 March. This session can be viewed on Parliament TV from 10:30am.

The Public Administration Select Committee is inviting written evidence on issues relating to this inquiry. Full details are set out in their issues and questions paper.