



Communities and Local Government

Homes for the future: more affordable, more sustainable

Northgate Information Solutions' response to the Housing Green Paper

October 2007

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Introduction

1. Northgate welcomes the opportunity to respond to the government's Green Paper: 'Homes for the future'.
2. We wholeheartedly support the government's objective of building affordable and sustainable housing through working in partnership with local authorities, developers, tenants and wider communities.
3. This document provides some general comments on the role of housing and planning in delivering community well-being; the need to maximise the sustainability of new homes and the management of existing homes; and how partnership working can be improved so as to meet the needs of all members of our communities.

Community well-being

4. All citizens have the right to enjoy accessible and responsive public services, able to deliver sustained improvement to the quality of life. It is fundamental to community well-being. Community well-being is founded on trust between local citizens and public authorities. Where there is perceived inactivity on the part of public authorities in dealing with citizens' day to day concerns, people are less likely to trust their ability to deliver fair and efficient public services.
5. Affordable and sustainable housing delivered through a simpler and more streamlined planning system, accessible to all, is central to the creation of 'successful places' and the well-being of our communities. Yet many individuals and families are living in sub-standard accommodation that is failing to meet their needs, contributing to unhealthy, unhappy lives and causing unnecessary damage to the environment.
6. The challenge is to work in effective partnerships to deliver personalised housing services that meet the needs of all members of the community and the needs of future generations.
7. We support the introduction of powers for local authorities to build new homes. The work of local authorities is critical in ensuring that a range of organisations, communities and individuals can work effectively and efficiently to improve the availability and standards of housing in their area. The provision of more public sector land for housing development is essential to the success of this initiative, and we welcome the intention to earmark 50% of this land for affordable housing.

Place-shaping

8. Northgate welcomes the increased role for local authorities in place-shaping, as envisaged by the Lyons review, and the green paper's proposal that the Homes and Communities Agency will support local councils in the exercise of this role. The wider place-shaping agenda, which Lyons explained as the 'creative use of powers and influence to promote the

general well-being of a community and its citizens', presents an opportunity to enhance the role of elected members and council executives and to deliver the results that showcase their role as agents for transformation within their local communities.

9. Registered social landlords as providers of social housing are also playing a wider role in contributing to place-shaping within their local community through, for example, the provision of employment training.
10. Social housing is of considerable importance in providing sustainable communities and in enabling low income households to access higher quality housing than they would be able to in the private sector, and it is essential that all housing providers are empowered to contribute fully to the government's vision for change.

Participation and engagement

11. The success of the place-shaping agenda relies on the ability of local authorities to engage with their communities in the process, to secure buy-in through consulting and communicating effectively, and to deliver the results that local residents wish to see to build public trust.
12. In a response to an earlier consultation on the Homes and Communities Agency, we welcomed its proposed establishment as a means of providing a more coherent approach to the delivery of housing programmes. We stressed that the design of the new agency and its investment decisions should be responsive to the diverse needs of tenants and local communities. Northgate would like to see greater consideration of how citizens from every community can be fully engaged in the place-shaping process to ensure that the vision of the housing green paper can be realised.

Social housing tenants

13. Ensuring that existing housing stock is well-managed and maintained remains crucial, as too is the need to provide a framework in which social housing tenants are empowered to engage and participate in service delivery and housing management. We welcome the commitment to make at least £2 billion available to ALMOs for the Decent Homes programme over the next three years.
14. Both our own experience in working in partnership with small, medium-sized and larger social housing providers and extensive research carried out throughout the sector show that, despite improvements over recent years, tenants continue to have relatively high levels of dissatisfaction with their landlords. At the same time, some social housing providers are under extreme financial pressure to provide services within the context of making cashable and non-cashable efficiency gains.
15. Meeting these challenges requires new forms of leadership, management and collaboration which encourage inclusion and the engagement of tenants in shaping and delivering services that meet their needs.
16. Furthermore, the regulatory regime needs to be comprehensive, consistent, clear, accessible and accountable to citizens and local communities. Northgate warmly welcomes the

government's recent announcement that the social housing regulator will be established as an independent standalone body, as recommended by the Cave review.

Sustainability

17. To meet the challenge of climate change, Northgate supports the commitment that all new homes will be zero carbon from 2016. The ongoing implementation of Energy Performance Certificates will also support energy efficiency improvements in existing homes through providing consumers with accurate information on the energy performance of their current or prospective homes.
18. We recognise that the creation of eco-towns will provide valuable opportunities for innovation in terms of technologies and policies, and hope that measures are put in place to ensure that the lessons learnt from these innovations are able to be transferred into existing communities where and when appropriate.
19. We welcome the commitment to working with organisations such as the Energy Saving Trust to provide householders with information on how they can access grants, for example for microgeneration. Northgate would also like to see consideration of the role of financial instruments, for example green mortgages, to incentivise home owners to take action to reduce their home's carbon footprint as well to effectively measure it.

Effective partnerships

20. Supporting local authorities in their place-shaping role requires new forms of leadership and collaboration. In the context of public spending constraints, shared services could be considered as a tool to free up front-line workers to focus on making partnerships work.

Shared services

21. It is important that any shared service arrangement is facilitated by organisations with a clear perception of public service provision. Private sector public service providers need to understand how public services differ from private services in order to add to the public value. If not, it is likely that this could result in public value failure.
22. Public value failure occurs when neither the market nor the public sector provides the goods and services required to achieve core public values. Irrespective of who delivers the service, the culture and values of the provider must reflect the public ethos in order to achieve added public value and deliver high quality services.
23. In a democracy the public defines the value of public services, and part of the legitimacy of government rests on how much it adds to the public value. Governments provide public services not only because there is market failure, but also to satisfy public preference. Public services have multiple objectives, including the delivery of ethical, accountable and inclusive services, efficient outcomes, customer satisfaction, legitimacy, and trust. Unlike private companies in the UK, where shareholder views are often aligned there may be widely differing preferences concerning public services and delivery, for example on traditional notions of social justice and redistribution.

24. If the private sector is to engage effectively in the delivery of shared services then it must demonstrate its understanding of the public ethos in order to build up trust and develop effective partnerships across public agencies.
25. Northgate would like to see new performance partnerships developing between local authorities and the private sector that are based on outcomes, shared ownership and skills transfer, rather than the purchasing of discrete products or services. We would also like to see more extensive use of proof of concept work to help prevent the large scale service failures of the past.

New technology

26. Northgate believes that new technology has the potential to drive through radical improvements to housing and planning services, but only where people are placed at the heart of new and existing systems. This is not only about citizen-focus but also about prioritising, preparing and energising front-line staff to enable them to make a real impact.
27. New technology adds value when it provides the best practical solution and enhances relationships between people and between organisations. It can assist in managing scarce resources, in joining up services and in reducing bureaucracy – allowing public authorities to focus on service delivery.
28. Technology can also help inform staff how well they are achieving things that matter to citizens, and many organisations have developed proactive communications campaigns designed to ensure that target audiences are fully aware of improvements and can feed into the process. Without such processes in place, organisations may find that they replace one outmoded system with a modern so-called ‘solution’ which fails to meet citizens’ needs and damages trust rather than builds it. It is essential that any investment in technology delivers value-added rewards in terms of improved delivery of services and increased trust.

Reaching out

29. Citizens increasingly expect services to be personalised to their needs. We would like to see greater use of new and innovative forms of communication to reach out to diverse communities.
30. The proactive use of mobile technology can support this process through supporting efficiency gains whilst ensuring that organisations are able to target and support hard-to-reach groups effectively and deliver personalised services to all.
31. When combined with the ability to integrate information systems across the range of agencies responsible for delivering housing and support services, mobile technology can enable significant improvements in the consistency, immediacy and responsiveness of service provision. In addition, there are unrealised benefits in the application of technology to support the independence of older persons and vulnerable members of our communities, and we would like to see innovative approaches piloted to establish a way forward that delivers best value.

About Northgate

Northgate is a technology services company with a difference. It is committed to high quality public services and understands the public sector. That knowledge is core to its business. Northgate's task is to enhance public sector value through the intelligent use of people and information technology systems and to share in the economic and social benefits that this brings.

Northgate assists the public sector to promote community well-being by helping them provide citizens with accessible and responsive one-stop services based on clear and detailed information; by engaging with public sector employees to transfer and enhance skills; and by working with public sector management to enhance performance management. In housing, Northgate works with over ninety clients assisting them in the management of over three million local authority and housing association properties worldwide.

Further information

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