



Communities and Local Government

Planning for a Sustainable Future: White Paper

Northgate Information Solutions' response

August 2007

Planning for a Sustainable Future

Introduction

1. Northgate Information Solutions welcomes the proposals in *Planning for a Sustainable Future* to improve the planning system to respond to the growing complexity of global challenges such as climate change and the need to promote healthy, sustainable communities.
2. An effective and efficient planning system is essential to the quality of people's lives, and it must ensure that local communities have a voice which is listened to and taken into account.
3. Our response focuses in particular on the need to ensure that decision-making is taken at as local a level as possible, and that citizens fully understand the process of planning, have trust in the process and can participate within it.

The need for change

4. Northgate agrees that there is a strong case for reforming the current system. Whilst there have been advances in promoting efficient and effective planning policy, as the white paper recognises, there is a pressing need to do more, particularly in meeting citizens' needs for a system which is transparent, accountable and deemed to be fair.
5. The existence of multiple consent regimes creates confusion amongst local communities, which is both costly and wasteful. Furthermore, as the white paper recognises, decisions are not always taken at the right level, with too much decision-making centralised and distant from local needs. At the same time, there is a need to ensure that decisions about those developments which have national and regional impacts are taken at the appropriate level.

Northgate's response

6. Northgate welcomes the overall package of reforms proposed by the government and its commitment to introduce responsive planning which integrates economic, social and environmental objectives.

Promoting community inclusion

7. It is clear that there is a need to shift community engagement away from process to practical involvement. Whilst we welcome the government's proposals to enhance community engagement at each of the three key stages of the new regime, we believe that the white paper does not provide enough detail to ensure best practice in promoting community engagement. Nor does it focus on the methods of communications which can maximise community engagement and participation and promote inclusion.
8. It is essential for the needs of particular stakeholder groups to be specifically catered for within the new system. For example: those who are 'time poor' with limited ability to participate in inquiries, hearings or open floor stage processes, but who nevertheless have strong views; people who may require interpretation and translation if English is not their first

language; people with disabilities who may have difficulties accessing services; and communities which are geographically isolated.

9. Furthermore, the use of new technology to promote inclusion should be considered. For an increasing number of organisations and individuals, the opportunities offered by new technology and the internet are being used to encourage two-way interactive communications and consultations.
10. Finally, we take the view that the planning process needs to be opened up by maximising new and less formal methods of communication, such as online consultations, stakeholder workshops, focus groups and the use of citizens' juries, as well as ensuring that there is effective feedback to participants. This feedback should demonstrate that views have been taken into account, and outline the reasons why suggestions or proposals were accepted or rejected.
11. In all these areas listed above, we believe that there should be a statutory framework for community engagement which is consistent at all levels and stages of the new planning regime and which provides citizens and communities with greater clarity. This legal framework should lay down the general principles and guidelines for promoting community engagement which meets the needs of all those within the community and reaches out to those considered to be 'hard to reach' groups.

National policy statements

12. Whilst we welcome the introduction of national policy statements governing key infrastructure sectors to provide a clearer framework for promoters, planners and communities, and accept that the precise nature of consultation will depend in part on the content (page 51), we are concerned that there is not enough detail on the methods by which inclusive consultation can be carried out.
13. We recommend that national policy statement consultation guidelines should be drawn up following discussions with key stakeholders, and that these should be consistent with the principles for community involvement set out by the former ODPM. We also recommend the replacement of the requirement for local authorities to provide Statements of Community Involvement (SCIs) with the new statutory best value duty to appropriately involve, as well as inform and consult, in all aspects of a local authority's business.
14. We are aware that the government is currently inviting views on effective consultation and recommend that the national policy statement guidelines are consistent with any changes made to the Code of Practice on Consultation.
15. We advocate that these guidelines, as in Sweden, are enshrined in law with the objective of consulting with all communities with a legitimate interest in a particular planning development. We applaud the example of the Republic of Ireland's guidelines 'Reaching out' which requires public bodies to consider issues such as whether the needs of "non-traditional" stakeholders are taken into account and whether the consultation has been published in online and offline media.

16. Northgate also welcomes Parliamentary scrutiny for the proposed national policy statements, as well as 10-25 years being the right forward horizon the statements.

Promoters of nationally significant infrastructure projects

17. Northgate welcomes the proposal that promoters should have to prepare applications to a defined standard, and believes that early and inclusive consultation is essential for a sustainable programme of development. We agree that developers should be required to consult the public before submitting an application to the infrastructure planning commission and recommend that the nature of this consultation should be governed by national guidelines consistent with those for the other two stages of the proposed planning regime. This should be included in statute.
18. We believe that under the new regime it would not be appropriate for government to draw up these guidelines, and that responsibility and ownership should lie squarely with the new commission under the direction of law.
19. To safeguard the public interest, we also welcome the proposal that promoters should consult with their local authorities at an early stage and that, as elected bodies, they should have a designated status over and above the proposed list of statutory consultees. Unlike other statutory consultees, local authorities should be required to give their views to the commission in line with the government's commitment to strengthen the role of local authorities in place shaping and put planning at the centre of their activities.

The national commission

20. Northgate welcomes the establishment of a new independent commission and the government's commitment to enable 'hard to reach' groups to participate within the consultation process for nationally significant infrastructure projects. We are concerned that the white paper fails to map out the ways in which the proposed commission might engage groups who are hard to reach and help build their capacity to participate fully in the inquiry process. For example, consideration should be given to the development of online public consultation and the use of community TV.
21. We also recommend that at least one of the Commissioners within the new body be appointed with the particular remit of representing the community interest.

Planning for sustainable development

22. The increased focus on economic development within the planning process is a good step forwards, and the proposed planning policy statement on Planning for Economic Development is a welcome initiative.

Local authorities and place shaping

23. When used strategically and with a forward-looking approach, planning can be a dynamic tool for creating healthy, thriving and sustainable communities. We welcome the introduction

of the duty to involve, and recommend that similar duties are established in the three key stages of the new planning regime.

A more efficient planning system

24. We welcome the government's commitment to streamlining the existing system which will help to reduce the burdens currently place on communities and the planning authorities by unnecessary and wasteful bureaucracy.
25. Northgate believes that new technology has the potential to drive through radical improvements to public services and to the planning regime, 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.

New technology

26. New technology adds value when it provides the best practical solution and enhances relationships between people. It can assist in managing scarce resources, in joining up services and in reducing bureaucracy to allow public authorities to focus on service delivery.
27. Northgate works with public authorities across the country to support them in managing their customers' needs through to the end of any process, keeping them informed of progress and of the service levels that they can expect.
28. Technology can also help inform staff how well they are achieving things that matter to citizens, and many organisation 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.

Conclusion

29. In conclusion, Northgate welcomes the white paper on planning as a major step forward in encouraging a dynamic and streamlined planning system and processes which can contribute to the development of healthy and sustainable communities. However, it is essential that the framework for community engagement is joined up within the new system and that new and dynamic forms of communications are used for maximum beneficial impact.

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.

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