

Response to consultation document on futurebuilders

Northgate Information Solutions

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Introduction

As a provider of information technology solutions to the public sector, Northgate welcomes the introduction of a futurebuilders' fund to enhance the critical role that the community and voluntary sector is playing in developing community well-being and justice.

We warmly welcome the fact that the government has prioritised issues relating to crime and social cohesion. Northgate firmly believes that criminal justice has to be placed within a wider context of 'community justice' and social well-being. Demoralised communities living in run-down or neglected environments need to know that broader social issues such as poverty and anti-social behaviour will be tackled. And when crimes are reported, but nothing done, then the community becomes a victim too.

For Northgate, community justice is about both help and punishment. It promotes social inclusion and enforces the administration of civil and criminal justice. Deep rooted problems such as poverty and social deprivation must be tackled alongside crime 'hot spots'. Public service delivery cannot afford to separate these issues, because the public does not make such distinctions.

We also welcome the fact that the fund will include provision for new technology to promote modernisation and the effective delivery of public services by the community and voluntary sector. Our response focuses on how the fund could assist in developing a problem solving and partnership approach to the use of new technology to deliver citizen-based services. It is based on our experience of extensive working with local authorities and police forces in developing community justice based solutions.

Guiding principles of the fund

Northgate fully supports the approach outlined in the consultation document which seeks to showcase best practice (para 2.3) and believes that such an approach is particularly suited to the funding and management of new technology within the community and voluntary sector.

In the public sector, over-hyping claims of what technology can achieve has, in the past, led to large-scale and high-profile failures. Successful IT, first and foremost, should serve people. Our experience is that large IT projects are delivered well, but the overall programme is often delivered badly. Too little consideration is given to the impact of new working methods on communication – to employees, to public service users or the general public. The thoughtless introduction of technology, or even too much thinking around technical excellence alone, can undermine service delivery.

Therefore an approach which focuses simply on providing a wider range of organisations with "new kit" will be unable to harness the full potential of information technology which, when carefully managed, can transform public services in the interests of the citizen user.

The 4 'C's Approach

Our view is that the fund should take an in-depth approach to the funding of information technology based on the 4 'C's approach. This consists of:

- communication first
- collaboration
- community inclusion and
- community justice

If the community and voluntary sector is to build up its capacity through the effective use of the fund, then due consideration should be given to effective change management strategies which prepare relevant staff, plan the impact on service development and introduce pre-emptive measures to deal with new demand. Enhanced communications with the citizen must be placed at the heart of everything that is done.

Collaboration is sometimes difficult to achieve. At its best, it creates an open learning environment where people can experiment, learn from experience and share information to drive through a programme of continuous improvement that creates real public value. Far greater use should be made of learning from organisations that have built up dynamic centres of excellence. We believe that you need both strong leadership and informed suppliers who work on a mutual basis to deliver community solutions. Just as you need strong leadership at the top, you need to maintain an unbroken chain of ownership and responsibility.

In the future, the lines of responsibility and accountability for community justice and well-being will become increasingly blurred and require even greater levels of collaboration between local authorities, the criminal justice system and the community and voluntary sector.

Citizens are both users and deliverers, and they should be collaborators. We can use technology to bring a fresh approach to public consultation. And we can also use it to engage citizens in the delivery of local justice. Involving service users – such as witnesses and victims – in developing practical solutions to problems is critical. So too is enabling citizens to be active participants in regaining control over their communities – in problem-solving and change management. And it is here that the diversity and range of community and voluntary sector projects, with their close links to the community, have a clear role to play.

We have to place criminal justice within a wider context of 'community justice' and social well-being. Fear often outweighs the reality of crime, and demoralised communities living in run-down or neglected environments need to know that the broader social issues will be tackled. When crimes are reported, but nothing done, then the community becomes a victim too.

Business and technical support

We welcome the proposal that the fund should proactively offer business support to the community and voluntary sector, but think that the form of technical assistance should go beyond financial assistance as currently proposed. In the area of information technology, many organisations could benefit from information sharing not only within the community and voluntary sector but also from opening up access across the range of public and non-profit making organisations within a given community. New technology provides the means to do this. Consideration should be given to providing technical assistance in this area – this could be achieved by harnessing the services of the private sector on a low-cost basis.

About Northgate

Northgate is a technology company with a difference. We are committed to high quality public services. And we understand the public sector. We know how it works, some of its problems and most of its challenges. That knowledge is core to our business. Our clear customer focus and collaborative approach has helped us to work with 49 out of 52 police authorities and nearly a quarter of local authorities. Our task is to enhance public sector value through intelligent use of information technology and to share in the economic and social benefits that this brings.

Northgate assists local authorities and the police to raise local standards by helping them provide citizens with accessible and responsive one-stop services. Our local authority clients at Halton and Swale have won awards in recognition of their contribution to e-government. We provide enforcement systems for Transport for London's congestion charging scheme. We are the provider of penalty notice enforcement systems to the police, and manage benefits system for local authorities such as Camden, streamlining the benefits process and allowing citizens easier access to the support that they need.