

Response to Home Office green paper

Policing: building safer communities together

Northgate Information Solutions' response

January 2004

Policing: building safer communities together

Introduction

Northgate warmly welcomes the government's green paper on the future of policing. Strengthening the links between police forces, the wider police family and the communities they serve is crucial to delivering a high quality police service that enjoys the support, trust and direct involvement of local citizens.

The police service alone cannot deliver safer neighbourhoods. Joint working between the police, local authorities, emergency services and the wider community is essential to delivering community justice, and we welcome the green paper's proposals for 'policing by cooperation'.

There is no one-size fits all solution to local policing. Local flexibility should operate within a national framework. This allows citizens to benefit from local initiatives and engagement, safe in the knowledge that they are not subject to a postcode lottery.

The Police Reform Act 2002 brought forward a number of changes to deliver a modernised service, and the Anti-social Behaviour Act 2003 brings new powers to tackle minor crime. It is time to build upon these changes to deliver a truly accountable and responsive police service based around the needs of citizens.

Community engagement

Visible policing for visible improvement

Increased community engagement is crucial to maintaining support for and trust in the police service. This is true across all public services. People need to understand broadly how a service works and who is responsible in order to feel secure that their needs or concerns will be dealt with quickly and effectively.

Visibility is a key component of community engagement. Given appropriate training and resources, we welcome the use of community support officers (CSOs) and accredited community safety officers (ACSOs) as a means of increasing visibility and reducing the administrative burden on the police.

Access to information

The green paper focuses on public access to information as a key part of community engagement. People should know who their local beat officer is and what is being done to tackle crime in their area.

Data collection is also an essential part of a modernised police service. Forces can monitor, predict, prevent and tackle crime more efficiently through the use of technology. Data on policing and crime figures can also be useful ways of demonstrating improvement or highlighting problems, and it is essential that local people know where and how they can access this information, should they need to.

The media is often an essential tool for communicating new initiatives and conducting public information campaigns, but access to information alone will not deliver trust in the police service if people do not feel safe and secure in their local area. Communities want to see crime reduction programmes working in practice. They need effective implementation, not statistics.

Delivering safer communities

Local people place quality of life issues such as fear of crime and minor disorder at the top of their priorities. These issues matter greatly to local communities because they affect their lives most. Where people feel that their day-to-day concerns are being ignored, they are less likely to trust the ability of public authorities to deliver fair and efficient public services. We welcome the Anti-social Behaviour Act 2003 which brings new powers to tackle these quality of life issues whilst reducing the administrative burden on police officers and the courts.

Building on the Police Reform Act 2002 and the Criminal Justice and Police Act 2001, the Anti-social Behaviour Act brings local authorities and the wider police family new powers to deal quickly and effectively with minor crime and disorder through the use of penalty notices.

Penalty notices

Used appropriately, penalty notices can be an effective way of dealing with high-volume low-level crime, environmental and social nuisance and other forms of minor civil infringements of the law which are currently either processed through the courts or where no action is currently taken. They give public authorities with limited resources an additional means of dealing efficiently with minor offences. A proactive approach to promoting community safety and well-being, backed up by a system of penalty notice administration where clear and decisive action is taken to tackle individual concerns, could help to enhance public trust and improve service delivery.

Training and best practice: Whilst penalty notices may provide an efficient and cost-effective means of dealing with minor offences, the penalty notice system is only as fair as it is operated. This means that particular attention should be paid to the training and resources of those who issue and enforce them. Police officers, CSOs and accredited persons should be adequately equipped to understand how human rights and diversity issues impact on service delivery and be able to deal with the public in a courteous, fair, equitable and consistent fashion. Penalty notices must be used proportionately and flexibly.

Education and effective enforcement: Any extended use of penalty notices must take place as part of a comprehensive education and enforcement programme, with clear standards set for the quality of enforcement. Enforcement systems must be responsive, transparent, accountable, equitable and audited.

Private sector involvement

The green paper rightly identifies the private sector as a key partner in tackling crime. Engaging with community safety agencies to prevent crimes against businesses, or on private sector property, makes sound financial sense.

Northgate also believes that businesses should take responsibility for their action or inaction at work that affects the quality of life of their employees. For example, effective enforcement of health and safety offences at work will contribute to well-being in the wider community. We would like to see the increased use of penalty notices against organisations as well as individuals in order to reinforce a culture of respect in the workplace.

Accountability

Leadership and structures

We welcome the introduction of a Police Leadership Centre. Strong leadership is essential to maintaining public confidence.

If people are to have trust in the police service, we must develop citizen-based services in which individuals actively contribute to more effective community policing. Within a national framework, local priorities should be determined by a combination of people's needs and an area's problems, taking into account the difference in policing required in rural areas and large conurbations.

The public benefits most from services that are based on a real understanding of their needs. Citizens need reassurance that their community safety concerns will be dealt with effectively. A thorough understanding of structures and accountability within the police service may be essential for those operating within it. This level of understanding is not as crucial for individual citizens. Delivering a citizen centred police service does not require the police to communicate the structure of a Basic Command Unit, or how BCUs work within forces.

Success comes through innovation and collaboration between all stakeholders, be they businesses, voluntary bodies, statutory agencies or individual citizens.

New technology can improve responsiveness

Used appropriately, new technology can transform public services by redefining the relationship between the service and the citizen. But only if the relevant change management strategies have been put in place can technology add value to services. Prior to new services being introduced, staff should be prepared, the impact on service development analysed and pre-emptive measures be put in place to deal with any new demand.

Northgate supports the introduction of a new three-digit number for non-emergency calls to reduce the number of unnecessary 999 calls and to improve citizens' access to services. This number could also be used to access a wider range of public services across organisations such as local authorities and the voluntary sector where appropriate. We believe that this could have a significant impact on citizens' access to public services, and we would like to see government bring forward further consultation to allow the options to be explored more fully. An incremental rather than 'big bang' approach could be considered to allow the services available through this number to be added in stages.

Partnership working

Although central government has prioritised crime and anti-social behaviour as a key policy area, Audit Commission research demonstrates only too clearly that much more needs to be done at a local level to enhance community safety. In part, we think this failure stems from an implementation gap where policy is designed at the top and implemented with differing degrees of success at the bottom. The key to success is to narrow this implementation gap and, within a broad national framework, give local communities the tools to regain control. An effective community safety programme requires effective agency collaboration and focused planning.

Crime and anti-social behaviour does not respect boundaries. The sharing of information between all agencies responsible for community justice is crucial. Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs) could be a useful forum for the development of an holistic approach to tackling low-level crime. A collaborative approach, working closely with local authorities and other enforcement agencies and emergency services would appear to deliver the greatest benefit to the community.

Northgate believes that local communities have a powerful role to play in promoting community justice and in crime prevention and reduction programmes. Local people need to feed into existing forums, bringing a fresh approach and contributing to the development of practical solutions. Northgate welcomes proposals for the introduction of neighbourhood panels as a means of bringing additional resources to local communities to improve their quality of life. There is no one size fits all solution, and government must ensure that there is flexibility to develop local solutions across a range of communities.

We support a broadening out of current oversight arrangements to encompass all agencies with responsibility for community safety and justice, so that quality of life issues such as litter, poor lighting and noise nuisance are dealt with alongside crime and public safety.

Operational effectiveness

The green paper requests views on changes to the structure of the police force. As responsibility for community safety becomes increasingly fragmented, this is a timely assessment. Citizen centred services must remain the goal of police reform, placing an ever increasing emphasis on the wider police family. At a national and local level, the maintenance of security and the fight against serious crime must be sustained and strengthened.

We believe that there are a number of areas where responsibility could be moved away from the police, and we look forward to sharing our views on police powers when the consultation is published. Any change in structure should be undertaken following a fundamental reassessment of responsibility for public safety issues across the board, involving the emergency services, criminal justice bodies and local authorities.

Modernisation

Northgate supports the modernisation of the police service in order to focus fully on the citizen. There is no one size fits all approach to policing across the country. Police forces should be responsive to local citizens' needs, which may mean something quite different for different communities.

Northgate welcomes the green paper's focus on providing additional flexibility for police forces through earned autonomy. However, government should also give consideration to encouraging shared autonomy. Such a system could provide new opportunities to encourage the range of services covering community safety to work collaboratively.

Further information

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About Northgate Information Solutions

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.

At Northgate we are sensitive to the internal requirements of our public sector customers, the process of public service delivery and the wider policy agenda surrounding public services. We develop solutions that take all three into account and understand the relationship between them.

Northgate supplies innovative technology solutions to the public sector. Our clear customer focus and collaborative approach has helped us to work with all 52 police authorities and over a quarter of local authorities. Our task is to enhance public sector value through the intelligent use of information technology and to share in the economic and social benefits that this brings.

Northgate helps communities to achieve a safer, cleaner and healthier environment by tackling the issues that are most important to local people, from anti-social behaviour to urban congestion. We believe that citizens should be at the heart of public services and be active participants in the delivery of local solutions.

New powers often create new headaches for public authorities, pressed for time and resources. With over thirty years of experience, Northgate's no-nonsense approach helps our partners meet changing demands with the minimum of fuss. We give public authorities the support to innovate and experiment, developing new responses to long-standing problems and anticipating problems that may arise in the future.

- Northgate assists local authorities, the police and the emergency services to raise local standards by helping them provide citizens with accessible and responsive one-stop services. Our local authority clients at Halton and Swale Borough Councils have won awards in recognition of their contribution to e-government.
- Northgate helps deliver solutions to high-profile environmental problems. We provide enforcement systems for Transport for London's congestion charging scheme, reducing delays and pollution in the capital.
- Northgate works in partnership with the government and police to give forces and local authorities the tools they need to deal effectively and efficiently

with anti-social behaviour. We are the biggest provider of penalty notice software systems to the police.

- Northgate provides managed services across numerous sectors, public and private, including the first fully managed service for Devon & Cornwall Police Authority.
- Northgate helps the emergency and other services to co-ordinate their work, providing them with the means to predict and prevent emergencies and crimes from occurring in the first place and to allow them to use their resources in the most efficient and effective of fashions.
- Northgate supports national road safety and local traffic management strategies. We are the UK's leading provider of vehicle penalty and fixed penalty enforcement systems.
- Northgate manages benefit systems for local authorities such as Camden, streamlining the benefits process and allowing citizens easier access to the support that they need.
- Northgate works in close partnership with many public sector organizations such as the GLA, helping them focus on the delivery of their core services by managing a wide range of human resource tasks, such as payroll, that require high levels of administration.

Northgate's services allow public authorities to focus on public service delivery, reducing the administrative burden. By using our systems, public authorities spend less time chasing the paper trail and more time improving the quality of life for local communities and their citizens.

Northgate helps public authorities to implement national policy through local delivery. When public authorities benefit, the community does too.