

Labour Party

Big Conversation

Northgate Information Solutions' response

August 2004

Big Conversation

Introduction

1. Northgate warmly welcomes the opportunity to contribute to public policy development through the Big Conversation. We are committed to fully engaging in the public policy process. Our response focuses on three main areas of the Big Conversation: community safety, transport and health.
2. We believe that partnership working is the key to efficient and effective public services; services that are trusted to deliver by the public. Without strong partnerships operating between and within government, and between government and the private and not-for-profit sector, that public's faith in public services can be undermined. Only by working collaboratively with all stakeholders - the citizens that access public services, the employees who deliver them, and the private and not-for-profit organisations that support them - will public authorities be able to harness expertise and share best practice.
3. Critical to the successful delivery of public services is that employees at all levels are enabled to make informed decisions on the basis of accurate information. Information technology can support this process through ensuring that all relevant data is collected, analysed and delivered to the right people at the right time. It can also enhance strategic decision making through predictive analysis and risk management.

Community safety

4. For Northgate, community safety is an essential part of community justice. Community justice promotes social inclusion by tackling poverty and deprivation and properly enforces the administration of civil and criminal justice. It is about both help and punishment.

Policing and the wider police family

5. 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.
6. The wider police family is already contributing to community policing. PCSOs are increasingly accepted as an essential resource; reducing the

burden on police officers; dealing with low-level and nuisance offending; and providing visible reassurance to the public.

7. Northgate supports the extended use of the wider police family as a way of further reducing the administrative burden. We also believe that there are a number of areas where responsibility could be moved to non-police staff, particularly in relation to routine back-office tasks.
8. However, any change in structure should be undertaken following a fundamental reassessment of responsibility for community safety issues across the board, involving the emergency services, criminal justice bodies and local authorities. There must be clear lines of responsibility and accountability to maintain faith in the service, and it is therefore crucial that any changes are effectively communicated both within the police service and to the general public.

Tackling low-level offending

9. It is essential that police officers are freed up to focus on prevention and tackling serious crimes. But low-level offending and nuisance behaviour must not go unpunished. 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 undertaken. They give authorities with limited resources an additional means of dealing efficiently with minor offences.
10. Penalty notices can have a "ripple" effect. Once imposed for particular offences or targeted in particular areas, word of mouth can quickly lead to others improving their performance to avoid paying of similar fines. By integrating them into the educative process, they may assist in changing attitudes, at least, in the short term.
11. There are a number of areas where penalty notices could be usefully employed as enforcement tools against organisations as well as individuals. Particularly in the area of business regulation, for example health and safety and trading standards, penalty notices could reduce the enforcement burden of regulatory authorities and prevent the escalation of offences by ensuring proportionate punishment for low-level offending. We welcome the announcement of new penalty notices in Defra's Clean Neighbourhoods consultation, but would like to see the introduction of a Penalty Notices Act to ensure their appropriate use through clear monitoring, audit and review systems.

12. Initial findings from research we commissioned into the use of penalty notices highlight a lack of coordination in their introduction and enforcement¹. Without a thorough analysis of this form of administrative justice, there is a chance that the penalty notice system will emerge by stealth rather than design and undermine public faith in the system.

Improving fine enforcement

13. The collection of fines remains a core issue for public authorities with enforcement powers. To act as an effective deterrent, once issued, fines must be collected.
14. Unlike court fines, penalty notices are not related to the ability to pay. This means that problems can occur if individuals are allowed to accrue large amounts of unpaid fines.
15. Where penalty notices are not paid, this will lead to the application of fine enforcement measures through the courts. We believe that there are strong arguments for minimising the use of the courts to pursue unpaid penalty notices and for developing mechanisms for clearly distinguishing between those who can't and those who won't pay. Enforcement systems should monitor their use to avoid cases of multiple issuing to individuals or families and to identify repeat offenders.

Harnessing technology

16. The intelligent use of technology can facilitate effective joint working between the police, local authorities, emergency services and the wider community. Technology can enable organisations to share appropriate information in a timely manner and allow public authorities to monitor and even predict the outcomes of their actions.
17. However, technology will only drive through radical improvements in public services where people are placed at the heart of new and existing systems. This means placing a priority on change management; preparing employees and service users for different working practices.
18. Technology-driven programmes of organisational change can take much longer and cost much more than expected. Incremental investment and a

¹ Two pieces of research commissioned from Fellows' Associates will be published in August 2004. One on the use of penalty notices by local authorities and legal research looking at their increasing use across English law.

measured pace to change is increasingly recognised to be a more effective method for achieving transformative change than the 'big bang' approach selected by some of the larger public authorities.

19. Incremental partnership offers organisations the ability to manage change without the comprehensive commitment of outsourcing and with lower risk. It means working with partners normally on a long term basis without an all-inclusive arrangement, allowing organisations to build up confidence with supplier partners and work collaboratively to change existing processes.
20. Incremental partnerships allow public services to pick and choose from the best of the private sector, to place expertise and innovation sourced from other outlets alongside existing systems, and to bring together the best mix of solutions to meet changing needs. They could also pave the way for new and innovative trading relationships between authorities and other organisations.

Transport

21. We must all take responsibility for protecting our environment for future generations. Tackling congestion in our towns and cities is critical to delivering healthy and thriving communities.
22. London's congestion charging scheme has led to a reduction in car volumes and the increased use of public transport. Thousands of people are feeling the benefits of shorter travelling times and reduced pollution.
23. A national road pricing scheme could extend the principle of charging motorists for the use of congested roads. However, conservative estimates place a national system as far away as 2014. We need to take action now to tackle congestion.
24. To sustain momentum and ensure that innovation is not stifled, technical and financial support for local authorities considering the introduction of charging schemes is essential. Any schemes introduced should be incorporated into the development phase of the national system to ensure that they can work together to achieve the overall goal of reduced congestion.

Health

25. Patient-centred healthcare has the potential to revolutionise the provision of services under the NHS. Allowing patients greater choice, based on universal quality standards, can encourage participation and help to build healthier communities.
26. Securing real choice and participation means enabling patients to make informed decisions. Individuals must be sure that they are being given all the information they need to feel confident in their choice of location, provider or therapy. This requires the effective communication of relative performance.
27. Information technology can support improved performance and help to deliver patient choice through reducing bureaucracy and enabling health professions to focus on the patient. Northgate supports the planned introduction of the new 'HealthSpace' linked to electronic patient records. Enabling patients to contribute to the way their health services are delivered will increase trust in and support for the NHS. Clinical governance should also be refined to highlight more clearly any improvement in performance.
28. If the NHS is to prevent poor performance and encourage a culture of continuous improvement, it needs centrally held information and analysis to enable corrective action to be taken. Critical to the success of such systems is that there is strong and robust local input and involvement, not only in collecting data but in defining and refining central information and analysis.
29. If health professionals are to have trust and confidence in the performance management framework, they need to know that it is transparent, accountable and equitable and that its primary focus is to improve healthcare rather than punish professionals. The information collected must be high quality, take into account local issues and circumstances and be refined on a regular basis.
30. Northgate supports a greater focus on preventing ill health. This means working collaboratively with a wide range of public agencies, the private sector and not-for-profit organisations. We welcome the proposed white paper on preventative public health measures and in particular would like to see a closer partnership between health and social care organisations to ensure a truly holistic approach to delivering health communities.