

Social Exclusion Unit

Improving service delivery for disadvantaged adults

Northgate Information Solutions' response

February 2005

Services for disadvantaged adults

Introduction

1. Northgate warmly welcomes the Social Exclusion Unit's consultation on improving service delivery for disadvantaged adults. We support the approach the Unit has taken; seeking the views of both users and deliverers of the services. Public services should be responsive and accessible for all, and this important consultation will help to give people confidence that their individual needs will be met.
2. Mainstreaming services for disadvantaged adults requires an holistic approach to service design and delivery. Not least in ensuring a true multi-agency approach that harnesses the wealth of experience in the voluntary sector. Northgate's response focuses on the challenges posed by greater partnership working, including the need to better share information and design services so that they respond effectively to the needs of all groups.

Community justice: building trust

3. Building trust in the ability of public services to deliver is crucial to ongoing public support. All citizens should 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 justice.
4. Community justice - in the sense we use it - promotes social inclusion and enforces the administration of civil and criminal justice to ensure that everyone, regardless of their experiences and circumstance, can achieve their potential in life.

Mainstreaming services

5. At both a national and local level, the structure of public services has traditionally placed organisational functionality above personal need. The real challenge is to meet citizens' demands for services that are more proactive and responsive and which keep pace with changing expectations.
6. As part of a wider programme of work in this area, this consultation seeks views on improving service delivery for disadvantaged adults of working age. It also states a commitment to 'mainstreaming' services for the key groups such as disabled people and those with poor basic skills.

7. Northgate recently welcomed the government's intention to roll out a 'whole person' approach to service delivery. Many people miss out on services to which they are entitled. Whilst mainstreaming can support a 'whole person' approach, the complexity of meeting individual need in a multi-agency context should not be underestimated.
8. There is no one-size fits all approach to public service delivery. People may choose to access services in different ways. What is crucial is that they are all easily and equally accessible. This requires breaking down the barriers between organisations.

Multi-agency working

9. Informal joint working is no longer sufficient to meet citizens' demands for seamless services. More formal information-sharing between a range of organisations can support the development of proactive and holistic services.
10. Multi-agency working requires new forms of leadership based on new and old forms of co-operation and collaboration across the public and voluntary sectors. It not only requires changes in systems, but also changes in culture.
11. Voluntary and community-based organisations often reach out to those citizens that public authorities are unable to, particularly for disadvantaged groups. The role of this sector in public service delivery is often been overlooked.
12. Northgate fully supports the increased involvement of the voluntary sector in delivering better services to disadvantaged groups. We welcome the stated commitment to work with a range of organisations involved in service delivery to 'test out' ways to make it more effective. Actively securing the involvement of the voluntary sector in the process will help showcase and further encourage innovative projects at a local level.

Access to entitlements

13. Improving service delivery for disadvantaged adults requires complex networks of support that enable people to participate fully in their communities. This means proactively reaching out to those who are not accessing their entitlements. Millions of people continue to miss out through unclaimed benefits. This is particularly true of the groups identified by the consultation, although there have been some very positive steps in this area.
14. Our conversations with the London Borough of Haringey highlighted just one example. Haringey's population poses particular challenges for its benefits

service including high levels of deprivation, a large transient population, a mix of ethnic groups and a significant number of asylum seekers. To help enhance citizens' access to benefits, the council took the innovative step of appointing a Marketing Officer for benefits and is creating officers with special responsibilities for key stakeholder groups such as housing associations and pensioners.

New technology and incremental partnership

15. The Social Exclusion Unit is also seeking views on the possible contribution of technology to service improvement. New technology can help revolutionise delivery, but only where individuals and organisations are adequately prepared for change.
16. A fundamental part of Haringey council's strategy is to deal with more benefit claims at source by using more visiting officers and making use of the power of wireless technology. But technology also created challenges for Haringey. The desire to improve technology had to be balanced against the fact that delays or downtime can affect performance significantly.
17. New technology, when introduced without thought, can impact negatively on the overall delivery of public services. If, for example, the public's expectations are raised thus creating increased demand or levels of enquiries which are unable to be serviced.
18. Northgate's experience is that although IT projects may be delivered successfully, all too often they fail because of overall programme management. Too little consideration is given to joining up systems and considering the impact of new technology on employees, members of the public and users of the services. Prior to new systems being introduced staff need to be prepared, the impact on services analysed and planned for and pre-emptive measures tackled to meet new demand.
19. Incremental investment and a measured pace to change is increasingly recognised to be a more effective method for achieving such transformative change than the 'big bang' approach often selected by larger public authorities.
20. Incremental change is change within the box of what is known in order to strengthen and improve what currently exists through a series of defined steps. The pace and level of change can be dictated by stakeholder concerns and resource issues. Incremental partnerships allow public services to pick and choose from the best of the private sector, to place existing systems alongside new expertise and innovation drawn from other sources and to bring together the best mix of solutions to meet changing needs.

Data collection and sharing

21. In order to lessen the burden of supplying duplicate information to a range of agencies involved in service delivery, it is essential that data collection, information and analysis is effectively managed. The type and volume of data collected must be kept under review, using systems flexible enough to respond to changing needs.
22. In the past, people have been let down by the fact that local service providers do not share intelligence and information in a timely and cost effective manner, have been reactive rather than proactive, and failed to connect with their communities in delivering permanent change. Failure to share information may also hamper the spread of best practice where it exists.
23. Partnership, prediction and prevention are crucial to improving services. The real core to prevention is ensuring timely information, accurate analysis and improved problem solving and investigation to ensure that speedy action can be taken by the relevant agency.
24. For example there is no technological reason why, when a person leaves hospital and where the need arises, the appropriate service deliverers cannot be notified so that they jointly provide a proactive, cohesive service to meet the individual's requirements.
25. There, are of course, dangers with such an approach. People's civil rights and security need to be protected, and people's nervousness about giving personal information needs to be addressed. There are ways to overcome this.
26. Step one is to define the services on offer and to deliver them on an incremental basis. Step two is to work with the public to educate and inform them on what whole-life issues are to be addressed. If the public knows and understands this, they are less likely to feel nervous about being drawn into something for which they have not given consent. Step three is to establish clear protocols and rules for shared data. Step four is to offer proactive services on the basis of this consent.
27. The contribution of the voluntary sector in service delivery must be fully enabled. Inadequate technology and poor access to information often hampers this important work, particularly for smaller organisations. Northgate would like to see greater government support for technology transfer initiatives and information sharing between the public, private and voluntary sectors.

About Northgate Information Solutions

We are 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 helps us to work with a wide range of public services in health, criminal justice and local and central government. 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 healthier, cleaner and safer environments by tackling the issues that are most important to local people, from access to high quality healthcare to anti-social behaviour. We believe that citizens should be at the heart of public services and be active participants in the delivery of local solutions.

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.