

**Every Child Matters
Northgate Information Solutions' response**

November 2003

Introduction

Northgate warmly welcomes the government's green paper on children at risk. Few individuals or organisations could have been left untouched by the news of the tragic death of Victoria Climbié and the profound failure of society to protect her. Lord Laming's report clearly demonstrates that poor information sharing and a failure to take responsibility by any one agency lay at the heart of the system's failure.

We applaud all of the sentiment and much of the content of the green paper. In particular, we support the need for early intervention and effective protection; the introduction of a lead professional responsible for ensuring a coherent package of services to meet individual need; and the use of multi-disciplinary teams based in and around schools and Children's centres.

Northgate has also publicly welcomed the announcement of a Children's Bill within the Queen's Speech as an important step forward in protecting child welfare. Northgate believes that the priority for children's services must be to improve front-line delivery and children-centred services through enhancing communications, improving risk management systems, joining up services and encouraging collaboration at a local and regional level through the development of incremental partnerships.

Community well-being and justice

Whilst government has a duty to improve and protect children's quality of life, we all of us have a responsibility to do so for the future well-being of society as a whole. If children are to be safe and secure in the future we need to promote community justice and well-being. A safe and secure community promotes social cohesion and economic progress as the guarantors of sustainable long-term success. The foundation of community well-being is community justice in its broadest sense.

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. As the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion states: 'To achieve inclusion income and employment are necessary but not sufficient. An inclusive society is also characterised by a striving for reduced inequality, a balance between individuals' rights and duties and increased social cohesion'.

Technology and public services

New technology has the potential to drive through future radical improvements in children's services but only where people are placed at the heart of new and existing systems. This is not only about placing children at the heart of the system but also prioritising, preparing and energising front-line staff and enabling them to make a real impact.

Technology should be first and foremost about serving people – about tackling problems within their local communities, enhancing relationships and improving communications. New technology is no panacea for bad communications. Communications can't be improved by simply buying new 'kit' or developing idealised solutions which are difficult to implement in practice. There needs to be an end to 'technology for technology's sake'. Technology is constantly on the move. It's the social problems that are deeply embedded.

New technology really adds value when it provides the best practical solution and enhances relationships between people. New technology can assist in managing scarce resources and in joining up services. Our experience of working within public services quarter of local authorities is that information technology is too often seen as an end in itself rather than a means to an end, with political imperatives being the driving force rather than citizens. Technology should assist in reducing bureaucracy to allow public authorities to focus on serving the citizen.

Prevention and risk management

Children and their communities are let down by the fact that local service providers do not share intelligence and information in a timely and cost effective manner and fail to connect with their communities in delivering permanent change. Partnership, prediction and prevention are crucial to improving children's 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.

The green paper proposes the development of local information sharing systems – through a local information hub based on national data standards. Every unitary and county council has been allocated funds to develop information sharing and to have a project manager with specific responsibility for the development and implementation of identification, referral and tracking projects.

Data matching difficulties

Whilst there are clearly resource and highly complex and legal data protection issues, associated with this proposal, on a much more practical basis the difficulties of matching data should not be under-estimated. An information hub is only as effective as the quality of its information. And poor quality of data matched with poorer quality of data compounds the problem of information sharing. A match rate between two different data sets is rarely more than 70%. The bigger the data sets the bigger the problems that are compounded.

The government proposes to remove technical barriers by defining a single identifying number to support electronic transfer building upon existing identifiers such as the NHS number. Yet according to media reports, when Hammersmith and Fulham council came to match its data with local NHS data it found a 48% mismatch.¹ Similarly local authorities have found the task of establishing local land and property gazetteers – creating a master from different local held address based datasets – far more time consuming and far harder than ever anticipated. To date 256 local authorities are signed up to the National Land and Property Gazetteer

¹ Computer Weekly, November 11 2003

Moving forwards through incremental change – adopting a modular approach

Although ultimately desirable a one size fit to IRT would appear to be impractical at the present time. More worrying still is that undue focus on developing new organisational structures and introducing new systems, may take the focus away from what we believe must be the priority – improving frontline services.

Northgate considers that the government should encourage local services to adopt a modular approach to IRT with each element being viewed as a distinct part. This will give local agencies greater flexibility, allowing them to employ a “plug & play” approach.

For many local agencies, the NHS will not necessarily be the natural identifier. IDeA states that 80% of all datasets use addresses as a key reference so some agencies are likely to be better placed to perform matching against addresses in the first instance. What is essential is to ensure that any modular approach is flexible enough to work with multiple identifiers.

National initiatives and improving front-line delivery

Our concern with the green paper is that a number of national prescriptions however well-meaning are unlikely to have the practical effect intended. This links to a general concern that we have relating to parts of the government’s approach to policy making. There sometimes appears to be a tension between national prescription and local initiative.

The green paper proposals in relation to identification, referral and tracking, however rational they may appear on paper, are likely to take a long time and be difficult to achieve. In the meantime some local authorities are delaying taking action. For example, the government’s lessons from the IRT trailblazers will not be released until the end of 2004. Yet local authorities should be beginning to take some action now. A national approach without strong leadership from government to support local initiatives may encourage lack of immediate action by local services who are waiting for national solutions.

The government is also considering placing a new duty on police and health authorities to safeguard children and hopes to encourage collaboration through the implementation of Local Safeguarding Children Boards including representatives from partner agencies such as the police and health. It is debatable whether such a new duty is required, but in any case new duties and new structures do not necessarily lead to improved implementation at a local level and can undermine immediate action whilst national initiatives are introduced. Indeed, new duties and structures may increase bureaucracy and undermine front line service delivery if not effectively co-ordinated. For example, crime and disorder partnerships have not worked as effectively as central government would have hoped. This, in turn, can undermine local confidence in public services if new powers are passed but not effectively implemented.

Our belief is that if we are to enhance front line delivery and children’s services then government must provide clear and strong leadership which promotes innovation at a local level; practical collaboration between agencies; and incremental change and partnership based on the notion of continuous improvement in improving the outcomes for children.

Government should use a number of levers to encourage practical implementation and reduce the implementation gap that exists between national policy and local services including, for example, using procurement as a means of encouraging greater collaboration.

Encouraging collaboration

Government needs to provide clear leadership in encouraging local and regional schemes and incremental partnership both between public authorities and with the not for profit, voluntary and private sectors.

Collaboration is an essential part of encouraging innovation at both a national and local level. At its best, collaboration encourages an open learning environment where people can experiment, learn from experience and share information to help drive through continuous improvement to add to the public value. Collaboration should be based on recognition of what works well and what needs changing. There is both a need to build and share best practice as well as to identify and solve problems relating to national and local issues.

Our experience is that IT projects are delivered well, but that overall programmes are often delivered badly. Too little consideration is given to the joining up of systems and the impact of new working methods on communication – to employees, to public service users or the general public. 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 need to be prepared, the impact on service development analysed and planned and pre-emptive measures put in place to deal with any new demand. This is particularly important in relation to service development issues.

Many agencies are pressed to deliver and collaboration may require investment in time, resources and effort. That is why government needs to promote measures which offer practical opportunities for collaboration. For example, through the procurement process.

Joining up back office systems

We believe that local agencies could refocus their activity and improve front line delivery of children's services by establishing more joined up delivery of back office systems. All too often, individual authorities are failing to develop economies of scale by not joining together to purchase back office systems from suppliers, wasting public money on individualised procurement processes.

Identifying synergies and partnerships for aggregating demand within communities based on geographic boundaries, or for multiple agencies operating across issues such as children's services where responsibilities are shared by different public authorities, makes sense. Increasingly a multi-agency approach is necessary for tackling a wide range of public service delivery issues including children's services, tackling anti-social behaviour, preventing crime and promoting public health. Government needs to take a far greater lead in encouraging and stimulating collaboration and cultural change within public

authorities. Collaboration can sometimes sit uneasily with the government's desire to promote trailblazing.

We welcome the recently published National Strategy for procurement for local government which identifies a range of actions that local authorities should take to improve procurement and to encourage partnership. We believe that there is a need for government to stimulate further action for aggregating demand between multiple agencies responsible for delivering joined up services for citizens. For example, promoting the establishment of e-procurement brokerages within the public or not for profit sector.

Far greater use should be made of independent accreditation and the use of approved reference sites to encourage collaboration. The reference site is typically used to validate the supplier's claims about service delivery. It is rarely used as an indicator to judge real business impact and benefits. Some public authorities are already delivering radically improved integrated children's services. These achievements could be built upon, using the procurement process as a means to identify best practice and to facilitate speedier procurement.

Secondly, public authorities do not currently give full recognition to the potential or consequential savings or service improvement. They will use a comprehensive 'whole of life' cost evaluation of the competing bids, but are not mandated to take into account the impact that different proposals might have in improved citizen service. Whilst the Local Government Act 2000 allows local authorities to account for community well-being, in Northgate's experience this is not widely used by authorities and is not available to some other public authorities.

Incremental partnership

The government rightly wants a joined up approach for children's services at a local and national level. Far from undermining joined up government, encouraging collaboration and partnership at local and regional levels between public sector authorities and with the not for profit, voluntary and private sectors should strengthen it. Key to this is to recognise the value of incremental change and partnership. Incremental investment and a measured pace to change is increasingly recognised to be a more effective method of transformation than the big bang approach.

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. An effective incremental partnership will enable a progressive relationship – based on trust and confidence – to flourish. The pace and of change can be dictated by stakeholder concerns and resource issues. So for example, the pace may be quickened as the relationship grows. Incremental partnership offers organisations step changes in service provision without comprehensive commitment and with lower risk. It means working with partners normally on a long term basis without an all-inclusive arrangement. And it allows organisations to build up confidence with partners, working with them to change existing processes, but without the expense and risks associated with a big bang approach.

Conclusion

Prediction, prevention and partnership are crucial to delivering improved children's services within local communities. Poor co-ordination between agencies and a failure to share information are critical areas that clearly need to be resolved, and a partnership approach to these are vital. We hope that the government's bill will pave the way to allow flexibility and innovation at a local level, whilst working to implement a national strategy that safeguards our children and protects them against a postcode lottery.

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.