

**'Strategic Thinking: work in progress'**

**Northgate Information Solutions' response**

**August 2003**

## **Early consultation encourages collaboration**

We warmly welcome this fresh approach to consultation taken by the Health & Safety Commission and Executive. Early consultation encourages greater inclusion and enhanced collaboration between organisations.

As a company committed to public service excellence, Northgate believes that 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.

## **Health and safety at work is an integral part of community well-being**

Northgate believes that occupational health and safety is an integral part of community well-being. We live in a world of greater uncertainty and increased security risk. Public concerns about community safety, a decline in public standards and increasing fear of crime have placed this issue at the forefront of governments' and individual citizens' concerns across the world.

Yet too often, occupational health and safety is separated from these issues by policy makers at a national and local level. If people feel unsafe, under physical threat or at mental risk at work, their lives at home and within the community are likely to be affected. If anti-social behaviour such as bullying or racial harassment is allowed to go unchecked in the workplace, it may be more difficult to challenge within the community. Drugs, alcohol and other substance misuse impact on the world of work and community at large. Their use at work damages health, causes absenteeism, reduces productivity and increases the risk of accidents. In the community, high volumes of low-level crime involving drugs and alcohol damages the quality of life for local residents and increases the fear of crime.

We welcome the Health & Safety Executive's aspiration that health and safety be recognised as a cornerstone of a civilised society. We would urge it to emphasise the policy connections between health and safety and wider community safety issues with governmental policy makers as part of this recognition-gaining process. These connections have important implications for public service delivery on health and safety matters.

## **Community justice and fair enforcement**

Northgate believes that community well-being is based on community justice, which both promotes social inclusion by tackling poverty, low pay and unemployment and properly enforces the administration of civil and criminal justice. It is about both help and punishment. We applaud the positive work that the H&SE carries out in terms of raising employer and employee awareness of the importance of health and safety at work.

The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 created a sea change in attitudes towards the issues of health and safety at many workplaces, with its correct focus on prevention. The

key to raising standards of health and safety in the workplace is to ensure effective collaboration between employers and employees. However, when health and safety offences are committed, there must be fair, proportionate and equitable enforcement.

It is our view that fair and effective enforcement is essential to the Health & Safety Executive's aims of: raising the profile of health and safety within the workplace; getting employers to take their responsibilities seriously for these matters; and of achieving higher recognition of the importance of health and safety as part of a modern, competitive private and public sector committed to social inclusion and social justice. Everything must be done to encourage responsibility within society, but where respect breaks down enforcement must be firm and fair.

### **Managing limited resources**

Northgate recognises that the Health & Safety Executive has limited resources, and that it must strive to add to the public value in the most effective fashion. This is a problem facing all public authorities that wish to promote public standards and have effective enforcement mechanisms in place. We recognise that in the future the lines of responsibility and accountability for community well-being and health and safety may become increasingly blurred between local authorities and the Health & Safety Executive. Instead of the current emphasis on dividing working responsibilities between the Health & Safety Executive and local government, we believe that greater levels of collaboration between local authorities, the Health & Safety Executive and the citizens they serve would lead to more efficient and effective use of resources.

Sharing information and joining up services could ensure that public service delivery is both efficient and responsive to individual need. For example, new issues and challenges such as stress at work do not neatly fall within current local authority or Health & Safety Executive responsibility – they cover all sectors.

### **Using technology to join up services**

New technology can assist in managing scarce resources and in joining up services. Our experience of working with all of the police authorities and a quarter of local authorities is that information technology is too often seen as an end in itself rather than a means to end. Technology should serve people and assist in reducing bureaucracy to allow public authorities to focus on serving the citizen.

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 in place to deal with any new demand.

### **Local solutions**

If health and safety is to be raised up the policy agenda, Northgate considers that the current targeted approach of enforcement from the H&SE needs to be considered. This quite rightly puts the focus on the prevention of serious offences and serious hazards.

This kind of approach, however, can ignore the daily concerns of individual citizens where “low level” health and safety issues may fundamentally affect the quality of their working lives. Employees without effective trade union representation may find it difficult to get things changed in the workplace and will continue to endure health and safety conditions which can contribute to ill health and stress. This failure can reinforce public attitudes that employers easily get away with committing offences and are not called to account for some of the most serious incidents that have occurred over recent years. A failure to tackle immediate concerns can lead to loss of confidence in enforcement authorities. This is an issue which local authorities, police and other public authorities are now facing up to.

Just as national and local government is currently tackling quality of life issues through increasing focus on the things that matter to ordinary people, so we believe that the Health & Safety Executive and local authorities need to consider a fresh approach to health and safety, focusing on individual citizens’ concerns to raise the profile of this issue within society.

This citizen-first strategy could provide more responsive health and safety public services as an integral part of promoting community well-being. It would help to raise public awareness of the importance of health and safety and help prevent more serious offences occurring in the future. Just as tackling anti-social behaviour is seen as a new form of activity designed to respond to citizens’ concerns whilst continuing to tackle serious crime, so tackling the daily concerns of employees could help to prevent serious offences at work. Such an approach may provide assistance with meeting all of the targets outlined in the Revitalising Health and Safety strategy document.

Citizens need to be involved not just as complainants, customers or users but also as collaborators in raising health and safety standards at work. By giving them confidence that their concerns will be dealt with, either by themselves through strong representation at work or with the ready assistance of enforcement agencies, this could act as a powerful motor for change.

## **A fresh approach to enforcement**

At a time when resources are limited, new and innovative forms of enforcement for low-level offences could also be considered. As a result of the recent changes in legislation and the current Anti-social Behaviour Bill, environmental officers and other officers from local authorities can deal with a growing range of high-volume low-level offences through penalty notices. The Government has not allocated funds to support the extended powers, but the Anti-social Behaviour Bill and the Local Government Act 2003 allow the receipts from penalty notices issued for litter, dog fouling, graffiti and fly-posting to be hypothecated for further environmental improvement.

Local authorities can already issue penalty charge notices for parking offences and penalty notices for litter and dog fouling. The Anti-social Behaviour Bill allows authorised local authority officials to issue individuals with penalty notices for graffiti and fly-posting, other than when the offence is motivated by racial or religious hostility. The Bill also grants the

power to issue penalty notices for noise nuisance at night to all local authorities, and removes the duty to supply a full 11pm to 7am service before adopting these powers. Some authorities such as Newcastle City Council are already considering employing dedicated 'street offence officers' with responsibility for all low-level environmental crime.

Currently the Health & Safety Executive and environmental health officers with health and safety duties have no powers to issue penalty notices for low level offences, yet arguably these could be a powerful tool in preventing escalation, for example if they were issued at the time of a warning to show clear enforcement intent, or after a warning when an infringement has occurred.

In New Zealand, health and safety at work legislation provides for a system of 'infringement notices'. An infringement is any failure to comply with the requirements of the Health and Safety in Employment Act. An inspector may issue an infringement notice if they have reasonable grounds to conclude that a person has failed to comply with the provisions of the Act and the person has had prior warning of the offence. Notices are issued where the inspector considers that prosecution is not warranted. Fines of between \$100 and \$3000 may be imposed for any breach of the Act, except for a failure to maintain a hazard identification system where the fine range is higher – between \$800 and \$4000. Companies can decide whether to accept and pay the infringement notice or to go through the courts. An infringement notice does not result in a criminal record, but infringement notices may be taken into account in future prosecutions.

Similarly, in Australia infringement notices are a recognized part of the enforcement mechanism in most states. In Queensland, the State Penalties Enforcement Act 1999 provides for infringement notices for a wide range of offences, covering nominated laws, local laws and by-laws. These include health and safety offences. In New South Wales, certain offences have attracted penalty notices for over twenty years. Originally basing its health and safety system on the UK nineteenth century system, the Australian system has focused on regional systems of enforcement including both reactive and proactive inspections based on targeted programmes.

The use of penalty notice systems to raise the profile of particular issues can act as a powerful deterrent for would-be offenders. In certain cases, they could free up time spent upon dealing with the escalated offence by tackling the offence at a lower level. They also could be used to attract local publicity for non-enforcers.

## **Conclusion**

We warmly welcome the Health & Safety Executive's approach to discussion and consultation. We believe that over the forthcoming years the Health & Safety Executive, working in partnership with local authorities, has a powerful role to play in making health and safety a cornerstone of a civilized society. We think that consideration should be given to a fresh approach towards health and safety which focuses on citizens' concerns and public service delivery and employs new and proportionate measures for tackling high volumes of low-level health and safety offences.

## 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.

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 nearly 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 government's chosen 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 services to co-ordinate their work, providing location-specific information systems.

- 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, operating in 41 out of 52 police forces.
- 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.