

NI14: Help or Hindrance?

NI14 provides a fresh look at the opportunities for change and improvement, finds Helen Olsen in a review on LGITU's research on this new National Indicator.

National Indicator 14, the duty to record and report on 'avoidable contact' with the citizen, is proving the most contentious of the new set of indicators tracking English councils' performance.

Whilst it is just one of 198 new indicators upon which councils must report in April 2009, it is possibly the one that has gained most column inches in the media and most heated debate as to both its potential effectiveness and the methods by which data should be collected in the first place.

The underlying aim of NI14 is laudable in the extreme – to enable local authorities to highlight the potential within existing service delivery operations to improve the citizen experience. However, vociferous debate since the indicator was first mooted late in 2007 has been polarised between those who believe that NI14 will be an important tool for driving transformation and aligning efficiency and Varney customer aspirations, and those who believe that NI14 will hinder the process of transformation and divert scarce resources to monitoring activities.

As the debate raged over the early summer months LGITU magazine, in partnership with Mouchel Management Consulting and with support from the IDEa and Microsoft, felt that there was a need to put this question out to local government as a whole; to ask local government officers how they were approaching the indicator, and what benefits they thought their councils would gain from the exercise.

Three hundred and thirty two officers from 213 local authorities participated in the subsequent research programme, representing a 55 percent response rate from the 388 English local authorities.

The overwhelming majority of local government officers responding to both parts of this research project felt that NI14 would be useful to the process of transforming service delivery.

And it would seem that the majority of councils are quietly working away towards reporting on this new indicator next April.

Reporting in 09

However there is little confidence in the sector that this first return will accurately reflect 'avoidable contact': just 12 percent of respondents to our main survey felt confident that their council's return next April would accurately account for all avoidable contact with the citizen.

Four in ten felt that their council would be able to 'submit a robust and defensible NI14 return'. But over half did not yet feel confident that their council had a clear understanding of the reporting requirements for this indicator.

Almost one in ten (9.2%) councils aspired to report across all services and all channels in this first reporting period. Just over a third intended to report across all mandated services and channels, and a further third over a sample of services and channels only. Just two percent were able to report NI14 on an integrated basis

across all channels today; a further 13 percent expected to be able to do so by 2009.

As things stand, councils were most easily able to report on telephone contact via existing call centres – eight in ten either could today or would be able to do so by next April. Over seven in ten either could or would be able to report on face-to-face transactions, and



over six in ten web and email communications by next year. Only half were confident of being able to report contact via postal channels by next April, and just 15 percent that they could monitor SMS communications.

Approximately half of councils intend to collect data via frontline staff reporting judgements, sample surveys or by collating different internal data sources. Around three in ten plan to use an existing telephone/call handling system or an existing/modified CRM.

A quarter had already involved suppliers in modifying existing systems to help with NI14 and a further eight percent planned to do so. Seven percent were looking to their outsourced supplier to provide the new figures.

Just over six in ten either have, or intend to put in place, plans for improving performance to meet NI14.

Setting the vision and selling on

It was striking that the head of customer services, in most instances, is responsible for taking the lead on all aspects of NI14 – from setting vision and strategy to accountability and reporting and overseeing operational systems.

It is equally striking that other senior officers are not engaged with the process. In just 15 percent of instances did the chief executive take a lead in setting the vision. Lead members were involved in less than two percent of cases on any front – if, indeed, they are aware of NI14 at all.

In light of the reliance on technology today to both deliver services and enable efficient reporting it is also interesting that the head of IT takes the lead on operational systems in just 13.5 percent of councils. The head of performance is the second most likely to take the lead on reporting – but only in 23 percent of councils.

Again, in light of the transformational nature of the indicator, it is interesting that the council's transformation lead had minimal involvement in setting vision or strategy – indeed, in both activities an officer champion was more likely to be taking the lead.

Benefits and downsides

Those in favour of the indicator see great benefit. Over seven in ten respondents felt that NI14 was complementary to both the

Bob Kamall, Senior Policy Adviser – Service Transformation Implementation Team, Cabinet Office

“Learning the lessons from previous indicators, such as BVP1157, NI14 was designed to be flexible; it is not a top down proscriptive indicator. NI14 should be aligned to local priorities as defined by local authorities and their local strategic partners within their local area agreements. There are no centrally derived targets for NI14 because it relates to local services and local needs – not those of Whitehall.

“NI14 is about collecting Customer Insight and used with other forms of Customer Insight helps to confirm that the chosen local priorities reflect real demand for customer services. NI14 can inform the decision-making process; what services are customer priorities, where are customer expectations not being met, and where do customers expect improvements to be made.

“Most local authorities accept that avoidable contact should be reduced and that service delivery should meet customer requirements; so why not measure the levels of avoidable contact and find out what services cause the most avoidable contacts?”

Gershon efficiency drive and Varney. Nearly eight in ten felt that it was complementary to the transformation agenda and three quarters that it would help the process of transforming service delivery.

Just 12.2 percent thought that it would in fact be a hindrance to progress with transformation in their councils.

Over eight in ten felt that it would increase customer satisfaction. Others that it could help their council deliver a customer-centric organisation, reduce service failure, present an opportunity to transform internal service culture, inform transformation, deliver proactive identification of service problems and provide better information for service planning.

Getting buy in from front office and back office staff was overwhelmingly seen as 'vital' for success. More than nine in ten also rated the ability to engage senior stakeholders as key. The ability to convey the importance of NI14 to all stakeholders and communicate success internally were also seen as important for success.

When it came to barriers, 'breaking down the silo mentality/culture within individual departments' was the chief blocker. The vast majority also felt that lack of budget and the cost of both collecting and analysing data were hurdles to clear.

The current lack of joined up services and the existence of proprietary/incompatible systems also figured highly in responses.

There was a downside to reporting on NI14. The biggest being the potential danger that people may not accurately report avoidable contacts - closely followed by the danger

that this inaccurate data would then lead to inappropriate strategy decisions.

There were fears too that the additional workload would have a negative impact on service delivery improvements, and that the additional costs would impact efficiency targets.

Tool for local transformation

NI14 was designed to be an indicator of:

- service transformation - not be a function in its own right;
- end-to-end service delivery - not just front office performance;
- local priorities - not centrally proscribed priorities.

For NI14 to be a success those who believe in its use as a driver for service improvement will need to spread the gospel among colleagues and senior stakeholders. For NI14 to be truly successful it must not be allowed to become a 'customer service ghetto' – as the e-gov programme became the preserve of the IT department.

Local government exists to serve the

Siobhan Coughlan, programme manager - service transformation, IDEa

"The results from this survey clearly demonstrate that for many - over 75 percent of those who responded - NI14 is seen as a 'help' in transforming local service delivery. More importantly, 48 percent of respondents noted that their council had a clear understanding of the reporting requirement and 41 percent were confident of submitting a robust figure next April. This is a good start - however it also indicates that the work needs to continue to support LAs to understand how to capture and use the data effectively.

"It was also encouraging to note that arrangements are already in place to engage senior officers and members through regular progress reports, with 82 percent of respondents submitting reports to senior management and 74 percent to cabinet members. Interestingly, 67 percent have started to do this to scrutiny committees as well; reporting to the elected members on these committees is important - however this could also provide a real opportunity to engage with real service users to get their views on how they actually experience services and also where to focus effort to reduce avoidable contact.

"Overall, I would say that this is good progress bearing in mind that the indicator only went live on the 1st of October. The question that does remain is how can we help embed this new indicator into the LAA priorities – as this is where the real improvements will be made by local partners working together to join up services around their shared customers? A challenge for the future!"

citizen. Technology is the enabler to pulling together disparate channels and providing continuous service and efficiency improvements. Whether or not officers believe that reporting a figure on avoidable contact is a help or a hindrance to this process, it is unarguable that the ethos behind NI14 provides a fresh look at the opportunities for change and improvement.

And on that basis alone it should be embraced by all.

Nigel Bates, director of local & regional government & emergency services, Mouchel Management Consulting (incorporating Hedra)

"NI14 is without doubt a potentially powerful indicator that can be used to effect long term beneficial service improvements for Local Strategic Partnerships by ensuring that issues and requests are satisfactorily dealt with at first point of contact.

"With only 12 percent of respondents believing it will be a hindrance, it is seen that improving NI14 figures will indicate that any contact across all partners in a community will result in a satisfactory resolution to customer requirements - ie excellence in public service provision.

"However, there are three fundamental challenges which need to be overcome by local authorities: data collection from across the whole organisation and its partners; short term improvement to processes which are currently not integrated or even in the same organisation; and the long term integrated approach to partnership wide process re-engineering."

Helen Gilroy, head of local and regional government business, Microsoft UK

"NI14 provides the catalyst for local authorities and government agencies to transform their online presence from predominantly i-government today (provision of information online) to e-government tomorrow (ability to transact with government online).

"In the commercial world, well-run businesses do not see customer complaints as a nuisance; instead they use the data gathered from websites and call centres to fine-tune their products and services. Local authorities can do the same. Just as businesses do not expect customers to deal separately with finance, logistics and sales departments, someone registering a newborn child should not have to worry about the way in which the tax authorities, social-benefit, health service, education system and local government may use the information. A good e-government scheme starts off from the citizen's eye view, not the bureaucrat's one."



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Main Survey

Maureen Shepherd, Business Process Redesign Consultant, Blackpool Council

Ray Brown, Customer Service Contact Centre Manager, Kensington & Chelsea RBC

Tony Hallam, ICT Project Manager, Nottingham City Council

Quick Survey

John Dyer, Strategic Partnership & Performance Manager, South Lakeland DC

The full report, 'NI14: Help or Hindrance? Performance indicators and customer service', is available for free download at LGITU's sister online publication: www.UKauthorITy.com/NI14