

## National Indicator 14 (NI14) UPDATE May 2009

### Background & context

NI14 – Reducing Avoidable Contact - is one of the 198 national indicators introduced to local government in 2008. The origins of this indicator lie in the Varney Review and the Service Transformation Agreement (STA) and it featured in CSR07.

The IDeA together with Communities and Local Government, the LGA and Cabinet Office worked with a number of local authorities to develop and pilot this indicator before developing national guidance for its implementation across all local authorities in October 2008.

### What is NI14

Avoidable Contact is defined as 'contact that is of no or low value to the customer'. The underlying purpose of NI14 was to support councils in addressing the challenge of 'doing more for less'. This was to be achieved through identifying opportunities for end-to-end service improvement from the customer's perspective, releasing efficiency savings and supporting capacity building, helping to improve job satisfaction and contributing to transformational culture change.

LAs have been asked to collect data across a range of different service areas (dependant on their type of LA) and across all channels of delivery, including: council tax and planning services, street lighting and rubbish collection, school admissions and care packages, and trading standards and housing repairs. However, they are required to submit a single aggregate percentage figure on an annual basis.

Importantly, NI14 was not and is not a target. It was established to develop and encourage a consistent evidence collection process to support the above improvements and to help demonstrate year on year progress within each local authority. LAs are required to submit a single figure aggregated from data collected across different services and a range of channels (dependant on their authority-type). Therefore as LAs are collecting information about different services and using different measurement methods it is inappropriate to use the data to compare local authorities' performance. The Audit Commission consider NI 14 to be a "non-comparable" indicator.

### What we did

IDeA has supported CLG and the Cabinet Office in the development and delivery of NI14 and has helped engage LAs in this work to ensure that this indicator was developed and implemented to reflect the needs and ambitions of LAs.

The work comprised a number of phases:

- **Engagement & consultation** – Including local authorities and local government stakeholders in the initial work to develop and define this indicator
- **Piloting the new indicator** – working with a group of volunteer LAs to test out the indicator, in particular to look at collection of data, robustness of data, staff engagement & training, different services and channels
- **Developing guidance** – working with the pilot LAs and local government stakeholders to develop and test guidance for implementation and rollout of

NI 14 based on the learning from the pilot LAs. Further support was provided via a range of online communities enabling officers to work directly with peers in other LAs

- **Submitting the data** – esd toolkit working with CLG has supported LAs to submit their aggregate percentage figure for the first year figure. In January 2009 CLG announced that esd-toolkit would be the sole route to reporting NI14 to the National Indicator Data Interchange Hub (DIH). Esd toolkit is also enabling LAs to compare their service level data with peer LAs.
- **Understanding & learning from the data** – IDeA is now working with CLG, Cabinet Office and LAs to better understand what we can learn from this year’s submitted figures. However, one issue is clear - measures of avoidable contact remain subjective, with great variability between how and what authorities measure. Hence, the data does not yet offer a basis for hard-edged “benchmarking”. However, the information provides a means for networking and learning with peers.
- **Reviewing the data collection practices and processes** – The IDeA is also working the sector to review the underlying data collection processes to ensure these are robust and applied consistently, review staff training and engagement to see if this can be improved, and identify and highlight real examples where NI14 data has contributed to service improvements

“We need to focus on the issue, not the number. At best, the number helps identify an area or a question worth pursuing further.”  
*Local Authority Officer*

### Activities:

Authorities are taking a variety of approaches to measuring and using NI14 data, and many practitioners recognise that the use of NI14 will mature and evolve over time towards more rigorous ways of measuring and interpreting the data.

Respondents also expect peer-to-peer knowledge sharing to lead to the development of “better” practices. In the meantime, good practice and “ways of working” are emerging for:

- Training and developing staff
- Engaging the back office
- Interpreting the data to inform improvements

“Avoidable contact is a subjective measure. The data is really merely a trigger for dialogue.”  
*Local Authority Officer*

Local authorities are typically using the avoidable contact data in two ways:

- To support incremental improvement, whereby customer services or business improvement teams work directly with the back office to improve operational processes
- To drive transformational change, whereby a central programme office uses the data to inform major change projects

The IDeA has worked with LAs both at a strategic and an operational level to develop and pilot NI14 and support its implementation. This has included working directly with the Local Government Delivery Council, with the RIEPs and various national and regional networks.

Esd-toolkit has worked with local authority practitioners as the key target audience through online communications tools, regional and national meetings and conferences (arranged by the IDeA and its esd-toolkit programme and private sector organisations).

This engagement has enabled esd-toolkit to inform, promote, guide & consult with councils around the country. This has helped reinforce the underlying principles behind NI14 and helped promote the guidance as well as share good practice developed in LAs to support implementation. The esd-toolkit website and its community site and forum at [www.esd.org.uk/NI14](http://www.esd.org.uk/NI14) have been key to this engagement and in supporting LAs.

### **What we found**

The closing date for first submissions from all English councils was 30<sup>th</sup> April 2009. 350 councils had submitted an aggregate figure for their LA by deadline and these will shortly be available.

However, following the advice and guidance from across the local government family including from CLG, the Audit Commission, the LGA and the IDeA and the Cabinet Office, local authorities recognise that the single aggregate number required by the DIH does not offer a basis for interpretation or comparison.

As highlighted by the Audit Commission in its advice to LAs, NI 14 is a non-comparable indicator. Since no two LAs will be collecting data on exactly the same services across exactly the same channels over the initial years of data collection, comparing NI 14 figures from different authorities would be like comparing apples and pears,.

Instead, the real value of NI 14 arises internally within LAs, as a means of triggering and focusing discussion and problem-solving between practitioners and stakeholders. NI14 offers a basis for exploring improvements in the customer experience and potential efficiency gains.

Efficiency savings from end to end service improvement are yet to be realised in many councils. However, there have already been reports from some that have made a start and can quantify actual savings (e.g. a one-off investment of less than £1k in the re-design of a form resulting in saving some £25k per year).

### **What we are going to do**

The IDeA will continue to gather evidence of both improvements to customer experience and efficiency savings resulting from NI14 data being used as a lever for service improvement and capacity building.

Evidence will be sought in the following areas including:

- Increased customer satisfaction
- Increased job satisfaction
- Efficiency savings
- Reduced inequalities
- Reduced internal avoidable contact

The first three of these need no explanation, but it is worth expanding on the last two. Analysis of NI14 data by customer segment might lead to interventions to support customers who need our help most of all but are least able to help

themselves, thus reducing inequalities. Internal avoidable contact is exemplified by the council that has already identified 30% of calls to its contact centre coming from officers, or the observation that central government requirements confuse (and intimidate) customers, thus causing avoidable contact with the council by them asking for help e.g. annual Council Tax notices.

In addition work will be done to help evaluate the data handling processes to enable improvements to be made and to ensure a consistent and robust collection to increase confidence in data collection for future years. Similarly, analysis of the data will take place to provide insights into the national picture of avoidable contact (e.g. Avoidable Contact by cause, service and customer segment)

LA involvement and feedback will continue to be sought on a number of issues via the esd-toolkit online – see [www.esd.org.uk/NI14](http://www.esd.org.uk/NI14) and on the NI14 and via the IDEA's Community of Practice at <http://www.communities.idea.gov.uk/welcome.do> .

The feedback and evaluations will lead to a better understanding of, and evidence for, benefits realisation, capacity building, culture change, sustainability, etc. all of which will help drive improvement and identify efficiency savings in the design and delivery of local public services.

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