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# NI14: Help or Hindrance?

- performance indicators and customer service  
Executive Summary



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## Targeting the Customer

### NI14: Help or Hindrance? Performance indicators and customer service

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.

In theory, if a council is delivering on both its efficiency targets and Varney service ambitions from the solid base of a transformed organisation, then NI14 will simply be a matter of running a report at the end of the year proving a satisfying 'zero percent' incidents of avoidable contacts.

Whilst every council aspires to the above scenario it is unlikely that many English councils will be able to achieve this task by next April.

The indicator is to be calculated in aggregate across all service channels across a set number of key service areas – including planning, building control, council tax/NNDR, environmental health, street scene (waste/refuse), housing, benefits, electoral register, parking (permits/tickets), children's services, highways, trading standards and adult social services – as relevant to the different tiers/types of authority.

The primary means of collating this information is expected to be an existing customer relationship management (CRM) system. However, in light of Socitm's IT Trends report from December 2007, which suggested that few councils CRMs today are actually back-end integrated into departmental systems, it is unlikely that many councils will be capable of collating this data automatically. In addition, as the indicator is to be tracked across all access channels, it raises the issue of integrating web based service delivery performance into the figures collated via CRM operations.

At an event hosted by Southwark last summer to demonstrate their 'One Touch Gov' approach, interest in NI14 was high, yet confidence in the ability to accurately report was low. Just five out of the 40 gathered felt that their council was ready for the challenge.

Furthermore, of those confident of being able to report next April, it was notable that the majority had been involved in the IDeA's working group on the subject, ie they were already ahead of the game. Among these, however, the approaches were markedly different. Barking and Dagenham, for example, intends to use sampling methodologies within a local priority area to inform business transformation and thereafter ongoing reporting standards. On the other hand Surrey, as part of its transformation programme, was aiming to have a 'stake in the ground' by October 2008 across the whole range of services and channels against which to report next April.

In the latest guidance on NI14, published in July 2008, the indicator is described as 'a prompt for those involved in the design and delivery of services in every authority to consider their users' and customers' demands. Staff, managers and elected members will be able to draw on their existing knowledge and that of partner organisations, to build a richer picture of our customers' needs, wants and expectations.'

Its detractors claim that it is ill-defined and a drain on resources to track – and that the resultant data will be no help to the transformation process.

As the debate raged over the early summer months, LGITU magazine felt 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 felt 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% response rate from the 388 English local authorities.**

*"Overall, NI14 is a good idea, simply because we should focus on reducing avoidable contact. To a certain extent, it is a very easy way of identifying savings and arguably we shouldn't really have to rely on central govt to tell us to do it. The idea of focusing thoughts and actions is great."*

*"In all honesty I am excited about the information we are likely to gather when we begin monitoring avoidable contact and I believe our corporate improvement team feel the same."*

*"NI14 is important to the Council and we want to use it to change the way we work, moving to a more customer service approach."*

*"If you remember BVPl157 was often passed over as an ICT matter, NI14 cannot become something that Customer Services are responsible for."*

### **Executive Summary: Targeting the Customer - A work in Progress**

*Helen Olsen, editor, LGITU magazine*

Despite the vociferous debate to the contrary over the last 12 months, 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.

#### **How accurate a return?**

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.

Just four in ten felt that their council would be able to 'submit a robust and defensible NI14 return', but the remaining six in ten were not confident in their council's ability to do this.

Indeed, over half did not yet feel confident that their council had a clear understanding of the reporting requirements for this indicator. Six in ten did not feel that it had yet been adequately defined.

#### **What will the return include?**

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 under three percent had no intention of reporting on this indicator next April.

Just two percent of respondents were able to report NI14 on an integrated basis across all channels today. A further 13% expected to be able to do so by April 2009. This indeed suggests that only 15% will be able to report meaningfully next April.

As things stand today, 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% that they could monitor SMS communications.

#### **Where is interest greatest?**

Nearly four in ten of our respondents worked in a customer service role and a further quarter worked in a performance management role. What was interesting, in light of the essential underpinning nature of technology for service delivery and integration of

customer service channels, was that just 14.6% of respondents worked in IT roles. Individuals from all three roles were invited to participate in equal numbers, so this suggests that NI14 is not being seen as a key issue within technology.

#### **Setting the vision and selling it 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% 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% of councils.

The head of performance is the second most likely to take the lead on reporting – but only in 23% 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.

#### **Senior buy in is key**

Director general for transformational government at the Cabinet Office Alexis Cleveland's assessment in the latest guidance on this indicator is that it is not yet seen as a strategic priority. Indeed, the guide provides strategic arguments, including improved and cost effective service delivery, for getting senior members and managers to 'buy in to the concept'. However, it would appear that there is much work to do to convince senior officers outside of customer services roles that NI14 has wider benefits for the council.

Those in favour of the indicator see great benefit. Over seven in ten respondents felt that NI14 was complementary to both the Gershon efficiency drive and Varney. Nearly eight in ten felt that it was complementary to the transformation agenda.

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. This is interesting when taken in comparison to answers to the previous

*"In my view this organisation has focused this on the service that delivers the front of house service, rather than involving all service users (who communicate with the public) from the earliest opportunity. I feel this is a missed opportunity as we are now six months in and no final decisions made and communicated."*

*"Just getting people to think more from the customer perspective and to stop doing so many 'stupid things'."*

*"...there has to be a drive from the top down to making change where problems are found. If people just pay lip service to the indicator by just collecting it then there will be no transformation."*

*"I think that NI14 will prove to be a distraction in that we will undoubtedly be given a target to reduce the percentage. In some areas, and Benefits is one, you actually want to invite people to make contact with you."*

question – lack of senior stakeholder support was not seen as a major blocker. However here it appears to be seen as a key driver for change in corporate culture and breaking down the silos previously identified as barriers.

The ability to convey the importance of NI14 to all stakeholders and communicate success internally were also seen as important for success.

### Highlighting the benefits

The majority, three quarters, thought that NI14 would be of some or great help to the process of transforming service delivery in their council. Just 7.7% thought that it would be of no benefit, and a further 12.2% thought that it would in fact be a hindrance to progress with transformation in their councils. There was no pattern within this group in terms of job role – they came from a mixture of customer service, performance, technology and finance roles.

Over eight in ten felt that it would be of some or great benefit to their council in terms of increasing customer satisfaction. Other benefits that respondents felt NI14 could bring their council included delivering a customer-centric organisation, reducing service failure, the opportunity to transform internal service culture, the opportunity to inform transformation, proactive identification of service problems and better information for service planning.

The majority of benefits were, however, perceived to be internal to the council or to the citizen. There was little benefit to enhancing multi-agency working or two-tier working seen by respondents.

### Perceived downside

There was a downside to reporting on NI14. The biggest perceived 'negative', by nine in ten of respondents, was the 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.

Two thirds also felt that the additional workload would have a negative to extremely negative impact on service delivery improvements. There were fears too from almost two thirds that the additional costs would impact efficiency targets.

### Barriers to overcome

When it came to barriers to successful implementation and use of NI14, 'breaking down the silo mentality/culture within individual departments' was the chief blocker to success. Just 7.5% felt that this would not be a barrier in their council. 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 response.

### Preparations today

Just over half of councils already have a dedicated officer or team preparing for and reporting on this new indicator. A third have no intention of dedicating a resource to this activity.

Just over six in ten either have, or intend to put in place, plans for improving performance to meet NI14 – but nearly a third do not intend to do so.

A quarter had already involved suppliers in modifying existing systems to help with NI14 and a further eight percent planned to do so. But over half had no plans to ask suppliers to modify systems, which is curious in light of the proliferation of CRM and call handling systems in use across local government today.

### Reporting

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, an existing CRM or to modify an existing CRM.

Seven percent were looking to their outsourced supplier to provide the new figures.

It was interesting to note the low levels of those who were going to harness performance management software (16%) or corporate EDRM/workflow systems (8%). Indeed, almost six in ten had no intention of using performance management software for this exercise; and two thirds had no expectation of harnessing an existing EDRM/workflow system for reporting purposes.

### Governance

Over two thirds of councils made quarterly reports to senior management and heads of service. Four in ten made quarterly reports to the council leader/cabinet members and 31% to the scrutiny committee.

In light of the importance of engaging senior stakeholders in the exercise it was most interesting to see that over a quarter made no reports to the leader/cabinet members at all; and approximately two in ten did not report on NI14 to senior management or service heads.

### Involvement council-wide

Nearly seven in ten of the officers who did not feel able to complete the in-depth survey felt that NI14 applied to them/their department or

*"It measures and reports on waste. How much waste measurement is wasted?"*

*"The concept is fundamentally flawed. We should be focussing on a 'right first time' standard of service."*

*"Inevitable performance comparison will cause perverse incentive and cheating."*

*"I believe NI14 will be a hindrance as it will become another target in itself, and people will adjust the measurements around the target (as for NHS waiting list stats etc.)."*

*"New silo between service channels ie contact centres (customer services) and web (ICT). NI14 indicator owned by customer services therefore web not seen as integral to indicator (fear of change)."*

*"Traditional culture not focused on understanding the real customer experience."*

service. But that leaves over four in ten that either didn't know whether it applied or felt quite definitely that it did not.

Which is worrying from a citizen's perspective: as local government exists to serve the citizen, it can be argued that the customer service ethos behind N114 applies to every member of the organisation, irrespective of role.

Encouragingly, over six in ten felt that N114 was seen as important within their council and half felt adequately informed. However, equally, almost half did not – which is worrying as the question was asked of respondents just a matter of weeks before councils were to officially begin recording data for this indicator.

For N114 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 N114 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 citizen. Technology is the enabler to pulling together disparate channels and providing continuous service and efficiency improvements. Whether or not officers believe in reporting a figure on avoidable contact is a help or a hindrance to this process it is unarguable that the ethos and the data behind N114 provide a fresh look at the opportunities for change and improvement.

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

#### Project partners:



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#### Commentary:

##### Local knowledge informs local service transformation Bob Kamall, Senior Policy Adviser – Service Transformation Implementation Team, Cabinet Office

This survey provides a detailed and informative view of what is really happening in local authorities and comes at an appropriate time as implementation of N114 gets underway. In many ways the responses are reassuring; the majority of local authorities are working on N114 and most see some benefit in doing N114. There is still some work to do; senior management engagement is still very low, and there is evidence that still more information is required about the purpose of N114.

N114 is probably the most debated of all the indicators in the new Local Government Performance Framework. There is, however, very little objection to the notion that we should reduce avoidable contacts – so why is N114 so misunderstood?

N114 is different from many indicators because it does not:

- By itself provide solutions
- Demonstrate specific improvements
- Provide evidence that defined objectives are being met
- Have proscriptive rigid requirements but is adaptable to reflect local priorities
- Have any targets to meet

Learning the lessons from previous indicators, such as BVPI157, N114 was designed to be flexible; it is not a top down proscriptive indicator. N114 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 N114 because it relates to local services and local needs – not those of Whitehall.

It is not surprising to see that many respondents are working in customer service roles since this is where customer contact occurs, or in performance management roles. However, N114 is not about managing contacts, from the outset it 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

*"Integrated channel strategy - recognise customers aren't always logical - technology affects the service landscape - need to make connections across disciplines - N114 is scary for traditional silos."*

*"(The) test will be how much freedom we have in doing things properly rather than following the guidance as it currently stands."*

*"The principle behind N114 is right, however translating it into a measure that does what it is supposed to do is the challenge - as much for Local Authorities to use it constructively as those designing the measure."*

*"If we get it right first time then it can only benefit everyone, and my staff are being encouraged to look at it in this respect at least within our area of the Council's contact with customers."*

*"(It will bring) a whole council culture change."*

*"Efficiencies through eliminating failure demand."*

Staff working in customer services, especially those on the frontline, deal with avoidable contacts daily. These contacts use up resources that can be better deployed providing value adding services. However the causes of these avoidable contacts lie elsewhere in the end-to-end service delivery chain; it is not staff in contact centres that fail to deliver services. NI14 therefore is not about frontline customer service provision but about the whole authority's end-to-end service delivery.

Every local authority will approach NI14 differently because they are free to decide:

- What services they want to include
- How they define what is an avoidable contact
- How and when to count contacts, avoidable or not

This does mean that the figures submitted in March 2009 are non-comparable and by themselves are of little or no value. However the underlying data – the disaggregated figures – provide evidence both of the levels of avoidable contacts within the authority and of which services or service areas are causing the most avoidable contacts.

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?



**Commentary: Good progress, but much still to do**  
**Siobhan Coughlan, Programme Manager - Service Transformation, Improvement & Development Agency (IDeA)**

It was a pleasant surprise to read through the results of this survey. A number of people across local and central government had worked hard over several months to develop NI 14. There had been workshops, online debates, exchanges of emails, drafts and redrafts before the final version was agreed and published. And then the real work began, with more workshops, LA pilots and further debate to develop the Guidance published in July this year.

This was then followed up by an online conference on the IDeA Communities of Practice platform which attracted over 500 participants and several different threads of debate and discussion, including sharing progress on work already started to implement the new

indicator. Plus there have been several national and regional workshops and events to further discussion and debate, plus more importantly share learning and ideas.

And reading this survey it does look as though all this hard work has paid off!

The results published from this survey clearly demonstrates that for many - over 75% of those who responded - NI 14 is seen as a 'help' in transforming local service delivery. More importantly, 48% of respondents noted that their council had a clear understanding of the reporting requirement and 41% were confident of submitting a robust figure next April. This is a good start - however it also indicated 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% of respondents submitting reports to senior management and 74% to Cabinet members. Interestingly, 67% 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!



**Commentary: Providing a base line for improvement**  
**Nigel Bates, Director of Local & Regional Government & Emergency Services, Mouchel Management Consulting**

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. The majority of respondents believe measuring avoidable contact will:

- Support Gershon & Varney
- Increase customer satisfaction
- Deliver a customer-centric organisation
- Reduce service failure
- Transform service culture
- Support transformation

With only 12% 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;
- Long term integrated approach to partnership wide process re-engineering.

#### Accurate data collection

For NI14 to truly achieve the predominantly accepted benefits, real change to service delivery across all members of the local strategic partnership must be achieved and reported. This needs a realistic baseline position to be achieved and this must be ready by April 2008. Simply taking a data download from a CRM solution and voice management systems will be insufficient and could be dangerously misleading - causing many years of apparently poor performance even if service improvements are being achieved. Therefore base-lining is critical.

A full citizen centric approach to data capture must be taken and this survey highlights that the majority of LAs will only focus on contact centre data - leaving a large area of potential contact in areas like social care, environment benefits etc unaccounted for.

In addition, gathering data reliably to ascertain a meaningful and true reflection of a baseline requires a combination of data from telephony, web services and face to face interventions only some of which can be extracted from contact centre Business Intelligence systems. The majority of the data will require manual data collection techniques or citizen surveys leaving it potentially susceptible to error.

There is likely to be a capacity and expenditure issue in capturing this data before April 2009 which will require investment and executive management support - something which respondents to this questionnaire feel will be missing.

The potential for incorrect baseline figures to be generated could negatively impact LAA ratings and hence impact an authority's ability to invest and improve.

#### Short term improvement leading to long term integration

Demonstrating quick wins and improvement on the baseline is going to be critical for positive CAA assessments and hence strategies for delivering them will be critical.

Empowering all government staff to provide information and advice to their customers at any point of contact will require investment in training, support systems and technology.

However, this is likely to be expensive and time consuming if an LSP wide approach is adopted. Prioritising the areas of highest citizen impact and largest volumes of transactions will, therefore, be the simplest way to make the necessary quick wins and improve perception of service improvement.

Tackling these areas will be the priority whilst long term business process transformation work is undertaken in parallel.

Mouchel's consultancy services can provide skills and capacity to address all three options.

### **Microsoft**

#### **Commentary: A catalyst for transformation**

**Helen Gilroy, Head of Local and Regional Government Business, Microsoft UK**

*"NI14 is important to the Council and we want to use it to change the way we work, moving to a more customer service approach."* This response from one of the contributors to the survey encapsulates the essence of NI14. It is an opportunity to achieve genuine transformation in the way that citizens receive and perceive services from local authorities and government agencies.

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 the products and services that they offer. Local authorities and government agencies could 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 administration, health service, education system, census department 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.

At Microsoft it is our belief that local authorities do not serve citizens, control costs, balance budgets or achieve operational excellence. People do these things and organisations excel when they empower their people.

Our vision for people-ready local government allows people to drive the key tasks that make local government work and enable it to deliver high-quality, value-for-money services to citizens. This is not as simple as deploying software to employees. A people-ready local authority must recognise the relationship between its goals and the systems, practices and people that drive towards those goals. It must provide its people with the software that takes into account their practices and methods, and it must prepare those people to take advantage of the technology at their disposal.

Any government ecosystem consists of many users with unique needs for information and access to applications. Local government is typically the 'public face' of government to most citizens, providing access to services delivered directly in a local context.

The impact of monitoring and analysing NI14 will be seen across the people, process and technology components of how local authorities and government agencies work. In this context, NI14 is considerably more than just another data point that needs to be measured. It is a catalyst for change.

The next stage of e-government activity is likely to involve more e-government initiatives that develop services and solutions based on the redesign and joining up of back-office business process and systems to deliver sustainable NI14 improvements. This will be quite disruptive of established public-sector structures, culture and management arrangements.

Transformation in the citizen experience of public services is what lies at the heart of NI14. It provides the catalyst for local authorities and government agencies to transform their online presence from predominantly i-government (*the provision of information online*) today to e-government (*the ability to transact with Government online*) tomorrow.



**Commentary: Reporting distracts from the end game**  
**Steve Palmer, Head of ICT at LB Hillingdon and Vice President, Socitm**

When the Service Transformation Agreement was published last October, Socitm welcomed it, and in particular its requirement for public services to halve 'avoidable contact' with citizens. We felt that the readily grasped concept of avoidable contact could breathe new life into the transformational government programme – something we knew our local government colleagues outside ICT were still not 'getting'.

At the time my Socitm colleague, Glyn Evans, who heads up transformation at Birmingham City Council said, "The clear and simple target for reducing 'avoidable contact' is very helpful. Together with the 3% efficiency goal it will concentrate councils' minds on making best use of technology to shift initial customer contact from face to face to the less expensive phone and web channels and find more efficient ways to process and track enquiries once made. What is most important, however, is that we focus our efforts on driving up the levels of customer satisfaction with the services we provide. That is the real end game."

This last point, about the nature of the end game, is where many of us feel frustration about the NI14 indicator. The discussion about how to report avoidable contact has distracted us from the real issue of how local authorities are going to deliver services in the future given our financial and operational pressures. We all know that we can't just

carry on as before, and that radical approaches are needed to transform how we deliver. And while avoidable contact is a major part of the transformation agenda, the concept is in danger of being trivialised by an indicator that will not enable effective benchmarking or stimulate radical thinking about change.

With the launch earlier this year of the Customer Access Improvement Service, Socitm is attempting to do just that. Through its three components, the Website Take-up service, GovMetric, and Channel Value Benchmarking, this service is enabling the capture and comparison of data about usage of, and satisfaction with, different access channels, as well as information about the comparative cost of providing the three main access channels (phone, web and face to face).

Thanks to Website Take-up service data, for example, we have an idea of the scale of avoidable contact arising from failures by customers to access services via the web. In the best councils for online services, this is running at around ten percent. In others it is 30% or 40%, and sometimes more. Given that the web is the most used channel (we know this from data generated through GovMetric), that is a lot of dissatisfied customers and a lot of contacts that are being diverted from the low-cost-to-serve web channel to the more costly phone or face to face channels. Once we have got a better idea of how councils should be costing their different access channels - something we are developing through Channel Value Benchmarking - we will be able to put a price on the additional costs being incurred.

It is noteworthy that councils participating in the Customer Access Improvement Service have remarked on the useful stimulus NI14 has given to discussion with service managers about what they do and how they do it – 'transformational' conversations that have previously been difficult to get going notwithstanding nearly a decade of e-government effort. That much is very positive, so it will be a huge shame if this potential is frustrated by controversy about what is reported around NI14 and the superficial conclusions that may be drawn from it.

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