

Customer Insight & Transformation

LGITU editor, Helen Olsen, reports on a discussion seminar with local government officers, Cabinet Office, IDeA and key suppliers on the results of LGITU's research, 'NI14: Help or Hindrance: Performance indicators and customer service'.

Proponents and opponents of NI14 may well remain polarised and vociferous, but the vast majority of authorities are working hard to collect meaningful data and are planning to use the indicator as a tool for transformation.

Over 55 percent of all English authorities contributed and responded to LGITU's snapshot survey towards the end of last year, which Nigel Bates, director of local & regional government in the management consulting business of report sponsor, Mouchel, told the discussion group was "significantly meaningful in terms of a sample base".

Tool for transformation

More than three quarters of survey respondents saw NI14 as something which can support their councils' aspirations and plans for the future. "Only 12 percent saw this indicator as a hindrance to the process of transformation," said Bates. "The overarching message was that NI14 will benefit local authorities on this journey."

To be blunt, this finding surprised the researchers. In light of strong opposition and criticism of the indicator in many sectors of the press and on discussion boards, the researchers expected a higher proportion of those who saw NI14 as a hindrance.

The survey could be accused of sample bias, in that those who chose to participate had an interest in doing so and were thus self-selecting. However as customer services and IT contacts in ALL English authorities were invited to participate, anyone significantly pro or anti the indicator is equally likely to have responded.

Indeed, both the Cabinet Office's senior policy adviser on the service transformation implementation team, Bob Kamall, and the IDeA's service transformation programme manager, Siobhan Coughlan, told the audience that they were both "surprised" and "encouraged" by the number of local authorities which responded and "the very positive response".

Said Kamall, "At one point it was suggested that Cabinet Office might wish to jointly sponsor this work. We declined, not because we didn't see the value of the work, but because we thought the real value came from its independence of government."

Kamall believes that Cabinet Office is "slowly beginning to win the battle about what NI14

is about". The questions they receive, he says, are no longer about 'why should we do NI14', or 'what's the point of doing something we already know': "Nowadays the questions are more specific to individual authorities and, more importantly, how to use NI14 data in the wider search for transformation."

He said that it "was the right time to do this research" as NI14 kicked off in local authorities, and that independent and up to date data was vital – particularly about the significant number of what Kamall termed "the silent local authorities, those that we don't hear from in the debates, at workshops and in the online communities".

Added Coughlan, "The survey in itself has been extremely helpful giving us a reflection in time. NI14 is live; it is out there; it is happening. And I am impressed by the amount of work that's already being done."

Engagement a problem

The research had marked contrasts, noted Bates, in areas of engagement. For example, whilst eight in ten saw clear links with the transformation agenda, only six percent of 'transformation' officers were involved.

Kamall also noted that whilst 82 percent of respondents regularly report to the senior management team, and it seemed the norm to report to cabinet members or scrutiny panels, "Full engagement still remains a barrier. Why is that? Perhaps further research is needed."

There was general concern that an overemphasis on 'customer service' would inhibit engagement and limit the potential for transformation: "This isn't a customer service initiative," said one. "This is a whole council approach and unless we get that back office involved it's just going to trim off the surface problems."

Highlighting success

Kamall agreed that more work needed to be done to engage organisations around NI14: "Clearly senior management buy-in remains a problem and I think it will remain so until NI14 starts to deliver some tangible benefits."

The Cabinet Office, working with the IDeA and CLG, he said, needed to highlight the benefits of NI14 as they emerge: "We need case studies that show how NI14 data is used, how customer insight is used to make changes and the positive impact of those changes."



So how far did attendees think their councils were down the line of being able to discuss examples and prove the usefulness of this indicator?

"Members of staff already really know the issues around avoidable contact," said one. "But now we have got the evidence to go and say this isn't just what we all think, this is real - and here is how we can improve services."

Others were equally as enthusiastic and sure of having "fantastic examples" to report after April.

The only note of caution was "whether the leadership is prepared to accept the evidence or whether there will be challenges from service heads" in light of the current lack of clarification from the Audit Commission. Would the debate around whether the figures were to be comparable and issues of collection damage the credibility of individual findings, offering "protective service heads" a "get out of jail free card" to challenge evidence for change?

Delivering efficiency

For others the key to engagement was proving efficiency: "At the end of the day, the chief exec will want to know how many millions this is saving us."

Coughlan said that the reality of delivering the three percent annual efficiencies from CRS07 would lead local government "to look more closely at partnership working and how we are delivering services. At the end of the day it's about making it easier for the customer, easier for staff and cheaper for the tax payer."

A key challenge going forward, she said, is how to integrate the ethos into the LAAs "because the savings and the improvements will not come unless we are doing it in partnership. We have signed up to LAA priorities; this is a means to achieving that."

All in the definition

One of the main points of contention since earliest discussion of NI14 has been the 'wording'. Said one delegate: "The terminologies have not been too helpful. These are people who need our help, or to solve their problem or to make their life better, and we say it's unavoidable? It is just not the right word. I don't know what would be a better word, but unavoidable isn't it."

Round up:

- The most contentious and debated of all the indicators in the local government performance framework
- NI14 is not about a number, it is about the customer insight the data provides and the ability to then take action
- Clear grass roots support for the indicator
- Those who 'get' NI14, get it. Those who oppose it are equally stridently opposed. Meanwhile, the message is not getting through to chief and senior officers or heads of services.
- Engaging throughout the organisation and demonstrating real benefits is key.
- Widespread concern as to how the indicator will be used by the Audit Commission within the CAA process
- Integrating NI14 into the LAA is key to delivering benefits

Many of the audience, including Kamall and Coughlan, agreed. However as the term has its origin in central government initiatives, Coughlan urged officers "not to get hung up on the name. Let's get hung up on the intention, the objective of what it is trying to achieve."

She was also keen to emphasise that "NI14 isn't something that was plucked out of nowhere and created in a smoke filled darkened room. It was something that was created by local government for local government."

Coughlan outlined the indicator's 18 month gestation period, incorporating consultations and local authority involvement in pilots, workshops and discussions. She also highlighted the IDEa community of practice for NI14 – a discussion and experience sharing forum that currently has over six hundred members, mainly officers in local authorities – and urged those interested in the future of the indicator to get involved.

And the scope

Another key issue is the scope of reporting expected – or not. In the survey just 15 percent said that they could either now, or by April, report across all services on all channels.

Mouchel's Bates noted the high number of respondents clearly linking the indicator to the efficiency, Varney and transformation agendas; and the high levels of intent - but lower actual plans - to report contact across all services and channels. He asked the audience: "Why was reporting for traditional channels not expected to be 100 percent? For example, why was 'face to face' being reported by just 71 percent – surely that figure should be either zero or 100 percent?"

It became clear that this was part of the wider engagement and definition issue – should face to face be defined as just one-stop shop and service centre contact? Or encompass every officer's contact with any

citizen? In which case, there was still much work to be done in engaging front line officers in eg planning and social services - who between them alone could have thousands of engagements a week.

Encouragingly, from a citizen's perspective, the majority of officers in the audience appeared to be taking the wider, all encompassing definition and grappling with the ramifications of this – thus explaining the 'not one hundred percent' outcome for reporting face-to-face contacts.

Technology base

Perhaps surprisingly for a software supplier, Microsoft's Ian McKenzie said, "The start point for actually addressing the challenges of NI14 is not a technological one." It started, he said, from reviewing and understanding what needs to change in the way of business processes and people - in terms of the people training, the people motivation to own the problem and to actually resolve the problem "ideally upon first contact".

He pulled together the potential benefits of Government Connect, the Tell Us Once pilot and the ability to inform transformation through NI14 to put forward a scenario whereby citizens had to inform just one point of contact for any change of circumstances; that information was seamlessly transferred throughout and between organisations; and customer service resource could be used to reach out to citizens who may not be taking full advantage of the services and benefits to which they are entitled.

Grass roots support

In terms of engagement, with NI14, said Coughlan, "We are at least a year ahead now in terms of the engagement, the support, the understanding at a local authority level than we were at this stage in the days of BVPI157."

Indeed, despite the vociferous debate this last year, acceptance of, and dare it be said, enthusiasm for, the indicator appears to be growing. One delegate suggested that, if the survey was re-run now, the findings would be even more positive: "Now that people have been working to understand it there is much more enthusiasm internally. You would get many more positive responses now."

Audit concerns

The Audit Commission accepts that NI14 is not a comparative indicator – in the first few years. It accepts the fact that every local authority starts from a different place. It accepts that authorities will concentrate on different priorities and therefore data can't be compared. However, as yet, the commission is giving no guarantees that league tables will not be published – which concerns delegates greatly.

Many thought that councils would view NI14 as a 'tick in the box' exercise, "purely because of the way the Audit Commission has come down on local authorities over the last couple of years."

Said one, "If the Audit Commission is true to their word and they don't place a lot of emphasis on the first two or three years and let us actually get the service improvements in place, then that's good. But if within a couple of years a table is produced saying who is doing well and who is doing badly, then it will just go back to being a tick box exercise."

Both Kamall and Coughlan said that they would actively resist any efforts to produce comparisons in both the short and the long term. Kamall said that he was "opposed to any attempt to try and impose consistency" on NI14, believing that best practice and experience sharing would build this instead from the bottom up: "That is much more valuable and relevant to local government than anything that we can do from the top down."

A contentious indicator

Kamall acknowledges that NI14 is contentious, and had been since its inception: "It's contentious because it is not prescriptive.

"I love the fact that NI14 empowers local authorities to adapt their level of priorities. I also like the fact that NI14 is a real indicator, it is not a target. However what delights me the most is that this piece of research shows that local authorities do understand and get NI14."

It is not about collecting data for the sake of it, he added, "What we are interested in, what we persuaded the Audit Commission to look at in the CAA process, is how that data is being used to inform service transformation agendas."

From the Cabinet Office point of view, using the indicator to help transform local services, said Kamall, "was the whole point of NI14".

In reality, no chief executive or council leader is going to be kept awake at night worrying about a service transformation agenda. The things they are going to be kept awake about are what we see on our TV screens - children dying, people failed, economic meltdown and the need to balance budgets.

If NI14 is a tool that can help understand where services fail and at the same time see where procedural wastage can be avoided then getting that message to the top level is indeed vital. But this will be no easy message to impart.

The full report, 'NI14: Help or Hindrance? Performance indicators and customer service', is available from LGITU's sister online service: www.UKauthorTy.com/NI14