

**Report to: Customer  
Transformation Task & Finish  
Panel**



**Date of Meeting: 30 April 2009**

**Subject: National Indicator 14 (Avoidable Contact) – End Of Sampling  
Exercise & Council Result**

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**Recommendations / Decisions Required:**

**That the Panel notes:**

- 1. the overall 'result' for EFDC of 26.9% Avoidable Contact.**
- 2. that consideration will be given over to how the Council will communicate this result to its partners & residents etc. in order that we lead the discussion.**
- 3. that this figure is not the 'end of the story' and that work now needs to begin to fully understand this result and the detailed results which lie behind it. To this end, the NI14 Working Party be reconvened to establish both an approach to next year's sampling and to determine how the Council should take forward its results in terms of mapping improvements to local priorities.**
- 4. that each individual directorate will be asked to consider its results and develop improvement plans based around detailed examination & understanding of the NI 14 data and mapping improvement to local priorities.**
- 5. that the work of the Working Party and the Directorates Improvement Plans should feed into the Council's Customer Transformation Programme.**

**Executive Summary:**

This report details the completion of the NI 14 avoidable contact measuring exercise, reports the overall Council result and also the results for the service areas taking part.

## **Reasons for proposed recommendations / decision:**

To note the data and results from the measuring exercise and consider its importance for the Customer Transformation programme.

## **Other Considered and rejected**

There are no alternative approaches recommended.

## **Report**

### **Background**

1. NI 14 is a new indicator for 2008/09 measuring the levels of avoidable contact experienced across the council in a range of key service areas. As part of its terms of reference, the panel was asked to consider the implications of the indicator and ways in which the data could be collected.

2. The Panel were keen to ensure that the data was not collected just to satisfy the requirements of the statutory indicator, but rather is utilised to identify areas for improvement.

3. This report details the completed results for the Council and for individual service areas as well as reporting actions that have already been taken and suggesting how this needs to be taken forward.

### **The Measuring Exercise**

4. A total of 7 service areas were included as part of the measuring exercise. These were:

- Planning
- Finance (Benefits)
- Finance (Council Tax)
- Licencing
- Electoral Services
- Housing
- Environmental Services

5. Planning, Licencing, Electoral Services & Housing were measured across four week periods, Finance (Benefits), Finance (Council Tax) & Environmental Services across two weeks. A two week measuring period would suffice for future exercises given the level of contacts experienced in the majority of service areas.

6. Full data and analysis of the results has been shared with each service area with a recommendation to share and discuss the results amongst all staff that were involved. A breakdown of unavoidable vs avoidable % contact was

provided by service area, by week and also by channel of communication. The breakdown by channel proved to be a most useful line of data.

## Top Line Results To-Date

### (a) Unavoidable Contact vs Avoidable Contact % Split

7.	Unavoidable %	Avoidable %
Planning	77.4%	<b>22.6%</b>
Finance (Benefits)	61.6%	<b>38.4%</b>
Finance (Council Tax)	79.8%	<b>20.2%</b>
Electoral Services	94.3%	<b>5.7%</b>
Licencing	77.3%	<b>22.7%</b>
Housing	64.2%	<b>35.8%</b>
Environmental Services	75.9%	<b>24.1%</b>
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<b>EFDC Total</b>	<b>73.1%</b>	<b>26.9%</b>
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### (b) Unavoidable Contact vs Avoidable Contact % Split By Channel

8. As mentioned above, the avoidable contact was further analysed by channel of contact and this proved extremely useful. It highlighted that, with the single exception of Electoral Services, the level of Avoidable Contact experienced by telephone was higher than the overall level for all services.

9. The comparison is shown overleaf and illustrates that the difference between levels of avoidable telephone contacts and the overall levels was often considerable:

Avoidable % (Overall)	Avoidable % (Telephone)	+/- Var
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Planning	22.6%	<b>26.4%</b>	<b>(+3.8%)</b>
Finance (Benefits)	38.4%	<b>57.1%</b>	<b>(+18.7%)</b>
Finance (Council Tax)	20.2%	<b>32.2%</b>	<b>(+12.0%)</b>
Electoral Services	5.7%	<b>3.7%</b>	<b>(- 2.0%)</b>
Licencing	22.7%	<b>34.2%</b>	<b>(+11.5%)</b>
Housing	35.8%	<b>42.8%</b>	<b>(+7.0%)</b>
Environmental Services	24.1%	<b>32.9%</b>	<b>(+8.8%)</b>
<b>EFDC Total</b>	<b>26.9%</b>	<b>36.0%</b>	<b>(+9.1%)</b>

10. From a total no. of telephone contacts recorded, across the Council, of 10201, this meant that 3673 calls were classified as avoidable. Of these, 1285 were a result of poor call transfer / poor signposting, 1068 were a result of unnecessary clarification, 815 were progress chasing, 437 were repeat notification of information and 68 resulted from premature closure of contacts.

11. This variance is partially a reflection of the distorting effect high levels of routine post can have on the overall level. Routine applications and information supplied on request for whatever purpose are often unavoidable and where high volumes are experienced this will naturally lower the overall level. Whilst these postal contacts should clearly continue to be recorded as they form part of the service function, it is also key to ensure that in future exercises it is always possible to break down the analysis beyond the top level to identify key areas for improvement.

12. In discussion meetings with services following the exercise, this key data was highlighted and identified as an important area to focus efforts to improve service delivery and reduce future levels of avoidable contact.

### **(c) Percentage Split of Avoidable Contact by Type Of Avoidable Contact**

13. Key:	UC	Unnecessary clarification				
	PCT	Poor call transfer / poor signage				
	RN	Repeat notification of same information				
	PC	Progress chasing				
	PREM	Premature closure of a previous contact				
		UC	PCT	RN	PC	PREM
		%	%	%	%	%
Planning		29.0	32.2	25.5	12.0	1.3

Finance (Benefits)	34.9	20.0	17.6	22.8	4.8
Finance (Council Tax)	25.2	38.5	24.1	9.0	3.1
Electoral Services	0.0	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Licencing	25.4	19.8	35.7	16.7	2.4
Housing	23.0	49.5	9.7	16.4	1.4
Environmental Services	23.9	25.5	5.0	44.2	1.4
<b>EFDC Total</b>	<b>27.0</b>	<b>34.5</b>	<b>17.1</b>	<b>19.2</b>	<b>2.1</b>

## Observations

14. Avoidable contact for the Council as a whole was 26.9%. This is the figure that will be reported as part of the National Indicator Set by 30<sup>th</sup> April.

15. Telephone avoidable contact for the Council as a whole was 36.0%.

16. Where service areas receive large quantities of routine post / emails, this can drive the overall percentage down. Care should be taken to focus in on the breakdown by channel to pick out any areas which show levels of avoidable contact significantly above the overall service percentage.

17. Similarly, there are specific roles within services where a high proportion of contact is routine and unavoidable. Again, this will drive down the overall percentage and targeted sampling might produce more valuable results in future exercises.

18. An example would be Building Control Administration which processes high volumes of applications. Whilst Planning was 22.6% overall, key customer facing roles had levels of +30%, +40% and +43% overall. It is these sections which may benefit most from using NI 14 as a tool for service improvement.

19. Those service areas that elected not to break down the measurement to a function level do not have that level of analysis to help drive out improvements and it would be better to ensure all services are measured at the same, functional level.

20. 4 weeks is probably too long a sampling period. Over 4 weeks, Planning recorded over 6000 contacts. Even at just 2 weeks most of the service areas would comfortably achieve the target number of contacts. Those services with lower levels of contact may want to continue with 4 weeks but even then they are unlikely to achieve a significant level of contacts.

21. Some confusion was experienced in the earlier exercises with the distinction between repeat contact and progress chasing. This confusion almost certainly contributed to higher levels of repeat contact than expected and was addressed with a more focused and clear definition during the later briefings and a redesigned recording sheet. A significant drop-off in repeat contacts (now referred to as Repeat Notifications) was seen in both Housing & Environmental Services as a result. For the sake of improvement planning, it is suggested that Repeat Notifications and Progress Chasing be considered as a whole.

22. Sharing and discussion of the results is key. It is acknowledged that the recording process would have been inconvenient for the staff involved and would have been an extra daily task to perform. It is essential therefore that they see the results of their efforts and are consulted for feedback on the exercise and suggestions for service improvements to reduce avoidable contact. Service areas should analyse & distribute their results and then set up team meetings to discuss. Focus should be on both a review of the understanding of the exercise and a consideration of the key results and what actions should arise.

23. The final results of the NI. 14 exercise, across all service areas, should be reported to a future meeting of Management Board, so that an agreement as to its value and the need to address the results can be achieved. As much as no target has been set by Central Government it is reasonable to assume that improvement will be sought and, perhaps more importantly, that we will seek it ourselves given that it is improvements in service delivery that will drive out reduced levels of avoidable contact. Unless we seek to use the results to achieve service improvement, the exercise is a pointless one beyond satisfying our National Indicator obligations. It is recommended that each service area involved, be asked to formally address Avoidable Contact and put in place an action plan to achieve improvement. These plans should be considered at Management Board level and feed into the ongoing Customer Transformation process in the Council.

### **Actions Taken / Follow-Up Survey**

24. Upon completion of the last service area in the exercise, a survey was circulated amongst the lead officers for each service to assess their opinions of the briefings, the recording processes and the analysis provided.

25. No statistical analysis on this very simple survey has yet been completed but the bulk of the responses were positive in terms of the level of briefing and understanding of the avoidable contact concept throughout the exercise. Of most interest was the question as to whether any follow-up actions or improvement plans have already been put in place as a result of the exercise.

26. Of the small no. of surveys so far returned:

- 1 directorate has discussed the results at team meetings, reformatted headed notepaper to avoid confusion and included the results as background data when completing their business plans. They also plan to review all communications for clarity.
- 1 directorate has shared the results and detailed analysis amongst key staff and plan to share the results at forthcoming team meetings. They also plan to look at poor call transfer and direct signposting as issues.
- In 1 service area results have been sent to all staff and discussed in management meetings but they felt that more detail is required to make improvements as they need to be able to identify specific problems in order to address them. They believe that staff are more aware of sending the right communications to start with to avoid clarification then being sought.
- 1 service area has introduced renewals by post which has been useful as they do not receive as many unwanted calls.
- 1 service area reported heightened awareness of call avoidance and customer experience as a result of the exercise, and have incorporated into the business plan a review of call transfers and refined use of automated telephone systems, a suggestion made by a member of staff as a result of the exercise.

### **Future Approach to NI 14 - Avoidable Contact**

27. Having completed this year's exercise, it is important that the Council understands and is clear on how it is going to use the results and how it will approach the collection of information over the coming year.

28. The Council has a result of 26.9% for 2008/09. However, it is more important what we do with the result rather than the result itself.

29. Guidance at the beginning of the NI 14 experience indicated that our result would not be used to rank the Council or compare it against other local authorities and this remains the case. In fact, it is expected that when publishing the figures the Audit Commission will make clear that the figures are not comparable between councils. Despite this, it is recommended that consideration be given to how we communicate this result to outside parties, suggesting the Council be proactive rather than wait to be questioned on it.

30. NI 14 is not about producing a result every year and looking for there to be a reduction in that figure year on year. Whilst we are encouraged to retain the same methodology year on year we are not restricted to surveying the same areas exactly and therefore the percentage figures may go up or down without it being a reflection of improvement or otherwise. Indeed, as avoidable contact develops the Council might well classify more contacts as avoidable, leading to inevitable increases before we can see decreases.

31. What is key to the indicator, however, is that the measuring of avoidable contact and the way in which the Council reacts to the result must be linked to our local priorities. NI 14 is to be used to inform decision-making on improving service delivery and should map to local priority areas.

32. 'Meaningless' is a word that some have used to refer to the top level N.I. 14 'result'. "It does not provide any evidence about what services or channels are causing the most avoidable contacts; and it fails to provide any insight about the reasons avoidable contacts are taking place" (Bob Kamall, Cabinet Office). However, the same commentator recognises that the value a council will get from NI 14 will come from the service level and channel level data collected at the same time.

33. At the earliest stage the Council took the decision to analyse its contact data at service and channel level and therefore each service has considerable evidence on which to begin assessing its needs for service improvement.

34. The Audit Commission, whilst not wanting to question or audit the overall figure, may well wish to look at how we have used the lower level data in order to drive out service improvements and transformation. Also, in the future, they may well wish to compare performances at these lower levels between authorities.

35. In terms of mapping the use of NI 14 to create improvement plans mapped to our local priorities the following corporate priorities are highlighted as some which may fit with the service data we have already gathered:

CP 2 - To improve access to and information about the Council's services, through the implementation of a Customer Transformation Programme.

CP 9 - To improve performance on the processing of benefit claims and changes of circumstances.

CP 13 - To improve the responsive repairs service to tenants, particularly response times, through a partnership with a large private repairs management company.

CP 17 - To improve performance on the processing of planning applications, as measured by National Indicator 157.

36. In addition, given the suggestion that the Audit Commission will want to see us mapping our improvements to our Local Area Agreement priorities, the following indicators may well be suitable LAA priorities that we would wish to focus on.

LAA Local Indicator – N.I. 5 – Overall/general satisfaction with the local area.

LAA Local Indicator – 5.1 – Access to Services

37. The Council's approach to NI 14 needs to be continuously developed at a strategic level. Consideration needs to be given to establishing a means of achieving this and it may be useful to reconvene the NI 14 Working Group for this purpose.



## **Conclusion**

38. Whilst the Council's result of 26.9% is not to be considered as either good or bad, the exercise highlights many opportunities for improvement of the customer experience and for the reduction of avoidable contacts.

39. To gain the most that it can from this exercise, the Council should focus its efforts over the coming months on identifying ways of connecting these improvement opportunities with its own corporate priorities. The overall result may be a 'meaningless' figure but our willingness to use the data to drive improvements in what matters to us locally is what the Audit Commission will be looking for when we are assessed.

## **Resource implications:**

There are no specific cost implications arising out of the recommendations of this report, as analysis and improvement plan design will come out of existing resources.

## **Legal and Governance Implications:**

Completion of this exercise will allow the Council to fulfil its reporting obligations under National Indicator NI 14.

## **Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:**

There are no specific implications.

## **Consultation Undertaken:**

The approach to NI 14 was discussed and planned via the NI 14 Working Party. Individual service areas were consulted prior to sampling on how they thought it would work best in their environments

Subsequent consultation with the staff involved at service level was recommended to all services when their results were published.

## **Background Papers:**

Reducing Avoidable Contact – A guide to NI 14 (CLG, Cabinet Office, IDeA)  
Cabinet Office Update on NI 14 – July 2008

NI 14: The Cabinet Office Perspective (Presentation by Bob Kamall)

ESD Toolkit FAQs on NI 14

Notes on ESD Toolkit – Cost Architecture Workshop 10<sup>th</sup> November 2008

## **Impact Assessments:**

There are no specific impact assessment implications arising from the report.