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All of us involved in the delivery of public services are increasingly valuing the input our customers give us. We are learning to use customer insight to redesign service delivery to meet our customers’ expectations. However, many of us are only just starting out on the customer insight journey and we all still need more information from our customers to fully understand their needs.

As the Cabinet Office lead on service transformation, I am keen to ensure that all sectors responsible for delivering public services develop a real understanding of the needs of their service users, and use that understanding to drive lasting service improvements.

The new Local Government Performance Framework for the CSR07 period and with it, a condensed list of national indicators, reduces the burden on local authorities. In line with this approach, we have designed National Indicator 14 (NI 14) to build on the existing good work, and to develop a deeper understanding of service delivery from the viewpoint of the service user.

NI 14 is 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. On occasion, however, such consideration and evidence will highlight avoidable contact.
Capturing this evidence of avoidable contact and using it to help redesign services to meet needs more effectively and efficiently are at the heart of this guidance and the use of NI 14. In so doing we can build on the initiatives of many local authorities to redesign services from the customer’s perspective, resulting in end-to-end service transformation that joins up local service delivery irrespective of the delivery organisation.

NI 14 is not, by itself, a tool for transforming services, nor is it a ready-made solution to the problems facing organisations that deliver public services. But it demonstrates that we are listening to the voice of the service user, as we attempt to identify the services where current delivery does not meet customer expectations.

This information, together with other sources of customer insight, will help to focus efforts and resources in the right place to make effective changes.

I hope this guidance document helps you to understand how to use the data you collect for NI 14 and will assist you on your transformational journey.

Alexis Cleveland
Director General for Transformational Government
and Head of Cabinet Office Management
For most people their local council represents a fundamental contact point for accessing public services. We want that experience to be one that is responsive, timely and efficient and which meets their individual needs.

Achieving this means designing and delivering services in ways that make sense to our customers rather than being convenient to our organisations and our own internal structures. It means looking for the opportunities to better join up what we do and giving people choice in the way they can access services.

Time is valuable to everyone. The concept of avoidable contact is easy to understand and reducing it has clear and obvious benefits in terms of improved customer satisfaction and efficiency. If viewed and used as an improvement tool, NI 14 provides local government with a great opportunity to better understand how and why our customers currently use and access our services.

By identifying the contact that is avoidable we are much better placed to redesign how services and information are made more accessible for our customers. This means they don’t have to make unnecessary and valueless contact that is both frustrating for our customers and costly for the council.
As a sector we are already doing much to improve our service offerings. The Front Office Shared Services (FOSS) project has highlighted many great examples of partnership and shared service delivery. The work of the Local Government Customer Insight Forum and the electronic service delivery (esd) toolkit Customer Profiling project are both testament to how we are already using our knowledge and understanding of customers’ needs to improve their experience of public services.

I believe that NI 14 will help us take our thinking about customer insight to the next level. It will help us to understand what really matters to the people we serve and as a development and improvement tool its impact will be significant and far-reaching.

I hope this guidance document acts as a catalyst to continue to improve public services in ways which really matter to local people and will help us all deliver on our ambitions for our communities.

Janet Callender OBE
Chief Executive, Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council and Chair of Local Government Delivery Council
how to use this guide

the aims of the guide
This guide is aimed at managers within local government responsible for implementing National Indicator 14 (NI 14) ‘Reducing avoidable contact: Minimising the proportion of customer contact that is of low or no value to the customer’.

The document sets out the practical approaches to implementation that pilot authorities have adopted and the lessons they have learnt (including, at times, what not to do). Where possible, we have included short case studies and examples of practical tools that the authorities have developed for their own use.

There is much work still to do on implementing NI 14 and we do not pretend that this document is the final word. NI 14 will continue to evolve. The guidance will therefore need to be updated at a future point. In the meantime, however, we hope that this guide provides real practical help and enables you and your colleagues to act with more confidence and speed in using this indicator to improve local service delivery.

the structure of the guide
The concept of avoidable contact may not be well understood in your organisation or recognised as an important priority. One of the key challenges of implementing NI 14 successfully and exploiting its full potential is to capture the attention of senior members and managers and to gain their support for tackling this issue as, used well, it is fundamental to improved and more cost effective service delivery.

After a brief summary of the context for the indicator, part one of the guide therefore sets out the strategic arguments for treating avoidable contact as a priority, both for our customers and our organisations. This section has been deliberately designed to act as a standalone document, which you can circulate to senior decision-makers in its current form, or from which you can draw arguments for your own briefings.

part two then addresses the question of definitions. A key message here is that concerns over detailed definitions, although important, should not unduly delay practical action.
Part three addresses the business case for investing in reducing avoidable contact – a key challenge in times of financial constraint. This section of the guide outlines the contribution NI 14 can make to a range of customer and organisational goals.

Part four of the guide contains information on a series of practical activities such as establishing appropriate governance and reporting structures, engaging stakeholders, and communicating the message. In each case we have set out why this activity is important and the practical steps that leading authorities have been taking.

Part five addresses data collection, sampling methodologies and staff training. Again, we have set out why each activity is important and the practical steps that pilot authorities have taken.

Finally, part six includes some case studies from local government and from across the public sector where avoidable contact data has been used as a platform for improvement.

The guide concludes with a number of appendices dealing with particular issues. These include:

- the approach that the Audit Commission will take in relation to NI 14 within the overall context of the new performance management framework
- potential support tools for implementing NI 14, such as ESD Toolkit
- the official definition of NI 14.

Further information

The following organisations can be contacted for queries on NI 14:

Communities and Local Government
www.communities.gov.uk
contact Neil Reeder in the Local Transformation, Improvement and Efficiency Division
neil.reeder@communities.gsi.gov.uk

Cabinet Office
www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk
contact Bob Kamall in the Service Transformation Implementation Team
bob.kamall@cabinet-office.x.gsi.gov.uk

Improvement and Development Agency
www.idea.gov.uk/ni14guidance
contact Siobhan Coughlan in the Service Transformation Team
siobhan.coughlan@idea.gov.uk
NI 14 is one of the 198 indicators against which local government will be assessed within the new performance management framework agreed between Communities and Local Government and the Local Government Association. The full text of NI 14 is given in appendix v of this document.

Local authorities will be required to report on these indicators at different frequencies. In the case of NI 14, the reporting interval will be annual. Local authorities will first report NI 14 data in April 2009, with councils expected to have the mechanisms in place in time for data collection to begin in October 2008.

Where the partners in a Local Area Agreement choose NI 14 to be one of their key indicators, a formal target for reducing avoidable contact will be agreed (as per the LAA frameworks).

More commonly, authorities will be expected to report annually on performance against NI 14 to the Department of Communities and Local Government via the Data Interchange Hub. The Audit Commission will use the national indicator set to inform its assessment of performance and improvement for Comprehensive Area Assessment. Appendix i of this guide sets out the Audit Commission’s likely approach.

Although NI 14 is an important measure in its own right, many authorities are already seeing the reduction of avoidable contact as a key part of their wider programmes to improve services to customers and reduce costs. It will become clear, as you read this guide, that this is the approach we believe will offer the most value to our councils and our customers.
part one
a tool for improving services

getting to grips with avoidable contact
The focus on avoidable contact can be seen positively as a valuable new opportunity to understand our customers better and to change the way we work, or it can be seen negatively as another box to be ticked.

Councillors and senior managers in local government will have a crucial role in shaping how their authorities react. What will be required?

a new way of thinking
First, we need to recognise that we are being asked to think in a different - and systemic - way about our services, how they work and how well they are designed to respond to the needs of our customers, residents and services users. This will undoubtedly mean less emphasis on how we find the resources to meet our existing volumes of customer contact and more emphasis on understanding the real nature of customer demand.

To understand and begin to quantify what is avoidable contact, we will first have to understand the current demands being made of services. It is clear that, even in the best services, existing volumes of demand will include instances of what we have termed avoidable contact: for example those telephone calls we all occasionally make to chase something that should really have been done already, a call that is of low or no value to us.

The need to understand and analyse current demand is one of the fundamental benefits of the use of this indicator.

Understanding demand, and avoidable contact, will help provide the evidence (and greater user awareness) to inform better service design, which will in return reduce contact that is of low or no value to the customer, as well as often having a positive effect on staff morale and reducing the cost of providing the service.

‘This is service redesign and culture change on the quiet. It gives different parts of our councils – and our partners – something really practical to focus on: How do we reduce the amount of time and effort we and our citizens waste?’

chief executive, metropolitan council
a commitment to change
A new way of thinking implies culture change and, in particular, seeing the way we deliver services from the customer’s point of view, so that our communications, forms, processes and even the ways in which we group services and work with partner organisations are truly customer-centric.

There is a strong link therefore between NI 14 and the work many authorities are doing to develop customer insight and an equally big challenge to ensure that we have the skills and management processes in place to turn analysis and insight into outcomes that both our customers and our staff can see.

Fortunately, as the IDeA’s recent work on Front Office Shared Services (amongst other research) has suggested, local government has made substantial progress in reshaping services from the customer’s perspective in recent years, often working closely with other local public service organisations.

Moreover, as a result of their day-to-day contact with customers, local authorities have tremendous reserves of tacit knowledge about the causes of avoidable contact upon which they can draw, including feedback from customers (either as individuals or as members of, for example, residents’ groups), the insights of councillors and front line staff, and the experience of partner agencies such as the local Citizens Advice Bureau who routinely help citizens to negotiate access to our services.

If the opportunities of NI 14 are to be fully exploited therefore, senior decision-makers will need to ensure that a wide range of contributors are involved in the discussions – particularly those staff who work with customers on a day-to-day basis and will already know what changes could be made – and that there is a commitment to reshape our organisations as a result.

active leadership
All of the above clearly indicates that effective and committed leadership is required to ensure that:

• the right context is set for any work, reinforcing the focus on understanding demand and avoidable contact as a positive tool for improvement

• the concept of avoidable contact is thus embedded within the authority’s wider approach to improvement and transformation

• a one-council approach is taken and problems are seen from the customer’s point of view, even where they cut across existing organisational silos

• partner organisations are engaged through bodies such as LSPs both to gain their insight into demand and thus avoidable contact and also to secure their commitment to reducing unnecessary referrals or duplication between local public services

• appropriate resources are mobilised to take full advantage of NI 14 so that it acts as a prompt for new thinking and ways of working.
This is one of the occasions where we can really talk about win-win-win. By focusing on reducing avoidable contact, we can provide:

- a win for our customers, who should find services more responsive to their needs
- a win for our staff, who should spend less of their time dealing with irate and frustrated customers and more of their day providing positive help
- a win for our organisations, which will be using their resources more productively and in a way that creates greater customer satisfaction, thereby helping to address the challenge posed by Comprehensive Spending Review 2007 of delivering better services at less cost.

**a tool for improving services**

What does avoidable contact mean in practice and why should we devote resources to identifying and reducing it? In essence, the term refers to those interactions between the public services and their customers that offer little or no value to either side — the chase-up calls, for instance, that cause citizens much frustration and stress and take up valuable staff time within our organisations.

The concept of avoidable contact is not new. Similar thinking underpins a range of formal improvement methodologies, such as lean and quality management, as well as being reflected in the more down-to-earth idea of getting things right first time.

‘Measuring avoidable contact is not about avoiding contact with our customers, but it is about reducing the need for customers to contact us because we have failed to deliver a service or information.’

Extract from a metropolitan borough council briefing document

By focusing our attention on reducing avoidable contact, we are responding to the requirements of the new local performance management framework, and indicator NI 14 in particular, as well as the government-wide Service Transformation Agreement, whose key aim is ‘to reduce the number of unnecessary contacts that people need to have with government’.

But, just as importantly, we are exploiting an approach that will help us to:

- understand our customers and their needs better, including those groups who find it particularly difficult to gain access to our services
- review and rethink the way in which we and our partners deliver services from a citizen’s perspective
- demonstrate that we value both our citizens’ time and our own efficient use of resources in times of financial constraint
- design services that reflect the needs of customers not arbitrary targets or performance measures
empower our front-line staff, helping them to minimise unproductive work and enabling them to concentrate their efforts on those service requests that really need their attention

• deliver real practical outcomes, such as higher customer satisfaction, reduced levels of complaints and greater efficiency.

Reducing avoidable contact would therefore be an important element of our drive to transform services even if the specific NI 14 indicator did not exist. But the presence of NI 14 in the national indicator set offers a real opportunity to galvanise our organisations into practical action.

‘Avoidable contact isn’t some dry abstraction. It’s about how we deliver efficient and effective services in ways that suit our customers.’

chief executive, district council

understanding the sources of avoidable contact

There are many ways in which avoidable contact can be triggered.

The most obvious is a failure to deliver a service within agreed timescales or to an acceptable standard. But often we create avoidable contact through our own actions. A couple of examples, drawn from real practice, will illustrate the point:

A council wanted to announce important changes to the parking regulations in a major market town. A junior officer in the Parking Section was given the task of writing a letter, which was then sent out to local residents. The letter was poorly drafted, full of technical jargon and was despatched in one bulk mail shot. No other part of the council was alerted. Chaos ensued, as the council’s contact centre and the Parking Section were bombarded with calls. When residents found they could not get through initially, they phoned time after time and were often angry and distressed by the time they spoke to a council officer. It was several weeks before things returned to normal.
An Education Department sent out application forms about student loans. After working through the detail, a family submitted a completed application. A week later, the family received a new form with a standard covering letter stating that their previous application had been incorrect. The letter gave no clue as to what mistake the family had made and neither a call to the council’s contact centre nor a visit to the local one stop shop helped to clarify the situation. The family submitted a new form with every expectation that this application would also be rejected and the cycle of contact repeated.

Both of these tales are examples of poor administrative practice, but there are other, often more fundamental, sources of avoidable contact. For instance, the complex design of the public services – what Sir David Varney has referred to as isolated ‘islands of service’ – may require the citizen to make contact with numerous organisations in order to complete a transaction, such as reporting a bereavement or a change of address, as well as obliging staff to collect duplicate information. Poor referral processes, both within and between the public services, may compound the problem.

Focusing on reducing avoidable contact should therefore be a stimulus for us not just to improve our day-to-day procedures but also to fundamentally rethink the very way in which we deliver our services to more effectively meet the needs and demands of our customers.

**the myths versus reality**

It is easy to imagine that avoidable contact is primarily a local government or public service issue, that the problem lies in our contact centres and that it will be enormously costly to resolve. In reality, however:

**This is a challenge for organisations in every sector… but an imperative for public services**

Experience in the private sector consistently suggests that commercial firms receive high volumes of contact that could be classed as avoidable, thereby involving their staff in significant levels of unproductive activity. This sort of contact is increasingly coming under senior management scrutiny.

However, there are particular imperatives on public service organisations to address avoidable contact, because their customers may often:

- find themselves in uniquely difficult situations – trying to claim benefits in order to feed their families, coping with homelessness or dealing with bereavement
- have no alternative organisation they can approach for the service;
- be short of money, making each additional phone call or bus journey an added burden.

In these circumstances, as the research underpinning current national initiatives such as the Tell Us Once project has suggested, each unnecessary or unproductive contact that the customer has to make is likely to be so much more stressful than if that same person were enquiring about a consumer product that had not been delivered on time.

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The debate therefore needs to focus not on whether avoidable contact is present in our organisations – it undoubtedly is - but on the practical steps we can take to reduce the level and the impact on our customers.

**This is about our citizens’ experience of services – it is not just a contact centre issue.**

Avoidable contact is a measure of how our services are performing as a whole. Reducing avoidable contact will therefore require an understanding of the customer’s end-to-end experience of key processes and the effectiveness of all the different parts of the organisation or organisations involved in delivering a particular service. The activities of important partners, including other public service bodies who are involved in jointly delivering key services as well as private sector contractors, may for example have a significant effect on the levels of avoidable contact.

The contact centre often acts as a barometer for an organisation’s performance and may be the place where avoidable contact is first picked-up or logged in the most consistent way. However, avoidable contact is unlikely to arise from the individuals handling that contact – customer advisers don’t miss bins. The underlying causes are likely to lie elsewhere in the service delivery chain.

Therefore, this is not just (or even primarily) a contact centre issue and the presence of avoidable contact is in no way the fault of the staff who identify it. It is essential to understand the difference between the evidence of avoidable contact and the cause(s) which almost certainly lie in service design and consequential delivery.

**We need to focus on how we design our services and organisations.**

We have already seen a number of the ways in which we build avoidable contact into our operations, by:

- forcing citizens to interact with a confusing array of public service organisations in order to get their issues resolved
- operating in isolation, whether within departmental silos or in poorly coordinated front and back office arrangements.

How much more effective might the letter written by the parking officer in the earlier example have been, for instance, if there had been a close day-to-day working relationship with the council’s communications function and an early discussion with the corporate contact centre?

To reduce avoidable contact in a sustainable way, we therefore need to focus as much on the way we design our services and organise our work, both internally and with partners, as on developing the behaviours and capabilities of our staff. Many local authorities are already focusing on improving business processes, and evidence of avoidable contact informs and supports those efforts.
A realistic score is important.

Given the sensitivity around any new performance measure, it will be tempting to declare an unrealistically low level of avoidable contact. But doing this will significantly reduce the value of NI 14 to the organisation and could foster cynicism amongst front-line staff in particular, who are well aware of the actual scale of the problem.

In contrast, a realistic score, which may well be significant, backed up by appropriate plans for rapid and sustainable improvement, could be taken as a sign of an organisation that is really willing to invest in understanding its customers’ experiences, to appraise its services honestly and to set ambitious goals for transforming itself, including working more effectively with partners.

Scores from across a variety of service industries suggest that it is not untypical for 40 to 60 per cent of overall contact to be classified as avoidable.

Action can be relatively simple and cheap.

Measuring avoidable contact does not necessarily require an investment in new and complex computer systems. A combination of alterations to existing systems and some manual intervention will often prove sufficient. Similarly, many of the actions required to reduce avoidable contact are neither new nor resource-intensive. They include:

- being clearer up-front about our actual (as opposed to our notional) service standards
- confirming agreed actions with a brief email or text message and contacting people in advance to remind them of appointments
- actively informing customers of a delay, explaining why the delay has occurring and giving a new timescale
- using plain English in written communications and on the web
- making people aware of what can be done electronically when they phone or visit us with a specific type of enquiry.

The skills to make these changes are typically there in our organisations, whether in individual service departments or in corporate functions. The challenge is often to get the different parts of the organisation working together.
meeting the challenge
Understanding demand and thus avoidable contact will not necessarily be easy. The approach will appear to challenge many existing ways of doing things. If not introduced carefully, it could be perceived by staff as an implied criticism of their work, or as a requirement to be disloyal to colleagues by blowing the whistle on poor performance.

Moreover, to analyse the scale and nature of demand and hence of the problem of avoidable contact we will need to collect reliable and informative data.

It will therefore be essential for senior decision-makers – both political and managerial – to recognise and address the potentially disruptive effects of such a change of emphasis, to lend their weight to the new approach and to back appropriate investments in staff (e.g. training), processes and systems.

Active leadership will be required. However, the prize is worth the effort, even if some of the detailed work may be arduous. We are confident that local government will seize the opportunity.
Customer contact is defined as an external customer (citizen or business) contacting the council across any channel (telephone, e-mail, post, website or face-to-face) with regard to the services set out in the Communities and Local Government documentation on the new performance management framework (see appendix v for the specified council services listed in NI 14).

It includes customer requests for a service or information, reports of failure to deliver a service, progress chasing and responses to council correspondence. Website contact is assessed as the number of web-based transactions in the specified service areas (see measuring web contact in part 5 of this guide).

Whether or not contact is avoidable depends on what caused the customer to make contact. A contact should be deemed avoidable if one or more of the following occurs:

A. The customer is seeking unnecessary clarification: Any query received as a result of a previous contact during which the council was not able to provide the necessary information or service, for example:
   - a phone call resulting from online service being unavailable or inadequate information on the website
   - an email asking for clarification following a council letter or other communications material which is poorly worded or has presented incomplete, inaccurate or out of date information

B. The contact is caused by poor signposting or poor call transfer to council services – for example, the customer rings the wrong number because contact points are not clearly advertised, or the customer is passed to planning services when their query relates to parking.

C. There is repeat contact with the customer, who has to provide the same information a number of times in order to carry out transactions with the council and its partners – for example, a customer being asked to provide information about a change of address to multiple parts of the council.

D. The customers are progress chasing, asking for reassurance or making other unnecessary service delivery follow-up. This category includes any contact which results from a council or partner’s inability to deliver a service as expected or promised (for example, a missed appointment to collect sofa for disposal or faulty boiler in council house not properly fixed); in other words if the council had delivered the service as promised right first time, the customer would not have needed to contact the council.

E. There is repeat contact after premature closure of a previous contact, for example, customer returns to a one-stop shop.
In considering these definitions, you should bear in mind the following practical points:

- ideally the assessor should be the individual handling the contact at the point at which the contact first reaches the council
- the assessment of whether a contact is avoidable relates only to what caused the customer to make contact (as opposed to evaluating the customer satisfaction with the contact or whether follow-up contacts will subsequently be needed or whether the outcome of the avoidable contact finally resolved the original issue).

Where there are questions over whether a particular instance of contact should be categorised as avoidable or not, we would encourage authorities:

- not to get too focused on the finer details of definition if this is getting in the way of practical action, as the bulk of avoidable contact is likely to be fairly easy to identify. Rather than focusing on one-off incidents that generate avoidable contact, local authorities should look for what is regularly (in other words predictably) being raised by customers as a problem
- to adopt a broad definition as this is more likely to stimulate new ideas on how service delivery can be improved. For instance, you may have tried unsuccessfully to contact some customers on their landlines before they call back. Logging their repeat call as avoidable contact may prompt you to think of other ways of getting in touch with them e.g. text messages to a mobile.

Note that, when determining the scope of the services covered by the indicator, a useful starting point is the esd-toolkit’s Local Government Services List (LGSL). This offers a standardised list originally developed for e-government reporting.

For information on contact arising from exceptional circumstances and from customer expectations, see part five ‘Collecting Data’.
Building a business case is critical to engaging senior stakeholders and persuading the organisation to devote resources to the programme of measuring, learning from, and improving as a result of NI 14.

An effective business case can reinforce the message that this is not just a simple performance measure, but a key element in a wider programme of improvement and change. Given the political complexion of many authorities at the moment, it is also useful to stress that organisations in all sectors are beginning to focus on avoidable contact.

The business case should consider a range of benefits, both tangible and intangible. These include the financial value of measuring and monitoring avoidable contact, both cashable and non-cashable. The council should also factor in the value of measuring for the organisation, in terms of improved learning and capacity. The business case should also incorporate an external perspective, reflecting the value to the customer in terms of time and effort saved from reducing contact, and the political value of the outcome to the community.

The benefits framework below outlines examples of these four factors. The framework broadly reflects the Audit Commission’s new use of resources assessment for 2008/09, which considers how well organisations are managing and using their resources to deliver value for money and better and sustainable outcomes for local people. The Audit Commission’s new use of resources assessment is structured into three themes that focus on the importance of:

- sound and strategic financial management
- strategic commissioning and good governance
- effective management of natural resources, assets and people.

From 2008/09, the Audit Commission’s ‘Key Lines of Enquiry’ (KLOE) are more broadly based than previously and embrace wider resource issues such as people and workforce planning, and the use of natural resources. The KLOE focus more on value for money achievements, outputs and outcomes rather than on processes, and are more strategic and less detailed.
making the business case

benefits framework

financial value

- measuring and understanding the causes of avoidable contact provides an evidence base for improvement initiatives which can unlock a range of relatively straightforward service improvements.
- by reducing avoidable contact, the council can release resources from both the frontline (which no longer needs to manage the contact) and back office (whose workload is lowered because the amount of errors and rework in service delivery is reduced.) The demands on partner organisations (e.g. contractors) and therefore their costs may also be reduced.
- these benefits may be cashable. Alternatively, some authorities may chose to take the benefits in the form of increased capacity in the workforce (and potentially among for example, members) to focus on more worthwhile activities, i.e. doing more with the same. The London Borough of Haringey, for instance, is looking at avoidable contact as a means of increasing the capacity of its customer services function.

organisational value

- by providing insight, measuring avoidable contact provides a major learning opportunity for councils.
- the training and development of personnel can result in a more engaged, empowered frontline.
- NI 14 may help demonstrate to other parts of the council the contribution made by the contact centre function and encourage a whole council approach to improvement.

The London Borough of Haringey anticipates that the evidence provided will help it and its partners to understand how a poorly worded letter directly results in a call from that customer seeking clarification or further information, and how the promises and expectations set in letters, leaflets and posters (such as an application form will be processed in ten working days) result in customer contact, cost and potentially dissatisfaction when these promises are not met.

customer value

- data on avoidable contact can help identify those improvements in processes and systems that will have the greatest impact on the way in which customers experience services. East Hampshire District Council's transformation team, for example, will use the data when planning their programme of work on process improvement, giving priority to projects that the data has highlighted as particularly important.
- reducing the causes of avoidable contact will save customer time and effort in contacting the council.
- reducing the causes of avoidable contact will improve the customer's experience of end-to-end service delivery and recorded customer satisfaction.
• A focus on avoidable contact should lead to improvements in communications, access channels and service design that should benefit those customers who find it most difficult to deal with complex bureaucracies – for instance, by prompting councils to emphasise Plain English.

**Political value**

• Reducing avoidable contact will enhance the reputation and trustworthiness of the council with the local community

• Reducing avoidable contact by improving communication will help to ensure councils better reach people who are eligible for services and benefits.

**Cost framework**

Any benefits need to be set against costs. The costs of implementing NI 14 are primarily a function of the breadth and depth of data required and the methods used to collect and analyse data.

However, it will be impossible to improve how services are designed and delivered – and therefore to identify cashable efficiency savings, for instance - without also investing resources in analysing and understanding the underlying causes of avoidable contact. The costs of exploiting the data need therefore to be taken into consideration.

In the small minority of local authorities with systems that can track avoidable contact without extension or human intervention, the costs of collecting data will be negligible, underlying the arguments for investment in systems which automate the process.

Where processes cannot be automated, there is a trade-off between the level of detail of the data, and the costs of collecting, collating and analysing it.

For example, monitoring avoidable contact continuously rather than annually will help councils to identify the trends that are evident, and will also give more up-to-date information which will facilitate easier, more rapid improvement. However, there is a risk that such an approach will be perceived as taking time away from the front office.

Each authority will therefore need to choose its sampling method to reflect its priorities for service improvement and the scale of prospective benefits. Many of our pilot authorities, however, would no doubt argue that collecting data on avoidable contact is as important as logging call volumes and collecting customer satisfaction statistics, all of which authorities typically already do.

Potential methods of collecting data on avoidable contact, including sampling approaches, are discussed in part five Collecting Data.
setting the context

Measuring avoidable contact is merely the beginning of the journey, the end being an improved outcome for both the council and the customer.

An effective implementation of NI 14 will therefore involve:

- a focus on the local drivers and the outcomes your local authority is seeking to deliver. For example, the London Borough of Southwark chose to pilot their measure of avoidable contact in their revenues service, as it was a high profile service with one in three households being on some benefit support. They were therefore keen to improve performance.

- a whole council approach that looks at how all the different parts of the council (as well as key service delivery partners) can achieve end-to-end service improvement. Hence, local authorities should consider the relationship of NI 14 data to existing business process improvement projects.

- a real commitment to making changes and redesigning services in ways that bring tangible benefits to customers. For example, the London Borough of Haringey considers avoidable contact in the context of delivering services right first time.

Much of this will be familiar from previous change initiatives, such as the e-government programme and the work that many authorities have done to establish corporate contact centres. Similarly, business process improvement projects can both inform, and benefit from, measurement of avoidable contact.

At the same time, anyone familiar with change programmes will know how much uncertainty and opposition they can generate. With NI 14, there is a risk that some staff could interpret the focus on avoidable contact as a criticism of their current work or a time-consuming irrelevance. To pre-empt or overcome this uncertainty, the rationale and benefits of spending time measuring and gaining knowledge on the causes of avoidable contact needs to be made clear through briefing and training.

The support of both senior officers and key members will be critical. It is vital, therefore, to devote as much time and effort to communicating with senior stakeholders and putting in place effective governance arrangements as to establishing data collection systems and training staff.

We outline some of the ideas emerging from the pilot authorities below. As a starting point within your own authority, you may wish to review the experience from any previous major change initiatives, including:

- supportive governance and programme management arrangements
- practical tools such as communications plans
- successful operational management arrangements, for example to foster dialogue between contact centre and service department staff
- management responsibilities for acting on knowledge gained to enable improvement.

All of these offer a basis for your NI 14 work.
putting NI 14 into place

4

establishing the right governance and reporting arrangements

The governance arrangements your authority establishes for NI 14 will have a significant effect on whether the measure is seen as an important driver for service improvement or merely another indicator to be reported on.

A key message emerging from the pilot authorities is that, wherever possible, you should aim to place avoidable contact within the remit of a senior-level body that has responsibility for corporate transformation – for instance, a service transformation board or an access to services committee – rather than under the wing of a performance group, where there is a danger, as one chief executive put it, of ‘hitting the target but missing the point’. It is particularly valuable if the body includes members, as well as representation from other public service delivery bodies and key private sector partners.

Avoidable contact in Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council, for example, will be the responsibility of the authority’s Public Service Transformation Board, chaired by a director and including the portfolio holder, and representatives from the Housing Arms Length Organisation (ALMO) and the Leisure Trust. Quarterly reports will go both to the Cabinet and senior management team.

Typically, officers have found it valuable to emphasise the theme of ‘learning about services’ in any initial reports to such potential sponsoring bodies, where possible also drawing on relevant corporate strategies or reviews. The London Borough of Enfield, for instance, had recently had an Audit Commission Access to Services review, which provided a useful context for their paper on NI 14. The council has also launched a Leaner change programme in which NI 14 will play a significant role.

We recognise that not all authorities have such options, however, and you may need to be pragmatic. In York, for instance, the council has an EASY (Electronically Accessing Services in York) board, focusing on access to services which, although concentrating primarily on electronic contact, represents the best home for avoidable contact.

Ideally, your sponsoring body should have the power to allocate resources to establishing the right infrastructure for measuring avoidable contact within your authority and the ability to direct further resources to resolving any issues raised (for instance, poor performance in a particular department). It should also be able to resolve any inter-departmental disputes, by having representation from a range of service functions.
Overall responsibility for the collection and presentation of data should sit with a senior officer, who has direct access to the council’s senior management team. This is a sponsorship and advocacy role. The officer needs to be senior enough to engage the major services of a council on an equal footing. You may also want to consider having a lead member for NI 14. Many authorities took this approach when they faced the task of monitoring their progress against the e-government target and appointed both member and officer e-champions.

A few of the pilot authorities were lucky in having relevant, senior-level appointments underway. In this case, you could consider including NI 14 in a job description and as part of the discussions during interviews.

**engaging stakeholders**

The workload in measuring, reporting and acting to address avoidable contact is non-trivial. Initially, measuring avoidable contact will require a degree of internal advocacy, evangelising and training to encourage management and staff to understand the value of addressing avoidable contact.

A key step in demonstrating the value of monitoring avoidable contact is presenting the resulting data for discussion and analysis with stakeholders – such as staff, senior managers, service managers, members, and partners.

Customers can make an avoidable contact with the front office, the back office, and directly with contractors and other service deliver partners. Local authorities are expected to collect all avoidable contact data relating to the prescribed services, regardless of office or channel and to pay particular attention to those services that support the delivery of local priorities.
Since an authority's customer services department may account for a large proportion of contact with customers, the pilot authorities have typically tasked their customer service managers with collecting data arising in contact centres and one-stop-shops.

However, in some authorities the customer services department may not yet support all of the services that require measurement. Your council's measurement effort should reflect the council's priorities for improvement rather than solely those services that are supported by customer services.

It is also essential to emphasise to senior stakeholders that avoidable contact is a whole council issue. The front office can help to detect levels of avoidable contact (where they deal with the customer); however, the front office cannot be held solely responsible for resolving the underlying causes of avoidable contact.

The Borough Council of Wellingborough is using NI 14 as a transformation tool to deliver the organisation’s culture change, from a service-focused to a customer-focused authority. Avoidable contact has been articulated as an improvement tool, with no mention of the specific NI 14 indicator. The implementation of NI 14 will sit within the transformation programme, along with community engagement, customer insight and communications. This programme is sponsored by the Deputy Leader and will report to CMT.
The chief executive is using the monthly management bulletin to communicate the rationale and potential of NI 14 to stimulate service redesign around the needs of the customer. CMT has also suggested that each team devote one of its weekly team talks to how to deal with complaints as a way of introducing the concept of NI 14, rather than discussing the technical detail of the indicator.

All of the above underlines the engagement and communication task that NI 14 involves. You and your sponsors will need to sell the benefits of measuring and reducing avoidable contact to the rest of the organisation and beyond, for example to key partners.

To do so, the language needs to be positive. Avoidable contact needs to be regarded in a context of delivering services right first time. By providing an evidence base, measuring avoidable contact illuminates opportunities to improve the customer’s experience of council services.

Furthermore, placing avoidable contact together with familiar concepts like repeat calls and complaints (which both contribute to avoidable contact) will help staff readily grasp the value of measuring it.

A number of key stakeholders need to be considered.

front office staff
Many of the pilot authorities have remarked upon the importance of customer service advisers’ understanding the issue and being keen to ensure that avoidable contact is recorded properly.

Front office staff need to understand the rationale for data collection and the agreed criteria for recording a contact as avoidable. They also need to have the tools, training, support and motivation to record the information, and active encouragement to recommend solutions.

The role of the customer service manager is therefore crucial in organising and monitoring the process and in ensuring that it is not seen as an additional and meaningless task.

Fortunately, avoidable contact is a concept that will already be familiar to many front line staff (although they may not call it by this name). Some pilot authorities have found that an initial discussion with staff in contact centres and one-stop shops has immediately generated a wide range of ideas about potential sources and solutions, even before measurement systems are in place, emphasising the value of fixing things that staff know instinctively are not working.

Focusing on avoidable contact can also be seen as a way of engaging and empowering front-line staff and giving them a chance to use their knowledge and professional judgement. The higher grades of qualifications such as those offered by the Institute of Customer Services, for instance, typically emphasise the contribution an applicant has made to reshaping rather than just managing services.
4

service departments
Managers and staff in service functions are likely to be particularly sensitive to the way in which NI 14 is introduced. There is a risk that focusing on avoidable contact could be seen as a criticism of the service departments’ current work or a challenge to their current ‘excellent’ rating from the Audit Commission. Nevertheless, it remains critical for you to work with your back office functions and key external contractors. Much of the contact they receive may be managed in an ad-hoc or unstructured manner, making collecting contact data challenging. However, it is in precisely these situations where some analysis of contact may prove most illuminating and therefore the council will need to agree how practical measurements can be put in place going forward. Analysis of contact can prompt and support business process improvement initiatives.

Key messages here will include:

- measuring NI 14 is about raising performance to the next level, not about criticising past performance
- a relatively high score (for example 40 per cent or more) is typical of many industries, not just local government. Indeed an unrealistically low score may suggest data quality issues and call into question the reliability of the results
- just as for their colleagues in contact centres or one-stop shops, this is an opportunity for staff to help design services that are more effective for everyone
- reducing avoidable contact may help reduce the day-to-day stresses on staff, for instance those involved in dealing with irate customers, as well as freeing up time to do more productive work.

senior managers
The arguments for senior managers have been set out in Part 1 of the guide. The key message here is that NI 14 should be a stimulus to service improvement and transformation rather than a mechanical reporting exercise.

Councils addressed a similar scenario when monitoring BVPI 157 where they identified and appointed an e-government champion to drive work on projects to deliver services electronically.

elected members
Elected members have a potentially crucial role to play in NI 14 and you need to consider how best to engage them.

All members will have direct experience of avoidable contact through their councillor case work. They will have real examples of where services are delivered in silos and not designed around the customer, or of poorly worded letters sent to local residents. They are therefore a valuable source of information about sources of avoidable contact and potential solutions.

Members can also have an important role to play in identifying which services should be targeted as a priority, derived from the community strategy and vision.
At the same time, members are important allies in helping to find the resources required to monitor and act on avoidable contact on a systematic basis. They may also be able to intervene where parts of your authority are not showing a willingness to engage.

Furthermore, a member scrutiny committee that is keen to make a practical impact on the council’s day-to-day service delivery may choose to focus on avoidable contact, exploring the underlying causes and hearing directly from local customers as well as helping promote and monitor a council-wide approach to using the data on avoidable contact to help drive service improvement.

partners
There are a number of different types of partner who have a role to play.

You will need to plan ahead for engaging contractors and other service providers, reviewing existing Service Level Agreements and seeking to negotiate-in measurements of avoidable contact.

The objective should be to create a win-win outcome for both the council and the contractor. In the long-term reducing avoidable contact should prove more economical for the contractor as well as the council as it will help identify blockages and waste in the existing processes. Anecdotal evidence from the pilot authorities indicates that front-office partners (such as providers of call centre services) are keen to participate as they appreciate the benefits of analysing customer contact.

It will also help both parties to better understand the experience of their shared customers so they can better redesign the process to be more customer focused and cost efficient.

Local authorities should also engage public service partners, such as health agencies, in direct discussions and share information relating to avoidable contact that arises from customers calling an inappropriate public body, or due to poor referral processes between partners. Where problems are apparent, you may wish to consider discussing evidence raised by NI 14 at LSP and LAA levels.

Discussions on customer contact with key community and voluntary groups such as the Citizens Advice Bureau or Age Concern will also be valuable, as they may have views on the underlying causes of avoidable contact (particularly for disadvantaged customers) and how these relate to the wider picture of need in the local community.
customers
Finally, we should not forget the contribution of customers themselves. Not only will they often help you to identify instances of avoidable contact (‘this is the third time I have rung about this problem’), they may also be able to suggest improvements (‘if you’d put the information on this part of your website, I wouldn’t have had to ring’).

You may therefore want to consider how you can pick up key instances of avoidable contact in any surveys or focus groups you run with citizens. And where your analysis is telling you there is a problem in a particular service area or customer group, you will need to think how best to get customer input into the redesign of the service.

Wigan plans to run workshops with the managers of the services set to measure NI 14 with the aim of firming up the definition of NI 14 to be used and choosing the best way to manage and implement the programme of measurement. Initial monitoring will begin in Wigan during July/August 2008 to enable them to identify and address any teething problems.

communicating the message
Workshops can be a productive method of introducing the concepts to staff and managers. Through exploring the issues in an interactive manner, participants are given an opportunity to contribute, be creative and gain a sense of ownership. East Hampshire District Council held workshops with front line staff that generated a number of ideas not only for measuring avoidable contact, but for addressing the avoidable contact that customer advisors already knew occurred. Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council used an online quiz, followed with a facilitated discussion at the next round of team meetings, to help their staff understand the nature of avoidable contact (see appendix iii for further details).

The chief executive of the Borough Council of Wellingborough is using the monthly management bulletin to communicate the rationale and potential of NI 14 to stimulate service redesign around the needs of the customer.

At the same time, as previous change initiatives such as the introduction of call centres have suggested, there is no substitute for getting on the agenda of, for example, service department management team meetings to discuss how avoidable contact can be approached as a council-wide issue. The regular meetings that many authorities have between their contact centre and key service departments are also an obvious starting point.

Councils are encouraged to use the content in part one of this guidance in their communications efforts.
The value of measuring avoidable contact is to provide the evidence base to illuminate opportunities for improvement. But how useful the data proves as an improvement tool is largely dependent on its robustness. Without trustworthy data the organisation will find it difficult to take forward initiatives to reduce avoidable contact.

This section looks at how you can report on services and channels, using both ICT and manual methods. Underpinning the section is an assumption that the quality of your data will be adequate. Some authorities are involving functions such as internal audit to ensure that appropriate policies and procedures around data quality are in place.

services
Local authorities are expected to measure all the services listed in the NI 14 guidance. However, in the short term, you may need to exercise informed managerial judgement to prioritise your measurement efforts on services that are critical to delivering your local priorities (for instance, services specifically identified in your LAA or corporate plan), or where there are known performance issues, recognising that you will need to be able to provide a valid rationale for your decisions and that this rationale may be requested if relevant to an Audit Commission assessment.

One key variable is the level of detail required. At a minimum level, local authorities should be reporting the percentage of total contact deemed avoidable. However, for the purposes of informing your authority’s wider approach to improvement and transformation, you will almost certainly want to go further – looking at patterns of avoidable contact by different customer groups, for instance, and logging the underlying causes. A number of the pilot authorities have already started to do this as part of more in-depth investigations following an initial sample.

Local authorities have a duty to involve customers, and NI 14 data will prove most useful when combined with other information that councils are collecting about customers and channels – for instance, when analysed alongside the results of customer journey mapping exercises. You will be able to get most value from the data if you consistently log the same personal characteristics from each customer. The Customer Insight Protocol developed by the LGA and IDeA with the National Consumer Council recommends that these are gender, date of birth, ethnic group and post code. Clearly there needs to be some judgement about how much information can be captured at each contact, but the essential point is to get maximum value from all the information the council holds on its customers.

As regards to the criteria for focusing on specific services initially, transaction volumes indicate use of services, thereby giving a good indication of local need and priorities. However, your authority also needs to identify the services and interactions that are critical to delivering outcomes that your local community values and these may not be solely high volume services.
In summary, you should:

- recognise contact data as a valuable source of knowledge on local needs, and analyse the data alongside the outputs from community consultation, citizen engagement and customer insight exercises.
- consider the key outcomes your authority is seeking to deliver to the locality when prioritising and planning your data collection exercise.
- consider collecting supplementary information relating to the underlying causes of avoidable contact, and with respect to equalities where appropriate (gender, age, ethnic background and so forth).

**channels**

To promote the use of the measure as an improvement tool, local authorities are encouraged to retain data according to the service and channel in which it was collected. Although CLG requires a single figure indicator to be reported, to encourage the sharing of evidence and good practice between authorities we recommend recording the data in the tabular format depicted below.

To support learning and benchmarking (both year-on-year and between authorities) local authorities are encouraged to record both real numbers (together with the sample size) and the percentage – for example 448/1000 (44.8 per cent) – as well as to summarise the steps taken to address the causes of avoidable contact.

**table 1 reporting avoidable contact**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>street scene</th>
<th>telephone</th>
<th>post</th>
<th>e-mail</th>
<th>web transactions</th>
<th>average per cent</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>council tax</td>
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<td>environmental health</td>
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</table>
At the request of central government the Audit Commission will publish results for all of the national indicators. Recognising the likely variation in the collection of this indicator locally it has agreed that it:

- will publish a single aggregate percentage value calculated on the basis of the figures for the required services over these five channels
- will indicate that NI 14 figures are non-comparable across local authorities due to the likely variation in the local arrangements for calculating the indicator
- will not publish averages, ranges or represent the data graphically for NI 14 in initial years (for further information on the CAA and the relevance of NI 14, see appendix i).

**measuring web contact**

There are a number of ways of measuring web activity. For the purposes of measuring avoidable contact, we are interested in transactions relating to the required services, which stay the same whether the customer uses web-based or other channels.

Information from web-based service transactions can be used to build up a picture of avoidable and unavoidable contact over the web. For the purposes of NI 14, web-based service transactions comprise:

- e-Payments (excluding council tax payments)
- e-Bookings
- e-Transactions via automated telephone payment systems (ATPs) (in other words for parking fines, council tax, and mobile parking payments may also be included)
- e-Forms and website email i.e.
  - reporting a problem that a council needs to respond to, such as graffiti or fly tipping
  - requesting a specific service by completing an e-form, for example submitting a planning application
  - reporting that information or a service is unavailable from the website
  - reporting a fault with the website.

The categories of avoidable contact remain the same whether the customer uses web-based or other channels. However, a successfully completed service transaction will generally fall into the category of unavoidable contact. Reporting of a fault or a problem should be regarded as avoidable contact.

It should be noted that, for the purposes of NI 14, service transaction data is a sub-set of customer contact via the web, as it does not include the visits that customers make to the website for information, or customer responses to e-surveys. However, for the time being we are restricting the web component of the indicator to web-based transactions of the types listed above in the specified service areas.
Note that contact should still be logged as avoidable regardless of whether or not customer expectations exceed service standards, and whether or not the problem is the responsibility of the council or service delivery partners, for example where tenants of the housing trust call the council regarding services provided by the housing trust, or citizens in two-tier areas call a district or borough council for highways maintenance services that are provided by the county council. This is to ensure that the reasons for the contact are analysed and appropriate action taken.

For instance, in cases where customer expectations exceed current service standards, an immediate response could be to make the timeframe for service delivery more explicit in any written or verbal communications e.g. by scripting the message and naming specific days and dates, in other words ‘that’s the 26th March, which is in three weeks’ time. Please call us after then if the job has not been completed…’

In the longer term, however, you may need to consider whether redesigning the service to fit with your customers’ expectations is desirable or feasible. Clearly, this will depend on the priorities of your individual authority.

In order to demonstrate how the collection and analysis of data can drive service improvements, we recommend that you should log any decisions taken based on your findings, for example ‘through our analysis of avoidable contact, we have identified that current service standards frequently do not meet customers’ expectations in service X, and by addressing and reducing the number of days to deliver our service we anticipate releasing sufficient resources to fund such an improvement.’ This will help clearly demonstrate the benefits both internally and externally, including to the Audit Commission, and will highlight how the council is using its work on NI 14 to drive service improvement.

There will be exceptional circumstances where the contact from the customer is not legitimate or valid, in other words where neither the council, nor an associated public service agency or partner, is obliged to deliver the service or resolve the enquiry.

Examples include:
- residents calling to have a car – which is taxed and legally parked – removed from outside their house
- a holder of a concessionary travel permit repeatedly requesting the details of the permit to be changed, which would have invalidated the permit.

These instances, although they can be difficult to predict and address, should still be logged as avoidable. Since we would expect examples such as these to make up a relatively small proportion of your overall total, they will not make a significant difference to your averages. However, the more frequently these instances occur the more predictable they become, in which case action should be taken to address the underlying causes.
Remember, NI 14 is focused on understanding and substantially reducing avoidable contact – it will not be feasible or economic to eradicate it completely. For example, many authorities carry out analyses of repair requests to see if there are patterns of repeat requests and if so what can be done to remove the cause (such as more planned maintenance). But there is no expectation that local authorities will achieve zero avoidable contacts.

using information systems to record avoidable contact
Local authorities have a variety of means available to them to record avoidable contact. Information systems, such as telephone call handling systems and customer relationship management applications, can help to identify and log avoidable contact. However, relevant information may also be contained in key back-office systems as well as for example in document management systems or queue management applications. At an early stage, therefore, you will need to identify where you will have to focus your efforts.

Ideally, the processes and systems can be designed to identify avoidable contact automatically, with no need for any additional steps required of the customer service agent. The London Borough of Haringey, for instance, is implementing a new CRM system and has built avoidable contact into the design (see figure 1 below), although the system will not cover all relevant services.

figure 1.
The London Borough of Haringey’s drop down boxes for recording avoidable contact and cause
Discussions at the North West e-Government Group (NWeGG) have suggested that some types of service request (for example, missed bin collections) can almost always be classified as avoidable contact and ICT systems could be programmed to log these instances automatically.

However, in most pilot authorities the advisers have modified their existing systems to log the data at the end of a contact:

- the London Borough of Bromley plans to use its contact centre telephone call handling system, because this currently covers a wider range of council services than its CRM. Existing call codes have been mapped as avoidable (or not) and where emerging problems are identified additional codes can be added to allow deeper analysis of the cause

- Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council has tailored the final screen of its CRM to enable the customer advisors to record whether the contact was avoidable or non-avoidable. Front line personnel make the decision (see screen shot below).

The drop-down menu at the bottom left of the screen shot shows the options available to advisors, including ‘failure demand’ and ‘value’.

The other two options are used when either live tests are necessary or where Dudley Council Plus are contacted by the back-office with a query about something that has been referred onto them. This approach enables measurement of services and information provision handled via the CRM, but is limited in the benefits it offers when seeking further detail to establish specific causes of avoidable contact.

\[\text{figure 2}\]

Dudley M.B.C. Aspire CRM – call wrap-up (end task) screen shot
In a number of cases, a mixture of ICT and manual recording has been required.

For example, Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council amended its telephone management system to have a pop-up screen appear as each call ends. The customer advisor is asked to state whether the call was avoidable or unavoidable and to give a reason for the failure.

**step 1:**
The advisor captures the customer’s details and requirements.

**step 2:**
The advisor is then prompted to ‘Select Call Activity’. This is where they specify whether it is avoidable contact or not. If it is, the advisor selects the category of avoidable contact e.g. progress chasing, mid-call transfer etc. At the end of the pilot a report was produced on these categories.
Note that in Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council’s face-to-face facilities, customer service advisors complete a pro-forma. This may also be necessary where the systems do not cover the complete list of services required.

In contrast, at the London Borough of Southwark, a council tax specialist reviewed a sample of closed calls from their CRM system after the event. The calls were extracted from completed enquiries and a specialist then analysed the details of notes for the causes of the call.

A number of local authorities have informed us that they are having discussions with their CRM systems suppliers, including in their user groups, to look at how adaptations might be made to enable the recording of avoidable contact. If you are not directly involved in these groups, you should ensure that your colleagues in ICT are fully briefed about your council’s requirements.

Discussions around NI 14 may also prove a useful prompt to deciding priorities where there is a programme underway in your authority to integrate your CRM system more closely with back-office systems.

Esd-toolkit will enable local authorities to upload data automatically (directly from CRM or via CSV files) for later analyses. Categories to be available for data collection include:

- service (LGSL)
- channel
- cause of avoidable contact
- customer ID (e.g. postcode, household, name)
- time log (date/time)

This data will then be automatically collated and reported and will be available via esd-toolkit for further analyses by local authorities (e.g. customer segmentation/profiling by cause of avoidable contact) including for useful comparisons to be made between councils.
**manual recording of avoidable contact**

Not every local authority has ICT systems to record avoidable contact across all of the service areas outlined in NI 14 or across all the different contact mechanisms, including post; therefore, they will need to log avoidable contact manually.

Manual sampling requires an investment of time and attention from both management and staff. The recommended processes are essentially the same as logging contact as avoidable or unavoidable on a screen, but, being paper based, they will result in a need to ensure that staff remember to record the data and to collate and compile the results.

Again, staff will need clear guidance and training and it might be helpful to provide a proforma to assist in both the collection and the analysis of the data. The London Borough of Haringey has developed such a proforma and this is included for consideration.

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**figure 4**
London Borough of Haringey: proforma for data collection
The London Borough of Bromley has developed the following pro forma, which includes notes on the cause of the avoidable contact.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>avoidable?</th>
<th>reason</th>
<th>number</th>
<th>notes/eg's</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>a. the customer is seeking unnecessary clarification:</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>b. the contact is caused by poor signposting or poor call transfer to council services</td>
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<td></td>
<td>c. there is repeat contact with the customer/provision of information</td>
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<td>d. progress chasing</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>e. premature closure of a previous contact</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>no</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n/a</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
sampling methodologies
The objective of collecting avoidable contact data is to drive service improvements. To do this, local authorities need to ensure that:
- the size of the sample is statistically credible
- the sampling period is representative, in other words reflects variation such as peaks and troughs and seasonality
- the data is reported according to the way it was recorded, for example structured by service and channel.

sampling size
Regarding sample size, the exact figure depends on the total number of contacts a council receives, the level of confidence it requires and the margin for error it deems acceptable. However, good practice would be a sample size of 1,067, which gives a confidence level of 95 per cent and an acceptable margin of error of three per cent. At a bare minimum a local authority should be reporting avoidable contact based on a sample of 1,067 contacts to the council. However, to provide a credible evidence base for service improvement, sample sizes should be set on a service-by-service basis. A rough guide to these sample sizes (all for 95 per cent confidence and three per cent error) can be found at www.idea.gov.uk/ni14guidance

London Borough of Haringey collected data manually over eight days in four of its walk-in centres and its telephone contact centre, covering the following services:
- benefits, council tax, NNDR
- children’s and young people’s services
- environmental services
- homeless services
- building control
- planning
- trading standards
- parking
- payments

Sampling took place every weekday except Mondays. Managers reminded staff to record data at the start and end of each day.

Customer service agents assessed and recorded e-mails and letters in the same way as calls and face-to-face interaction. Collation and data-entry of all hand-written tick sheets into a single spreadsheet was undertaken by temporary data entry staff.
sampling period
The sampling period also needs to be representative, in other words it should reflect variations such as peaks and troughs and seasonality.

In practice, you can vary the time or the human resources spent sampling. Approaches you could consider include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All contact personnel record data for one limited but continuous period of time during a year e.g. four weeks</td>
<td><strong>Pros:</strong> focuses management attention on sampling once a year, thereby concentrating effort</td>
<td><strong>Cons:</strong> offers a snapshot of activity at just one point during the year, and fails to capture avoidable contact data on big events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All contact personnel record data over a (randomised) series of days distributed throughout the year</td>
<td><strong>Pros:</strong> captures data from across the year, with a greater possibility of incorporating variation</td>
<td><strong>Cons:</strong> lack of continuity may accentuate the management and training challenge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A small number of contact personnel record continuously during the whole year</td>
<td><strong>Pros:</strong> focuses the management processes and skills required, reflects variation</td>
<td><strong>Cons:</strong> personnel need to maintain a representative workload</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All contact personnel record data continuously throughout the whole year</td>
<td><strong>Pros:</strong> gives the data to support a concerted attempt to reduce avoidable contact across the authority</td>
<td><strong>Cons:</strong> needs to be built into the council’s overall approach to performance management and requires major change in short term</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
If your authority chooses the first option, you should use the same four week period year on year to assist comparisons. The four weeks identified should also be as typical as possible, in other words you should avoid weeks that are known to have seasonal variations, for example throughout August and the end of December or early January or the weeks around.

Local authorities should consider using the collection method that best suits each service. For example, the sampling exercise needs to accommodate specific services in which contact typically occurs during a condensed period (e.g. the posting out of annual council tax bills or when applications for school places are submitted).

Furthermore, local authorities may choose to use a different approach from year to year. For example, where a service has been identified as a concern, a local authority may wish to measure all contact all year to gain greater detail and evidence. Similarly, they may not want to keep that level of resource committed year-on-year where it would be inefficient to do so.

**training staff**

Your authority will need to justify the effort in recording avoidable contact to staff by illustrating the benefits – in other words using the data to identify the potential for improvement in specific services. Informed and motivated members of staff are also more likely to record the data accurately.

Frontline staff are often eager to record avoidable contact data. They are already aware of the problem and are pleased to contribute to finding a solution. Being familiar with the nature of customer contact on a day-to-day basis, frontline staff also tend to find detecting and differentiating avoidable contact from unavoidable contact to be relatively straightforward. Frontline staff are, after all, more familiar with the nature of customer enquiries and behaviour than any one else in the council.

**Involving staff in participative, interactive workshops can help to engage them in the process and to contribute to it creatively.**

As an alternative to taking frontline staff out of operations, Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council incorporated online training into staff’s existing routine, using a PowerPoint self test quiz for staff to help explain the difference between avoidable and unavoidable contact and to build understanding and enthusiasm (see appendix iii for further details.)

Customer service team managers then participated in facilitated question and answer sessions at customer advisor team meetings. These approaches fitted around the working patterns of staff.
However, councils need to invest time and effort in preparing and training staff to record avoidable contact. The benefits of measuring, and the criteria for recording contact as avoidable need to be made clear.

Training needs to emphasise that avoidable contact is a symptom of problems with end-to-end service fulfilment, not merely an issue of communication between the customer and the council.

For example, in some instances staff can be cynical about classifying missed bins and streetlights as avoidable contact, remarking: ‘How would we know about these problems if the public didn’t tell us?’

**Staff at the London Borough of Bromley are continuously encouraged by managers to suggest ideas to bring avoidable contact down. For example, frontline staff suggested advertising bank holiday bin collections in the local paper. The result was a reduction in calls to the contact centre.**

Therefore it will be important to engage these staff in helping them understand why this is avoidable contact (in other words it indicates an underlying service delivery problem) and why it is important to log it as such to address the problem.

Key questions you can use with staff include:

- if the service had been delivered properly first-time, would the customer have needed to contact the council?
- if the council had kept its promises, or fulfilled its obligations, would the customer have contacted the council?
- could the council have done anything differently that would have removed the need for this call?

As a way of cultivating buy-in, managers at Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council discussed alternative ways of doing things with the staff who would use the data being collected. These scenarios include using previous data to identify predictive maintenance opportunities or to target programmed inspections to areas that are known to experience greater levels of need.

Examples of benefits of measuring and reducing avoidable contact are offered in the section ‘Making the Business Case’, one of which is the opportunity to develop your staff’s knowledge and skills.
London Borough of Southwark

The London Borough of Southwark has been measuring call volumes and repeat calls for a number of years. Based on these figures, the London Borough of Southwark identified housing Repairs as the single largest source of contact. This is unsurprising, as Southwark is the largest social landlord in London.

There were several areas of difficulty. Some customer requests required staff to have a detailed understanding of the type of repair to determine the most appropriate personnel to do the work. For example, sometimes both a plumber and an electrician are required. But without adequate knowledge, it is difficult for front-line staff to deploy the correct tradesmen, leading to delays and frustration. Scheduling the call to be convenient for the customer could also be challenging.

To address these issues, London Borough of Southwark has deployed a ‘middle office’ of Repair Resolution Officers in the front office to handle contact with tenants directly. Repair Resolution Officers are familiar with the nature of repairs that are typically required, understand the skills required for particular jobs, and use a software application to help schedule the repair at a time convenient for tenants. The team also uses a text messaging service to remind tenants of their appointments.

By understanding the nature of customer contact, and using data to re-design the service, the London Borough of Southwark has effectively reduced the amount of avoidable contact by re-designing the service and enhancing the capabilities of their frontline staff.

By measuring and analysing call volumes, staff at the London Borough of Sutton detected that they were receiving a high number of call relating to garden waste during the months of October and November – months when they did not provide a garden waste collection service. Their analysis of these calls led them to extend the service into the autumn to meet this need.
London Borough of Southwark’s One Touch Team is a team of frontline officers dedicated to serving new residents of Southwark. Rather than have residents contacting the local authority multiple times for separate services such as applying for a parking permit, registering for council tax and on the electoral roll, and applying for library and leisure cards, customers now contact the One Touch Team who then ensure the appropriate information is exchanged between the customer and the council, and across the council to deliver all the services. The One Touch Team also helps to ensure that a new resident’s first experience of the local authority is positive.

DVLA

Recent success at the DVLA demonstrates the opportunities and benefits of focusing on the cause and effect of customer contact in your organisation.

The DVLA answers in excess of one million calls per month. It was keen to reduce avoidable contact, not least to release resources for an expansion of services.

The DVLA created a small team of people with detailed knowledge of their business – a Customer Channel Team (CCT) – to track call volumes by major call type and category. The CCT conducts in-depth research and analysis into the individual call categories, by listening into large call samples to ascertain exactly what the customer actually said and thus the real cause of the call.

As a result, the DVLA has accumulated substantial information about call cause, effect and solutions. The DVLA’s Customer Service Improvement Team has used the data to reduce the number of calls, focusing on information and process. Information improvement initiatives include creating a speed review process to revise and simplify the content of all customer-facing literature, and creating new literature where appropriate.

Process improvements include reducing process times for application handling, even though performance was already inside target, thereby reducing the number of progress chasing calls the DVLA was experiencing. From these initiatives, the DVLA has reduced the volumes in its top nine call types by 24 per cent over the last twelve months (2007 to 2008 operational year), delivering both operational efficiencies and an improved customer experience.
appendix i
reporting performance

Under the forthcoming performance framework – the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) – the Audit Commission and the other public service regulators will be seeking evidence that demonstrates that LSPs have effectively addressed the following:

- they understand their local community and have identified local needs and priorities and these are reflected by the targets in the LAA
- the desired outcomes are being delivered and leading to positive changes for local people
- plans are in place to ensure that improvement can be sustained over time.

Measuring and reducing avoidable contact is relevant to all three areas.

Monitoring and analysing contact from customers should be part of local authorities’ efforts to identify local needs and issues. Contact data is a valuable source of knowledge about customer and community needs, to be considered alongside the outputs from community consultation, citizen engagement and customer insight initiatives.

Though arising in an operational context, customer contact constitutes an active expression of preference and need that offers significant opportunities for learning. Attending to avoidable contact demonstrates that a local authority is listening to customers, analysing needs, and acting on evidence.

The Audit Commission’s approach to inspection under CAA will be proportionate and risk-based. If relevant, it is likely that the Audit Commission would seek to establish:

- how a local authority's measurement and reduction of avoidable contact maps to local area priorities
- how well the local authority is using and applying NI 14 data in service improvement.

The Audit Commission, as part of the organisational use of resources assessment, will look at management process, policies and training relating to data quality.

Specifically, in reporting the national indicator set, it has been agreed that the Audit Commission:

- will publish a single aggregate percentage value calculated on the basis of the figures for the required services over these five channels
- will indicate that NI 14 figures are non-comparable across local authorities due to the likely variation in the local arrangements for calculating the indicator in the initial years
- will not publish averages, ranges or represent the data graphically for NI 14 in initial years.

Local authorities are required to submit a percentage figure to one decimal place. Data is to be submitted via the CLG’s data interchange hub.
appendix ii
using support tools

The local authorities piloting NI 14 were investigating the following tools to support their work as these were the systems they already had in place. We have included details of them as an illustration of the sorts of systems that may be available to help with your NI 14 implementation.

**ESD Toolkit**
Many local authorities are already esd-toolkit users. Local authorities pay an annual subscription of between £700 and £2150.

Local authorities have previously used esd-toolkit to submit returns such as their annual IEG assessment for BVPI 157 and Annual Efficiency Statement for inspection.

Esd-toolkit is currently used for recording and sharing data on every service provided by the council with links to supporting material such as business processes, responsible officers, Gershon efficiency streams, national indicators, citizen-types, delivery channels, cost-to-serve indications.

The programme’s key focus during 2008 to 2011 is set to support the Citizen Insight and Service Transformation agenda.

The esd-toolkit currently supports NI 14 through its capabilities to identify, link and record:

- **services**
  - provided to customers
- **processes, activities and information assets**
  - elements which make up services
- **costs**
  - cost elements that make up a service
- **customer need**
  - generic needs which can be mapped across customers
- **customer profiles**
  - local segmentation of customers
- **customer take up**
  - measurement definitions
- **customer satisfaction**
  - scoring mechanism
- **functions**
  - legislation giving powers and duties
- **partners**
  - organisations which are involved in the service or process.

Local authorities can cross-reference their data to Gershon efficiency work streams, the 198 national indicators, CAA targets, other organisations and contacts within them who are excelling in particular areas or are in need of support and assistance.

During 2008-9 esd-toolkit will enable subscribing authorities to:

- use avoidable contact data to identify key points of leverage for end to end service improvement
- develop shared understanding through use of an esd-toolkit wiki or similar
- analyse avoidable contact data across a variety of criteria (for example, time, service, channel, customer identification, cause of contact, and so forth) on a service-by-service basis (via automatic transfer from CRM or via manually prepared CSV files)
- aggregate raw data to enable a variety of automated analyses and reports (for example, NI 14 summary report and NI 14 service groups; use of customer identification data to integrate with segmentation analyses for customer insight use)
- identify trends in avoidable contact over time and enable comparisons to be made with other LAs
- support avoidance of avoidable contact across organisation boundaries and services (for example building on Chorley’s circles of need concept).
To achieve all this, the esd-toolkit programme 2008-09 will:

- consult with LAs, central government, associated agencies and technical suppliers
- recommend the use of robust auditable processes and methodologies
- enable the sharing of successes and case studies, focusing on quantifiable outcomes for customers.

Potential benefits to local authorities include:

- better data to help with the improvement of services (customers’ perspective)
- better understanding of how to increase customer satisfaction
- better understanding of processes to help reduce unnecessary and avoidable contacts
- identification of efficiency savings
- identification of ways to increase organisational capacity.

The advantages of using esd-toolkit for your NI 14 reporting are that collection, collation, aggregation, calculation, analyses and reports will be automated and will also allow user defined interrogation for comparative and other purposes. You will be able to use these data to identify points of leverage for service improvement.

There is no additional cost for NI 14 support for annual subscribers. For further information, register for free at www.esd-toolkit.org.uk and contact your local esd-toolkit administrator or the core project team at esd-toolkit@idea.gov.uk

The esd-toolkit news page on NI 14 is regularly updated and is found at http://www.esd.org.uk/esdtoolkit/News/NewsDetail.aspx?Item=455

GovMetric

The GovMetric service uses a range of data recording methods (including touch screen kiosks, web screens, and PABX) to monitor

- customer satisfaction by channel
- customer satisfaction by service
- interaction volume by channel
- interaction volume by service.

The GovMetric service is being extended to record avoidable contact and provide NI 14 data for customer contact in person, by telephone, by e-mail and by post. Customer agents can record whether the contact was avoidable or non-avoidable via telephone input or by logging the data on a web screen.

Hence, using GovMetric helps to measure avoidable contact across these channels, and since it measures total volume of contact it will help to ensure that the percentages for avoidable contact are accurate. GovMetric will also enable councils to review their avoidable contacts against measures of customer satisfaction.

The data is stored on the GovMetric databases, and the fees include the option to benchmark your Council against your peers. The service also enables you to plot customer satisfaction against avoidable contact.

The GovMetric NI 14 solution also provides functionality that surveys the customer for their perception of whether the contact was avoidable or non-avoidable.

In the future GovMetric will also add the ability to plot the data against demographic data from Experian’s MOSAIC.
The service – excluding monitoring of avoidable contact – is priced on a population basis. For example:

- a small district council would pay £7,000 to £8,000 to implement the system initially, plus £5,000 to £6,000 per annum
- a large unitary would pay £15,000 to £20,000 to implement the system, plus £15,000 to £17,000 per annum

The cost of adding support for NI 14 is dependent on the size of the authority. Installation of the NI 14 add-on costs from £995, plus from £1,500 per annum.

More detail is available on the GovMetric website: www.govmetric.com
appendix iii
NI 14 training quiz for staff
– Dudley MBC

UNDERSTANDING VALUE AND FAILURE DEMAND FROM OUR CUSTOMERS

A Quick Quiz to help you understand the difference between customer requests driven by Failure and those that are driven by Value!
Version 2 / 22nd January 2008

Question 1:
I'm moving house soon and have some old furniture to get rid of, can the Council collect it and get rid of it for me?

Value or Failure demand? … Click the mouse to find out!

An easy start … its VALUE!!!

Question 2:
I've just got back from work and my garden waste bin hasn't been emptied – I left it out as I'm supposed to do!

Value or Failure demand? … Click the mouse to find out!

This one is FAILURE demand (failure to empty the bin when expected). It could still be failure if it was the end of December and the service had stopped for the winter, it would depend upon whether the customer had been told but had 'forgotten', or they simply didn't know (failure to communicate it to them effectively!)

For the complete quiz and accompanying presentation, please visit www.idea.gov.uk/ni14guidance
We would like to thank the following organisations for their contribution to the guidance:

Audit Commission
Cabinet Office
Communities and Local Government
Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council
East Hampshire District Council
East Northamptonshire Council
ESD Toolkit
GovMetric
Hertfordshire County Council
Improvement and Development Agency
Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea
Local Authority Contact Centre Benchmark Group

London Borough of Bromley
London Borough of Enfield
London Borough of Haringey
London Borough of Southwark
London Borough of Sutton
Local Government Association
North West E-Government Group
SOCITM Insight
ROL
Suffolk Coastal District Council
Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council
Watford Borough Council
Borough Council of Wellingborough
Westminster City Council
Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council
City of York Council
appendix v
definition of NI14

NI 14: avoidable contact: the proportion of customer contact that is of low or no value to the customer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Is data provided by the LA or a local partner?</th>
<th>Y</th>
<th>Is this an existing indicator?</th>
<th>N</th>
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</table>

Rationale

Local authorities are fundamental points of contact for the citizen when seeking access to public services. They provide key services for their local communities that greatly affect the quality of life for individual citizens and the overall community.

In accord with the vision of the Local Government Delivery Council and the principles of the Service Transformation Agreement (www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/B/9/pbr_csr07_service.pdf), the customer experience for both citizens and businesses when contacting their local council should be one which is responsive, timely and efficient.

By identifying customer contact that is ‘avoidable’, the local authority and its partners are better placed to redesign the way services and information are made more accessible for their customers, so they do not have to make unnecessary, valueless contacts which are both frustrating for the customer and inefficient for the provider.

Definition

The proportion of customer contact that is avoidable.

The indicator is calculated in aggregate across all service channels, across selected key service areas. The assessment of whether a contact is avoidable relates only to what caused the customer to make contact (as opposed to evaluating the customer satisfaction with the contact or whether follow-up contacts will subsequently be needed).

Customer contact: an external customer (citizen or business) contacting the council across any channel (telephone, e-mail, post, website or face-to-face) with regard to the specified services. It includes customer requests for a service or information, reports of failure to deliver a service, and responses to council requests. Website contact is assessed as the number of transactions rather than the number of hits.

Avoidable Contact: to promote a clear and focussed definition in line with the issues raised in the rationale above, avoidable contact should be assessed by the adviser for a given contact if one or more of the following occurs or has occurred for the service areas defined for the appropriate tier of council.

A. Unnecessary clarification by the customer
Any query received as a result of a previous contact during which the council was not able to provide the necessary information or service, for example:

- phone call resulting from online service being unavailable or inadequate information on the website
- email asking for clarification of a council letter or other communications material which is poorly worded or presented; incomplete, inaccurate or out of date.
NI 14: avoidable contact: the proportion of customer contact that is of low or no value to the customer (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definition (continued)</th>
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<tr>
<td>B. Avoidable contact caused by poor signposting, or poor call transfer to council services – for example, customer rings wrong number because contact points not clearly advertised, or customer is passed to planning services when their query relates to parking;</td>
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<tr>
<td>C. Repeat contact with the customer having to pass on the same notification of information to carry out transactions with the council and its partners – for example, customers being asked to provide information about a change of address to multiple parts of the council;</td>
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<tr>
<td>D. Customers are progress chasing, asking for reassurance or making other unnecessary service delivery follow-up: any contact which results from council/partner inability to deliver a service as expected or promised (for example, missed appointment to collect sofa for disposal or faulty boiler in council house not properly fixed). This holds force regardless of whether or not customer expectations exceed service standards, and whether or not the problem is the responsibility of the council or service delivery partners;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Repeat contact after premature closure of a previous contact (for example, customer returns to one-stop shop at a later time when the queues are much shorter than previously).</td>
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Ideally the assessor should be the agent handling the contact.

Sampling

The primary way of collecting data for this indicator will be through the use of a contact management or Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system. Where councils do not currently have this in place, they will need to undertake surveys of a sample of contacts. Guidance to be issued by June 2008 will include advice in respect of sampling methodology.

Further detail and advice on assessing avoidable contact will be provided to local councils before the end of June 2008.

Service areas

Councils will record the proportion of avoidable contacts in respect of contacts relating to selected key service areas, which cover high volume citizen and business transactions, across a number of typical council departments. These are:

**District councils:**
- Planning services (local planning issues)
- Building control
- General council tax enquiries, billing and recovery process for payment of council tax and national non-domestic rates
- Environmental Health services (licensing, food safety, pollution and pest control)
- Street scene – waste collection and street cleaning, including recycling, street furniture and fly-tipping
- Housing (benefit claims, council tax benefit, repairs, allocations and lettings process for social housing)
- Electoral register (including registration and enquiries on electoral services)
- Parking permits and Parking Control Notices.
NI 14: avoidable contact: the proportion of customer contact that is of low or no value to the customer (continued)

**Definition (continued)**

**Unitary Councils, Metropolitan Borough Councils, London Borough Councils and City of London:**
- Children’s services (school admissions, free school meals, youth services)
- Highways (condition of roads, street lighting)
- Housing (benefit claims, council tax benefit, repairs, allocations and lettings process for social housing)
- Environmental Health services (licensing, food safety, pollution and pest control)
- Street scene – waste collection and street cleaning, including recycling, street furniture and fly-tipping
- General council tax enquiries, billing and recovery process for payment of council tax and national non-domestic rates
- Planning services (local planning issues)
- Building control
- Trading standards
- Adult Social Services (care packages, dial-a-ride, home helps, meals on wheels)
- Electoral register (including registration and enquiries on electoral services)
- Parking permits and Parking Control Notices.

**County Councils:**
- Children’s services (school admissions, free school meals, youth services)
- Highways (condition of roads, street lighting)
- Trading standards
- Adult Social Services (care packages, dial-a-ride, home helps, meals on wheels).

**Formula**

\[
\frac{x}{y} \times 100 = z \text{ per cent}
\]

- \(x\) = the number of customer contacts that are assessed as avoidable
- \(y\) = the total number of customer contacts within the relevant services
- \(z\) = percentage of customer contacts that are assessed as avoidable.

**Worked example**

If 600 contacts are assessed as avoidable out of a total of 1,000 contacts, the proportion of avoidable contacts is 60.0 per cent.

**Good performance**

Improved performance is typified by a lower percentage.

**Collection interval**

Annual (Financial year)

**Data source**

Varied: Local authorities and/or councils through Customer Relationship Management Systems and/or other forms such as emails, call centres and websites.

**Return format**

Percentage

**Decimal places**

One

**Reporting organisation**

Local authority

**Spatial level**

Single tier, county and district council
NI 14: avoidable contact: the proportion of customer contact that is of low or no value to the customer (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Further guidance</th>
<th>a) Sources of advice</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Local Authorities will be expected to have effective processes in place to underpin their assessment. To ensure that effective processes are in place in Local Authorities, the requirement to assess NI 14 will take hold as of October 2008. Training and guidance packs will be worked up in consultation with the sector, and issued before the end of June 2008 on the IDeA website (<a href="http://www.idea.gov.uk">www.idea.gov.uk</a>) and Business Improvement Package (<a href="http://www.bip.roe.gov.uk">www.bip.roe.gov.uk</a>). These will also set out any refinements to the definition of the indicator (such as the wording of the services covered) in the light of lessons learned through piloting of the indicator.</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>b) Collecting data</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The primary way of collecting data for this indicator will be through the use of a contact management or CRM system. Where councils do not currently have this in place, they will need to undertake surveys – adding up the number of contacts assessed as avoidable within the sample number of contacts, divided by the sample number of contacts. The guidance to be issued by June 2008 will include advice in respect of sampling methodology.</td>
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<th></th>
<th>c) Supplementary data for use on voluntary basis</th>
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<tr>
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<td>To enhance local understanding of customer needs, councils may wish to consider voluntary use of:</td>
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<td>• Disaggregation by service and channel (with a particular focus on priority areas) for use as an internal service audit and improvement tool;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Disaggregation with respect to equalities where appropriate (gender, age, ethnic background etc);</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• The Contact Council’s Performance Management Framework (<a href="http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/public_service_reform/contact_council/workplan.aspx">www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/public_service_reform/contact_council/workplan.aspx</a>). Where the council carries out customer satisfaction surveys on these services, feedback can be used to assess the robustness of the processes in place to measure the indicator, as well as being a valuable management information tool in its own right to improve the way that customers access information and services from the council.</td>
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<th>d) Other elements of good practice</th>
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<td>The indicator does not measure all aspects of behaviour to reduce time spent in contact that is of low or no value to them. Councils may therefore also wish to consider other elements of good practice, including reducing the need to repeat information when passed from agent to agent and the ability of customers to get through to call centres.</td>
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<th>e) Background – redesigning services for greater customer satisfaction, increased staff engagement and enhanced efficiency</th>
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<td>The vision of the Local Government Delivery Council and Service Transformation Agreement is for local government and its partners to deliver services that are ‘better for customers, better for staff and better for the taxpayer’.</td>
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NI 14: avoidable contact: the proportion of customer contact that is of low or no value to the customer (continued)

### Further guidance

These services will be organised in ways that make sense to their users, rather than being convenient for the organisations that are delivering them; handled by staff who have the appropriate training, skills and access to information to be able to assist the citizen effectively; and delivered both effectively and efficiently through all channels which are designed for the user so that they are simpler, clearer and more accessible.

Effective action requires councils to:

- Understand their local customers and their needs
- Recognise the extent and causes of customer contact
- Understand the stages of the delivery chain from end to end in terms of the value each adds to the customer experience
- Assess the capability that exists compared to what is needed to deliver that value, and the barriers that prevent enhanced customer service
- Engage customers to help shape how services are designed and delivered
- Monitor changes over time including an analysis of the factors that lie behind changes in performance as measured by the indicator
- Take a multi-channel approach, both enabling customers to self serve and empowering staff and intermediaries to assist effectively those who need help through whichever channel they choose to approach their council
- Work with local and central government partners through LSP and LAA arrangements to find better ways to deliver joined up customer focused services.

By understanding the causes of avoidable contact in this way, councils can then work to address key barriers to efficient and effective service delivery.
The Local Government Association is the national voice for more than 500 local authorities in England and Wales. The LGA group comprises the LGA and four partner organisations which work together to support, promote and improve local government.