

Executive Summary

Local Area Agreement National Indicator Four Benchmarking Exercise

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The South West partnership of the National Empowerment Partnership, a national programme funded by the Department of Communities and Local Government to improve the quality and functioning of relationships between citizens and government, and to enable people to influence decisions which affect them.

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Introduction

- ❖ In June 2008, the Socio-economic Research and Intelligence Observatory (SERIO) at the University of Plymouth was commissioned by Empowering Communities to carry out a National Indicator Four (NI 4) benchmarking exercise. NI 4 is:

“...the percentage of people who feel they can influence decisions in their locality” (Communities and Local Government, 2008a, p9).

- ❖ The exercise aimed to establish what activities were being undertaken in relation to NI 4 and identify any help and support needs. The research focuses upon 12 Local Authority areas (Unitary and County Councils) in the South West.

Methods

- ❖ The benchmarking exercise adopted a pluralistic approach incorporating both primary and secondary research methods. In the secondary research phase, an initial search of the available literature and policy documentation, from both national and local government sources, was conducted to inform and contextualise the primary research. This was followed by two primary research stages, in the first stage a series of face-to-face semi-structured interviews were undertaken. Two focus groups were held in the second stage in order to explore the key findings from the initial interviews in more depth. In addition, focus group participants were invited to complete a confidential questionnaire to provide an opportunity to raise any issues outside of the group discussions.
- ❖ The research focused upon 12 Local Authority areas that were identified by Communities and Local Government (CLG) as either prioritising NI 4 or ought to be prioritising it. The 12 areas were: Bath and North East Somerset, Bournemouth, Devon, Gloucestershire, North Somerset, Plymouth, Poole, Somerset, South Gloucestershire, Swindon, Torbay and Wiltshire.

Secondary Research

- ❖ The secondary research undertaken as part of the benchmarking exercise identified that:
 - ❖ The concept of community empowerment has gained increasing importance within both central and local government since the introduction of the *Local Government Act 2000*. The publication of *Strong and Prosperous Communities: The Local Government White Paper* (CLG, 2006) outlines a range of proposals which reinforce the importance of involvement, participation and empowerment as key mechanisms to provide more responsive public services and stronger communities.
 - ❖ Most recently, CLG has published an empowerment White Paper, *Communities in Control: Real People, Real Power*. The White Paper outlines how more people are to be empowered through a new style of politics and a continued commitment to devolve more power to citizens. In addition, it sets out a range of proposals aimed at enabling citizens to influence local decisions, and outlines the key role of Local Authorities in the empowerment agenda.
 - ❖ The Regional Government Offices and Local Authorities have a key role, alongside CLG, in the delivery of empowered communities, particularly through the Local Area Agreements (LAA). A feature of the new LAAs is that they represent a radical reform to the multiple performance frameworks utilised within previous LAAs; instead replacing them with a set of 198 National Indicators. Each local authority is expected to adopt up to 35 indicators, in addition to 18 statutory targets for education and early years. NI 4 is directly related to community empowerment, focusing on those local people who feel they are able to influence local decisions. The Indicator will be measured using the Place Survey, which replaces the Best Value User Satisfaction Survey in 2008.

Primary Research Key Findings

- ❖ The key findings emerging from the primary research stages are presented here under the following sub-headings: definitions and interpretations; the local approach to NI 4; the wider approach to empowerment; help and support needs; and suggested actions for the future.

Definitions and Interpretations of NI 4 and Empowerment

- ❖ Interview respondents' understanding of NI 4 generally reflected CLG's rationale for the inclusion of NI 4 within the national indicator set. In describing empowerment and empowerment processes, respondents emphasised the importance of listening to, and acting on, the views and opinions of communities, and demonstrating to communities how this information had been used to shape services and decision making. The provision of feedback was perceived to enable the development of a trusting relationship.
- ❖ Respondents highlighted NI 4 measurement issues, and the indicator vulnerability created by them, commenting that the actions that may determine perceptions of influence are likely to include those beyond the jurisdiction of a local authority.
- ❖ There was some consensus amongst respondents that empowerment was a process whereby local communities and people were enabled to have greater control over public services and decision making processes. The concept of control in this context ranged from "**having a voice**" in how services are delivered to the devolution of power.

The Local Approach to NI 4

- ❖ The in-depth interviews sought to determine which local authority department or team was responsible for leading on NI 4. Respondents typically emphasised the cross-cutting nature of the indicator and therefore some expressed difficulty in identifying specific teams involved in delivery.
- ❖ Respondents described a mixture of stages and processes that they were going through as part of their approach to NI 4. The approach in place across the 12 study areas typically built upon existing programmes of work, and in some cases provided either a renewed drive for empowerment activities or justification of their need. However, the view that NI 4 was a driver was not shared by all research participants; instead, some expressed concern that the inclusion of NI 4 would lead towards the adoption of an approach simply to improve indicator performance rather than the development of a commitment to empowerment.
- ❖ Partnership working emerged as a key process in the approach to NI 4. Given the range of organisations determining communities'

and individuals' everyday life experiences, respondents highlighted the importance of a joined-up approach. The success of such a joined-up approach was perceived as dependent upon a common culture between partners, and in particular, a shared understanding of the definitions of empowerment and engagement. Effective working across the different tiers of local government was also identified as an important process in some areas.

- ❖ Reflecting the differences in opinions on whether or not NI 4 was driving forward empowerment activities in an area, mixed responses were given to the investigation of the introduction of new structures or processes as part of their work on NI 4. Although the majority of questionnaire respondents agreed that new structures or processes had been introduced as part of their approach to NI 4, findings emerging from other research stages indicated that many of these actions were related to wider programmes of work.
- ❖ Similarly, mixed views on the impact of the new Duty to Involve were also found. Some of the interview respondents felt that the Duty would help to reinforce the importance of empowerment and engagement across the whole of the council, and therefore plans were in place to introduce several new activities. In comparison, three respondents highlighted that the introduction of the Duty to Involve would not represent a radical alteration of how people are involved in their locality. Similarly, two respondents reported that they had no current plans to introduce any new measures or activities in response to the Duty to Involve.
- ❖ Both primary research phases identified a number of key factors as helpful to the effective delivery of NI 4. These included: the role of Government Office for the South West, although support for this perspective was mixed amongst questionnaire respondents; the national policy emphasis; and partnership working. Interestingly, partnership working was also identified as a barrier to effective NI 4 delivery in some areas. Other barriers highlighted included: the interpretation and measurement of the indicator; knowledge and skills; representing a range of views; and resources.
- ❖ Plans for the measurement of NI 4 were also explored in the in-depth interviews. NI 4 will be measured biennially by the Place Survey; respondents from five local authorities reported that they would be using ongoing surveys as an additional measure of the delivery of NI 4 in their area. In other areas, new measurement

systems, including a yearly Place Survey, were being planned or explored.

The Wider Approach to Empowerment

- ❖ The wider approach to empowerment was also explored in the in-depth interviews. Some areas described the adoption of a community leadership approach, whereby the frontline role of councillors was developed, and the broader management of the relationship between participative and representative forms of democracy.
- ❖ Other approaches to empowerment drew upon concepts of devolution and the perception that communities are able to deliver services or manage assets. Finally, an area based approach was in place in some areas, an approach that had typically developed from a previous funding scheme, pilot or pathfinder initiative.
- ❖ Interview respondents highlighted a diverse range of empowerment techniques used within their area. The most commonly utilised empowerment mechanism was an area forum.
- ❖ A range of empowerment activities were identified in both the interviews and focus groups as working well, and less well. Examples of perceived good practice typically shared one of the following features: partnership working; dedicated staff with appropriate skills; communities shaping or determining the agenda; and reaching the wider community. Focus group participants agreed that the techniques for engaging and empowering people must be creative and inclusive using a variety of methods.

Help and Support Needs

- ❖ Help and support needs were identified, in the first instance, through the in-depth interviews and then explored further in the second stage of primary research to identify what forms were perceived to be most beneficial to NI 4. A variety of help and support provisions were highlighted, many of which were specific to the local context. However, mechanisms for sharing good practice featured strongly and were perceived as an important step in achieving cultural change across organisations.

- ❖ The types of good practice information identified as potentially useful, included: general details that can be applied in any local context; what works and what does not work; how the indicator is being measured; and effective feedback mechanisms. The preferred dissemination method for such information varied and advantages and disadvantages were associated with each of the following: written formats; face-to-face opportunities, such as seminars and workshops; informal face-to-face meetings; online forums; and a stakeholder database and directory.
- ❖ Training for elected members, council officers and wider stakeholders involved in NI 4 delivery also emerged as needed. Specific training needs included: community leadership; facilitation and management of meetings; selling the concept of community engagement and empowerment within organizations; and empowering communities.
- ❖ Additionally, increased resources emerged as being helpful to NI 4 delivery. For some, it was felt that more resources are always useful, but in other areas it was perceived that existing staff and financial resources were insufficient.
- ❖ There was agreement amongst focus group participants that help and support provision is most valuable when it is targeted towards those areas and individuals less committed to the empowerment agenda and tailored to reflect the local context.

Suggested Actions

These key findings have been used by the research team to identify suggested actions for both the delivery of NI 4 and mechanisms to help and support this. It is suggested that:

- ❖ **A Range of Help and Support Provision is Delivered**

A range of help and support needs were identified by research participants as potentially valuable to their work on NI 4, and more generally, empowerment. Given this, it is recommended that a variety of help and support provision is delivered to ensure the needs of different areas can be met in relation to NI 4.

❖ **Dissemination of Good Practice**

One form of dissemination that is likely to benefit all areas, is the development of a single point of access to all good practice information. Incorporating a stakeholder directory within such a resource would enable further dissemination and exchange of good practice information. It is important, however, that this resource does not duplicate activities undertaken elsewhere.

❖ **Targeted and Tailored Help and Support Provision**

It is also suggested that any help and support provision is both targeted towards those areas where most work is needed and tailored to reflect local circumstances.

❖ **Creating Opportunities for Exchange of Good Practice**

The value of informal face-to-face meetings was highlighted by some respondents. It is therefore suggested that future seminars and workshops allocate time within their schedule to enable informal networking and exchange of delivery approaches.

❖ **Benchmark Delivery Plans and NI 4 Scores**

To respond to the uncertainty surrounding which actions determine NI 4 performance, it is suggested that delivery plans and indicator scores are benchmarked following the completion of the Place Survey 2008/09. Although a causal relationship between delivery plans and NI 4 performance is unlikely to exist, by benchmarking such information further insight can be gained.

❖ **Explore Perceptions of Influence on Local Decisions**

Given that an individual's perceptions of influence over local decisions are likely to be determined by complex issues, it is suggested that this is explored further in future research. It is recommended that any such research adopts a qualitative methodology to ensure that the depth of information required is obtained. Such information may provide further valuable insight into the links between NI 4 delivery approaches and performance.

❖ **Draw Upon Proven Approaches**

Reflecting the range of actions and structures that are perceived to be working well, it is suggested that future empowerment and engagement approaches incorporate the following elements:

- ❖ Partnership working;
- ❖ Dedicated, and appropriately skilled, staff to work with communities;
- ❖ Consulting and engaging with communities on issues of importance to them; and,
- ❖ Building relationships with communities.

Furthermore, and reflecting the importance assigned to this in determining perceptions of influence, all approaches should ensure effective systems are developed to enable the demonstration of communities' impact upon decision making and service delivery.