



## Pilot of Local SD Lens

Report to the Sustainable Development Commission

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# **Sustainable Development Commission Pilot of Local Sustainable Development Lens**

A report from **CAG Consultants**

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# Introduction

The Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) has proposed the development of a voluntary basket of local indicators that can be used to guide and track progress towards sustainable development (the Local Sustainable Development Lens).

CAG Consultants have been asked by the SDC to pilot the Lens with four of the CAA pilot authorities. This report describes the results of the pilot. First we describe the purpose, criteria and limitations of the Lens. We then describe the methodology used. Finally we report the conclusions, followed by recommendations.

## Purpose of Lens

Based on initial discussions with key stakeholders, the SDC has proposed that a Local Sustainable Development Lens (LSDL) could be used:

- to help local authorities and their partners to determine the way in which they achieve social, economic and environmental performance in a more balanced, integrated and strategic way. It will also help determine the way in which the local authority and local areas can champion SD more effectively at the local level.
- to help inform the development of a local area's Sustainable Community Strategy and Local Area Agreement (LAA) and the local authority's improvement plans. It could also be used, for example, to help local areas' self-assess their own progress towards SD, as they see fit.

The pilot aims to test whether the Lens would be useful for these purposes. In addition, the SDC considers that the Lens could be used:

- to help inform the Audit Commission's own understanding of local area progress towards SD, particularly through the area risk assessment in the new Comprehensive Area Assessment.
- to help provide the UK Government with a better understanding of national progress on its 'litmus test' priorities for SD by highlighting trends at the local level and to track progress against Defra's Department Strategic Objective on SD (only indicators from the National Indicator Set would be used for this purpose).

## Content: what should the LSDL look like?

The LSDL will provide a foundation for tracking local area progress towards sustainable development. SDC proposes that the LSDL should consist of three layers:

- A 'core' set of indicators from the NIS. These are the only indicators in the LSDL against which local authorities' performance, alone or in partnership, can be reported to, or performance managed by, Central Government. Taken together, these can be used to measure progress at the local level against Defra's Departmental Strategic Objective (DSO) on sustainable development.
- An 'additionally recommended' set of voluntary indicators that the SDC believes should also form part of a holistic baseline assessment of sustainable development at the local area level. Taken together with the 'core' set, these form a small number of key environmental, social and economic indicators, based on the Government's definition of a sustainable community which could be used to provide a more rounded picture of local progress on sustainable development. Unlike the 'core' set, these are voluntary indicators and, as such, could only be determined and performance-managed locally, for example through the Sustainable Community Strategy or as additional local LAA indicators.
- A 'supplementary database' of indicators, which would provides users with the flexibility to build on the foundation of the core and additionally recommended sets. These could be used to form a more locally-relevant, flexible and innovative LSDL.

### Criteria for selecting the LSDL indicators

Based on consultation with key national stakeholders, SDC have based the content of the proposed 'core' and 'additionally recommended' indicators on a number of criteria. They should:

- Incorporate a small number of key environmental, social and economic indicators which can be used to track the 'litmus test' priorities which will have the most impact on sustainable development;
- Be based around existing sustainable development policy within the UK. As such, they have framed the LSDL around the Government's definition of a sustainable community, as set out in the UK SD Strategy;
- Use indicators that are outcome-based and area-based as far as is possible (rather than process-based or organisation-based);
- Use only existing indicators and data sets (so that there is no extra reporting burden for local areas);
- Not result in additional performance-management from central Government. As such, only indicators selected from the NIS would be subject to national performance management in the new performance framework.

## LSDL indicators: limitations and caveats

SDC do not claim that the proposals will provide a definitive measure for tracking progress on sustainable development at the local level and there are a number of limitations:

- The LSDL, by its very nature, can only provide an 'indication' or starting point for assessing progress on sustainable development. This is why it is called it a lens: it helps to frame key SD outcomes and to shed light on whether they are being achieved;
- The proposals are based on existing indicators only. The result is that some of the proposed indicators are 'best-fit' indicators rather indicators that are completely 'fit-for-purpose', in SD terms;
- The proposals have been developed in consultation with key national stakeholders involved in local government work. Further consultation (informal and formal) would help improve the robustness of the LSDL. This report helps with this;
- It is recognised that 'one size does not fit all' and that each local area will have different SD priorities. As such SDC have tried to limit the amount of indicators in the core set to those which can be regarded as 'litmus test' priorities. The supplementary database is designed to make the LSDL locally-relevant and applicable.

# Methodology

This pilot has been undertaken at an early stage in the development of the Lens. It aimed to test the value and practicality of the proposed indicator set (core indicators and additionally recommended). It did not review the proposed supplementary indicators. It incorporated the following elements:

## Data collection

Data for the core and additionally recommended indicators was collected for four of the CAA action learning pilot areas: Thurrock, Hampshire, Barking & Dagenham and Middlesbrough (part of the Tees Valley pilot group). Trend data was collected where available, and comparative data for the region and England where available. Where no data was available, relevant similar alternatives were looked for, though these were not always available. The data collected is reported as Appendix 1.

## Data review

The purpose of the review was to consider whether the data is a useful reflection of the sustainability of the area. The first step was to obtain information on key sustainability issues for the area from relevant Sustainability Appraisal reports. This information is included in Appendix 1. The sustainability issues were then discussed with a local officer responsible for sustainable development. The aim of the discussion was to establish whether the list did provide a good picture of local sustainability and in turn whether this was reflected in the Lens indicators.

## Phone interviews

A relevant officer from each of the local authorities was interviewed using a standardised questionnaire. Where possible, the interviewee was provided with the data and sustainability issues beforehand. The first part of the interview contributed to the data review. The second stage aimed to understand the benefits and limitations of the Lens and how it could be used.

## Indicator review

The results of the data collection were also used to identify any practical data issues with individual indicators. Details are included in Appendix 2.

In addition a simple review of each indicator to consider whether it integrates or conflicts with other sustainability issues and, if not, whether any alternatives are available. This was done using a basic matrix which is included at the end of Appendix 2.

The review and the phone interviews also aimed to examine the extent to which the data and indicators can be integrated with each other to create a deeper understanding of sustainability issues.

### **How could the Lens be used?**

The review aimed to identify what the Lens could and could not be used for. It did this by drawing on the phone interviews, and the results of the data collection. It considered the following questions:

- How can it be used?
- What are its limitations?
- What are the areas of uncertainty that require further investigation?

### **Review of findings**

Officers from the pilot authorities were given an opportunity to comment on the draft report before this final version was produced. None disagreed with the findings, though the comment from Middlesbrough resulted in the inclusion of some additional material in Appendix 1.



# Conclusions

## Data collection

The collected data is included as Appendix 1. The data collection process, along with the phone interviews with an officer from each authority, provided information about the availability and usefulness of each proposed indicator.

For some proposed indicators there are still outstanding issues which are noted in figure 1 on the next page. Detailed comments on each indicator are included in Appendix 2. These include recommendations for future use.

## How well do the indicators reflect local sustainability?

### Key sustainability issues

Information on the key sustainability issues for each pilot area was obtained from a relevant Sustainability Appraisal report (this information is included with the data in Appendix 1). In discussion with a local officer for each area, this data was reviewed to consider whether it provided an accurate reflection of the issues. In general it was considered that it did, with some provisos:

- The issues identified included some which were more relevant to the strategy being appraised than the area as a whole;
- In some cases the SA key issues comprised 'everything' that stakeholders came up with – rather than any distillation into the really significant SD issues for the area;
- The issues identified were strong on environmental elements (reflecting the requirements of the SEA Directive), weaker on governance, and in some cases weaker on social issues.

Officers from Middlesbrough expressed concern that simply listing the key sustainability issues focuses on negative aspects without first setting the context. They therefore suggested that the inclusion of the Sustainability Appraisal Objectives and some general contextual information would highlight aspirations and issues being addressed in a more positive way. This was done for the Middlesbrough information included in Appendix 1. It provides a useful reflection of how the Lens information could be presented by a Local Authority.

### Are these issues reflected in the Lens?

This question was discussed in the phone interviews, in light of the sustainability issues identified (taking account of the caveats noted above). In summary, the officers considered that the Lens does provide a good reflection of local sustainability issues, which should be applicable to all local authorities. It was noted that it covers 9 of the 10 themes in the Aalborg commitments (the 10<sup>th</sup> being local management). It was considered that this demonstrates that it covers a good spread of issues. A review of the Lens coverage against each of the four sets of sustainability issues also demonstrates that in general it provides a good reflection of local sustainability.

One interviewee suggested there is a need for some more corporate indicators such as green energy purchased, waste per member of staff. This suggestion conflicts with the aim of the Lens to use area-based rather than organisation-based indicators. This is an issue that is discussed further below (see page 12).

A number of points on specific indicators issues arose in the phone interviews and data collections. These are listed in the table below.

**Figure 1: Comments on specific indicators**

Lens indicator number	Comment
SD1	<p>There were mixed views on the value of NI 17 against the quality of life indicator. The QoL indicator has benefits of being known and used and does directly address feelings of safety. It has disbenefits of being provided at Police Force level unless local survey undertaken. As the NIS indicator is mandatory, and as a whole will also reflect feelings of safety, it is recommended that it be used. Information for NI 17 will be collected through the Place Survey. It will ask the following question:  <i>For the following things I read out, can you tell me how much of a problem they are in your area? By your area I mean within 15 minutes walk from here. How much of a problem is/ are</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Noisy neighbours or loud parties?</i></li> <li>• <i>Teenagers hanging around on the streets?</i></li> <li>• <i>Rubbish or litter lying around?</i></li> <li>• <i>Vandalism, graffiti and other deliberate damage to property or vehicles?</i></li> <li>• <i>People using or dealing drugs?</i></li> <li>• <i>People being drunk or rowdy in public places?</i></li> <li>• <i>Abandoned or burnt out cars?</i></li> </ul>
SD6	<p>The indicator on volunteering (NI 6) was preferred as an indicator of community involvement by 2 of the pilots. It is suggested that it provides wider measure of involvement in the local community.</p>
SD9	<p>The NIS indicator on biodiversity (NI 197) was preferred by three of the pilots. In summary, the argument is that this provides a wider measure of</p>

	biodiversity and a better measure of sites which are valued by local people. However, there are also strong arguments for the suggested alternative. It is suggested that both could be included in the Lens.
SD10	SD10 is proposed as an indicator of the sustainability of existing housing, but an indicator has not yet been identified. HECA data was used in the pilot, but this is not viable in the future. The new Energy Performance Certificate could provide a potential source of new data. It was suggested by interviewees that this should also cover new build and other types of buildings. One interviewee also noted that fuel poverty is an important issue not addressed. It is therefore suggested that the fuel poverty indicator NI 187 be included as an alternative in SD10.
SD11	It is suggested that the NIS indicator on affordable housing (NI 155) be included in the core set, instead of NI 158 which only relates to Council homes. This would be in addition to the voluntary indicator on affordability.
SD12	The inclusion of an indicator on green space was supported <sup>1</sup> , despite the current lack of data for SD12. The latest version of the indicator definitions <sup>2</sup> now includes an indicator on children and young peoples' satisfaction with parks and play areas (NI 199). Given the benefits of including NIS indicators in the Lens, and the lack of data for the suggested alternatives, it may be best to use this indicator. However, details for this indicator have not yet been published, so a final decision would depend on this information.
SD15	There were mixed views on which of these indicators to use for traffic. Including NI 167 could effectively provide a proxy for air quality, which has been identified as a gap. However, overall traffic flows are a useful SD context indicator which is easy to understand. It could be possible to retain both within the Lens.
SD21a	Data is not available for this indicator. However, it is an important issue, so it is suggested that alternatives should be investigated. This could include maternal smoking status or teenage conception rates.

## Does the Lens meet the test of integration?

Sustainable development is not just about achieving social, economic and environmental policy objectives. Central to the concept is that they are addressed in an integrated fashion, so that achieving one objective does not have a negative impact on another. This is most clearly reflected in the tension between economic development and environmental protection. The challenge is to meet economic aims such as increased employment and greater prosperity without increasing environmental impacts such as climate change.

A set of indicators for sustainable development should also be able to demonstrate integration. It can do this by providing a range of indicators which:

<sup>1</sup> In discussions with the consultant, the organisation Greenspace suggested that the proposed indicator is the most useful single indicator for green space

<sup>2</sup> Published 1<sup>st</sup> April 2008. See

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/finalnationalindicators>

- Considered together can demonstrate whether improvements have been achieved in an integrated fashion. For example, has there been an improvement in prosperity, but an increase in the area's ecological footprint?
- Are consistent with each other. This can be tested using a simple matrix to test whether improvements to one indicator will contribute to, act against or have no effect on improvements to another indicator.
- Include indicators which combine different policy aims to reflect an integrated approach. For example, the South East England Regional Assembly uses the following indicators in the RSF: Index of Sustainable Economic Wellbeing (with a target relating the ISEW to GVA), and GVA generated per tonne of material entering waste stream.

These elements of integration are discussed below.

### **Integrated coverage?**

In the phone interviews, the majority view was that the Lens does demonstrate integration because it includes an appropriate range of issues. When considered together these will provide an integrated picture of changes in the area. However, it was noted that this depends on how the Lens is used. There is a need to understand the context and interpret the information correctly. There was some concern that it would be possible to selectively use the information to present a misleading picture of an area.

It was noted that with the Aalborg commitments (as used by Hampshire County Council) integration is demonstrated by an overall score. However, it is not suggested that the Lens indicators be scored.

An initial review of the data collected for the pilots indicates that the Lens can be used to provide a picture of local changes which can be reviewed to consider whether improvements have been achieved in an integrated fashion. The limitations on being able to do this arise from a lack of trend data, rather than from a lack of key indicators. This demonstrates the importance of ensuring as much trend data as possible is included when data is collected for the Lens.

### **Internal integration?**

As noted in the bullet points above, a matrix was used to examine the consistency of indicators with each other. The matrix is included at the end of Appendix 2. In summary it shows that there are no indicators which conflict with other indicators. The indicators which make the most clear positive contributions to other indicators are: access to services (SD14); traffic flows (SD15); fear of crime (SD1); climate change emissions (SD6); adaptation to climate change (SD7); health and wellbeing (SD19); travel to school (SD2); green space use (SD12), qualifications (SD20). The ecological

footprint indicator (SD22) is also a good integrated indicator, though it does not address economic issues.

### Indicators of integration

It did not prove practical within the time available for this pilot to identify suitable indicators of integration, along the lines of the Index for Sustainable Welfare. However, one of the interviewees suggested that a tool for using the Lens could promote integration by representing areas of overlap or connecting them in some way. This suggestion could be applied by providing calculations of a small number of integrated indicators as part of the Lens tool. Such indicators could include for example the resource efficiency indicator used by SEERA. They could also include a combination of the climate change emissions indicator with an economic indicator to examine “decoupling”, as was suggested in the brief. It is suggested that this issue be given further consideration in the next stage of development of the Lens.

## Benefits and limitations

### Existing systems

In order to understand the context, interviewees were first asked about existing tools and mechanisms used by the Council to assess its sustainable development performance.

Of the four pilots, three have sustainability performance management systems in place. Hampshire County Council uses the Aalborg commitments as a tool for measuring and improving sustainability performance. This has been embedded in corporate performance management system. Middlesbrough Council has a set of quality of life indicators monitored by their Corporate team. Thurrock Council use a State of the Environment report (which includes the social and business environment) and all corporate strategies have a sustainability appraisal.

### Value of the Lens

Three of the four interviewees were positive about the usefulness of the Lens:

- For tracking local area progress generally;
- For informing the Sustainable Community Strategy;
- For LAA development.

It was considered that its national profile and links with the NIS would aid local understanding of sustainable development. It was considered that if the Lens can capture the interconnectedness of the indicators, as discussed above, it would provide real added value. In the interviews, there was a clear consensus that the audience for

the Lens should be both SD practitioners and performance officers. For most, this would be a significant benefit, as it would demonstrate and contribute to mainstreaming of the Lens and sustainable development in local authority performance management.

The three pilots who were positive already have performance management systems which include sustainability indicators, and they felt that the Lens would make a positive contribution. In summary it was considered that the development of the national set would support local systems. It was accepted that in some cases there would be a need to modify current SD indicators, but this was not considered to be a major issue if it was done in the right way.

The fourth interviewee thought it would have some benefit, but had concerns about the area-based focus. It was considered that it would be more useful to have an approach that challenged the Council on the sustainability of its own activities. This was because the officer wanted to use the Lens to get things moving within the Council itself.

### Why is it necessary?

It is worth considering, as one interviewee asked, why there is a need for a separate SD Lens. In an ideal world, the NIS should be fully reflective of sustainable development. However, it must be remembered, that all the NIS indicators have been chosen for local authorities and partners to monitor and potentially use within their LAA. This implies that they must have some ability to influence the indicators. Looking at the additionally recommended indicators in the Lens it is clear that many of these will have been excluded from the NIS for this reason. For example, local organisations are limited in their ability to influence house prices or health inequalities. These issues however are important reflectors of sustainable development.

It is worth understanding this issue, because it relates to the question of how the Lens would be used to inform the LAA and the SCS. One way is that the indicators which are from the NIS set could be included as LAA indicators, or as performance indicators in the SCS. However, as one interviewee noted, it is already too late to intentionally include Lens indicators in the LAA, and the same is likely to be true of the SCS. In addition as noted above some Lens indicators are not capable of being used in this way. However, there are other ways the Lens could be used, for example as a policy appraisal tool. How the Lens would be used in practice is an issue that needs to be further explored in the next stages of development.

This discussion reflects the importance of understanding the intended role of the Lens. The Lens is designed to help measure progress towards sustainable development. It aims to be area-based rather than organisation-based. One reason for this is that there is a desire not to require any additional performance management from Central Government beyond the NIS set. As noted above, this will not suit all local authorities, some of which might prefer a more performance-based approach.

However, the current Lens in fact contains a mixture of context and performance indicators. The balance of these two types is an issue that requires more discussion in developing the Lens.

## Limitations

A small number of limitations were identified by the interviewees. These are shown in the table below.

**Figure 2: Comments on limitations of the Lens**

- Need to persuade people to consolidate/reduce existing sets of indicators. However, as noted above, this was not considered a major difficulty.
- How effectively will it demonstrate integration, as discussed above? Smaller number of indicators keeps it manageable but makes it harder to achieve integration.
- Voluntary nature, likely to result in minimal sign-up
- Won't all be relevant to all authorities, though it is generic enough to be OK. Maybe could introduce flexibility – say authorities can choose 15 of the SD lens indicators?

The final point is an interesting one. Both Hampshire and Middlesbrough identify priority themes as part of their performance management process, and this is an element that could be included within the Lens. The supplementary indicators are also designed to provide local flexibility.

There was a consensus that there would not be significant resource implications arising from the Lens. The NIS will be collected anyway. There may be some additional time required to change systems, but most authorities already collect sustainable development indicators.

## Using the Lens

### An interactive tool

There was a consensus on the value of an online interactive “tool” that would allow local authorities to obtain reports on the performance of their local area.

There are at least two existing models of how this could be done:



- A national Data Interchange Hub has been developed by DCLG. The idea of the data Hub is to make data from the NIS indicators available to local authorities, to enable it to be reported simply and to facilitate benchmarking. The website has now gone live ([www.hub.info4local.gov.uk](http://www.hub.info4local.gov.uk)). The Hub is not designed to be available to members of the public. Details of what will be included in the Hub are shown in the table below<sup>3</sup>.
- The Audit Commission's Area profiles site is aimed at the general public, though of course, it is useful for policy makers and researchers as well. It reports on a range of data for every local authority, and allows comparison with a selection of comparators.

**Figure 3: Hub phases, expectations and timelines**

<p><b>PHASE 1 RELEASE 1 – April 2008</b></p> <p>The Hub will contain only published information including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A list of all the national indicators</li> <li>• Historic data – where available</li> <li>• For the small number of indicators which require local authority input of data, online web forms have been created</li> <li>• A .csv extract tool to download data into MS Excel</li> <li>• Online help and user guidance notes</li> <li>• The facility to track LAA targets once they have been agreed.</li> </ul>
<p><b>PHASE 1 RELEASE 2 –August to November 2008</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The LAA/GO Reporting Tool will be implemented and allow monitoring of performance against LAA targets</li> <li>• The ability to report indicator values within the year for an indicator where indicators are entered more frequently than annually</li> <li>• The information needs for CAA required by the Audit Commission and the other inspectorates</li> <li>• Automated system to system (XML transfer) with LSPs and government departments to extend the capacity for automatic transfer of data without the need to manually upload the data</li> <li>• Additional time series will be available in the Hub to look at historic trends of data where it is available.</li> </ul>
<p><b>PHASE 2 2009 (TBC)</b></p> <p>The scope of any future phase of Hub development is not yet fixed. We will be exploring how to deliver more timely data to LSPs, in a secure environment, increased options for automated XML transfer and a wider range of linked repositories.</p>

Given the links with the NIS, and the desire to ensure that the Lens is used to inform the LAA and SCS, it would make sense to link a Lens tool with the new Data Interchange Hub. As described in the table above, this could be as part of phase 2 of the Hub development.

<sup>3</sup> Taken from Hub Guide Version 1 DCLG March 2008. See <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/datainterchangehub>



There were a range of views on how the tool should be designed and used. These are reported in the table below.

**Figure 4: Comments on a Lens tool**

- Two roles, helping get the data together, and for the general public to access data. Can't really compare one area with another unless you can check that the data has been done in the same way. Feel the use will be locally to report progress to local population, link to reporting mechanism should be a public website that can be turned into leaflets.
- Would favour interactive tool and link to reporting mechanism. Should be a 'fun' tool to use to see how sustainable your LA is. But finalised report should go with CAA score. SD not currently required to be addressed in CAA – need to boost the SD component of CAA and link CAA with SD lens.
- Wary of the phrase tool, but would need something online, concise and simple, so its user friendly.
- Would be good to get data out in form of graphs showing how you compare with similar authorities, national averages, or % improvement i.e. degree of benchmarking. Would be useful if could identify where the area/ authority is falling down so can justify identifying appropriate resources to address the issue.

## Practical issues

### Comparative data

The data collected for the pilot included comparative figures for the region and England. As noted above, comparison or benchmarking is mentioned by one of the pilots as a useful role for the Lens. The Area Profiles site offers a range of comparators, shown in the table below.

**Figure 5: Area Profiles comparators**

- Charts comparing authorities within each selected area to similar types of authority
- Charts comparing authorities within each selected area to all authorities within the Government Office region
- Charts of each selected area compared to specific comparison groups
  - a. Geographical Neighbours

- b. Nearest Neighbours (April 2007 Onwards)
- c. Office for National Statistics (ONS) Local Authority Cluster
- d. Crime & Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP) Family

However, there is a limited appetite for benchmarking on sustainable development, as shown by the interim results of the separate study currently being undertaken by CAG for SDC<sup>4</sup>. This view is also reflected in comments from some of our interviewees. However, it does not exclude the use of suitable comparative data. This is an issue that requires more investigation.

### Weighting of indicators

Three of the interviewees considered that weighting is not a viable option, because of difficulties in deciding how to do it. However, the suggestion on identifying some of the Lens indicators as priorities, discussed above, is a much more practical option.

## Recommendations

Based on the previous discussions, we make the following recommendations on the use of the Lens:

- Development of the Lens and the tool should now proceed to wider discussion with local authority sustainable development and performance management officers.
- An interactive Lens tool should be linked with the Data Interchange Hub, possibly as part of phase 2 of the Hub development. The tool should be online, simple to use, and enable local authorities (and other users) to obtain information on all the Lens indicators, and provide information on those which they are responsible for collecting. It should provide a report on local progress towards sustainability which takes an integrated approach and possibly includes some indicators of integration. As much trend data as is available should be included in Lens reports.
- Detailed recommendations on changes and further work required in the development of other indicators are included in Appendix 2.

The following issues require further investigation and discussion with potential users:

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<sup>4</sup> *Capability for Local Sustainability* CAG Consultants for SDC, Draft Report March 2008

- Final agreement on composition of the Lens indicators, and how flexibly they can be used. Does it contain the right mixture of contextual and performance based indicators?
- Is the proposed supplementary list a useful element of the Lens?
- How in practice it will be used to inform the SCS and LAA?
- How else could it be used, for example in policy appraisal?
- How it will relate to existing local sets of SD and QOL indicators?
- What exact form should the tool take?
- Will the tool (or an element of it) be aimed at members of the public?
- Should comparators be used and if so which?
- Should indicators of integration be included within the Lens, or should the Lens tool be designed to provide reports on some of these indicators?