



The information authority

Paper 5: ILR Specification Timetable for 2010/11

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1. Introduction

This paper is prepared for *the information authority* board ('the board') meeting on 3 December 2008 to ask it to agree the timetable for publishing the specification of the individualised learner record (ILR) for 2010/11.

The paper sets out the rationale for the 2009/10 timetable, describes strengths and weaknesses of that timetable, makes proposals about adjustments to it for 2010/11 and recommends a timetable for 2010/11.

This paper will be supplemented by an oral report at the meeting from Anne Fessi containing feedback from a series of stakeholder workshops led by *the information authority* secretariat ("the secretariat") which took place in the second half of November 2008.

2. Background

The timetable for publishing the specification has always been and is always likely to be a compromise between those wanting early publication, mainly providers and software suppliers, and those wanting later publication, mainly policy colleagues in the data consuming organisations.

The publication of the specification is important since once it is published providers can plan changes to their enrolment processes and forms. It also finally draws to a close the opportunity to change the ILR specification to reflect emerging, new or amended policy requirements apart from those that can be accommodated in the flexible national monitoring fields in the specification. It gives software developers a firm basis on which to design and implement changes to their systems for deployment by the start of the teaching year. Where changes are made to the specification at a late stage this often results in poor data quality, at least in the first year, because the change is not fully thought through and providers have too little time to prepare. Poor data quality in turn leads to unreliable management information (MI). Late changes also tend to increase the cost of developing and implementing changes to computer systems.

There is an in built tension between those wanting early publication and those who want the latest possible publication date. Those who want earlier publication include staff in providers planning processes for the coming year and software developers in all stakeholders. Those who want later publication include some policy colleagues in the LSC and the Departments. Policy colleagues in these organisations often want the maximum opportunity to ensure the ILR collects data relevant to new, changed and emerging policies so that it can be used to generate MI used in their evaluation. Those in these organisations who use the ILR to produce statistics, often at a national or regional level, tend to be more concerned about stability of the specification and more supportive of early publication. The LSC through consultation

established in 2003 the ILR as a stable data collection instrument that collects only data that:

- applies to a large proportion of provision
- needs to be collected at the learner level, rather than at the programme, contract or allocation level
- is definitely needed on a continuing basis. That is for four or more years.

At its meeting in March 2008 the board endorsed the proposed ILR specification timetable for 2009/10 with a publication date at end of November. This decision was in the light of feedback from stakeholder workshops that the period November to January was the most acceptable time for publication of the ILR specification for both data providers and data users. It allows sufficient time for planning and making software changes. The board also confirmed that the ILR as a 'stable, high quality, high volume data collection activity' thus underlining the need for early publication of the specification.

In both the comparable data collection arrangements, the schools and higher education (HE) data collections, specifications typically are published a year in advance of the start of the year to which they apply, for example by 31 July 2008 for the 2009/10 year starting in August 2009. In both these arrangements this is to give providers and software suppliers more time to prepare for the benefits identified above.

For years up to 2007/08 the ILR specification was published in early March, for 2008/09 this was brought forward to 25 January 2008 and for 2009/10 to 28 November 2008.

3. Description

3.1 Timetable constraints

The broad timetabling constraints for producing the ILR specification are:

- stakeholders need to be formally informed of the last date for change requests to be received by the secretariat at least 65 working days (13 weeks) before that date. This time is used by stakeholders to identify, prepare and agree their requirements internally and communicate them to the secretariat
- the secretariat currently needs 65 working days from the last date for change requests to be received to presentation of consolidated changes and recommendations at *the information authority* board. This time is used to consolidate similar requirements, support preparation of a robust business case, take requests through the ILR challenge process, develop options and recommendations for data requestors and present them to the board in a written paper

- a minimum of 35 working days, seven weeks, are needed from board confirmation of consolidated changes to publishing the specification. This time is needed to finalise detailed changes, including detail of how agreed changes interact with the existing specification and other changes agreed by the board and document these in the ILR specification manual.

3.2 Feedback on process for 2009/10 specification

Feedback received on the process and timetable used for agreeing the ILR specification for 2009/10 identified the following main strengths:

- the process was more transparent and better understood by stakeholders than previously
- for the first time a document containing a summary of all changes requested was produced shortly after the closing date for making requests. It was useful to stakeholders.

A similar document will be produced for 2010/11

- there was more opportunity for stakeholders to input into the process
- bringing forward the specification date is welcomed by providers and software developers as it gives them more notice of changes and time to prepare for them. They also commented that to capitalise fully on the earlier publication of the specification there needs to be similar earlier publication of new versions of the data collection related software, the learner information suite (LIS) and learning aim database (LAD), validation rules, support manuals and of LSC funding and audit guidance.
- the improved criteria for evaluating changes worked well.

Less positive feedback identified:

- the use of *the information authority* community server, feconnect, for consultation did not engage as many stakeholders and resulted in less feedback than expected

The secretariat will be working with stakeholders to improve their experience of the community server and encourage more use of it as a consultation tool. The interim head of the secretariat, Steve Dale, forecast that it would take three years to develop an effective online community.

- running consultation with stakeholders and clarifying requirements during the period mid-July to the end of August was not effective

- the earlier timetable resulted in data requesting stakeholders being less ready and able to supply detail to support their request than in previous years
- the significance of the changed relationship between the LSC and the staff undertaking the ILR change process for the secretariat was not wholly appreciated. This led to misunderstandings about responsibilities, for example about who would be responsible for ensuring there was support for a request across the whole of the LSC. Some progress has and is being made to address these issues, for example the LSC has appointed someone to lead and coordinate its requests to the secretariat. The secretariat is facilitating a workshop with LSC staff to learn from the process to investigate 2009/10 changes.

In summary during the period mid-July to the end of August the secretariat was able to make little progress on requests that require consensus across organisations, that is most requests. It also found it difficult to obtain sufficient feedback from providers.

The secretariat recognised that it would make less progress during the period mid-July to the end of August and took this into account in setting the timetable. It predicted less progress because some staff in:

- stakeholders would be unavailable and so would be unable to comment on the consultation on the community server
- data consuming stakeholders would be unavailable and so agreeing and clarifying requirements would be slowed
- the secretariat would be on leave. To help address this it recruited a business analyst to support the process from July 2008 to January 2009.

The secretariat experience was that it made even less progress than it predicted during the period mid-July to September 2008 because:

- it had misjudged just how much of its work on each request involves it in talking to a range of colleagues in data requesting stakeholders and ensuring a consensus about such requirements. Progress in July and August 2008 on most changes was delayed because in many cases consensus could not be achieved due to the unavailability of one or more stakeholders
- the low volume of responses to consultation on the community site and from consultative groups. This raised concerns about whether the advice received was sufficiently representative. This was addressed by sending lists of specific questions to existing stakeholder advisory groups.

The overall effect was that the proposals in the board paper were less completely defined than in previous years. Subsequently two of the requests for new fields approved by the board were withdrawn. In one case the request was withdrawn because the requesting stakeholder decided not to proceed with the business change that drove the request. In the second when more detail about the change was requested for inclusion in the specification it was discovered that assumptions on which the request was made were no longer true. Two of the factors contributing to this are thought to be the lack of effective progress on investigation and specification during the period mid-July to the end of August and the need for the first time to work on the detail of changes earlier in the stakeholders' business cycle. Consequently the secretariat strongly recommends that the process is planned to take account of the difficulties in consulting and gaining consensus about requirements between mid-July to the end of August. It also plans to discuss with stakeholders how it can improve processes around the ILR specification so that only requests that are completely defined are taken to the board for decision.

At this stage some of the strengths of publishing the specification by 28 November 2008 are yet to be realised. These are expected to include improved data quality and lower development costs for providers and the Data Service. These are based on being able to plan and implement more effectively in the longer, more realistic, time available between publication of the specification in late November and the start of the collection year in August. Consequently the secretariat does not propose to revert to the timetable used for the 2008/09 specification where publication was in late January 2008. Instead the secretariat proposes to make a minimum of adjustments to the timetable to address difficulties encountered in making progress in the period mid-July to the end of August. Options for these timetable adjustments are described below along with their strengths and weaknesses.

Options for 2010/11

Three options have been developed to address the issues raised by feedback about the timetable used to publish the ILR specification for 2009/10.

In summary:

- option one: assumes minimal progress during mid-July to the end of August, schedules the board meeting for the latest point before this period and leads to publication on 23 October 2009
- option two: assumes minimal progress during mid-July to the end of August, schedules the board meeting for the earliest point after this period and leads to publication by 13 November 2009
- option three: is based on the timetable for 2009/10. It is included for completeness and information and is not recommended given the issues experienced during 2008.

A table in the appendix sets out the timetables for these options, including the one used in the previous year, along with their strengths and weaknesses. It can be used to compare them.

The options are described in more detail below.

Option 1 – Bring forward close date for requests, consultation and board meeting and publish in October

In this option the close date for requests for change would be 10 April 2009. At this close date a requestor would need to be clear about what outcome was needed and have sufficient information to work with the secretariat on detailed proposals to achieve this outcome. Consultation with providers would end 19 June 2009, the Board would meet week commencing 13 July 2008 to agree changes and the specification would be published on 23 October 2009.

The strengths of this option are:

- the specification would be published five weeks earlier than in the previous year
- the summary of confirmed changes would be published in July 2009, three months earlier than in the previous year
- no consultation or significant stakeholder interaction is planned for the slow period between mid-July and the end of August

The weaknesses of this option are:

- the closing date for requests would be 10 April 2009, 11 weeks earlier than the previous year and the earliest close date of all the options, when in some cases it is harder for stakeholders to be sure of their requirement

Option 2 – Bring forward close date for requests and consultation, and as for previous year hold board meeting in late September and publish in November.

In this option the closing date for requests for change would be 22 May 2009, consultation with providers would end 17 July 2009, the Board would meet week commencing 21 September 2009 to agree changes and the specification would be published 13 November 2009.

The strengths of this option are:

- no consultation or significant stakeholder interaction is planned for the slow period between mid-July and the end of August thereby improving the completeness and detail of input to the board paper

- specification is published two weeks earlier than in the previous year

The weaknesses of this option are:

- the closing date for requests is 7 May 2009, seven weeks earlier than the previous year, when in some cases it is harder for stakeholders to be sure of their requirements

Option 3 – Follow similar timetable as that used in the previous year for the 2009/10 specification

In this option the timetable for the process would be similar to that for the previous year.

The strengths of this option are:

- the close date for requests is unchanged at 26 June 2009, the latest date of all the options

The weaknesses of this option are:

- as in the previous year consultation and significant stakeholder interaction is planned between mid-July and the end of August. Experience has shown that little effective progress is achieved in this period with the results described on page 6 of this paper. For this reason this option is not recommended.

4. Recommendation and Decision

The secretariat recommends the board to support Option 2 – Bring forward close date for requests and consultation and as for the previous year hold a board meeting to agree changes in late September and publish the specification in November 2009.

5. Next Steps

Based on the board's decision the secretariat will publish the timetable for publishing the ILR specification for 2010/11 by 23 December 2009.

6. Contact Details

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ILR Specification Timetable for 2009/10 and Options for 2010/11

Activity	2010/11 Option 1	2010/11 Option 2	2009/10 Actual Option 3
Communicate 2010/11 ILR change process and publication timetable	by 9 January 2009	by 20 February 2009	April 2008
Initial requirements gathering – opportunity for informal discussions with <i>the information authority</i>	January to March 2009	March to May 2009	April to June 2008
Closing date for requests for change to the specification.	10 April 2009	22 May 2009	27 June 2008
Publish comprehensive list of all changes received	April 2009	Early June 2009	July 2008
Consult with providers and stakeholders on possible changes.	April to June 2009	May to mid July 2009	July and August 2008
Consultation with stakeholders closes.	19 June 2009	17 July 2009	Mid-September 2008
Recommendations prepared for board consideration	3 July 2009	11 September 2009	19 September 2008
<i>The information authority</i> board meets to agree the specification.	wc 13 July 2009	wc 21 September 2009	1 October 2008
Publish summary of confirmed changes.	July 2009	October 2009	October 2008
Publish 2010/11 ILR Specification	23 October 2009	13 November 2009	28 November 2008
Publish 2010/11 ILR Validation Rules	18 December 2009	15 January 2010	30 January 2009
Strengths	earliest publication of specification earliest list of confirmed changes avoids engagement in July/August	avoids engagement in July/August earlier publication of specification	latest close date for requests
Weaknesses	earliest close date for requests	earlier close date for requests	engagement in July/August

All the 2010/11 options have the strength that they avoid stakeholder consultation in late July and August