

Data Quality Policy

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Given the authority’s strategic commitment to data quality, the updated policy has been approved by the Leader of the Council and applies to all business areas in relation to data collection, recording, analysis and reporting. National standards for data quality are also taken into account.

1. Why do we need a Data Quality Policy?

- 1.1 All businesses need information that is fit for purpose to manage services and measure performance. Service providers and users also need accurate information to make judgments about the efficiency, effectiveness and the responsiveness of their services.
- 1.2 Ultimately we use data to:
- Inform good decision making and effective service planning.
 - Help measure the effectiveness and efficiency of our services to the public.
 - Benchmark cost and performance with other authorities.
 - Set targets to improve performance, reduce cost and improve customer care.
- 1.3 Consistent, high quality, timely and comprehensive information is vital for good decision making, improved service outcomes and robust public accountability. Good data quality is a fundamental element of:
- Supporting the Council's improvement and resource planning
 - Monitoring the delivery of effective, efficient and economic services
 - Aiding the identification of areas for improvement
 - Effectively communicating our priorities and performance
 - Providing information about user satisfaction and demand for services
- 1.4 Having an effective system of control enables us to deliver a better understanding of the organisation and business environment, allowing it to increase value for money, improve service delivery and minimise inefficiencies.

2 Scope of this Policy

- 2.1 This policy sets out Maidstone Borough Council's approach to achieving better service delivery through improving the quality of our data. Through implementation of this policy we will support staff to be more aware of their role and responsibility for improving the quality of data we handle and to make better decisions that affect the outcomes of people in the community of Maidstone. We will provide effective training and ensure that our systems support and reflect activity.
- 2.2 **Data** can be defined as "numbers or words collected, stored or processed to provide information on activities and outputs" and in so being, can be either qualitative or quantitative. Data items need to be defined to give them meaning.
- 2.3 Policy Objectives
- To ensure that the Council's data is relevant, accurate, timely and complete;
 - To ensure that data is held and released lawfully;
 - To ensure that data is held securely and systems for producing data are robust;
 - To ensure that where data is exchanged with other organisations appropriate protocols are in place;
 - To ensure that the quality of data is regularly monitored and checked; and
 - To ensure that appropriate mechanisms are in place for ensuring staff are aware of the Council's data quality requirements and provided with suitable training.

- 2.4 This policy covers data used for service management and performance monitoring across all areas of Maidstone Borough Council. It includes data shared with partners, confirmed through Data Sharing Agreements.
- 2.5 This document does not cover:
- IT security
 - Records management
- 2.6 This policy outlines the principles, responsibilities and reporting structures to be able to maintain a high standard of data quality - from the establishment of performance measures and their definition, via the collection and input of individual pieces of data into a system, to the production of performance management information for validation by an internal or external auditor to ensure robust and accurate performance reporting. This policy is a framework of management arrangements to ensure the quality of the data the Council uses to manage and report on its activities.

3 Principles of data quality

- 3.1 The concept of data quality is relative, depending on the different perceptions and needs of data users. However, it is possible to identify several characteristics of good data quality. These are sometimes referred to as 'principles' of good data quality and are captured in the Audit Commission's document: *'Improving Information to Support Decision Making: Standards for Better Data Quality'* (November 2007). In summary, they are:

Accuracy	Data should be sufficiently accurate to present a fair picture of performance and enable informed decision-making at all appropriate levels. The need for accuracy must be balanced with the costs and effort of collection. A prerequisite is that definitions for data should be specific and unambiguous. Officers should know exactly what data is to be collected, how and by when, and which performance indicators are produced from the data. Performance information must be at an appropriate level of detail to influence related management decisions and must be within a reasonable margin of error.
Validity	Data should represent clearly and appropriately the intended result and should be used in accordance with the correct application of any rules or definitions. Where proxy data is used, consider how well this data measures the intended result.
Reliability	Data should reflect stable and consistent data collection processes and analysis methods across collection points and over time, whether using manual or computer based systems, or a combination. Systems and processes for data collection, recording and collation need to be fit for purpose - and incorporate controls and verification procedures proportionate to risk. Managers and stakeholders should be confident that progress toward performance targets reflects real changes rather than variations in data collection methods.
Timeliness	Data input should occur on a regular ongoing basis rather than being stored to be input later. Verification procedures should be as close to the point of input as possible. Data outputs must be available for the intended use within a reasonable time period, and

	frequently enough to influence the appropriate level of management decisions. For example, it may be appropriate to accept a small degree of inaccuracy where timeliness is important.
Relevance	Information reported should comprise the specific items of interest only. Sometimes definitions need to be modified to reflect changing circumstances in services and practices, to ensure that only relevant data of value to users is collected, analysed and used. Information should be presented in such a way as to be easily understood by the audience it is intended for (see Section 6.6).
Completeness	All the relevant data should be recorded. Monitoring missing or invalid fields in a database can provide an indication of data quality and can also point to problems in the recording of certain data items

4 Applying the policy

- 4.1 As part of the Council's Data Quality Policy the following assurance procedure relating to systems and the production of performance data has been adopted:
- a. Overall responsibility for data quality at a strategic level lies with the Chief Executive; however, operational responsibility has been assigned to heads of service and section managers on their behalf.
 - b. As part of the service planning process, each section manager will produce a statement on how they will assure data quality and publicise expectations to staff. Where appropriate this will cascade into performance appraisals.
 - c. Heads of service and section managers will ensure that appropriate systems are in place to collate performance data ('right first time'), that they are fit for purpose and that procedure notes/manuals are in place for business-critical systems and that these are reviewed and updated as appropriate.
 - d. Heads of service and section managers will provide the relevant training to staff where appropriate to ensure they are aware of how data quality relates to their work and what the requirements are for assuring data quality. Where appropriate data champions will be appointed and national, key and local performance indicator comparisons sought.
 - e. Heads of service and section managers will ensure that appropriate risk management and business continuity management arrangements are in place, paying particular attention to the areas highlighted below:
 - Where there is a high volume of data transactions;
 - Technically complex performance information/definition guidance;
 - Problems identified in previous years;
 - Inexperienced staff involved in data processing/performance information production;
 - A system being used to produce new performance information; and
 - Known gaps in the control environment.
 - f. Each performance indicator will have a designated officer ('the responsible officer') who will regularly monitor progress against any targets that have been set, manage any risks associated with the indicator and verify the accuracy of published outturns.

- g. Outturn data will be produced as soon as is practicable after the required timescale has elapsed.
- h. The responsible officer will ensure that calculations are checked by a colleague to reduce the potential for mistakes.
- i. Working papers for audit inspection will be forwarded to the Policy and Performance Team when requested and copies will also be maintained locally.
- j. The Council will work to ensure that financial and activity data collected as part of partnership working, particularly in the Mid Kent Improvement Partnership, is checked and validated, as part of business cases and ongoing monitoring.
- k. All Data Managers and Data Entry Officers will sign a data quality responsibility statement to confirm they understand their role and will adhere to the Data Quality Policy.

4.2 In addition to the above procedure and principles in section 3 of this document there are also a number of additional elements to be considered relating to the management of data.

4.3 **Keep data secure** - Systems, spreadsheets and documents that are used to record data should be password protected. This prevents any unauthorised access to or amendment of the data. Spreadsheets could be set to read only so that formulae are not accidentally deleted or amended by those who are not trained to use those systems. Security arrangements should also conform to legislation, such as the Data Protection Act, where applicable.

4.4 **Awareness** - Data quality is the responsibility of every member of staff entering, extracting or analysing data from any of the Council's information systems. Every relevant officer should be aware of his or her responsibilities with regard to data quality.

4.5 **Record data once and in one location** - Data should only be recorded or input once to ensure there are no duplication errors. Data should also be recorded in one location. Databases should not be copied and pasted elsewhere. This prevents two versions of the same set of data existing. If files need to be used by more than one person they should be saved in a shared location.

4.6 This policy and the Council's overall approach to data quality will be monitored by Management Team and the Chief Executive. The Council's Internal Auditors will review internal assurance controls for the performance indicators and other data related information as part of their ongoing audit work. These documents are available on the Policy & Performance Vindex site.

4.7 Current controls

- **Accuracy** – All performance indicators (except RTS) have audit commission style guidance. Setting out the rationale, definition and calculation of each indicator.
- **Validity** – Once performance indicator data is submitted it will not be used in reports until the responsible officer has signed it off.
- **Reliability** – All officers responsible for either entering or signing off indicators will each year sign a Data Quality statement to show that they understand and will adhere to the Data Quality Policy.

- **Timeliness** – Data will be submitted within 21 days of the end of the reporting period and is reported to CMT within three weeks of this deadline.
- **Relevance** – Performance indicators will be reported with the appropriate objective or outcome so that the context in which the data is provided is clear to the reader.
- **Completeness** – Every year we will produce an annual performance report detailing performance against targets and setting out progress made on our priorities.

- 4.8 Internal Audit undertake systems audits of most service areas, including those where data collection and reporting need to be accurate and robust. Following an audit, they produce a report containing recommendations that services must respond to. Internal Audit subsequently checks that action relating to agreed recommendations has been taken.
- 4.9 If a data quality concern has been raised, in the first instance, the service manager should complete the Data Quality Audit Template (DQAT), The outcome of completing this template is to either show that there is an adequate 'control environment' in place, or that action is being taken to address weaknesses. Once completed the DQAT is a "live" management document – which managers are encouraged to review or update.
- 4.10 If you have any concerns about data quality or would like further information on the subject of data quality please contact the Performance & Scrutiny Officer on 01622 602491.

5. Roles and responsibilities

- 5.1 A successful approach to data quality requires clear leadership from the top, together with a comprehensive management and accountability framework and an active commitment to securing a culture of data quality throughout the organisation. The Council's approach to discharging these responsibilities is set out below:
- 5.2 **All Employees** - Data quality is the responsibility of all employees in the Council, and all need to understand their role in ensuring good data quality. Employees should be aware of the Council's approach to data quality as set out in this policy, and attend any relevant training and awareness sessions.
- 5.3 **Responsible Officers** are responsible for checking and confirming performance data. Heads of service and section managers are not always Data Managers but still have responsibility for assuring data quality as set out in the procedure.
- 5.4 **Data Managers** The responsibilities of a Data Manager include: checking the accuracy and calculation of performance data, signing off (activating) performance data within the specified timeframe, providing commentary where indicators have under or over performed, creating action plans to improve performance, highlighting any areas of concern in relation to data quality and the creation and monitoring of procedures to collect and store data within their areas.
- 5.5 **Data Entry Officers** are responsible for Calculating performance data, inputting performance data accurately within the specified timescales, ensuring that working papers are retained and stored correctly and highlighting any areas of concern in relation to data quality.

- 5.6 **Line managers**¹ are required to ensure that employees are adequately trained and follow the appropriate systems, processes and policies. Line managers are also required to make sure that any relevant guidance is updated where necessary and that any changes are effectively communicated to staff.

6 Partners

- 6.1 The Council works in partnership with other organisations therefore it is important that data provided by partners and other third parties is accurate. Managers will make arrangements to ensure that third party data is in line with authority standards where appropriate. Any doubts about data quality should be addressed with the organisation. Responsibility for data verification lies within the division receiving the information.
- 6.2 In order to ensure that robust data quality arrangements exist within the partner organizations involved in providing data for council purposes there is a third party data quality protocol. The protocol is not a binding contractual agreement but is intended as a tool to show a commitment to data quality. It is a shared set of principles which describe the key elements of a robust approach to data quality. Each of the organisations providing data to the council must be committed to using these principles as a framework to assess and inform arrangements for securing data quality. A copy of the protocol is available on the Policy & Performance VIndex site.

7 Contracts

- 7.1 Maidstone Borough Council recognises that data quality is an important part of any contract where a service is outsourced to a third party to deliver. This is of particular importance to public-facing service contracts where large amounts of performance data are requested by the Council from which to judge a contractor's performance.
- 7.2 We will ensure that where data collection and data quality are instrumental to the delivery of the service all appropriate contracts will have a clause inserted into the contract which defines data quality and how it should be embedded into the contractor's processes.
- 7.3 Responsibility for the verification of data lies within the service managing the contract.

8 Risk Assessment

- 8.1 Data quality needs to be embedded in the Council's Strategic Risk Register and the Service Risk Registers. Areas that can be classified as 'high risk' include:
- Where there is a high volume of data transactions;
 - Technically complex performance information definition / guidance;
 - Problems identified in previous years;

¹ The term 'line manager' encompasses any officer with responsibility for other staff, and therefore covers all officers who manage and appraise others - from team leaders through to service managers, service directors and corporate directors.

- Inexperienced staff involved in data processing / performance information production;
- A system being used to produce new performance information; and
- Known gaps in the control environment.

8.2 Responsible Officers should consider the risks in relation to each of these points in terms of likelihood and impact. Appropriate actions should then be taken to manage the risk.

9 Monitoring and Reviewing this Policy

9.1 This policy and the Council's overall approach to data quality will be monitored by Management Team. The Council's internal and external auditors will review the adequacy of internal assurance controls for the national and local indicators and other data related information

9.2 The monitoring and review process will involve:

- Meetings with responsible officers to ensure that the correct systems and procedures are in place.
- Quarterly monitoring and review of PI's by Management Team.
- Follow up of any data quality queries from members of staff.
- Liaising with Internal Audit and External Audit regarding any data quality issues they have come across as part of their review / Inspection programme.

9.3 The Data Quality Policy itself will be reviewed by the Policy & Performance team and an update sent to Cabinet every two years to ensure that advice is current and in line with best practice.

10. Data Quality Documents

The following documents mentioned in this policy can be found below on the Policy & Performance Vindex site.

- Third Party Data Quality Protocol
- Data Quality Responsibility Statement
- Data Quality Audit Template