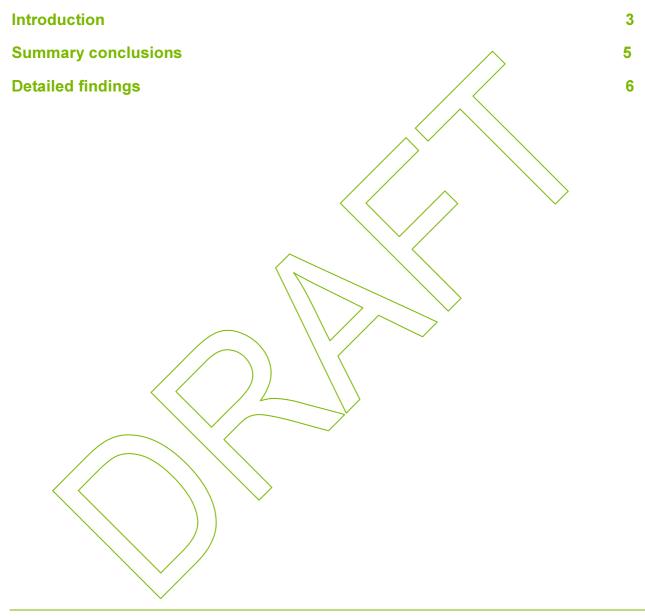# Data Quality

Maidstone Borough Council

Audit 2007/08

Date 08 February 2009

Contents

Status of our reports

The Statement of Responsibilities of Auditors and Audited Bodies issued by the Audit Commission explains the respective responsibilities of auditors and of the audited body. Reports prepared by appointed auditors are addressed to
members or officers. They are prepared for the sole use of the audited body. Auditors accept no responsibility to:

- any member or officer in their individual capacity; or
- any third party.

Introduction

1   The purpose of this report is to summarise the findings from our work on data quality for 2007/08.

2   Auditors' work on data quality and performance information supports the Commission's reliance on performance indicators (PIs) in its service assessments for comprehensive performance assessment (CPA).

3   Our work on data quality is complemented by the Audit Commission's paper, *'Improving information to support decision making: standards for better quality data'*. This paper sets out standards, for adoption on a voluntary basis, to support improvement in data quality. The expected impact of the Audit Commission's work on data quality is that it will drive improvement in the quality of local government performance information, leading to greater confidence in the supporting data on which performance assessments are based.

Scope of our work

4   We have followed the Audit Commission's three-stage approach to the review of data quality as set out in Table 1.

Table 1   Data quality approach

Stage 1	**Management arrangements**
	A review using key lines of enquiry (KLOE) to determine whether proper corporate management arrangements for data quality are in place, and whether these are being applied in practice. The findings contribute to the auditor's conclusion under the Code of Audit Practice on the Council's arrangements to secure value for money (the VFM conclusion).
Stage 2	**Analytical review**
	An analytical review of 2007/08 specified BVPI and non-BVPI data and selection of a sample for testing based on risk assessment. Specified BVPIs and non-BVPIs are those used for CPA purposes.
Stage 3	**Data quality spot checks**
	In-depth review of a sample of 2007/08 specified PIs, to determine whether arrangements to secure data quality are delivering accurate, timely and accessible information in practice. For 2007/08 PI spot checks, the Audit Commission specified that it is compulsory to review two housing benefits PIs at all single tier and district councils as a minimum.

5 As this is the third year of applying this approach to data quality, we tailored our work to focus on the key changes and actions taken to address previously identified weaknesses and recommendations.

6 In addition to the specified indicators at stage 3, we selected 1 performance indicator to review that is not on the list of specified indicators.

Summary conclusions

Stage 1 – Management arrangements

7   The Council's overall management arrangements for ensuring data quality are well above minimum requirements.

8   The Council has clearly assigned data quality requirements and responsibilities underpinned by sound data quality policies, including a high level data quality policy. These are reinforced at operational level by the Council's performance management system, a data quality checklist and a series of sign off and validation procedures. The Council has used a staff survey to understand the extent of staff appreciation of data quality, and this confirms that its briefing and training programme is effective.

9   The effectiveness of the data quality arrangements are tested by a risk based internal audit programme and reported annually to councillors. The Council has a detailed data quality improvement plan, monitored as part of its corporate improvement plan. It has worked on improving data quality arrangements in some of its partnerships and this work is ongoing. This will be supplemented by partnership work on the national indicator set and the Local Area Agreement targets.

10   The Council makes good use of performance information in its performance management system, but also through the Kent Price Book benchmarking exercise and business transformation programme. The main challenge for the Council is to continue its work to establish high standards of data quality in its partnerships.

Stage 2 – Analytical review

11   Our analytical review work at Stage 2 identified that most PI values reviewed fell within expected ranges or could be substantiated by evidence. In addition to the 2 mandatory specified PIs, we selected 1 further non specified PI for review at Stage 3.

Stage 3 – Data quality spot checks

12   Our review and spot checks of PIs for Housing Benefit processing times (78a and 78b) and private sector home (H18) found the following:

- 78a average time to process (new claim)- found the PI to be fairly stated

- 78b average time to process (change of circumstances)- found the PI to be fairly stated

- H18 - percentage of total - found to be unfairly stated but the Council subsequently amended the calculation and the PI is now considered to be fairly stated.

13   Our review and spot checks found the reported outturns of the above three PIs to be fairly stated. Our Stage 3 findings were therefore consistent with our earlier assessment under Stage 1 that management arrangements in respect of data quality are well above minimum requirement

Detailed findings

Management arrangements (Stage 1)

14 Overall, the Council's corporate arrangements for data quality are well above minimum requirements.

Governance and leadership

15 The Council has clearly assigned data quality requirements and responsibilities through a high level data quality policy, reinforced by a range of policies and plans. Data quality arrangements are risk assessed and internal audit resources are directed accordingly. There is a high level annual report on data quality arrangements.. The Council's data quality improvement plans are regularly monitored as part of the Corporate Improvement Plan. At an operational level, the Council's data quality requirements are reinforced through its performance management system, a data quality checklist and cascading of examples of good data quality practice to staff. Good data quality practice is being introduced into partnership arrangements though this is programme is not yet completed.

Policies

16 The Council's data quality requirements are clear - albeit that they are stated in a number of different documents. Its high level data quality policy is supplemented by guidance in its strategic plan, competency framework, code of conduct and staff handbook. The Council's overall requirements for data quality in partnerships are also covered in these documents, which are kept under review. The new computer based performance management system has helped the Council to raise the profile of data quality and deal more flexibly with changing requirements and procedures. The Council is currently reviewing its arrangements to accommodate the national indicator set. A recent staff survey shows a good understanding of data quality requirements.

Systems and processes

17 The Council has robust procedures for collecting and validating performance data and it has been proactive in strengthening performance information systems through its risk based audit programme. These systems have been further enhanced with the introduction of the new computer based performance management system.

18 The Council has engaged with staff on performance management and data quality issues. Data quality issues are reported through senior management to members. The Council has good arrangements for data security with a business continuity plan that has been tested for its resilience. The Council has arrangements in place for internal data sharing, and these were commended in the 2007 assessment. External contracts make appropriate reference to performance reporting and the data quality policy includes a statement on data sharing in partnerships. A series of reviews are underway to review data quality arrangements in individual partnerships, although this is still work

in progress. This review is being undertaken alongside the county-wide work on the national indicator set and LAA indicators.

People and skills

19 Training needs assessments pick up data quality issues, and there has been an ongoing focus on integrating data quality into the Council's competency framework. There has been communication with staff on specific data quality issues and also through the implementation of the computer based performance management system. The data quality staff survey shows a good awareness of data quality issues overall.

Data use and reporting

20 The Council makes good use of performance data to manage performance, though quarterly reporting, but also through Scrutiny, the Kent Price Book and business transformation exercises that challenge performance and secure improvement. It can demonstrate improvements in performance as a result . Some of this work is now being carried out in partnership with adjoining councils.

21 The Council has robust procedures in place to validate performance data - with appropriate audit trails and sign off procedures managed from within services and checked corporately. These processes have been consolidated with the introduction of the new computer based performance management system and are kept under review through the risk based internal audit programme. The Council has done some work on good data use in partnerships, but this is still work in progress.

Analytical review (Stage 2)

22 An analytical review of the BVPIs and non-BVPIs was carried out. This did not identify any PIs where the variance was outside reasonable ranges, therefore indicating that no further audit work was required,over and above the validation of a sample of PIs in stage 3 spot checks.

Data quality spot checks (Stage 3)

23 Three PIs were reviewed using a series of detailed spot checks and audit tests. Our findings are shown below.

Table 2   Spot check findings

Performance indicator	Assessment	Comment
Housing Benefits BVPI 78a- average time to process-new claim	Fairly stated	Our testing of a random sample of 65 new claims identified 3 minor errors that

Performance indicator	Assessment	Comment
		did not impact upon the reported outturn
Housing Benefits BVPI 78b- average time to process- change of circumstances	Fairly stated	Our testing of a random sample of 65 changes of circumstance identified 2 minor errors that did not impact upon the reported outturn
Housing Non-BVPI H18 - Percentage of total private sector homes vacant for more than six months	Fairly stated	Our testing did not identify any errors in the data recorded or methodology used to calculate this PI