

Kent County Council

Data Quality Policy

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Foreword

- 1 To ensure that we fulfil our commitment to continually improve services and provide better outcomes for Kent residents we need to be confident that we are making decisions based upon high quality information. The robustness and use of our data is also something which will be increasingly scrutinised by our regulators, reflecting its importance and value.
- 2 Data supports our planning process, helping us identify what we need to do to deliver high quality services. It underpins our performance management framework, helping us assess when things are working well and where we need to take action to make improvements. We also use data to help us focus services around our customers and ensure that we are making the best use of our resources and delivering value for money.
- 3 The policy is intended to address the quality of information/data used for decision making, otherwise known as performance indicators and ensuring such information is fit for purpose.
- 4 Data quality as defined here is essentially concerned with aggregate data and summary statistics relevant to performance management at a more strategic level, otherwise known as PIs, and not with records at a individual level more relevant to personalised services at an operational level, although the former is often built upon the latter and these two levels of data are clearly interlinked.
- 5 Data Protection and information governance have separate, although related requirements to the general requirements around management arrangements for securing data quality and are addressed in more detail within existing policies and documentation. In some cases data security is related to data quality through a subordinate role, for example if data is not secure, its quality could be comprised.
- 6 This document sets out the expectations for data quality across the organisation and provides specific policy guidelines for performance data. It brings together the good work we are already doing around data quality, provides a framework for sharing best practice and outlines our commitment to improving data quality.

The commitment to data quality

7 The aim of this policy is to :

- communicate the Council's commitment to data quality, giving the necessary assurance to those using information to make decisions, assessments or judgements; and
- outline some specific good practice guidance and advice to those involved in the production and use of data.

8 The Council recognises the importance of having good quality data. The overarching objective of this policy is therefore to improve the quality of all data used by the Council.

9 We aim to support this by:

- providing clarity about the characteristics of good data quality;
- defining the roles and responsibilities of those staff who produce, handle or use data;
- and providing general guidance relating to all other aspects relevant to delivering data quality such as systems and processes.

10 In turn, improved data quality will:

- support corporate and service planning;
- enable effective performance management, helping us deliver improved services by identifying and resolving issues rapidly and managing risks;
- support the provision of value for money, helping us manage our resources efficiently and effectively;
- facilitate benchmarking with other authorities to identify best practice and support improvement;
- inform customers, citizens, partners and other stakeholders about the quality and cost of services.

Characteristics of good quality data

- 11 Good quality data should be sought for all information used for decision making purposes. The primary focus of this policy is to address strategic information – that is information relating to corporate priorities (ie Towards 2010 and the Kent Agreement) and national statutory indicators. However the same principles are applicable to all information used by the Council
- 12 In the past data quality was often seen simply as accuracy of data but it is now widely acknowledged that data quality is a multi-dimensional concept which can be summed up as “fitness for purpose”. Accurate data is of little value if it arrives too late for timely decisions to be made. The following are characteristics to be considered when addressing issues of data quality.
- 13 In seeking to achieve good quality data, we recognise that a balance may be required between some of these characteristics. It is also important that the resources used to achieve these characteristics should be proportionate to the perceived value it provides to the organisation and therefore consideration must be given to its purpose/use of the data.

Relevance	Data should be defined/selected, collected, recorded and analysed with the intended use and audience in mind.
Accuracy	Data should provide a true account of what it is intended to represent to enable informed decisions to be made.
Timeliness	Data should be available frequently and promptly enough for it to be valuable for managing service delivery and decision making, providing the opportunity to take corrective action where needed.
Accessibility	Data should be easily available to those who need access to it. This also refers to the format used to present the data and accompanying notes of explanation to ease interpretation.
Coherence	This refers to data being consistent with other available information, either from other sources or with different frequency.
Comparability	Data should be comparable across time and space, which requires consistency of method in preparation of the information.

- 14 There are different frameworks available for describing the various characteristics of data quality. The above categorisation is based on that used by the Office for National Statistics, which is in turn based on recognised international standards.

Governance Arrangements

- 15 Data quality will be explicitly considered, planned for and managed in relation to all new information technology systems which produce any form of management information.
- 16 Responsibility for data quality will be clearly defined throughout the organisation with accountabilities made clear in unit operating plans, job descriptions and personal action plans. See Table 1 on the next page for more detail on responsibilities across the organization.
- 17 All directorates will have named contacts with specific responsibility for ensuring that information provided meets with the defined characteristics of data quality. Responsibility also includes highlighting any concerns/caveats and cascading requirements to others involved in producing this data.
- 18 Directors and heads of service should consider and receive reports which include data quality as relevant to their own operations and this will be integrated within other planning and monitoring processes.
- 19 Management will promote and make clear to staff the importance of data quality.
- 20 Where data quality is found to be lacking, specific action plans should be implemented to deliver improvements
- 21 Internal audit will consider issues of data quality in relevant audit work and provide recommendations where appropriate with a risk based approach taken in this work.
- 22 Data quality will be considered within corporate risk management arrangements and the Statement of Internal Control.

Table 1 – Specific roles and responsibilities for data quality

Role	Areas of responsibility
Chief Officers Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall responsibility for ensuring that arrangements are in place to assure the quality of data (in particular that which is business critical) and that improvement action is taken where necessary
Divisional/Unit Managers (or equivalent)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring that the Data Quality Policy is communicated, understood and implemented • Ensuring staff have the necessary skills required to deliver high quality data and that their responsibility for data quality is reflected in job descriptions and monitored and supported through the staff appraisal process. • Ensuring that appropriate systems and processes are in place to deliver high quality data, and contingency arrangements and appropriate controls are in place to give assurance about quality • Reviewing data quality and agreeing actions for improvement where required
Performance Management Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keeping knowledge of relevant performance measures, requirements and issues up to date and cascading appropriate information to any other staff involved in producing this information • Ensuring high quality information is regularly provided within the timescales agreed, highlighting any changes, caveats or potential issues relating to the information provided (e.g. changes to systems, sources and definitions) so that sound judgements can be made about how this information should be used and interpreted. This should also include regular appraisal of data quality, highlighting areas of concern, responding to issues/taking action and providing updates on progress as appropriate. • Ensuring that the information provided is supported by underlying working papers/records and that these are retained as appropriate • Sharing learning relating to data quality from inside and outside of the organisation, applying good practice and collectively tackling data quality issues
All Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness of their individual responsibilities relating to data quality and how their day to day work can impact upon the quality of data and add value for the organisation.
Internal audit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annual audit programme to include review of underlying systems used to produce performance information where data quality issues have been identified using a risk based approach

Policies and procedures

- 23 All significant information systems which provide strategic information should have documentation providing comprehensive procedures and guidance for users and this should be easily accessible on k-net.
- 24 Such documentation will cover, among other things, data entry, database management, report production and will also define how any key indicators based on the information are compiled.
- 25 Staff should be fully involved in the development of such documentation and documentation should be reviewed annually to ensure it stays fit for purposes.
- 26 Each system should have nominated data quality champions who oversee the production of documentation, promote the policies and report and review on compliance with the policy.

Systems and processes

- 27 Arrangements for collecting, recording, analysing and reporting data (including frequency and quality standards required) should be considered as part of the business planning process, for example when new indicators are agreed.
- 28 Responsible officers should ensure that systems and processes are in place to provide data in line with the characteristics of good quality data.
- 29 Systems and processes should be designed, and staff trained, in line with good practice guidance. These systems and processes should be set up in a way that maximises our ability to achieve high quality data first time, avoiding the need to divert resources and cause delays due to excessive checks, controls and 're-works'.
- 30 The level of checks and controls should be proportionate to the value of the data and risk of poor quality. These should be appropriate to the systems and processes being used and include lead officer 'sign off' to assure the quality of data.
- 31 The interface between systems and processes should be streamlined as far as possible. Replication and ineffective/inefficient overlaps in data storage and reporting systems should be avoided where possible to minimise duplication of effort and reduce opportunities for errors and inconsistencies.
- 32 Contingency arrangements should be established to ensure data can be delivered when circumstances change. This should include, as a minimum, producing back-ups of data, creation/retention of audit trails and ensuring that there is a deputy in place who would also have some knowledge of the relevant data and processes and/or systems used to produce it.
- 33 Where data is provided by a third party or shared externally, quality standards and frequency of exchange should be agreed and documented.
- 34 Relevant supporting information should be held for all performance data, including a document outlining the definition of measures.
- 35 Definitions/guidance documents should be referred to by performance staff when results are calculated. Any definition changes should be documented and clearly highlighted in any resulting analysis or reports. These will act as detailed procedure notes, enabling continuity where there are staff changes and will be used to support any audit work.
- 36 Systems and processes should be regularly tested to ensure they remain fit for purpose. Data quality should be regularly reviewed in year using appropriate tools and techniques to enable necessary actions to be taken where issues are identified.

People and skills

- 37 The organisational values shape how staff work and behave. These include a commitment to be responsive to customer needs and provide quality. Data and/or information should be provided in a way that provides value for the customer (both internal and external) and is focused upon organisational needs, helping us get things done and make improvements.
- 38 All staff involved in producing data/information – whether defining, collating, recording, extracting, analysing or reporting - have a responsibility for quality. Staff should be aware of how any data they record or handle is used (and its relative value to the organisation) and how their role can impact upon quality.
- 39 Staff and members have a responsibility to consider the quality of information (and underlying data) when making decisions based upon it.
- 40 The recruitment, performance appraisal and ongoing staff development processes should clearly reflect and reinforce the importance of data quality for those staff working with data. These processes should take account of the aspects of data quality that are relevant for individual roles, reflecting these aspects in job descriptions, personal action plans and ongoing training and support.
- 41 Whilst all staff have a collective responsibility for quality, there are also some specific responsibilities that individuals and teams should be aware of.
- 42 Staff involved in the production or use of this data should be provided with appropriate training and support to ensure data is produced and used in a way that adds value for the organisation, taking account of the characteristics of high quality data. This should be discussed and reviewed in annual performance appraisals.

Data use and reporting

- 43 To provide most value, data should be focused upon supporting the organisational priorities and be defined in a way that will support decision making and help the organisation take appropriate action. Relevance should be kept under review and data may need to be modified to reflect changing circumstances.
- 44 Data should be presented in a format that is meaningful and accessible to the user. User feedback should be sought to ensure outputs continue to be valuable.
- 45 Data can be most effectively used if it is produced, communicated and reported in a timely way, aiming for as near to 'real time' reporting as possible to allow management action to be taken where needed. In order to achieve this it may be necessary to accept a lesser degree of accuracy.
- 46 The collection and reporting timetable should be staged in a way that enables the quality of information to be assured, issues discussed and content approved and/or improved with any additional information before ongoing reporting.
- 47 Where performance data or other business critical information is not available frequently the creation of proxies/alternative data sources should be considered in the interim where these will support decision making. In these instances, care needs to be given to ensure that data shows what it is intended to and limitations of such proxies are communicated and taken into account by users.
- 48 Data used for decision making should be complete and balanced. This might best be achieved by presenting/interpreting data alongside other complementary information. Data that isn't already scaled may be best considered against relevant population/volume data.
- 49 To get most value from data, supporting commentary and contextual information needs to be maintained and kept relevant and up to date, with any caveats or data quality issues clearly outlined.
- 50 Data should be at an appropriate level of detail to influence management decisions e.g. broken down to underlying activity, district or service level data where meaningful.
- 51 Comparison to earlier periods and/or other organisations or groups should be considered to help with interpretation of data and identifying potential areas of good practice.
- 52 Where there is significant variation in performance against target and/or over time, underlying information and causes should be considered to identify whether this is a performance issue or data quality issue. Monitoring and reporting should include a review of latest progress on such issues and any management action being taken to address these.
- 53 Where data quality issues are raised internally through self-assessment or externally, e.g., through matters arising from audit, this should be taken into account in any interpretation and analysis.