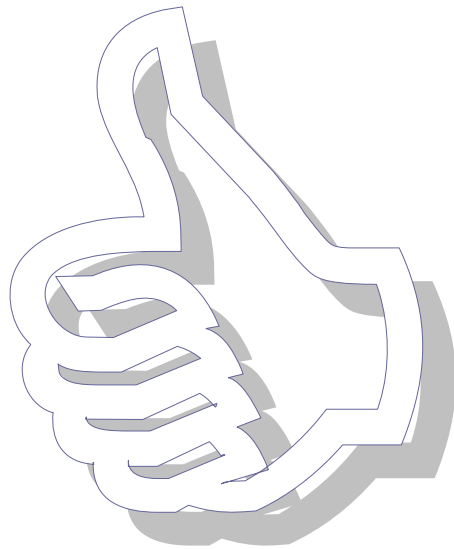


DATA QUALITY POLICY



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Introduction

All effective organisations measure their performance in order to know how well they are performing and to identify opportunities for improvement. It is a vital component in the drive to improve services.

The effective use of performance measurement depends on indicators that are robust and accurate. There needs to be sufficient data available to effectively analyse it and interpret it to be sure performance is on track and provide an early warning if targets may be missed.

The Council and its partners use performance information every day and they require reliable and comprehensive data and information to enable them to manage their services effectively, benchmark performance and cost, inform target setting, make strategic decisions about priorities and to be held to account.

Data is also used in assessments to judge the performance of the council overall or for a single service. If data and information is used smarter and more effectively, better decisions, which improve the lives of local people can be made.

Context and Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to set out the Council's approach to improving and maintaining a robust data quality process across the Council. High quality and timely performance information is vital to support good decision making and continuously improve service delivery outcomes.

Performance information has grown in importance to external agencies as a means of assessing the Council as an organisation. It is no longer just a case of assessing how an outturn figure for a performance indicator has been achieved; there is now a need to audit the systems we have in place to secure the quality of the performance data. Auditors will need to be satisfied that robust systems are in place for data collection and reporting to ensure that any performance data reported has a high degree of reliability.

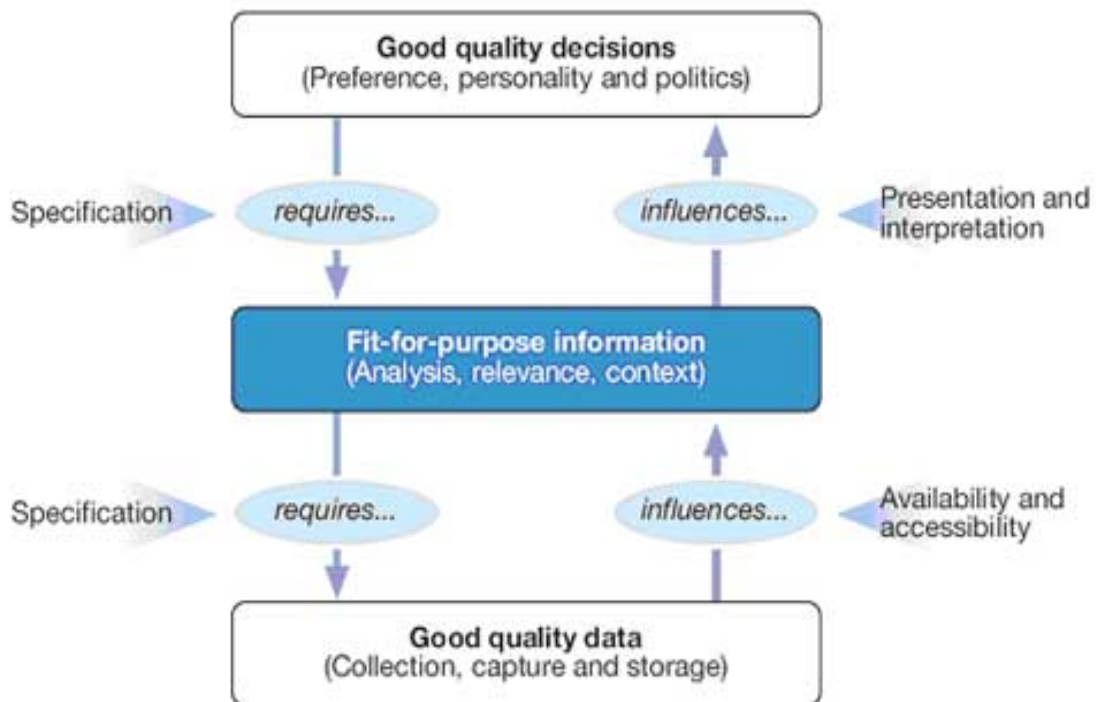
Braintree District Council recognises the importance of reliable information to the delivery of excellent services to its customers. Data quality is crucial and the availability of complete accurate and timely data is important in supporting customer care, corporate governance, management decisions, service planning, accountability and adherence to audit and inspection processes.

This document seeks to formally set out the Council's approach to data quality to ensure that high standards are clearly set, achieved and maintained.

Why is data quality important?

The quality and cost of public services depend on the decisions that people make. Poor quality information can lead to poor decisions or inappropriate conclusions that can affect our services and so impact on the lives of Braintree district residents.

Good quality data which is collected, captured and stored in the right way, should then be turned into fit-for-purpose information which is well analysed, relevant and right for context and used to inform good quality decisions which improves outcomes for local people.



Source: "in the know" (Audit Commission 2008)

The key risks arising from relying on information which is not fit-for-purpose are significant and may include:

- Published information which is misleading
- Poor use of council resources
- Failure to improve services
- Poor policy decisions
- Not recognising and rewarding good performance
- Not identifying and monitoring improvement opportunities

Characteristics of good quality data

Detailed below are key characteristics of good quality data:

Accuracy

Data should be sufficiently accurate for its intended purpose, representing clearly and in enough detail the interaction provided at the point of activity. Accuracy is most likely to be secured if data is captured as close to the point, and time of activity as possible.

The concept of 'right first time, every time' should be used making sure there is no unnecessary checking, correcting or reformatting of information once it has been submitted.

Validity

Data should be recorded and used in compliance with relevant requirements, including the correct application of any rules or definitions. This will ensure consistency between periods and with similar organisations, measuring what is intended to be measured.

Reliability

Data should reflect stable and consistent data collection processes across collection points and over time, whether using manual or computer based systems, or a combination. Managers and stakeholders should be confident that progress towards performance targets reflects real change rather than variations in the methods or approaches in data collection.

Timeliness

Information is collected as quickly as possible after the event as is feasible, and made available at a frequency and timescale that is deemed appropriate for its use. Data must be available quickly and frequently enough to support information needs and to influence service or management decisions.

Relevance

Data captured should be relevant to the purposes for which it is used. This entails periodic reviews of requirements to reflect changing needs.

It will have a use and purpose and not be collected for the sake of collection. When being used for decision making, the information collected and presented must be relevant to that decision.

Completeness

Data needs to be complete, representative and unbiased. Sufficient information should be collected and to a suitable quality, as it is needed to draw significant or meaningful conclusions. For example, if captured by survey, the data needs to be free from bias and the sample robust and representative of the wider population. Also needs to be relevant to what the organisation is aiming to achieve.

Secured

Information is stored safely and with appropriate access controls. Sensitive information is only used for the purpose it has been collected for, and only retained for as long as it is needed. Information is only shared with others where the council is satisfied that appropriate controls and safeguards are in place.

Policy Objectives

Braintree District Council is committed to ensuring it maintains the highest standards of data quality. In order to achieve this, our objectives are to:

- Ensure that performance information in use meets the criteria of high quality data and is accurate, valid, reliable, timely, relevant and complete
- Ensure that data supporting performance information is used to manage and improve the delivery of services for local people
- Document and communicate expectations and requirements in respect of the standards of data quality from our staff and elected members
- Develop and support a culture of valuing high quality data
- Ensure that the right resources, people and skills are in place to ensure that we have timely and accurate performance data
- Ensure that data is stored, used and shared in accordance with corporate standards and relevant legislation (e.g. Data Protection Act and freedom of Information Act)
- Ensure data meets external inspection/audit standards and requirements

Policy Principles

The following principles underpin good performance data quality:

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 their responsibilities with regard to data quality. The commitment to data quality will be communicated clearly throughout the Council to reinforce this message.

Definitions

All staff should be aware how their day to day activities contributes to the calculation of performance indicators and how lapses can either lead to errors or delay reporting both of which can limit our ability to manage performance effectively.

Responsible officers should have an understanding of what the numerator and denominators are and have a working knowledge of any technical guidelines/instructions on how to calculate the data correctly. Everybody

should have an understanding of any performance indicators affected by the data they produce.

For National performance indicators and Local Area Agreement (LAA) performance indicators, every detail of the definition of the indicator needs to be applied to ensure data is recorded consistently, allowing for comparisons over time and for benchmarking purposes.

Clear definitions and formulas for calculating outturn figures need to be established for local performance indicators that everyone can follow.

Every performance indicator should have a named officer who is responsible for collecting and reporting data along with a named responsible officer, who holds responsibility for cross checking the calculation methodology and the outturn figures produced. Audit trails need to be kept of any changes in definitions that occur.

Data Capture

There must be adequate controls over the input of data aiming for 100% accuracy at all times. Officers should have clear guidelines, procedures and adequate training (where applicable) for using systems to ensure information is entered correctly and consistently.

Officers need to ensure that when entering data into the performance management system they are clear as to whether the figure required is a snapshot of the current period or a year to date figure. System notes are required to explain the performance and evidence of the outturn figure either uploaded to the performance management system or kept for a minimum of a year for auditing purposes. Supporting evidence can take the form of spreadsheets, screen dumps, links to a database or a description of where the supporting information is kept.

Controls

Data requirements should be designed along the principle of *'getting it right first time, every time'*.

It may be necessary to undertake verification tasks, such as:

- Data cleansing - removing duplicate records or filling in missing information
- Spot checks on the data quality provide by third party
- Reconciliation of systems produced data with manual records
- Sample checks to eliminate reoccurrence of a specific error

A number of performance indicators rely on information provided by external sources and officers need to ensure that the data received from them is relevant, timely and accurate. It is important to ensure that where data is provided by an external source, there are clear guidelines about their responsibilities for data quality.

Systems

It is vital that the systems used to collect, store and calculate performance information are accurate and any faults or errors are identified. All systems need to be checked and tested regularly.

Each data collection system needs to be maintained by the responsible officer who would be required to ensure that local data collection systems are robust and ensure that:

- Users are adequately trained and guidelines/instructions are available
- Access to systems are secure (where applicable)
- Periodic tests of data integrity are undertaken checking that the raw data and calculations produce accurate results
- System upgrades are implemented where necessary
- Amendment to performance indicator definitions are updated as necessary
- The system meets managers information needs
- Adequate back up procedures for saving and restoring data are in place.

Continuous improvement of systems is also important in ensuring that data produced is at the highest quality.

There are a number of conditions that need to be considered if a data collection system is to be classed as robust. 'High risk' conditions will include:

- A high volume of data/transactions
- Technically complex definitions/guidance
- Problems identified in previous years
- Inexperienced staff involved in data processing or the production of performance indicators
- Systems being used to produce a new performance indicator
- Data for the indicator is supplied by a third party
- Known gaps in the control environment

Data quality is a consideration when reviewing the Councils Strategic Risk Register and some high risk performance indicators may also be included in the operational risk register.

Reporting

Regular reporting of accurate information leads to good decision making and improved performance.

Performance information is subject to scrutiny and challenge at a directorate level before it is presented to Management Board, Performance, Innovation and Efficiency Board, Cabinet or published to external parties. This allows for management actions to be taken to improve performance.

Spot checks on performance indicators will be carried out on a sample basis to check data quality ensuring performance information is accurate.

An increasing number of performance indicators (particularly National Indicators) are reported to external bodies, including central government. It is important that the reporting made through government returns and other submissions maintain high standards of data quality.

As the Council increasingly works in partnership with other organisations and relies on the information that they supply, it is crucial that this information is of a high quality.

It is therefore necessary to seek written assurances from all third party providers regarding the accuracy of the data they provide. This can be in the format of a copy of their data quality policy or written confirmation that the data they provide to the Council is accurate, and can be relied upon.

Presentation

Information regarding the performance of an indicator needs to be presented in such a way as to give an easily understood and accurate picture of our performance to external inspectorates and the public.

Roles and Responsibilities

All staff are responsible for data quality and to ensure that data is fit for purpose. Commitment to data quality will be clearly stated in job descriptions where relevant.

Cabinet Member for Efficiency and Resources - has overall member responsibility for performance and need to be pro-active in raising issues around data quality challenging progress made against corporate and service data quality objectives.

Directors – have overall responsibility for challenging performance and data quality.

Heads of Service – are accountable for the accuracy and quality of performance data and information within their service area and need to ensure their staff are aware of their data quality requirements.

Service/Team Managers – are responsible for the accuracy and quality of performance data and information, undertaking necessary checks and complying with the guidance as well as identifying and implementing improvement measures to improve the quality of data.

Collection Officers – are responsible for ensuring that the data collection systems are robust. They will be able to identify and implement improvement measures to improve the quality of data and must keep up to date with current guidance on all performance indicators.

Performance Indicators responsible officers and owners – are responsible for the accuracy and quality of performance data and information and for cross checking the calculation methodology and the outturn figures produced. They also need to highlight any measures for improving data quality and need to keep abreast of the latest guidance and performance indicator definitions.

All staff and elected members – need to be aware of the data quality policy and where applicable, should be aware how their day to day activities contribute to the calculation of performance indicators.

Internal Audit – have responsibility for securing data quality as part of their responsibility for corporate governance and risk management.

Programme and Performance Management Office (PMO) - work closely with Internal Audit to help improve data quality. Maintains Covalent, the Councils leading performance management system ensuring system updates are communicated to all staff.

Performance Management Co-ordinator – is responsible for corporate co-ordination, reporting and monitoring of performance indicators including data checks and challenge meetings. Reports any concerns in data quality that have been identified.

Supports the audit process both internal and external carrying out sample checks to ensure data quality on performance indicators and provides help, support and guidance for any data quality issues that arise.

Applying the policy

This policy applies to all employees of Braintree District Council as it is clear that all staff have a responsibility for data quality. It is accepted, however, that certain officers will have greater lead responsibility for activities to secure a high standard of data quality.

Internal Audit plays an important role in securing quality data within the council. The Programme Management Office (PMO) and individual services will continue to work closely with Internal Audit where appropriate to help improve data quality.

A number of activities and actions are required to maintain quality data and to achieve this; there is an associated delivery plan with identified actions and responsibilities.

Data Quality Action Plan

The data quality standards introduced by the Audit Commission have been adopted to form the backbone of our approach to improving data quality. The table below details what we will do to improve data quality to ensure a consistent approach is applied across the Council.

Action	Priority	Responsibility	Date	Comments
Governance and Leadership				
Re-launch the commitment to data quality throughout the Council a) Members b) SMG c) All staff d) New joiners (staff, members, third parties)	High	PMO	On-going	Training Course written and published on Vision for all staff to complete by March 2011 and for new joiners to complete with induction programme.
Consider formally reporting data quality matters within performance reports to Audit Committee and Cabinet	Medium	PMO	On-going	Quarterly performance management reports include comments on performance indicators checked to ensure data quality.
Data quality issues are highlighted to PMO or Internal Audit	Medium	PMO/Internal Audit	On-going	
Evidence the strategic approach to data quality through inclusion in the Councils corporate strategy with clearly identified actions to support improvement	Medium	PMO/Management Board	On-going	
People and Skills				
Develop and implement a formal and regular programme of training and updates for all staff involved in recording and reporting on performance information and data	High	PMO	On-going	Performance management training includes importance of data quality. E-learning developed.

quality				
Staff using performance systems will have access to procedure manuals and user guidance.	Medium	PMO	On-going	User Guidance provided for Covalent training
Policies				
Provide a comprehensive guidance for staff on data quality for collecting, recording and analysing	High	PMO	On-going	Revised Data Quality Policy published on internet and intranet. Policy updated in January 2011.
Systems and processes				
Design and implement processes for validating data from all third parties including partnerships, or seek written assurances from third parties over the accuracy of the data.	Medium	PMO	On-going	All third parties contacted and assurances being received. Confirmation sought from PKF that documentation on third parties websites (ie their DQP) can be used.
Data				
Ensure adequate audit trails are retained to evidence the reported performance that is uploaded into the performance management system	Medium	PMO	On-going	PI's to have audit trail noted and made available to Performance Management Co-ordinator for spot checking. Where possible uploaded onto Covalent.
Ensure local performance indicators have robust guidance and formulas for everyone to understand and implement	Medium	PMO	On-going	All new performance indicators uploaded in Covalent must have this section completed. Almost all existing local indicators have been updated. Remaining indicators are under review.

* Comments updated January 2011