

DATA QUALITY POLICY

Agenda Item ..

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Background Papers:- None
Financial Implications:- None
Equalities Implications:- None
Legal Implications:- None
Options: To adopt or review the policy
Risks: Failure to adopt this revised data quality policy will reduce confidence in the published data, and will significantly reduce the score for the key line of enquiry on data quality.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Poor information quality leads to poor decision making and can be a symptom of poor operational management. This is recognised in the Governance and Leadership inspection programme called 'key lines of enquiry', part of which requires the Authority to make formal statements about data quality in its agreed policy.

To cover these statements, the Council's data quality policy has been revised to explain the principles that will define how the Council stores, uses and manages data. These principles are applicable to any system, whether it uses paper, computer or other media. However, the focus will be on computer systems, specifically the Covalent information management system that is used to collect and analyse the Best Value Performance Indicators. It defines the roles and responsibilities needed to produce accurate and reliable information, and applies to the background data; the records, evidence, calculations and processes that are used to produce those reports, as well as the finished reports.

DECISION

It is recommended that the Council adopts the policy.



Braintree District Council Data Quality Policy

2007 to 2009

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Introduction

High quality information and data is critical to enable the monitoring and improvement of service delivery.

Braintree District Council recognises the importance of reliable information to the delivery of services and their management.

The quality of information will affect the capability to make operational decisions about the way services are planned, managed and undertaken. Poor information quality leads to poor decision making and is a symptom of poor operational management. As Performance Indicators are used as a way of judging operational performance, weaknesses in information quality cannot be accepted as a reason for low achievement.

Improving information and data quality is not a trivial task. It requires an approach that addresses the whole range of activities from basic data collection through to the application of information analysis and knowledge.

The principles set out in this policy are applicable to any system used or managed by the Authority, whether they use paper, computer or other media. However, the focus will be on computer systems, specifically the Covalent information management system. It applies to the information that is produced in reports, but it also applies to the background data; the records, evidence, calculations and processes that are used to produce those reports.

If you have any queries or comments on the Data Quality Policy, please contact:

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Part 1. Braintree district council's data quality policy

1. What is data quality and why is it so important?

Data will be of high quality if it is:

- Correct
- Comprehensive (i.e. all data is captured)
- Valid (in a format which conforms to council and national standards)
- Available when needed
- Stored securely and confidentially

Inspection bodies such as the Audit Commission must have confidence in the accuracy of our performance information. This emphasis on data quality takes us from the external audit approach of checking calculation to the more challenging scrutiny of systems controls. This means that the way we collect data is as important as the data itself; and the quality of our data is crucial for an assessment of the Council's effectiveness.

The higher the number of amendments and reservations that we receive regarding our data following external inspection or scrutiny, the lower the confidence that inspectors, government and interested parties will have in the performance information we provide. This results in increased and more detailed inspection and the likelihood of lower performance scores.

2. Objectives of the policy

Braintree District Council is committed to ensuring that it maintains the highest standards of data quality. We need reliable, accurate and timely performance information with which to manage services, inform users and account for our performance. To achieve this Braintree District Council will:

- Ensure that performance information is high quality, consistent, timely, comprehensive and held securely and (where appropriate) confidentially
- Put in place arrangements at senior level to secure the quality of data that we use to manage our service and demonstrate our performance
- Make clear what is expected from officers and contractors in terms of standards of data quality
- Put in place systems, and procedures to enable the highest possible data quality, particularly where information is shared with partners
- Ensure that we have the right resources to deliver timely and accurate performance information
- Ensure that we have the right controls to provide what is expected of us

3. Scope of the Data Quality Policy

All Council systems and processes that hold management and performance data relevant to Braintree District Council and its partners. Everyone in the organisation will be responsible for complying with it.

4. Principles of the Data Quality Policy

There are a number of principles that underpin good data quality and these must be considered in the right order. If any of the principles are missed, or taken out-of-order, inaccuracies will occur, and attention to subsequent principles will not rectify the position.

Awareness: everyone recognises the need for good data quality and how they can contribute.

Definitions: everyone knows which performance indicators are produced from the information they input and how they are defined;

- Statutory performance indicators have nationally set definitions with no flexibility or scope for interpretation. Every detail must be scrutinised and checked to ensure that data is recorded consistently, allowing comparison over time, and national benchmarking.
- Where we are setting local PIs, we must establish a clear definition and collect and report the data in an agreed format
- In some cases, there are a number of similar indicators (some national and some local) measuring the same thing in slightly different ways. It is important to ensure that separate figures are calculated and reported systematically for each definition
- Every performance indicator will have a named officer who will collect and report the information.

For more detailed guidance, see the *performance management and data collection* work instruction in part 3.

Input: there are controls over input to the Covalent Management system;

- The objective is to be right first time, every time - time spent on cleansing data and correcting errors is time wasted.
- Officers will use the guidance and procedures for data collection and must be adequately trained to ensure that information is being entered consistently and correctly
- A key requirement is that data should be entered monthly, quarterly or annually as required in the Corporate Performance Plan
- The systems must also record all relevant information and supporting documents

Responsibility: Each performance indicator, whether national or local, has three names associated with it; the Service Unit Manager, the Senior Manager, and the Director. The Service Unit Manager is the administrator and record-keeper. The Senior Manager has operational control, and the Director has strategic control and accountability for performance against each indicator.

- The Covalent monitoring database has provision for documenting the methods and calculations, and it is the Senior Manager's responsibility to keep these up-to-date, updating them when required, and reviewing them annually.
- Senior Managers and Service Unit Managers will have a deputy to produce this information in their absence.

Output: performance indicators are calculated regularly, efficiently and communicated quickly. They will be presented in a way that can be checked by external auditors and inspectors.

Verification: there are verification procedures in place as close to the point of input as possible. In complex systems, even where there are strong controls over input, errors can occur. Where it is needed, a verification procedure will be defined in Covalent. Data are to be input by the Service Unit Manager, and activated (i.e. verified) by the Senior Manager responsible for the data.

Most performance information will require an auditable trail of evidence to support the data. The requirements for supporting data will be specified in the data collection guidance given in Covalent, and the evidence will be saved to the covalent system so that the performance indicator outturn can be calculated from the data saved.

Presentation: Performance indicators are presented with conclusive evidence, in such a way as to give an easily understood and accurate picture of our performance to external inspectorates and the public.

5. Corrective actions

Where problems are found, corrective action and any recommendations for change will be identified. Simple corrections will be managed by a Covalent 'current data note' identifying the change needed. More complex corrections will have a Covalent Action created to manage the change. The corrective action will be monitored through Team, Departmental and Management Board meetings as appropriate. The corrective actions will be reviewed in the quality audit section of the integrated audit process.

6. Risk assessment

Data quality is embedded in the Council's Strategic Risk Register, and some high risk indicators will also be incorporated in the operational risk register. Reasons for classifying an indicator as "high risk" include:

- A high volume of data transactions
- Technically complex performance information definition / guidance
- Problems identified in previous years

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

7. Roles and responsibilities

Data quality is the responsibility of every employee who enters, extracts, or analyses data from any of the Council's information systems and records. Every employee should be aware of their responsibilities for the quality of data. It is the responsibility of all staff that input, store, retrieve or otherwise manage data to ensure that it is fit for purpose.

Commitment to data quality will be clearly stated in job descriptions for all relevant roles within the Council, ensuring that Corporate Directors, Senior Managers, Service Unit Managers, and others recognise their responsibilities as an integral part of their role and profession.

The Performance Manager maintains an overview of data quality, and has responsibility for managing and developing the systems that deliver the corporate performance information. The Performance Manager will report to the Management Board on any issues that will affect the quality of data.

The Corporate Directors and the Performance Manager are responsible for delivering on the actions set out in the Action Plan in Part 2 of this policy and for monitoring them to ensure that any corrective action is taken, if required.

The Corporate Directors have overall accountability for the indicators; responsible for defining the local indicators, setting targets for all the indicators, and allocating the resources necessary to meet those targets.

The Senior Managers have responsibility for managing the performance that meets the targets and ensuring that the performance is recorded in an accurate and timely manner.

The Service Unit Managers are responsible for delivering the service and for the day-to-day management of the data, ensuring that it is available when required, calculated as agreed, and with all the supporting evidence available and uploaded to the covalent database.

Senior Managers and Service Unit Managers are responsible for ensuring that the performance information they provide is accurate, timely and meets the relevant guidance.

The Performance and Efficiency Group and the Audit Panel have responsibility for data quality as part of their responsibility for corporate governance, performance management and risk management.

8. Contracts

Braintree District Council recognises that data quality is an important part of any contract, and is of particular importance to public facing service contracts where the Council retains responsibility for service standards.

Where data collection and data quality are essential to the delivery of the service, the contracts will have a standard clause inserted which sets out:

- the requirement for the contractor to provide timely and accurate information and
- the responsibilities for data quality and checking information

Responsibility for the verification of data lies within the Department managing the contract.

9. Partners

Important information is provided by partner organisations and other external agencies such as Essex Police and Essex County Council. We will work constructively with these organisations to ensure that the quality of data we give and receive is fit for purpose.

Responsibility for data verification lies within the service and the Service Unit Manager and Senior Manager receiving or providing the information.

10. Reporting and Audit

Performance data required by Government Departments and inspection bodies normally has a timetable for publication. All performance information will be produced in accordance with the relevant timescales and in time for management assessment and action prior to publication.

Performance updates are reported to Management Board, the Performance and Efficiency Group and the Audit Panel as part of the Council's performance management framework.

Performance will be subject to scrutiny and challenge.

Braintree District Council receives external validation of its performance and data quality through an external audit process. During these audits the officer responsible for data collection will be available to provide all supporting information. If that officer is not available, there should be at least one other officer who is able to provide advice and information on the Performance Indicator and the supporting data.

The auditor will require working papers to confirm the definition has been followed, the calculations are correct and that the indicator is supported by a full audit trail. These working papers will be uploaded to the Covalent performance management database by the Service Unit Manager.

11. Monitoring and review

This Policy and the Council's overall approach to data quality will be monitored by Management Board and the Performance Manager. The monitoring and review process will involve:

Monthly exception reports to Departmental Management Teams, detailing those performance indicators that are below target.

Corrective action plans for any performance indicator that is below target

Monthly exception reports to Management Board detailing those performance indicators that do not have corrective action plans, or that are consistently below target.

Quarterly monitoring and review of all high priority indicators (as defined in the Corporate Performance Plan) by Management Board, the Performance and Efficiency Group and the Audit Panel

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 and Inspection programme

Part 2. Data quality action plan

1. Action Plan

Implementation of the Data Quality Policy is through the actions listed in the attached action plan. None of these actions have any cost implications, although officer time is needed to implement them.

2. Anticipated outcomes

The main outcomes of delivering the Data Quality Action Plan are:

- Improved accountability for data quality issues
- An increased awareness of data quality and its importance
- An increased commitment to data quality by the Council
- A strengthened performance management framework

3. Action plan monitoring

The delivery of this Data Quality Action Plan will be monitored on a quarterly basis by the Performance Manager and an annual report will also be produced and presented to the Management Board, and Audit Panel.

	Actions	Target Date	Resource (one-off/ ongoing)	Responsible Officer	Comments	Required Outcomes
1	Policy To include a reference to data quality in the Council's key corporate documents		Ongoing	ALL	Corporate Performance Plan Corporate Action Plan	Increased commitment to data quality
2	Procedure To adopt the data quality procedure detailing correct use of the Covalent system		One off	Performance Manager	To make data quality explicit	Increased commitment to data quality
3	Internal Audit Use the integrated audits to review data quality and improvement		Ongoing	Performance Manager	This is already underway	Improved data quality testing
4	Risk Register To have reference to data quality in the Council's Strategic Risk Register and to elements of the Operational Risk Register		Ongoing	Performance Manager Deputy Finance Director Senior Managers	To make data quality explicit	Increased commitment to data quality
5	Covalent PI raw data is input to Covalent, outturns are calculated from Covalent		Ongoing	Senior Managers, Service Unit Managers	This will include high level details of any statistic returns to central government or any statutory bodies	Centralised record of what is reported when, and who is responsible

	Actions	Target Date	Resource (one-off/ ongoing)	Responsible Officer	Comments	Required Outcomes
6	Process documentation To ensure that data collected has supporting processes in place to ensure data quality, and that these procedures are reviewed regularly		Ongoing	Senior Managers Performance Manager	This will ensure that data quality is embedded through procedures, documentation and processes, as well as allowing for any areas of concern to be raised and resolved	Data quality embedded into all performance management reporting
7	Management Board and Directorate Management Meetings To consider data quality on a monthly basis whilst monitoring Performance Indicators. Directors follow up any anomalies and queries in their areas of responsibility and report back		Ongoing	Management Board Senior Managers Performance Manager Audit panel	Any issues raised will be documented and resolved	Increased awareness of data quality Reporting of data quality issues in a timely manner to enable timely issue resolution
8	Annual review of Data Quality To undertake an annual review of data quality in relation to all high priority indicators		Ongoing	Performance Manager	A review of the Data Quality Policy will be included	Strengthened data quality arrangements

	Actions	Target Date	Resource (one-off/ ongoing)	Responsible Officer	Comments	Required Outcomes
9	Role Profiles To review role profiles and job descriptions for relevant staff to incorporate data quality issues		One-off	Performance Manager Human Resources	Performance Manager will work with HR to identify relevant officer posts	Improved accountability for data quality issues
10	Awareness To provide appropriate training on the use and analysis of data		Ongoing	Performance Manager	Under way	Identification of knowledge gaps Increased awareness of data quality issues
11	Contract To develop a standard clause re data quality and implement it to appropriate public-facing contracts tendered		One-off	Performance Manager Head of Law and Governance	This will be implemented as and when new contracts materialise	Improved arrangements for data quality with contractors

	Actions	Target Date	Resource (one-off/ ongoing)	Responsible Officer	Comments	Required Outcomes
12	<p>Partnership Data To identify what arrangements need to be put in place to validate data from third parties</p> <p>To identify any areas of risk</p>		One-off	<p>Performance Manager</p> <p>Relevant Service Unit Managers</p>	This unable us to understand what data we receive from where, and what processes third parties have in place to verify this data before passing it across	<p>Increased awareness of data quality</p> <p>Improved accountability for data quality in partnerships</p>
13	<p>Action Planning To monitor the delivery of this Action Plan on a quarterly basis</p>		Ongoing	<p>Performance Manager</p> <p>Audit Panel</p>	This will form part of the quarterly reporting process	Improved accountability for data quality

Part 3. Performance management and data collection work instruction

Introduction

Collecting data to calculate performance indicators has been a fact of Council life since 1993, but for some reason, we sometimes have problems justifying the results and proving to the Auditors that we have used the right numbers. This work instruction explains how to go about collecting and organising the information you need for a simple and straightforward audit.

Remember, auditors *like* detail, and never tire of asking for more. It is easier for all concerned if you collect the data in good time, and sort out the detail when you have a chance to reflect on it, and check it for consistency. So far as the Auditor is concerned, you have had over a year to calculate the indicator, analyse it, and understand the implications of any exceptions.

We have a policy on data and information management, make sure you understand it, and make sure you are collecting your information in good time. As part of the PI collection process, we will be sampling the data throughout the year, so not only will you be expected to produce finished results for audit, you will also have to show your work in progress.

These notes are mainly intended for the Service Unit Managers who are updating the records, but they will apply to anyone who is responsible for collecting, or managing data.

What can go wrong?

Calculating a performance indicator should be easy; the definition is clear, the method is explicit, and the raw data is as good as only you can make it. Why should we keep having problems? There are three reasons why a performance indicator goes wrong.

You didn't read the definition.

There is no scope for interpretation with PIs, if the PI asks for a calculation based on the 2006 mid-year population estimate, then that is what you must use. If the indicator asks for a number per hundred thousand head of population, then don't put a percentage in. This may seem obvious, but misreading, or misinterpreting the requirements is the most common failure in the PI collection.

It is easy to spot this mistake if the figure in question is the final PI, but it can be hard to spot when it is buried in the calculations

You didn't keep the calculations.

Some of the PIs are quite subtle, and it can be difficult to remember in September the maths you did in March. Write it all down, and keep records of where you got your raw data. Always keep enough information to allow a doubting auditor to repeat your calculations, and make sure they can see how you captured the data in the first place.

One particular point to remember, it is impossible to recreate the data from a live database like Siebel or Anite. If you have to demonstrate the numbers that were in place on a particular day – take a screenshot, run a report, do something that will give the Auditor confirmation that the figures are real. Where the PI is an annual figure to be on the safe side, you should do this every month so the auditor has a way of seeing the figures add-up.

You didn't justify any unexpected answers.

The indicators aren't collected in a vacuum, there will be a history to the service, and there are other Authorities doing the same thing. Once you have calculated the PI, take a critical look at it and decide if it makes sense. If it doesn't, you will have to find-out why. For some reason, an incorrect PI that looks right will be accepted on the nod, whereas a correct PI that looks wrong, will take a lot of justification. If your answer is unexpected, then take the time to understand why, and anticipate any questions that an Auditor may ask.

So, remember your exam technique;

**read the question,
show your workings,
justify your answer.**

Covalent software

We now have the Covalent software package to manage the PI collection. You will use this to collect and manage the performance data, the business plans and the capital programme. If Covalent is not already installed on your PC (look for the blue icon on your desktop and your start menu), then you can get to the installation routine in iConnect; click on Performance / Covalent Performance Management / install. If you need any help installing the software, call Michael Letch on 2723. Once Covalent is installed and running, you can access all the help files by clicking on the blue question mark in the top right-hand corner. Note that your Covalent account does not give unlimited access to all the features; you cannot, for example alter all of the PI data, you can only amend the PIs for which you are responsible. If you find that you do not have permission to do something that needs doing, call 2723 to discuss the matter.

If you are responsible for a PI, you will be able to change some of the properties of that PI, but most of it will be set-up for you. Check that it is set-up the way you expect.

Next, review the data and make sure it is correct and up-to-date. Add any benchmarking data you need, and set the graph and the speedo to sensible settings so you can see what is happening.

Finally, check the limits of the red and amber thresholds. Remember, the red threshold is the level above (or below) which we are failing. Amber is the danger-zone where we are getting close to failing. Numerically it represents a value within 5% of the agreed target.

Data collection.

We have already considered what can go wrong with PIs, so what must you do to get it right?

Read the definition – Covalent has a full set of guidance notes for all of the BVPIs; definitions, calculations and relevant extracts from the newsletters. Make sure you read the lot before starting. Specifically, look to see how the information is to be presented, and what evidence is required.

Plan what you are going to do – What evidence do you need, and how are you going to collect it? By now, everything you need should be available electronically, and you can upload your evidence to the Covalent system in the form of Word documents, spreadsheet, or screenshots.

If you are stuck with paper documents, make copies and put them in a file with some explanation of what they are.

If the evidence is on your computer screen and you need a way of transferring it to another document, remember that you can use the key combination <control>+<Print screen/SysRq> to capture a screenshot that can be pasted into a word document.

Where possible, collect your information monthly and save the sub-totals, it makes it easier to justify the final figure if you can show how it develops over the year. Remember to collect this information at the appropriate time, many computer

systems keep running totals of indicator data and this makes it difficult to recreate data after the monthly report has been run. Also remember to make notes that explain any anomalies or variations.

Make sure you are using the correct data. No doubt you have complete confidence in the data that you produce, but what about figures that come from other areas? If you need figures like population, properties or spend, they come from within the Council, and you will be provided with the correct figure. Where the figures are provided by a partner or outside agency, you should be particularly careful. Often, our partner has to provide data in a different format and they will give a percentage where we are required to give a ratio.

Checking the work.

Covalent makes it easy to keep ahead of the PI data, you can set reminders for data collection, and tolerance limits to warn you when data is not behaving as you would like. Collection intervals are defined as part of the indicator, so there is no reason to miss a collection point, or to be unaware of failing performance. As part of your Covalent identity, you will be assigned the PIs for which you have responsibility. You decide who receives the reminders, and who receives the alerts, so make sure you define these properties when you set-up the indicator's properties. We will be sampling the data throughout the year, to make sure that it is reasonable, timely, and based on robust evidence.

To summarise

Accuracy of data is everyone's responsibility, but the Service Unit Managers and the Senior Managers have a particular responsibility to maintain data to the level required.

The covalent system is now the only place to store performance data.

If you manage an indicator, it is your responsibility to keep it up-to-date, and your responsibility to make sure that any explanatory notes are entered.

Keep evidence to validate the PI figures you report.

Make sure your information, is robust, reasonable, relevant and timely.