



Improving Services Together

Data Quality Strategy



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1 Introduction: Data Quality in Cheshire East

The purpose of this Strategy is to outline how Cheshire East Council will ensure an effective and coordinated approach to data quality. Data quality is an integral part of our operational, performance management, and governance arrangements. Cheshire East Council has a responsibility to ensure that all data held across the organisation is relevant, fit for purpose, reliable, timely, accurate, and supports pertinently the processes and systems for which it is sourced and retained.

Cheshire East has an obligation to ensure that its employees have an understanding of why they collect data, how it is being measured, and what it will be used for.

All data retained electronically must be stored on relevant and secure IT systems, and subject to IT system control via regular data backups, as outlined in the Council's IT Strategy.

2 Objectives of this Strategy

Data is vital in managing and improving our Services, undertaking our day-to-day activities and maintaining accountability. Therefore, we want to maintain the highest standards of data quality, ensuring that we have the right information at the right time at the right cost. In addition, the actions we undertake to ensure data quality will also be considered as part of external audit and inspection and this will be reflected in the organisational assessment undertaken by the Audit Commission as part of Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA).

This Strategy intends to set the guidelines for:

- Putting in place systems, policies and procedures to enable the highest possible data quality, including information that is shared between ourselves and our partners
- Ensuring that all staff, Councillors, partners and any other stakeholders understand their roles and responsibilities.

3 Definition of Data Quality

There are six key characteristics of good data quality that should be used when assessing performance data:

Characteristic

Accuracy	Data should be sufficiently accurate for its intended purposes ('fit for purpose') and should be captured once only, although it may have multiple uses. Accuracy is most likely to be secured if data is captured as close to the point of activity as possible. Appropriate quality checks must be in place to ensure consistent data accuracy, which may be subject to verification via internal and external audit processes.
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.
Reliability	Data should reflect stable and consistent data collection processes across collection points and over time.

Timeliness	Data should be captured as quickly as possible after the event or activity and must be available to support information needs and influence decision-making.
Relevance	Data captured should be relevant to the purposes for which it is used, and will require periodic review to ensure that changing requirements are both considered and acted upon.
Completeness	Data requirements should be clearly specified based on the information needs of the organisation and data collection processes matched to these requirements.

4 The National Indicator Set

The new national indicator set, introduced in April 2008, means that the Government and their inspectorates will now base their activity on constantly updated data. Therefore, it is more important than ever to improve the quality of data at the point of collection and entry, to ensure it is fit for purpose throughout the year.

This also means that it is vital to develop data quality systems and processes in partnership with those organisations that contribute to the National Indicator Set. The arrangements for data quality will therefore also be set out in our Local Area Agreement.

5 Structure of this Strategy

Listed below are seven key aspects of ensuring data quality. This Strategy will address each of these in turn.

- **Awareness** – everyone recognises the need for good data quality and how they can contribute
- **Definitions** – everyone knows which Performance Indicators are produced from the performance information they provide and how those indicators are defined
- **Recording** – information is recorded and entered on an ongoing, timely basis to ensure information can be collated effectively
- **Verification** – there are verification procedures in place as close to the point of input as possible
- **Systems** – are fit for purpose and staff have the expertise to get the best out of them
- **Output** – Performance Indicators are extracted regularly, efficiently and communicated quickly
- **Presentation** – Performance indicators are presented in such a way as to give an easily understood and accurate picture of performance.

5.1 Awareness

Data quality is the responsibility of every member of staff entering, extracting or analysing data from any of the Council's performance information systems and every relevant officer should be aware of his or her responsibilities. The commitment to data quality will be communicated clearly throughout the Council to reinforce this message. It is important, therefore, for key Council Plans and Strategies to include reference to data quality and a clear indication of its importance.

Contravention of the Council's Data Quality Strategy considered to be wilful or deliberate "neglect of duty or behaviour liable to bring the Council into disrepute" may be subject to disciplinary review under the definition outlined in the Cheshire East Disciplinary Policy.

Each performance indicator will be allocated a 'responsible officer' – a named Council officer who has internal responsibility for ensuring consistency in the application of definitions and data collection systems. Where responsibility for an indicator clearly lies with a partner organisation, the responsible officer will liaise with that organisation to ensure that data is available as and when required.

5.2 Definitions

All officers who are involved in entering, calculating, monitoring and reporting performance indicators should have an awareness of how they contribute to managing performance effectively. This, as a minimum, should be knowledge of the performance indicator, what it is used for, what it is measuring and whether there are important technical guidelines that need to be taken into account.

It is important that data is recorded consistently, allowing for comparison over time, and national benchmarking. If local performance indicators or proxy measures are used, clear definitions must be set.

5.3 Recording

There must be adequate controls over the input and recording of performance data to ensure that this is consistently accurate. The aim should be 100% accuracy 100% of the time. Officers will have clear guidelines and procedures for using systems and will be adequately trained to ensure that information is being entered consistently and correctly. Data quality will be a key component of performance management training, available to all key officers and Members.

Information should be recorded on time as required. In particular, performance information should be recorded in-line with the Council's quarterly performance management cycle.

5.4 Verification

Data requirements should be designed along the principle of 'getting it right first time' in order to avoid unnecessary time spent on verifying data. Yet, there may still be the need for verification processes and where this is needed it should exist closest to the point of data input.

Within the National Indicator Set, a significant amount of data and performance information is supplied from external sources. Where possible, we will work alongside our partners to decide what data should be collected and what standards should be applied.

When entering into contracts with service providers it is essential that, wherever relevant, there is a requirement to provide timely and accurate performance information, and that we are clear with the contractor about their responsibilities for data quality.

5.5 Systems

Arrangements for collecting and recording data, and reporting it as performance information, will be integrated as far as possible into the wider business planning and performance management processes. Therefore, responsibility for maintaining a robust control environment for information systems lies centrally and will be developed as part of the Council's performance management and information management arrangements.

5.6 Output

Best use can be made of performance data if it is produced and communicated on a

timetable that allows for management action.

Performance indicators, particularly those that can be measured in-year, will be reported and monitored through the quarterly performance monitoring and reporting process. This process also links the performance against indicators to the priorities set out in the Council's Corporate Plan and the actions set out in Service Plans.

It is important that performance information is subject to scrutiny and challenge, where appropriate, before being passed up the line for management action. This can be undertaken in a number of ways, including performance review meetings, scrutiny reviews and other officer and Member performance groups.

5.7 Presentation

Presenting information in an appropriate manner leads to better, more informed decision-making and, ultimately, improved performance.

When information is presented it should be in a clear, concise format that highlights key information for Members and officers to view. Where appropriate, background evidence may be necessary if called upon.

Importantly, consideration should be given to the audience, whether internal or external, as data can often be used in a variety of ways to suit a variety of purposes. Therefore, what is suitable for one set of stakeholders may not be understood or be useful for others.

It is also important to provide comparative figures for prior periods and/or comparable organisations or groups.

6 Roles and Responsibilities

6.1 Officers

If organisations are to achieve consistently high standards of data quality to underpin their performance information, clear leadership from the top of the organisation is essential, together with a comprehensive management and accountability framework.

In addition, responsibility for data quality will be reflected in job descriptions, where appropriate, as well as the appraisal process.

Corporate Management Team is responsible for the strategic approach for data quality, as set out in key Council documentation, for example the Corporate Plan.

Heads of Service have overall ownership and responsibility for data quality within their service areas and will ensure that:

- Managerial reviews of data quality are undertaken
- Targets and achievements are communicated appropriately
- Commitment to data quality is stated clearly in job descriptions for all relevant roles
- Staff recognise data quality responsibilities as integral to their role

Team Managers have day to day responsibility for ensuring data quality within their service delivery area, and that:

- New members of staff receive appropriate training and instruction to ensure an awareness of how and why data is collected
- Staff have access to this Strategy and other relevant Policies and procedures
- Indicator calculations are correct, timely, evidenced and complete, and reviewed regularly for relevance

Planning & Performance Team has responsibility for:

- Reviewing this Strategy and Action Plan
- Submitting any indicator information to the Audit Commission that is not held on the hub or by partners
- Reviewing and retaining the corporately held list of all indicator responsible officers
- Advising Directorates and Services of new and amended performance indicators so that data quality processes can be set up/amended
- Checking and following-up data returns and ensure that appropriate explanations are provided for performance exceptions
- Maintaining links to national performance indicator guidance and disseminate information as appropriate
- Developing the performance management framework and systems to incorporate data quality functionality
- Coordinating cross-directorate performance peers group
- Working with colleagues to ensure that data is used to establish or maintain timely, accurate and relevant performance measures with appropriate approaches to target setting.

Responsible Officers will be identified to take ownership of data collecting and reporting of specific national and local indicators. It is important that this role is seen as a core part of their job and not an 'add on'. Each responsible officer should ensure that:

- The procedures needed to produce the information to the required standard are documented
- They have sufficient ability to allocate resources, programmes and people to help achieve the objectives
- Where appropriate, they work with the corporate performance management team to ensure that systems are fit for purpose
- Quarterly reports will be produced on each indicator.

Technical Officers will be identified to support the process of data collecting and reporting of specific national and local indicators. It is important that each technical officer is able to support – and deputise in the absence of the responsible officer – in producing indicator information. Each technical officer should ensure that:

- They have detailed knowledge of the indicator definition and the systems/processes which are used to produce this indicator
- They are responsible for producing the performance information/indicator in a timely way
- They can answer detailed questions regarding the calculation of the indicator, interrogation of related systems, and data quality
- They keep appropriate records of systems and procedures and any quality issues.

All staff inputting or extracting data have responsibility for:

- Understanding how – and why – data is being collected, and how it will be used
- Getting it right first time
- Their own knowledge of relevant definitions and available guidance
- Up-to-date record keeping
- Providing updated information to the performance management team in line with the performance management timetable and reporting against any specific action plans in under-performing areas.

6.2 Councillors

The Portfolio holder for Performance and Capacity has overall Member responsibility for

data quality.

Working together with officers, Members will have responsibility for quarterly performance reports.

Members have an important scrutiny role in assessing the performance of the authority and, therefore, the quality of this data should be subject to Member-driven review as part of this role. This will help to ensure further consistency and accountability.

6.3 Partners

Important information is passed between the Council, partner organisations and other external agencies. Where performance information is provided directly to the Council by external agencies our intention is to work together, wherever possible, to provide assurance. It is the responsibility of each Service within the Council for making partner organisations aware of our policy objectives and expectations. Any doubts about performance data quality should be addressed.

Responsibility for data verification lies within the Service receiving or sending information to and from our partners.

It is also important in developing cross-organisational agreements, frameworks, plans and strategies that consideration is given to performance data and the accuracy of it (for example our Local Area Agreement). The key aspects of data quality, as described in section 3, should be applied

7 Training and development

Key contacts for submitting performance information to the Council's performance management team will be trained, as appropriate, to ensure that appropriate information is submitted in a timely and efficient manner. This may also apply to partners and any training should cover new requirements as and when they arise.

Service and Team Managers should develop their own competency in managing performance information and to understand how the use of indicators can help them in their jobs.

8 Data Quality Action Plan

Implementation of the Data Quality Strategy is through the actions listed in the Action Plan.

This Data Quality Strategy will be reviewed in 12 months.