



**ASHFORD**  
BOROUGH COUNCIL

## **Data Quality Policy**

# 1 Contents

1	Contents .....	2
2	What is Data Quality and why is it Important? .....	3
3	Objectives of the Policy .....	4
4	Scope of the Data Quality Policy .....	5
5	Principles of the Data Quality Policy .....	6
6	Standards and Procedures .....	8
7	Risk Assessment .....	9
8	Roles and Responsibilities.....	10
9	Contracts .....	12
10	Partners .....	13
11	Output and Reporting .....	14
12	Monitoring and Review .....	15

## **2 What is Data Quality and why is it Important?**

The quality of our data is crucial for assessments of council effectiveness. Policies and strategies for ensuring data quality as well as governance and leadership for ensuring accurate and reliable data are essential. The higher the number of amendments and reservations that we receive regarding our data following external inspection / scrutiny, the lower the confidence that inspectors, government and interested parties will have in the information we provide. This results in increased and more detailed inspection and the likelihood of lower performance scores

Inspection bodies such as the Audit Commission require assurance that performance information is accurate. This is increasing the emphasis on data quality and the external audit approach of checking calculation and systems reports is developing into the more challenging scrutiny of systems controls. This is likely to entail an examination of the systems and processes for the collection of data and the use of information.

Data will be of high quality if it is:

- Accurate.
- Comprehensive (in terms of all data being captured).
- Valid (in an agreed format which conforms to recognised council and national standards).
- Available when needed.
- Stored securely and confidentially where applicable.

### **3 Objectives of the Policy**

The Council recognises the importance of data quality and the need for reliable, accurate and timely information with which to manage services, inform users and account for our performance. We are committed to ensuring that we maintain the highest standards of data quality. In order to achieve this Ashford Borough Council will:

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

The purpose of the data quality reporting process is to ensure that the Council supports a learning culture. All members of staff will be encouraged to report any data quality issues they believe exist.

## **4 Scope of the Data Quality Policy**

All Council systems and processes that produce information are in the scope of this Policy in order to ensure that accurate and dependable information is available for all Council functions. The Council believes that continued initiatives in relation to data quality should be proportionate to risk.

## 5 Principles of the Data Quality Policy

There are a number of overarching principles that underpin good data quality. These are:

- Awareness: everyone recognises the need for good data quality and how they can contribute.
- Usage: everyone knows what happens with the data they produce and how it is used.
- Officers with responsibility for data should document the procedures that are required to produce the data and ensure the procedures are reviewed and updated on a regular basis.
- Officers with responsibility should work closely with IT in procuring the systems and the general management of the systems to ensure a robust control environment.
- Officers should have clear guidelines and procedures for using systems and be adequately trained to ensure that information is being entered consistently and correctly.
- Data should be entered on an ongoing basis, not saved up to be entered in a block at the end of a period. This reduces the error rate and the need for complex verification procedures.
- Controls should also be in place to avoid double-counting. These should be designed according to the nature of the system, in particular where more than one person inputs data. A likely control will be an absolutely clear division of responsibility setting out who is responsible for what data entry.
- Data requirements should be designed along the principle of 'getting it right first time' in order to avoid waste in the form of time and money spent on cleansing data, interfacing between different information systems, matching and consolidating data from multiple databases and maintaining outdated systems.
- Where it is needed, a verification procedure should exist close to the point of data input. The frequency of verification checks will need to be aligned with the frequency of data reporting.
- Officers should ensure that they have a deputy to produce this information in their absence.

In addition to the above there are some principles that, although originally developed in relation to performance indicators, can also be applied to other sources of data.

- Definitions. For performance indicators (PI's) it is important that every detail of the definition is applied. This ensures that data is recorded

- consistently, allowing for comparison over time, and national benchmarking.
- Where we are setting local PIs, we need to ensure that we have established a clear definition and that there are systems available to collect and report the data in an agreed format.
  - Every PI should have a named officer who is responsible for collecting and reporting the information. This should include responsibility for the systems used to collect and store the data. This ensures that there is consistency in the application of definitions and use of systems for providing the data.
  - Each named officer should be kept up-to-date of any changes in definition that may occur from time to time.
  - Performance indicators should be extracted regularly and efficiently and communicated quickly.
  - Any output produced should have an auditable trail i.e. evidence to support the data output that an Auditor would be happy with.
  - Annual performance indicators should be presented in such a way as to give an easily understood and accurate picture of our performance to external inspectorates and the public.

## 6 Standards and Procedures

Ashford Borough Council is committed to collecting and processing data according to national and locally defined standards. Standards and procedures are necessary to ensure that:

- Data collection is consistent throughout the organisation and in accordance with national definitions as laid down in the statutory guidance where appropriate.
- Information can be meaningfully compared / collated both across the organisation and nationally.

Where there is no national standard to guide procedures for data collection, processing or reporting, the Council will generate its own local standards and procedures. This will be done as and when the requirement arises. Where problems are identified corrective action should be taken. Where at all possible, data must be corrected at source. Heads of Service retain responsibility for data quality within their service areas.

At all times, notwithstanding the content of this Data Quality Policy, due regard must be given to the Council's Data Protection policy and all of its provisions.

## 7 Risk Assessment

Data quality needs to be embedded in the Council's Strategic Risk Register and the Service Risk Registers. Areas that can be classified as 'high risk' include:

- Where there is a high volume of data transactions;
- Technically complex performance information definition / guidance;
- Problems identified in previous years;
- Inexperienced staff involved in data processing / performance information production;
- A system being used to produce new performance information;
- Known gaps in the control environment.

## 8 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 his or her responsibilities for quality of data.

- The Deputy Chief Executive has senior responsibility for data quality with regards to performance information and is the Officer Data Champion (with delegated authority from the Chief Executive). The Deputy Chief Executive will report to Management Team on data quality and any data quality issues that arise.
- Management Team (and all managers) are responsible for scrutinizing the data they receive. Should the quality of data being provided appear to be suspect the accuracy of the data must be questioned and, if necessary, the arrangements for collection and reporting of the data should be reviewed.
- The performance indicator Service System Administrators will be the Data Quality co-ordinators with responsibilities for promoting the importance of data quality throughout the organisation. In addition they will:
  - Advise relevant Heads of Service of new and amended performance indicators so that data quality processes can be set up / amended.
  - Check and chase up data returns and ensure that appropriate explanations are provided for performance exceptions.
  - Maintain links to national performance indicator guidance so that it is readily available to data collectors, authorisers and auditors.
  - Develop and manage supporting systems to incorporate data quality processes at the point of collection.
- Corporate Governance has the responsibility for ensuring that accurate and complete records are maintained and that performance and appraisal processes are in place to maintain and enhance data and information quality for the Council.
- Heads of Service are responsible for ensuring that adequate systems for holding an acceptable standard of information are developed and maintained and that the information they provide is accurate, timely and meets the relevant guidance and or standards. As part of this the necessary training must be provided to the staff that operate the systems.
- Heads of Service are responsible for ensuring the implementation of corporate policy and procedures and the development of service based policies and procedures for data collection and reporting.
- It is the responsibility of all staff who input, store, retrieve or otherwise manage data to ensure that it is of the highest quality.
- Everyone in the organisation will be responsible for complying with this Data Quality Policy.

- All staff are responsible for following policies and procedures and all Heads of Service's for ensuring that this is the case in their respective service teams.

Commitment to data quality will be clearly stated in job descriptions for all relevant roles within the Council, ensuring that directors, managers, administrative staff and others recognise their responsibilities as an integral part of their role and profession. Further reinforcing the Councils commitment to data quality the Council will introduced to its standard terms and conditions of service a paragraph referring to data quality and integrity.

## **9 Contracts**

Ashford Borough Council recognises that data quality is an important part of any contract that is outsourced to a third party to manage. This is of particular importance to public-facing service contracts where large amounts of performance data are requested by the Council from which to judge a contractor's performance.

We will ensure that where data collection and data quality are instrumental to the delivery of the service all appropriate contracts will have a standard clause inserted into the contract which defines data quality and how it should be embedded into the contractor's processes. This clause will lay out our requirement for the contractor to provide timely and accurate information and that responsibilities for data quality and checking information are clearly set out.

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

## **10 Partners**

Some important information is provided by partner organisations and other external agencies e.g. Kent Police and Kent County Council. It is the intention to work constructively with these organisations to provide assurance of the data quality. Any doubts about data quality should be addressed with the organisation. Responsibility for data verification lies within the division receiving the information.

## 11 Output and Reporting

Data required by external government departments and inspection bodies normally has a timetable for publication. All data should be available in time for management assessment and action prior to publication. It is important that the data is subject to scrutiny and challenge before final reporting.

Performance updates are reported to Management Team as part of the Council's quarterly service performance management meetings prior to being reported to the Executive.

Reporting accurate information leads to good decision-making and improved performance. For many indicators that performance will only be recognised publicly if it can be substantiated by external bodies.

Ashford Borough Council receives external validation through an audit process. During these audits the officer responsible for data collection should 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 data. This is important to ensure that audit work proceeds smoothly. The audit will require working papers to confirm the definition has been followed, the calculations are correct and that the data is supported by a full audit trail. A comprehensive process is already in place for the collection, verification and reporting of the statutory national performance indicators (Best Value Performance Indicators).

## 12 Monitoring and Review

This Policy and the Council's overall approach to data quality will be monitored by Management Team and the Deputy Chief Executive. The Council's internal and external auditors will provide internal assurance controls for the statutory Best Value Performance indicators and other data related information.

The monitoring and review process will involve:

- Meetings with Heads of Service and System Administrators to ensure that the correct systems and procedures are in place.
- Quarterly monitoring and review of BVPI's by Management Team
- 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 / Inspection programme.

The Council recognises the need to achieve a balance between the resources required to set and meet data quality standards and the relative benefits that this produces. We will take this into account in developing our approach to monitoring and review. It will be necessary to focus resources on data that the council regards as critical to its overall business objectives. Equally, the right balance must be achieved and justified between the dimensions of data quality, for example, a balance needs to be struck between accuracy and timeliness.