

Government and Public Sector

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Darlington Borough Council Draft Data Quality Report

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Dear Lorraine

Data Quality Reviews

We are pleased to present the summary results of our assessment of the Authority's data quality arrangements, which has been completed in accordance with the methodology and guidance issued by the Audit Commission. We met with David Goodchild and Dawn Barron throughout the review to discuss the results and issues arising. Please contact Simon Clegg on 0191 269 4132 if there are matters that you would like to discuss further.

Yours faithfully

PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP

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Code of Audit Practice and Statement of Responsibilities of Auditors and of Audited Bodies

In March 2005 the Audit Commission issued a revised version of the ‘Statement of responsibilities of auditors and of audited bodies’. It is available from the Chief Executive of each audited body. The purpose of the statement is to assist auditors and audited bodies by explaining where the responsibilities of auditors begin and end, and what is to be expected of the audited body in certain areas. Our reports and management letters are prepared in the context of this Statement.

Reports and letters prepared by appointed auditors and addressed to members or officers are prepared for the sole use of the audited body, and no responsibility is taken by auditors to any Member or officer in their individual capacity, or to any third party.

Introduction and summary

Introduction

The Audit Commission has developed a three stage approach to the review of data quality comprising.

Stage 1: Management Arrangements

A review to determine whether proper corporate management arrangements for data quality are in place and whether these are being applied in practice. The findings contribute to the auditor's conclusion under the Code of Audit Practice on the Council's arrangements to secure value for money (the VfM conclusion).

Stage 2: Analytical Review

An analytical review of 2007/08 Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPI) and non-BVPI data and selection of a sample of individual performance indicators (PIs) for testing, in Stage 3, based on a risk assessment.

Stage 3: Data Quality spot checks

In-depth review of a sample of 2007/08 PIs, all of which come from a list of specified BVPIs and non-BVPIs used in Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA), to determine whether arrangements to secure data quality are delivering accurate, timely and accessible information in practice.

All three stages of the review have been carried out at Darlington Borough Council.

Summary

We have completed an assessment of the Council's data quality arrangements in accordance with the methodology and guidance prescribed by the Audit Commission in "Local government data quality refresh 2007/08: Stages 1, 2 and 3".

This report sets out the results of our assessments.

Summary Findings

Stage 1 - Management arrangements

The assessment of the management arrangements in place for data quality is used to:

- Direct the detailed work that we undertake on data quality spot checks (see below); and
- Inform our Use of Resources Conclusion in respect of performance information (as reported in our 2007/08 audit report).

The work that we have undertaken is also reported to the Audit Commission to inform their CPA assessment.

Overall the council are 'performing well' for Management Arrangements over Data Quality.

Strengths:

- A formal strategy for data quality has been implemented to set out key policies, procedures and responsibilities.
- The framework in place for monitoring data quality and reporting to those charged with governance is now fully embedded.
- Within individual departments, data is subject to internal verification through self audits and review.
- Staff have clearly defined roles and responsibilities in relation to data quality which are linked through to service delivery plan objectives.
- The Council has arrangements that are focused on ensuring performance information is used as a tool to improve the delivery of services.

Weaknesses:

- A formalised data quality training programme should be developed and implemented for all relevant staff.
- Arrangements should be put in place with partners who supply third party information to the Council to ensure they are aware of their responsibility to provide accurate and complete data.
- Data sharing protocols should be implemented.

While the above areas have been highlighted as weaknesses in this report, it is acknowledged that the Council have considered each of these within the Data Quality Strategy. As such, it is anticipated that, through the implementation of the Strategy, these areas will be addressed in due course.

Stage 2 - Analytical Review

In the analytical review work performed at Stage 2 we identified that PI values had either changed in line with expectations or, where they had not, the movements could be substantiated by evidence provided by officers.

Stage 3 - Data Quality spot checks

Our review and spot checks of 6 PIs found the following:

BV165 - Percentage of pedestrian crossings with facilities for disabled people - this was found to be fairly stated and no amendment to the submitted figure was required.

BV199 a, b, and c – Local Street and Environment Cleanliness - this was found to be fairly stated and no amendment to the submitted figure was required.

BV78a - Average time for processing new claims - this was found to be fairly stated and no amendment to the submitted figure was required.

BV78a - Average time for processing notification of changes in circumstances - this was found to be fairly stated and no amendment to the submitted figure was required.

BV 214 - Repeat Homelessness – this was found to be fairly stated and no amendment to the submitted figure was required.

HIP HSSA - Percentage of total private sector homes vacant for more than six months - this was found to be fairly stated and no amendment to the submitted figure was required.

Acknowledgements

We would like to take this opportunity to thank officers and staff, particularly David Goodchild and Neale Kipling, for their assistance during the course of our work on data quality at the Council.

Summary of key findings and areas for improvement

Governance and leadership

Has the body put in place arrangements at a senior level to secure the quality of data used to manage and report on performance?

Overview

- Performance Indicators are included in the BVPP/Corporate Plan. The BVPP demonstrates the Council's commitment to performance management. It sets out clearly targets and actual performance for each of the PIs.
- The Authority continues to improve the use and functionality of Performance Plus, with additional reports and outputs used to provide relevant and user-friendly data for those charged with governance.
- A formal strategy for data quality has now been implemented which sets out key policies, procedures and responsibilities. The strategy also indicates key action points that the Council intends to achieve going forward with appropriate timescales attached to each.
- A number of self audits have been performed in the departments; including recalculations and a review of source data. This has ensured a clear audit trail and confidence over the quality of the data in the PI calculation.
- The combined finance and performance report is now embedded within the organisation and is used effectively by Cabinet and Scrutiny committee (or "scrutiny committees") to review performance, progress and identify areas which need additional development.

Areas for Improvement and Recommendations

- The Council should ensure that the performance management leads take on a wider data quality monitoring role (beyond simply focusing on performance indicators). This should have a proportionate focus at both corporate level and departmental level. We acknowledge that this has been considered as part of the Data Quality Strategy and will be implemented during 2008/09.

Policies and procedures

Has the organisation defined its expectations and requirements in relation to data quality?

Overview

- A comprehensive data quality policy is now in place, together with an action plan for further progress in the future.
- The Departmental Performance Management Framework (PMF) Practitioners Group meets regularly to discuss data quality issues and share good practice within their departments which others can adopt.
- Staff have access to guidance on the intranet as well as through internal resources. There are no formalised procedures for updating staff on changes to guidance as this tends to be done via e-mail and team meetings.
- Data quality champion roles are assigned within each department to provide a clear lead on data quality. The champions have a clear commitment and responsibility to the quality of data and performance information in their area.
- Service plan maps are used effectively to link corporate, departmental and service area objectives. The service plans include objectives in relation to PIs but not specifically data quality.

Areas for Improvement and Recommendations

- The Authority should review the data quality strategy annually to ensure it remains relevant to their data quality and performance objectives. The strategy should also be developed to reflect recent concerns and issues that have been raised nationally which may be relevant. The Council have begun to demonstrate this with an extensive information governance input into the Strategy for the current year.
- Non compliance with the policy should be monitored and reported to senior management; and
- Progress against the action plan should be monitored and actions updated as timescales are met or extended.

Systems and processes

Are there effective systems and processes in place to secure the quality of data?

Overview

- The Council works to the 'right first time' principle and arrangements for recording and reporting data are integrated into the Council's business management processes.
- The Council, and in particular the performance leads, consult with staff when developing or implementing new information systems; this demonstrates the Council's commitment to ensuring staff are comfortable and competent with new information systems.
- In the past the Council has consulted with partners and has been prepared to implement the same systems in order to facilitate the progress of the partnership, a clear example of this is with the newly established partnership with Stockton Borough Council.
- The Council is continually improving Performance Plus functionality and the guidance provided to the users and readers of Performance Plus to ensure the most effective output is achieved.
- The Council has established procedures to check and review the information that is being input into Performance Plus.

Areas for Improvement and Recommendations

- Third party data should be validated to ensure it is complete and accurate, whilst taking account of the benefit gained and the level of risk associated with not doing it.
- Examples of internal and external data sharing are evident within the Council although no formal protocols have been developed. The Council recognises the need to have such protocols although they acknowledge a balance is required between onerous protocols and improving data quality.

People and skills

Does the organisation have the resources in place to secure data quality?

Overview

- Responsibilities for specific PIs and the importance of data quality are recorded in individuals' Personal Development Reviews (PDRs). Targets and objectives are set for data quality and these are reviewed six monthly.
- The responsibilities of the individuals involved in collating performance information are reinforced by the inclusion of the Accountable Officers' listing within the Corporate Plan.
- Training is provided informally when identified as a requirement by individuals and senior staff during their PDRs. (However, there is no formalised training programme in relation to data quality).
- There is a roles and responsibilities document in place which details individuals' responsibility in relation to the wider area of Performance Management. Staff appear to be clear on the responsibilities assigned to them.

Areas for Improvement

- An assessment of data quality skills in place and potential gaps should be carried out by the Authority to identify specific training needs.
- A formalised data quality training programme should be developed and implemented for all relevant staff. This training programme should concentrate on areas of weakness identified in the skills gap assessment.
- The departmental data quality champions could be utilised further to identify potential data quality issues and see that they are addressed through front-line staff training or briefings.

Data use

Are there effective arrangements and controls in place for the use of data by the organisation?

Overview

- Various reports including: combined reports, monthly performance reports and monthly budget monitoring reports, are used on a day to day basis by management to improve performance in relation to both data quality and wider service objectives.
- All staff are kept informed of progress in relation to data quality and performance through a number of different media, including the intranet and quarterly meetings. This approach ensures the importance of data quality is fed through the whole organisation.
- The Cabinet and senior management use the performance information effectively to identify possible areas to which funding should be allocated.

Areas for Improvement

- Reported data should be rigorously verified but the extent of verification should be based on the level of risk associated with the data being misstated, the likelihood and impact of data errors and the accuracy needed in the reported performance.
- A formal, documented, process for checking externally reported data/performance indicators, both departmentally and corporately, should be put in place to assure the quality of the data.

Analytical Review - Stage 2

An analytical review of the following BVPIs and non-BVPIs was carried out. The findings from this review are shown below with the result of our individual spot checks being detailed in the Summary of Results.

2007/08 Performance Indicator	Assessment	Comment
BVPI165 - Percentage of pedestrian crossings with facilities for the disabled. 2007/08 5.8% (2006/07 7.8%)	Variance from 2006/07 attributable to real performance decline.	The Council had 4 crossings which passed in 2006/07. A decision was taken by the Council that only the crossings that had previously passed would be surveyed to determine if they still met the criteria. During the survey the Council found that one of the crossings no longer passed the criteria as the upstand was no longer within the tolerable threshold. This has reduced the PI as only 3 crossings are compliant with all the set criteria.
Cost per library visit 2007/08 £3.58 (2006/07 £2.88)	Variance from 2006/07 attributable to real performance decline.	The Council has kept costs in line with the prior year but the number of visits has fallen by almost 75,000. The fall in visits is attributable to restricted access to the library due to the floods in the prior year and changes to the local bus routes. This has impacted the PI and costs per library visit have increased.
BVPI82a - Percentage of/tonnage of household waste recycled. i – 2007/08 17.96% (2006/07 16.02) ii – 2007/08 8,869.71 (2006/07 8,036)	Variance from 2006/07 attributable to real performance improvement.	The Council has invested in recycling awareness programmes to raise the profile of recycling and advertise the importance of it. In addition to this there have been specific community school projects to encourage youngsters to become involved. This has impacted the PI and recycling and composting of household waste has increased.
BVPI82b - Percentage of/tonnage of household waste composted. i – 2007/08 7.05% (2006/07 6.69%) ii – 2007/08 3,479.52 (2006/07 3,354.40)	Variance from 2006/07 attributable to real performance improvement.	
BV214 - Repeat Homelessness 2007/08 0 (2006/07 0)	No variance from 2006/07.	The Council has maintained its excellent record with regard to this PI.

2007/08 Performance Indicator	Assessment	Comment
HIP HSSA - Percentage of total private sector homes vacant for more than six months 2007/08 1.01% (2006/07 1.11%)	Variance from 2006/07 attributable to real performance improvement.	The Council have maintained their excellent record with regard to this PI.
BVPI212 - Average re-let times for local authority dwellings (days). 2006/07 28.62 (2006/07 26.67)	Variance from 2006/07 is attributable to circumstances specific to the year.	<p>During the year, a capital refurbishment programme was carried out which meant that tenants needed to be decanted into temporary accommodation whilst the work was being carried out.</p> <p>This has increased the average re-let time for local authority dwellings.</p>
BV199 - Local Street and Environmental Cleanliness a - Litter and Detritus 2007/08 11 (2006/07 10.8) b - Graffiti 2007/08 6 (2006/07 4) c - Fly-posting 2007/08 0 (2006/07 0)	a – no variance from 2006/07. b - variance from 2006/07 is attributable to real performance decline. c – no variance from 2006/07.	<p>In the year the incidence and reporting of graffiti has increased and appears to be becoming more of a problem than litter.</p> <p>The graffiti problem is being addressed by the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership and more resources are being assigned to this area.</p>

Summary of Results

Performance Indicator	Assessment	Comments
BV165 Percentage of pedestrian crossings with facilities for the disabled.	Fairly stated	<p>Testing was performed on 10 crossings. The results showed that one crossing classified as a 'fail' by the Authority passed when surveyed by PwC and one crossing classified as a 'pass' by the Authority failed the criteria when surveyed by PwC.</p> <p>The crossing that originally passed the Council's survey failed due to deterioration of the upstands between the dates on which the two surveys were carried out.</p> <p>The crossing that was classed as a fail had been incorrectly classified. On review of the working paper file it was determined that this was an isolated error.</p> <p>The two errors noted have no net impact on the indicator and therefore no amendment to the submitted figure was required.</p>
BV214 - Repeat Homelessness	Fairly stated	<p>Testing was carried out to ensure that the repeat homelessness applications were included in this calculation and that no repeat homelessness applications had been incorrectly excluded.</p> <p>No issues were noted with this testing.</p>

Performance Indicator	Assessment	Comments
HIP HSSA - Percentage of total private sector homes vacant for more than six months	Fairly stated	<p>Testing was carried out by reviewing the Council Tax system for properties which were exempt from Council Tax for more than 6 months.</p> <p>No issues were noted in the testing.</p>
BV199 - Local Street and Environmental Cleanliness a - Litter and Detritus b - graffiti 2007/08 c - Fly-posting	Fairly stated	<p>Testing was carried out to ensure that the surveys had been set up correctly, and were carried out in the timescales detailed in the guidance. A number of surveys were then agreed to the database to ensure that these had been recorded correctly.</p> <p>No issues were noted with this testing.</p>
BV78a - Average Time for Processing New Claims	Fairly Stated	<p>In line with the new guidance provided by the Audit Commission to integrate the data quality and certification of housing and council tax benefits return, 40 claims across all 4 benefit types were selected for testing.</p> <p>The testing was performed to check that;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • new claims had been correctly classified by the authority in line with the definition of a new claim • the receipt date of the claim had been correctly recorded <p>Testing involved a review of the claim on the Iworld database to ensure it was a new claim and a review of application forms/information to ensure the correct receipt date had been recorded.</p> <p>No issues were identified during testing.</p>

Performance Indicator	Assessment	Comments
BV78b - Speed of processing: change in circumstances for housing and council tax benefit	Fairly Stated	<p>In line with the new guidance provided by the Audit Commission to integrate the data quality and certification of housing and council tax benefits return, 40 claims across all 4 benefit types were selected for testing.</p> <p>The testing was performed to check that;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • change of circumstances claims have been correctly classified by the authority in line with the definition of a change in circumstances claim • the receipt date of the claim had been correctly recorded <p>Testing involved a review of the claim on the I-world database to ensure it was a new claim and a review of application forms/information to ensure the correct receipt date had been recorded.</p> <p>One error was found in case 3008107 where the incorrect receipt date had been recorded. The Council were notified of the change in circumstance during an interview but the interview date was not used as the receipt date. This was an isolated error found in testing and had no impact on the reported PI figure.</p>

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