

Data Quality Strategy

Eastbourne Borough Council

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1. Introduction

1.1 Context

1.1.1 Nine out of ten councils say they think good quality information is a top priority. However, less than 5 per cent of councils have excellent quality data and 65 per cent face problems sharing data externally¹.

1.1.2 Producing data that is fit for purpose should not be an end in itself, but an integral part of Eastbourne Borough Council's operational, performance management and governance arrangements. By putting data quality at the heart of performance management systems we are most likely to be actively managing data in all aspects of our day to day business, in a way that is proportionate to the cost of collection, and turning the data into reliable information for decision making.

1.2 Purpose

1.2.1 The purpose of this strategy is to outline the corporate approach to improving the quality of data across the Council. This ensures that the authority provides consistent, high-quality, timely and comprehensive information.

1.2.2 Consistent, high quality, timely and comprehensive information is vital to support good decision-making and improved service outcomes. A high standard of data is essential for the authority to achieve its four priority themes. The quality of our data is crucial for assessing the effectiveness of Eastbourne Borough Council and to support good decision

¹ http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/localgov/nationalstudies/istheresomething/Pages/Default_copy.aspx

making and ultimately the delivery of improved outcomes in line with the DRIVE programme.

1.2.3 The Strategic Development team uses the Covalent performance management database to collate departmental performance data and present it in a form that is useful to managers, staff, members and the public. It also has features that aid the timely collection of data. However it is vital that the Council adopts a rigorous and consistent approach to the collection of data and the calculation of performance data to input onto the system and other systems within the council.

1.2.4 To do this a standardised approach to data quality is needed, with a clear understanding of what is expected and who will deliver it. This strategy outlines the approach needed to ensure all provide the highest possible standard of data.

2. Scope

2.1 The strategy applies to all employees and contractors working for, or supplying services to, the Council.

2.2 The policy does not cover financial data. Financial data is collected according to professional accounting rules and subjected to strong internal controls and a formal audit regime. The quality of nonfinancial data can be more variable because internal controls for their recording and preparation can be less well developed.

3. What is meant by Data Quality?

3.1. Data quality in this context is based on the Audit Commission’s six dimensions of good quality data²:

| | |
|---------------------------|--|
| <p>Accuracy</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Captured once. ▪ Captured as close to point of activity as possible. ▪ Balanced with the importance, intended uses for the data; and the costs and efforts of collection. |
| <p>Validity</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Recorded and used in compliance with relevant requirements. ▪ Where proxy data are used bodies must consider how well these data satisfy the intended purposes. |
| <p>Reliability</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Data should reflect stable and consistent data collection processes. |
| <p>Timeliness</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Data should be captured as quickly as possible after the event or activity. ▪ Data must be available quickly and frequently enough |

² http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/localgov/nationalstudies/istheresomething/Pages/Default_copy.aspx

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| | to support information needs. |
| Relevance | <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Data captured should be relevant to the purposes for which they are used. |
| Completeness | <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Data requirements should be clearly specified based in the information needs of the body. |

4. Importance of Data Quality in Eastbourne Borough Council

4.1 Publicly accountable and sound decision making needs to be based on solid evidence. Decisions taken on the basis of poor quality data can result in resources being directed to areas or activities where the requirement is not as critical as the data would suggest, poor value for money and reduced outcomes for our communities.

4.2 Data quality is therefore essential for:

- Customer care – delivering a relevant and responsive service to the customer.
- Keeping everybody connected with the council informed – through central data collection mechanisms.
- Efficient administration and compliance with the law.
- Operational management and strategic planning to provide appropriate allocation of resources and future service delivery.
- Performance management – requiring information that will enable the identification and resolution of any shortfalls against standards and targets.

5. Principles of the Data Quality Strategy

5.1. Good quality data is achieved by 7 critical success factors, each of which is dependent on its predecessor. Sequentially, these are:

- Awareness
- Definitions
- Input
- Verification
- Systems
- Output
- Presentation

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

5.2.1. Data quality is the responsibility of every member of the council and partner organisations entering, extracting or analysing data from any of the council's information systems. Each person should be aware of his or her responsibilities with regard to data quality. The commitment to data quality needs to be communicated clearly throughout the organisation. Partners are responsible for this communication within their own organisations.

5.2.2. The organisation's performance officers will have overall responsibility for data quality on the performance system (Covalent) but

this does not exempt others from their responsibility to ensure that their data is accurate and up-to-date.

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

5.3.1 Statutory performance indicators (when applicable) have nationally set definitions. 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.

5.3.2 When we are setting local performance indicators, 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.

5.3.3 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.

5.3.4 Every performance indicator should have a named officer who is responsible for collecting and reporting the information. This ensures that there is consistency in the application of definitions and use of systems for providing the data. Each named officer will be kept up-to-date by the Strategic Development team of any changes in definition that may occur from time to time.

5.4. **Input:** there are controls over input, especially that information is input on an ongoing basis rather than stored up to input later.

5.4.1. To successfully manage the performance of the organisation data needs to be accurate. Related to consistency, data should if possible be 100% accurate every time it is added to the system. Where data provided

has not been formally signed off it needs to be highlighted that it is provisional to ensure that all users are aware of this.

5.4.2 It is important that officers have clear guidelines and procedures for using systems and are adequately trained to ensure that information is being entered consistently and correctly.

5.4.3 It is important that 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.

5.4.4 Controls should 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.

5.4.5 The systems must also record all relevant information (for example data sources).

5.4.6. Where possible data should be submitted at the lowest spatial level possible.

5.4.7. Inputters will be notified when their data is needed through Covalent's email alert function. This will help to keep the organisation's reporting timely and will strengthen data quality by using standard templates.

5.5. **Verification:** there are verification procedures in place as close to the point of input as possible.

5.5.1. 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 cleaning data and identifying and correcting errors later on.

5.5.2 Nevertheless, in complex systems, even where there are strong controls over input, errors can creep in. 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.

5.5.3. Particular attention needs to be paid to data provided by sources outside of Eastbourne Borough Council. We need to ensure they operate to as high a data quality standard as ourselves. Third parties and partner organisations should either have their own data quality strategies / assurance in place or adhere to the set of standards set out in this document.

5.6. **Systems:** It is important that the systems used by the authority are able to produce accurate and relevant data and that the officers using them are trained to do so correctly.

5.6.1. National (when applicable) and local Indicators for the Borough Council are collected, measured and managed by Strategic Development using Covalent, a web-based performance management system.

5.6.2. In addition to internal performance management, the system will allow the Borough Council to record a range of performance measurement information from all departments into a central database and analyse and report to Cabinet, Scrutiny, partners and the public.

5.6.3. The system will mean that thematic blocks, priorities and measures / indicators can be analysed on many different levels to assess the success of the organisation as a whole (aggregation) or to drill down and investigate individual measures (disaggregation).

5.6.4. Covalent enhances the value of the organisation by:

- ensuring data is collected without duplication and analysed consistently with agreed data quality standards adhered to
- highlighting the relationship between priorities and DRIVE and illustrating the golden thread running through both
- demonstrating how measures relate to the achievement of objectives

- providing an easily understood and accessible story of performance in the organisation
- providing real time information and predicting trends which can be used to identify action that could change the way a measure is performing rather than just reporting what has taken place

5.7. **Output:** performance indicators are extracted regularly and efficiently and communicated quickly

5.7.1 Any output produced should have an auditable trail - evidence to support the data output that an auditor would be happy with (e.g. supporting documents / spreadsheets).

5.7.2. Until data is signed off it will remain embargoed and will not be shared without consent of the owner. This avoids situations where data is released before members or senior management have seen it.

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

5.8.1. Performance is presented quarterly in such a way as to give an easily understood and accurate picture of the borough's performance. This will also include some form of interpretation and health warning to add value to otherwise potentially ambiguous figures.

5.8.2. Where appropriate, the source of reported information should be identified, especially where third party data is used, for example ONS population figures. This may also include data which is used to benchmark and compare members of the organisation with other bodies.

5.8.3. Good data quality needs to be balanced with the cost and effort of collection, importance and intended use of the data concerned. In some

cases data may be considered fit for purpose in spite of known limitations. For example, it may be appropriate to accept some degree of inaccuracy (i.e. estimated or provisional data) where timeliness is important.

6. Responsibility

6.1 At a corporate level, responsibility for data quality lies with the Head of Strategy and Democracy (Peter Finnis) . At a councillor level, responsibility for data quality lies with the Leader of the Council.

6.2 Heads of Service are responsible for ensuring that adequate, safe systems holding an acceptable standard of information are developed and maintained and that performance information they provide matches the principles listed in section 5 above.

6.3 It is the responsibility of all staff who input, store, retrieve or otherwise manage data to ensure that it is of the highest quality.

6.4 The Strategic Development team is responsible for:

- Co-ordinating day-to-day data quality issues
- Offering ongoing support to managers and officers responsible for working with data
- Communicating information relevant to data quality issues
- Leading the reporting/monitoring of data quality work to CMT and Members.
- The administration of the Covalent system
- Development of Covalent to ensure that performance information relates to purpose, and is useful to managers and staff to help them improve their services, as well as reporting to Government and other users.
- Maintaining a current list of Covalent licensees and commissioning or providing appropriate training

- Liaising with the Internal Audit Service to provide additional checks on data quality, proportionate to the risk posed by error

6.5 Performance data is used by a variety of internal and external users and it is important that the data used by the Council is subject to periodic critical assessment. This task is the responsibility of the Strategic Development team in consultation with internal and external users. The two critical tests for measures should be, 'do they relate to purpose?' and 'do they assist managers and staff to improve the service provided to customers?'

6.6 The Data Quality Strategy will be reviewed and amended if necessary annually by the Strategic Development team. An updated copy will be held on Insite.

7. Training

7.1 For reference, please complete the **Introduction to Data Quality module** on OLLIE.

7.2 Bespoke training for staff and members on Data Quality issues or Covalent usage is available from the Strategic Development team on request.

For further information on the Data Quality Strategy, Covalent and associated issues please contact:

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