

Data Quality Policy

May 2012

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 The aim of the Data Quality policy is to set out our approach to achieving better service delivery and business management through improving the quality of our data. We rely upon data for monitoring and improving performance, setting budgets, preventing fraud, protecting vulnerable people and making informed policy judgements. As such we need to ensure it is sufficiently accurate, valid, reliable, relevant, complete and timely to meet the requirements of the council and of those to whom it is accountable.
- 1.2 This policy sets out the council's definition of data quality and applies this definition to the different purposes for which we use data, from the operational management of front line services all the way to strategic decision making and audit. It also sets out a framework for managing data quality that all service areas must apply to their areas of responsibility. The Data Quality policy sets out the range of behaviours and actions that need to be exhibited by council officers and our wider delivery partners to make it a reality.
- 1.3 The Data Quality Policy has been designed to be practical and action focussed. There is an expectation that teams and individuals will take appropriate steps to improve the quality of data at all organisational levels, including in our external delivery partners.

2. Purpose and scope

- 2.1 The purpose of this policy is to ensure that all data produced and used by the council for any purpose are of good quality. There are a range of risks associated with poor data quality. This policy is intended to mitigate these risks through effective leadership, strong governance and a clear definition of actions. The key risks are:
 - publishing information which is misleading;
 - making poor use of resources;
 - failing to improve services;
 - making poor policy decisions;
 - reputational damage to the council;
 - inaccurate rewarding of service delivery partners
 - potential compensation claims where an individual suffers substantial damage as a result of inaccurate data held
- 2.2 The definition of data quality and data guidelines set out in section 3 of this policy applies to all data that is collected, processed or in any way used by the council. It

also applies equally to officers within the council and to organisations delivering services on behalf of the council (delivery units). Delivery units are expected to understand this policy and apply it to their work. This policy supports the corporate Information Management Strategy.

2.3 This policy will be reviewed annually from the date of publication.

3. Our definition of data quality

3.1 The London Borough of Barnet is committed to ensuring that the data we use possesses the following six key “quality” characteristics, and that officers and delivery partners at all levels understand what their role is in relation to data quality. These six characteristics collectively constitute the council’s definition of data quality:

- **Accuracy** – data is without errors, and adheres precisely to any applicable definition
- **Reliability** – data reflects stable and consistent collection and capture processes across collection points and over time. These processes should minimise manual intervention and maximise the automation of data collection and manipulation.
- **Timeliness** – data is captured as quickly as possible after the event or activity, and is used in a timely fashion
- **Relevance** – data is applicable to the issue and provides the answers needed
- **Completeness** – data collected and captured comprises of all necessary elements
- **A clear audit trail** – a documented process for obtaining and using the data, which is understood by all involved in producing the data, and is accessible to those who rely on the data or have an interest in it

(Adapted from Improving Information to Support Decision Making: Standards for Better Quality Data, Audit Commission, 15 March 2007).

3.2 The Council recognises that the resources spent on achieving these data quality characteristics must be proportionate and appropriate to the importance of the data.

4. Guidelines for improving data quality

4.1 All teams working to deliver a service that the council is accountable for providing will adhere to this policy and will take practical actions to apply it to improve and maintain robust data quality, and will apply the general and specific guidelines set out in this policy. This includes service areas that are directly provided by the

council, and delivery partners who have been commissioned to provide a service or function on the council's behalf.

4i. General guidelines

4.2 To protect the quality of data used across the council and its partnerships, the following guidelines should be adhered to by all officers and partners (These standards apply to all of the purposes of data set out in Section 4i and 4ii):

- Responsibility for data quality is clearly assigned and everyone understands their individual responsibilities with respect to data quality. Data quality responsibilities should be included in job descriptions where appropriate.
- Staff at all levels in the council and its delivery partners recognise why data quality is important and that it is 'part of the day job'.
- Systems, processes and controls are fit for purpose and operate according to the principle of 'right first time'. Standard methodologies for collecting, processing and storing data should be in place and written down. Manual data capture or process intervention should be minimised.
- All council teams and delivery partners must be transparent about the data they collect and areas in need of improvement. They will engage constructively with any improvement activity that is initiated.
- Adequate and effective controls must be in place during the input, reporting and publication of data to ensure the quality of the data is maintained. Departmental and corporate level spot checks of data will take place on a regular and planned basis.
- Clear and complete audit trails must be maintained to demonstrate accuracy for all data used for decision-making internally or reported externally to government. These will also be supplied to Internal Audit and the Performance Team upon request and are open to constructive challenge.

4ii. Specific guidelines

4.3 The table below shows how the definition applies to the specific purposes that data is used for by the council and its delivery partners, and gives practical examples of the actions that officers are required to take in order to deliver good data quality.

Purposes of data:

Purpose of data	Why data quality is important	Guidelines for officers
Service delivery	The delivery of services, from waste collection and disposal to housing, child protection and adult social care is dependant on the intelligent use of high quality data. For instance, allowing resources to be targeted accurately, or helping us respond as quickly as possible when vulnerable people need extra support or help.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Front line staff are all trained on the importance of inputting accurate data. • Data is collected, processed and shared in compliance with the Data Protection Act. • Where appropriate there should be appropriate and clear process maps and methodology statements in place for the consistent collation of data. • Only relevant data should be collected. Service users will not be asked unnecessary questions.

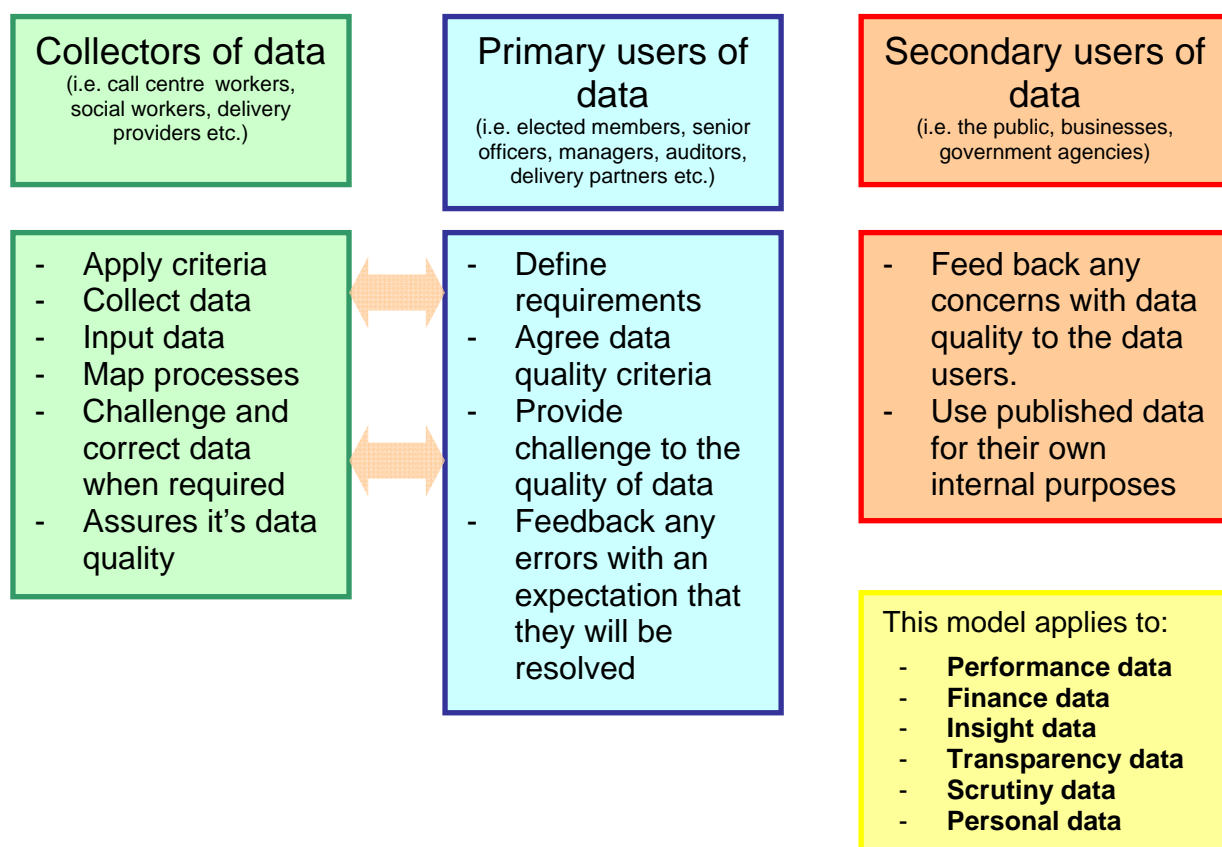
<p>Strategic planning</p>	<p>If we want to plan effectively for the future we need high quality data that allows us to understand what the most important strategic challenges are, what resources we have available to meet them, and we need to be assured that the decisions we make now are the correct ones based on good quality data. It also allows us to compare how we are doing with other organisations and to identify areas of our performance that we need to improve.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are clear processes in place for aggregating service level data and reporting it to key audiences. • Clear communication explains the need to produce high quality data. • Benchmarking data is used appropriately to allow us to identify areas of weak or strong performance. • Assurance of accuracy given by the data owner on all data that will be used for strategic decision making or planning, • Clear requirements and consistent standards for the use of geographical data. • Only aggregated or anonymised data will be used.
<p>Managing the business</p>	<p>Managing a large organisation like the council involves a wide range of activities that enable the delivery of effective frontline services. This includes managing council buildings and staff, maintaining efficient and effective information systems, understanding the risks that affect us, developing and managing contracts with our delivery partners, procuring services and assets on behalf of residents, and ensuring that we have the necessary resources in place and correctly allocated to make all of this possible. All of these activities (and many more) require good quality data.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managers understand the need to keep up to date data and accurate records e.g. staff absence. • Contracts are being monitored using relevant, measurable and up to date data. • Senior managers initiate and action research to identify areas of poor data quality and deliver improvement. • All staff and delivery partners understand that data quality is everyone's business. • All data is collected inline with legal requirements.
<p>Oversight and Governance</p>	<p>It is important that the borough's elected representatives and senior officers are able to have oversight of the way the council's services are being run, and can take action as soon as any problems are identified. This could include overview and scrutiny committee meetings, Cabinet, senior management team meetings, and central government. The council's Performance team also has an oversight role for spot checking the quality of data and facilitating improvement. Internal Audit will provide assurance to key stakeholders as to whether this policy has been applied.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All data produced has an owner with responsibility for ensuring the quality of that data. • All data given to decision making bodies (i.e. Cabinet) has been signed off by a senior officer. • Senior officers and members set the expectation that data collected/inputted at the service level should have a clear methodology in place and that all staff understand their role.

<p>Accountability and Transparency</p>	<p>The final, and important purpose for having data, and for needing good quality data is so that the council can be held to account for the services it provides, for instance through the publication of our accounts, performance, risk and HR data, and through Freedom of Information requests. This allows residents to engage with the democratic process, to ask questions based on the data and the council to give responses based on high quality data.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where possible data produced by the council and its delivery partners should be available to be published in support of transparency. • Where possible data should be made available in machine readable formats e.g. as .CSV files. • Data released in response to Freedom of Information Act requests should be prompt, of consistently high quality, and relevant to the question asked.
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Users of data and collectors of data

- 4.4 The council expects different service areas (including those directly delivered by the council and those delivered on its behalf) to utilise the model below when implementing this policy.
- 4.5 Officers who will be the primary users of data (for instance for policy making or resource allocation purposes) are responsible for defining the data requirement and for setting out quality criteria. The collectors of that data and their managers will ensure the definition and quality criteria are complied with and that control measures are applied effectively.

Figure 1: The model for delivering improved data quality



5. Implementing this policy

- 5.1 This policy will be embedded into the wider performance management framework of the council and will be refreshed in 12 months time (May 2013). The implementation activity set out in this section will be delivered throughout 2012/13 and will involve a number of strands that will collectively contribute to an improvement in data quality across all service areas, including those provided directly by us and on our behalf by our delivery partners.
- 5.2 The data quality policy will be delivered through:
- 5.3 **Guidance, support and training:** Training on data quality will be offered by the Performance Team when requested by specific service areas or delivery units, including attending management meetings to explain data quality requirements, and tailored support to individuals or particular teams about best practices and ideal behaviours.
- 5.4 **Data quality spot checks:** The Performance Team will undertake a series of data quality spot checks on a limited set of performance indicators or data sets each year following a standard methodology. Where weaknesses are identified services will be asked to produce targeted action plans to deliver improvement, which will be followed up until completed to ensure improvement takes place. Internal Audit will be able to provide assurance on the application of the overall data quality framework across the council. Compliance will be monitored and enforced where appropriate by the Performance Team.
- 5.5 **Communications:** Briefing sessions on data quality will be offered by the Performance Team when requested by specific service areas or delivery units. A range of resources will be developed that will be freely available to all parts of the council and will allow services to diagnose their data quality challenges and strengths, and put in place targeted actions to deliver improvement where necessary. Data quality training will be included into the induction process for new starters, including temporary staff where appropriate.
- 5.6 **Objective setting:** There is an expectation that officers who work closely with data on a day to day basis, or who have a responsibility for overseeing the management of data, will have data quality included in their objectives and/or role profiles in an appropriate and proportionate manner.
- 5.7 **Reporting:** The quarterly performance management and monthly service reporting processes will be used to verify the data quality associated with our top corporate priorities as set out in the Corporate Plan. Data quality issues that are identified will be followed up with the relevant service(s) and may be investigated in detail through a data quality spot check. In addition, all corporate plan indicators will have an accompanying "data quality sheet" produced that allows the quality of their accompanying data to be tested.
- 5.8 **Council transformation:** The Intention is that this policy will be shared with existing providers, and will also be placed in the data rooms for the DRS and NSCSO One Barnet Programmes. This policy is applicable to all employees of the

council, contractors, agency staff, Council Members, contractual third party suppliers, agents and partners of the council

6. Governance

- 6.1 The Corporate Performance Team have responsibility for developing and refining the corporate Data Quality Policy and for providing guidance on its implementation across the council.
- 6.2 It is the responsibility of each service area/delivery unit to apply the requirements of this policy to their area of responsibility in a way that is consistent with the descriptions set out in sections 3 and 4. These procedures should be developed in consultation with relevant partners, suppliers, or delivery partners to develop compliance and ownership of data quality.
- 6.3 Council services and delivery partners are required to give assurance to elected members and senior officers that they have appropriate procedures and controls in place to ensure good data quality.
- 6.4 Internal audit will be able to provide assurance on the application of the overall data quality framework across the council, and on particular sets of data.
- 6.5 Data quality “spot checks” will be conducted by the Corporate Performance Team on particular items of performance data to test data quality
- 6.6 Overview and scrutiny will have a role holding officers and delivery arms to account, analysing the data against the agreed outcomes.
- 6.7 Data quality is fundamentally the responsibility of every individual who works with data.

7. Associated Policies

- 7.1 There are a number of Council policies and guidance which contribute towards ensuring good quality data, which should be adhered to.
- 7.2 **Information Management Strategy** – Sets out our strategic approach to managing information in the council. This Data Quality Policy explicitly supports its delivery.
- 7.2 **Risk Management** - Risk management includes identifying and assessing risks and then responding to them. This includes identifying and managing risks

associated with data quality issues. All services should ensure that any risks related to data or data quality are identified and managed under this process.

7.3 **Business Continuity** - Seeks to protect the public against the loss of day-to-day services, which might worsen the consequences of an emergency or disruptive event. In terms of data quality, business continuity activity includes ensuring backup arrangements for the Council's main data and information systems.

7.4 **Access to Information** – This covers a number of policies and procedures in regards to information management, with particular reference to compliance with government legislation. This includes the Data Protection Act 1998 and the Freedom of Information Act 2000. All services should ensure that data is dealt with in accordance with relevant legislation.

7.5 **Records Retention Policy** – Sets out how we store records. By managing our written documents effectively we will be able to maintain effective audit trails.

8. Further guidance and support

8.1 Further support in relation to data quality can also be obtained from:

- The [Performance Team](#), which supports, challenges and reports on corporate performance issues. It also leads on ongoing data quality guidance and training in conjunction with nominated service performance leads, and any external audits of data quality.
- [Internal Audit](#), which can provide independent and objective assurance on processes in place for data quality.
- The [Information Governance team](#) can provide guidance on the Data Protection Act 1998 which governs the protection of personal data and the Freedom of Information Act 2000 which deal with the handling of requests for information. email: foi@barnet.gov.uk or data.protection@barnet.gov.uk

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