

Data Quality

Stevenage Borough Council

Audit 2007/08

April 2009



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Status of our reports

The Statement of Responsibilities of Auditors and Audited Bodies issued by the Audit Commission explains the respective responsibilities of auditors and of the audited body. Reports prepared by appointed auditors are addressed to non-executive directors/members or officers. They are prepared for the sole use of the audited body. Auditors accept no responsibility to:

- any director/member or officer in their individual capacity; or
 - any third party.
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Introduction

- 1 The purpose of this report is to summarise the findings from our work on data quality for 2007/08.
- 2 Auditors' work on data quality and performance information supports the Commission's reliance on performance indicators (PI) in its service assessments for comprehensive performance assessment (CPA).
- 3 Our work on data quality is complemented by the Audit Commission's paper, 'Improving information to support decision making: standards for better quality data'. This paper sets out standards, for adoption on a voluntary basis, to support improvement in data quality. The expected impact of the Audit Commission's work on data quality is that it will drive improvement in the quality of local government performance information, leading to greater confidence in the supporting data on which performance assessments are based.

Scope of our work

- 4 We have followed the Audit Commission's three-stage approach to the review of data quality as set out in Table 1.

Table 1 Data quality approach

Stage 1	Management arrangements A review using key lines of enquiry (KLOE) 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 BVPI and non-BVPI data and selection of a sample for testing based on 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 CPA, to determine whether arrangements to secure data quality are delivering accurate, timely and accessible information in practice. For 2007/08 PI spot checks, the Audit Commission specified that it is compulsory to review two housing benefits PIs at all single tier and district councils as a minimum.

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- 5 As this is the third year of applying this approach to data quality, we tailored our work to focus on the key changes and actions taken to address previously identified areas for improvement and recommendations.

Summary conclusions

Stage 1 – Management arrangements

- 6 The Council's overall management arrangements for ensuring data quality are consistently above minimum requirements and have been further embedded compared to the previous year. Responsibility for data quality has been assigned throughout the Council with the use of the Performance, Priorities and Improvement Group (PPIG) and BVPI clinics. Data quality champions have also been in place since the end of 2006/07 and are now fully embedded with roles and responsibilities clearly defined.
- 7 The Council has a clear data quality policy in place which sets out that the Council's commitment to data quality is driven corporately. The policy outlines the Council's objectives regarding data quality. It outlines the roles and responsibilities for monitoring and review and creates a clear sense of direction for data quality throughout the Council.
- 8 The Council has an internal network of staff focussed on data quality throughout the Council. Data quality champions provide feedback on efforts being made at each service level. The role of data quality champions is considered to be notable practice and has been put forward to the Audit Commission as such. The Council has also shown that information staff work closely with service level staff to identify any data recording issues if and when they arise.
- 9 The Council has processes in place to validate data prior to reporting to senior management. While there are processes in place to enable verification of performance management data from some third party and partnership bodies (eg police data), this practice is not consistently applied across all third party or partnership data. In addition, performance data reported to external bodies is not always subject to verification checks prior to submission. The partnership toolkit being developed in 2008/09 should ensure that data quality objectives are reflected in partnership arrangements. A framework for managing Stevenage Homes Limited (SHL) data has already been put in place with monthly meetings to discuss performance and data quality.
- 10 The Council has not yet put in place training for all members which would ensure the Council are fully aware of the importance of data quality. They do, however, have awareness of data quality through reports given at the Audit Committee and from Head of Service briefings. Training is being developed for 2008/09 which should enhance the knowledge of the members.
- 11 The Council has shown that data collected is used routinely throughout the Council and that management action is taken where necessary to resolve issues on data returns if they occur.

Stage 2 – Analytical review

- 12 Our analytical review work at stage 2 identified that the PI variances reviewed were substantiated by evidence to support whether they were real performance improvement, decline or were caused by other reasons.
- 13 No further work has been undertaken as a result of information supplied at this stage.

Introduction

Stage 3 – Data quality spot checks

- 14** Our review and spot checks of PIs BV78a, average time for processing new claims, and BV78b, average time for processing change of circumstances, found that they were fairly stated.
- 15** Our review of BV212, average re-let times for council housing, identified an issue in respect of how major works were recorded. An initial sample of 20 major works were selected for testing to establish whether the work being carried out met the definition of a major work and that evidence could be provided to support this. Information was unavailable for 7 of the 20. Following this, the Council did a full review of all major works and found a further 17 cases in the population that could not be substantiated. A further sample of 10 was selected by us for testing and we agreed with the conclusions drawn by the Council. The Council then recalculated the PI which was verified and agreed. However, it was not possible to change the conclusion on the Audit Commission's reporting system as the deadline for amendments had passed.
- 16** An action plan has been agreed with the Council (see Appendix 1) to address the issues arising from this review. The Council should consider incorporating these into the data quality action plan.

Detailed findings

Management arrangements (Stage 1)

17 Overall, the Council's corporate arrangements for data quality are consistently above minimum requirements. There have been a number of improvements since last year's assessment which reflects the actions that the Council has taken in recent years to embed data quality arrangements throughout the organisation.

Governance and leadership

18 The Council has demonstrated a commitment to data quality through the ongoing monitoring and the continuous updating of the data quality policy. This document allocates responsibility for data quality at appropriate levels within the organisation. Arrangements could be further improved by providing specific training for members outlining the importance of data quality and raising the awareness of the arrangements the Council already has in place to mitigate the risks associated with poor data quality. This would ensure the members were well placed to identify and respond to any areas for improvement that may be reported to them.

19 There are numerous arrangements in place for monitoring data quality arrangements and reporting the results of data quality work through PPIG and BVPI clinics.

20 There is also evidence that challenging data quality objectives are set at a corporate level with individual directorates also setting their own objectives based on these corporate objectives.

21 Data quality objectives are yet to be reflected in partnership arrangements. The partnership toolkit being developed for 2008/09 will ensure that this criterion is met.

Recommendations

R1 Ensure new partnership toolkit clearly outlines data quality objectives for partnership organisations.

R2 Ensure lead members and officers are fully aware of the need for data quality when sharing information through partners.

R3 Develop a comprehensive training session for members to allow learning about the importance of data quality and the arrangements already in place.

Policies

22 The Council maintains a data quality policy which was updated during 2007/08. The performance management guide covers the arrangements for data collection, recording, analysis and reporting. This guide was also updated during the year. This shows the Council's dedication to ensuring policies and guidance is up to date for use by staff.

Detailed findings

- 23 Corporate documents are accessible by all as they are shared on the Council's intranet. The Council's 'Message of the Day' ensures there is timely notification of any changes in policy or procedure.
- 24 The role of data quality champions is fully embedded across the organisation with quarterly meetings and training for those in post. The role of data quality champions is considered to be notable practice and has been put forward to the Audit Commission as such. Workshops take place to ensure the data quality policy is updated annually.
- 25 In depth arrangements for partnerships were not fully in place at the end of 2007/08. However, with the introduction of the partnership toolkit, any non-compliance with the Council's data quality expectations should be noticed and resolved. This has been included within the monitoring framework for SHL with key issues and concerns being escalated to the Council's Strategic Management Board (SMB), but these arrangements do not yet cover all partnership arrangements.

Recommendation

- R4 Ensure that the partnership toolkit incorporates a mechanism for dealing with any non-compliance with the Council's data quality policy so it can be pursued and rectified.

Systems and processes

- 26 A 'Right first time' is the accepted principle across the Council. This is where the Council expects data produced to be correct in its initial reporting format and not to need extensive data cleansing or manipulation. This applies to both manual and computerised systems.
- 27 PIs produced by the Pericles housing benefit system were monitored throughout 2007/08 following issues around data quality. This meant 100 per cent checking of data produced. However, we did identify some issues during spot checks which are outlined in stage 3 below. The Pericles system is due to be replaced during 2009/10.
- 28 There is a country wide data sharing network which provides the framework for sharing data between all local authorities.
- 29 The Council is yet to establish robust assurance from all partners that processes which supply information to the Council are fully secure.

Recommendation

- R5 Establish full co-ordination with partners to ensure systems used to provide data are secure.

People and skills

- 30** Roles and responsibilities to achieve data quality have been outlined within the data quality policy and the performance management guide.
- 31** Staff performance and development meetings involve the completion of a data quality competency checklist which allows development and support to ensure quality data is captured. Personal development meetings identify needs for training and the checklist ensure adequate standards of performance are being met.
- 32** Data quality champions are yet to establish feedback loops with partners to enable identification and sharing of information on potential data quality issues.

Recommendation
R6 Establish links with partners for data quality champions to provide feedback loops to identify potential data quality problems.

Data use and reporting

- 33** Operational staff receive reported information in a variety of formats including link newsletters, performance charts and team briefs. This reinforces the importance of the quality of data in reported information and demonstrates how it is used.
- 34** Performance clinics allow continued improvement and information is reported to the SMB on a regular basis. Performance information is regularly used to identify any deviations from planned performance. Improvement plans are in place to report information on specific targets, monitor service delivery, forecast year-end achievement and identify any areas where action is needed.
- 35** Internal audit carry out reviews of high risk BVPI data and ensure a full audit trail is available for external audit review.
- 36** Following a recommendation made last year, data quality assurance checklists have been introduced to ensure that departmental and corporate staff can evidence their checks of internally and externally reported performance information.
- 37** Through our spot check, we noticed that not all data returns are supported by sufficient and appropriate evidence (see BV212 in stage 3 overleaf).

Detailed findings

Analytical review (Stage 2)

38 An analytical review of the following BVPIs was carried out. The findings, subject to the validation of a sample of PIs in stage 3 spot checks, are shown below.

Table 2 Analytical review findings

2007/08 Performance indicator	Assessment	Comment
BVPI 183b - Average length of stay in hostel accommodation - variance +35.27 per cent	Variance from 2006/07 explained satisfactorily	Delays in the completion of new homes meant that tenants remained in hostel accommodation far longer than anticipated.
BVPI 184a - Proportion of LA homes that were non-decent - variance +60 per cent	Satisfactory explanation provided for the variance from 2006/07	Major works programme did not start until the last quarter of 2007/08 which has restricted the number of properties made decent in the year.
BVPI 199a - Local street and environmental cleanliness - litter and detritus - variance -14.29 per cent	Variance from 2006/07 explained satisfactorily	The sample draws on a large number of individual inspections. As the figures reported are so low, a small change results in a proportionately large percentage variance.
BVPI 199b - Local street and environmental cleanliness - graffiti - variance +100 per cent	Variance from 2006/07 attributable to real performance improvement	The figures reported are low due to targeted/proactive work undertaken by the Council's graffiti buster operatives. A small change results in a proportionately large percentage variance.

39 All other PIs reviewed were found to be complete and within plausible and permissible values set by the Audit Commission. These are tolerance levels set based on national averages and likely changes possible and acceptable in a year.

Data quality spot checks (Stage 3)

40 A total of three PIs were reviewed using a series of detailed spot checks and audit tests. The first two PIs tested were mandatory (BV78a and b) and the final PI (BV212) was identified as a risk from our review of Internal Audit work. Our findings are shown overleaf.

Table 3 Spot check findings

Performance indicator	Assessment	Comment
Average time for processing new claims BVPI 78a	Fairly stated	<p>The PI was concluded to be fairly stated but arrangements can be further enhanced to address the following issues.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The results of our review highlight that in a number of cases the number of days recorded on the STATs 124 report was not inline with the evidence found. One case reviewed was not correct to be classed as a new case.
Average time for processing change of circumstances BVPI 78b	Fairly stated	<p>The indicator was found to be fairly stated but arrangements for producing it could be enhanced to address the following issue.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The reporting system shows a number of changes apparently actioned in one day which when investigated are not changes and are actually system errors. <p>We are aware that the Pericles system is to be changed during 2009/10 and therefore this issue may be resolved.</p>
Average re-let times BVPI 212	Considered fairly stated, but remained unfairly stated on the Audit Commission's reporting system.	<p>Following results from our initial work on this PI, issues arose around evidence to support major works properties. We were not able to obtain information to support the major work carried out and ensure it was in line with the definition. On this basis the PI was concluded unfairly stated.</p> <p>Further work was then carried out by the Council which led to the PI increasing from 39.07 to 46.10 days, which we have concluded as fairly stated.</p> <p>However, the deadline for making amendments had passed and the unfairly stated conclusion has remained on the Audit Commission's reporting system.</p>

41 BVPIs have been replaced by the National Indicator Set for 2008/09. The recommendations below arise from our work on the outgoing BVPIs but should be considered in light of the new NIS.

Detailed findings

Recommendations

- R7** In respect of housing benefit performance indicators, some general recommendations to consider are:
- monitor reports on a regular basis to ensure results are in line with expectations; and
 - investigate anomalies to ensure they are correct and not a system error.
- R8** In respect of void re-let time, some general recommendations for collection of data are:
- retain all work orders for major works projects to be used as an audit trail; and
 - record all information about major works and other work carried out on the Northgate system.

Appendix 1 – Action Plan

Page no.	Recommendation	Priority 1 = Low 2 = Med 3 = High	Responsibility	Agreed	Comments	Date
6	R1 Ensure new partnership toolkit clearly outlines data quality objectives for partnership organisations.	3	Head of Policy, Performance and Partnerships	Yes	The Partnership Toolkit is being refreshed in May 2009. The Toolkit will outline the Council's data quality objectives as an example of standards. A data quality agreement for partners to sign up to will be developed and included in the toolkit. LSP partners will be asked to sign following the annual forum and election of new Board and Executive.	May 2009 July 2009
6	R2 Ensure lead members and officers are fully aware of the need for data quality when sharing information through partners.	2	Head of Policy, Performance and Partnerships	Yes	Roles and responsibilities of lead members have been set out as part of the ongoing development of an LSP Governance Handbook. This will include the data quality and information sharing agreement for partners to sign up to.	July 2009
6	R3 Develop a comprehensive training session for members to allow learning about the importance of data quality and the arrangements already in place.	2	Corporate Governance Group	Yes	A training session on Corporate Governance is currently being developed that will include learning about the importance of data quality	August 2009

Appendix 1 – Action Plan

Page no.	Recommendation	Priority 1 = Low 2 = Med 3 = High	Responsibility	Agreed	Comments	Date
7	R4 Ensure that the partnership toolkit incorporates a mechanism for dealing with any non-compliance with the Council's data quality policy so it can be pursued and rectified.	2	Head of Policy, Performance and Partnerships	Yes	The refreshed Partnership Toolkit will set out how the Council is taking a lead in identifying methods to deal with non-compliance. The toolkit will provide guidance on how partnerships can address non-compliance through their performance management process.	May 2009
7	R5 Establish full co-ordination with partners to ensure systems used to provide data are secure.	2	Head of Policy, Performance and Partnerships	Yes	The Partnership Toolkit is being refreshed in May 2009. The Toolkit will outline the Council's data quality objectives as an example of standards. A data quality agreement for partners to sign up to will be developed and included in the toolkit. LSP partners will be asked to sign following the annual forum and election of new Board and Executive.	May 2009 July 2009
8	R6 Establish links with partners for data quality champions to provide feedback loops to identify potential data quality problems.	3	Head of Policy, Performance and Partnerships	Yes	A process will be established through the refresh of the Partnership Toolkit. Awareness raising will take place with LSP link officers. The process will be reflected in the Governance Handbook. The process will include link officers providing feedback from LSP theme partnerships to Stevenage Borough Council's So Stevenage Partnership officers and Performance & Improvement Team. Feedback will be shared with data quality champions and actioned as appropriate.	May 2009 June 2009 July 2009

Page no.	Recommendation	Priority 1 = Low 2 = Med 3 = High	Responsibility	Agreed	Comments	Date
11	<p>R7 In respect of housing benefit performance indicators, some general recommendations to consider are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • monitor reports on a regular basis to ensure results are in line with expectations; and • investigate anomalies to ensure they are correct and not a system error. 	2	Head of Revenues	Yes	<p>The finance performance dashboard allows us to monitor performance on a monthly basis. Combined with daily monitoring of workload through the Anite@Work document management system, this provides an effective 'early warning system' to performance dips.</p> <p>The replacing of Pericles Benefits during 2009/10 will resolve current issues with data quality and remove the need for 100 per cent data cleansing of the performance outcome figures.</p>	<p>In place</p> <p>October 2009</p>

Appendix 1 – Action Plan

Page no.	Recommendation	Priority 1 = Low 2 = Med 3 = High	Responsibility	Agreed	Comments	Date
11	<p>R8 In respect of void re-let time, some general recommendations for collection of data are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> retain all work orders for major works projects to be used as an audit trail; and record all information about major works and other work carried out on the Northgate system. 	1	Head of Strategic Housing	Yes	<p>The following actions have been taken to address this recommendation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clarification of the major works definition to ensure consistency across Stevenage Homes staff - building on the CLG guidance. A template has been devised for recording and verifying the use of the major works code. All evidence is now centrally collated for use of the major works code – including all the works orders raised. <p>Stevenage Homes is due to have a further audit on BVPI 212 as agreed by Stevenage Borough Council on 2009/10 data, which should evidence that the record keeping is now robust.</p>	<p>In place</p> <p>August 2010</p>

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