Data Quality Standard

1. Introduction

1.1 Reliable information is a fundamental requirement for any organisation to conduct its business efficiently and effectively. For the Council this applies in all areas of activity including the service delivery, performance management, corporate governance, internal and external accountability and communication. Data quality is a crucial pre-requisite to information that is accurate, valid, reliable, timely, relevant, and complete.

1.2 Ever-increasing use of computerised systems provides greater opportunities to store and access many types and large volumes of data, but also increases the risk of misinformation, and therefore poor decision-making, if the data from which information is derived is not of good quality. This risk applies both to the Authority's internal use of information and to information conveyed in the form of statutory returns to central Government and its various agencies. In addition, the Authority provides data to the many partnerships to which it belongs. For that information to have value it is essential that the data that underlies it is consistent and complies with national standards.

1.3 Through the Use of Resources annual assessment Councils are assessed and judged on the quality of the data they produce. This is especially important in terms of National Indicators, other indicators included in Kent Agreement 2 and the forthcoming Multi-Area Agreement, local indicators (for example included in the Corporate Plan), and other data reported to central Government Departments all of which depend on good quality data for their accuracy and supporting evidence.

1.4 It is for all these reasons that the authority requires a Data Quality Standard.

2. Scope

2.1 This Standard is intended to cover all data that is entered onto computerised systems within the Council, and all paper-based records. It covers primarily data relating to service users, the delivery of services, financial management, service management, performance management, corporate governance and communications. In this regard, it should be noted that this policy is not restricted to just performance indicators.

2.2 Service user data is held on a number of information systems owned by the Council or accessed under Service Level Agreements with partner organisations. The Council also operates a range of information systems that support its business processes.

2.3 The Standard applies to all staff who use, or supply data that is input to, those systems. It outlines good practice and identifies the roles and responsibilities of both the Authority and its staff in terms of data quality.

3. Data Quality Principles

3.1 The core principles that this Data Quality Standard is built upon are as follows:

(i) overall responsibility for the strategic management of data quality in the Authority will lie with the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Performance and Learning and Skills. Overall responsibility for the operational management of data quality will lie with the Head of Policy;

(ii) Heads of Service are responsible for, and will champion, data quality issues within their service areas;

(iii) individual systems (whether ICT-based or otherwise) will each have a named officer responsible for the quality of the data that they produce;

(iv) all responsibilities for data quality will be explicitly stated in Job Descriptions;

(v) Swale Borough Council will seek to achieve a judgement of 'consistently above minimum requirements' in the Use of Resources assessment for the 2009/10 financial year; and

(vi) Swale Borough Council will ensure that systems are in place to comply with the requirements of the Data Protection Act (1998), in particular that all information held is accurate and up to date.

3.2 Below Head of Service level, accountabilities for individuals with responsibility for data quality are to be clearly and formally defined and reinforced as part of the performance appraisal process.

3.3 The importance of achieving good data quality will be addressed with all staff as part of the Corporate Induction process at commencement of their employment. This clear message will be reinforced periodically as and when required using an appropriate method of delivery.

3.4 The working environment will be conducive to achieving data quality. Supervision of staff using computer systems will encourage appropriate working practices, including:
- lighting, heating, ventilation and equipment that comply with health and safety legislation;
- adequate breaks;
- refresher training; and
- reasonable workload.

3.5 All data collection and input processes will have an audit trail that operates continuously. Any training and development issues identified in the course of auditing will be addressed promptly.

3.6 All responsible officers and system users will be made aware of the Authority's Protected Disclosure Policy ('whistle-blowing'). This will allow individuals, who may have concerns about the quality of data and are

experiencing difficulties in resolving them in the normal way, the opportunity to relay them to an appropriate senior member of staff.

4. Data Quality Standards

4.1 We will adopt the following data quality standards.

(i) **Accuracy:** our data shall be sufficiently accurate for its intended purposes, representing clearly and in sufficient detail the interaction provided at the point of activity. Data will be captured once only, although it may have multiple uses. Accuracy is most likely to be secured if data is captured as close to the point of activity as possible. Reported information that is based on accurate data provides a fair picture of performance and should enable the Council to make informed decision at all levels. The need for accuracy must be balanced with the importance of the uses for the data, and the costs and effort of collection. Where compromises have to be made on accuracy, the resulting limitations of the data should be clear to users.

(ii) **Validity:** data will be recorded and used in compliance with relevant requirements, including the correct application of any rules and definitions. This will ensure consistency between periods and with similar organisations. Data items held on Council computer and other record systems must be valid and contextually logical. Where possible free-text fields will be avoided and standard codes or options used which comply with national standards or map to national values. Wherever possible computer systems will be programmed to only accept valid entries. In particular, steps will be taken to ensure that service-user details are validated for changes and accuracy throughout the duration of service provided by the Authority.

(iii) **Reliability:** our data will reflect stable and consistent data collection processes across collection points and over time, whether using manual or computer based systems or a combination. Members, Managers and stakeholders should be confident that progress towards performance targets reflects real changes rather than variations in data collection methods.

(iv) **Timeliness:** data will be captured as quickly as possible after the event, and will be available for the intended use within a reasonable time period. Data must therefore be available quickly and frequently enough to support information needs and to influence both operational and strategic decision making. To that end, key staff, need to be aware of relevant deadlines.

(v) **Relevance:** data captured will be relevant for the purposes for which it is to be used. This will entail periodic review of requirements to reflect changing needs.

(vi) **Completeness:** data requirements will be clearly specified based on the information needs of the Council, and data collection processes matched to these requirements. An assurance review may be instigated should monitoring identify missing, incomplete or invalid records. In this respect the assurance and feedback processes (see below) will be adhered to, ensuring quality of data.

(vii) **Documented Procedures:** in order to minimise errors and achieve good quality data, appropriate procedures and guidance must exist so that staff can be trained and supported in their work. Details of these procedures, processes and training will be in the relevant System Administration manuals and available to all trained staff.

5. Assurance Framework

5.1 Data quality will be subject to internal control (including risk) processes within the Authority and to external scrutiny in the following ways:

(i) all information systems and processes will have routines developed and designed to systematically identify errors and other aspects of poor data quality;

(ii) data will be checked and verifi ed, then validated at the appropriate level prior to being reported (both internally and externally);

(iii) data quality issues will be integrated with regular performance reports and considered by the appropriate monitoring body, which will make recommendations regarding the improvement of data quality;

(iv) data quality reports will be routinely fed back to operational managers with advice as to corrective action to be taken, such as improving processes and systems and staff training and development; and

(v) audit of performance indicators and data quality by external auditors.

5.2 The Council will aim to be significantly above average in the data quality of all its indicators, and will strive for 100% accuracy. The Council will act on all enquiries made by service users, stakeholders, officers and Members, as well as undertake remedial action suggested by external inspectors.

6. Issue of Indicator Guidance

6.1 The Policy and Performance Officer responsible for data quality will, every two weeks (as a minimum), visit the Audit Commission website to ascertain whether updated indicator guidance has been issued. Should the Audit Commission issue new guidance this will be formally circulated to Heads of Service as soon as practicable

6.2 Heads of Service will be accountable for ensuring that their 'responsible officers' and their deputies read the amended guidance and, where appropriate, take the necessary action to change systems and processes (including documented procedures).

6.3 As part of the departmental Data Quality arrangements, Heads of Service are responsible for ensuring changes to systems/process are subject to validation checks.

6.4 In addition, should amended guidance require changes to systems/processes these indicators will be assessed proportionate to risk and, where appropriate, subject to Internal Audit review as part of the Internal Audit Plan.

7. Implementation and Compliance

7.1 It is the responsibility of all those accountable to assist the Council in achieving continuous improvement in data quality. All Staff are therefore obliged to adhere to this Standard.

7.2 Managers at all levels are responsible for ensuring that the staff for whom they are responsible are aware of and adhere to this Standard. They are also responsible for ensuring staff are updated in regard to any changes in this Standard.

7.3 The Head of Policy, on behalf of the Chief Executive, will take steps to ensure that Heads of Service and all staff adhere to this Standard.

7.4 In addition to the Corporate Induction Process, the Head of Policy will work with the Head of Organisational Development to ensure that training on data quality is available to Heads of Service and all staff who require it.

8. Data Quality in Partnerships and by Third Parties

8.1 Where the Council is involved in partnership working, although each individual agency/body is ultimately responsible for the data it manages and produces; common protocols are needed to ensure all members of the partnership are committed to and provide data (specifically Kent Agreement 2 and Multi-Area Agreement Indicators), which is of good quality.

8.2 To ensure a common approach, the principles of good data quality set out in this Standard are as a minimum to be adopted, and the Council will show leadership by both holding partners to account for and supporting them in the continuous improvement of their data quality.

8.3 Other than formal partnerships the Council receives data from third parties for example as part of a Service Level Agreement or contract monitoring or other arrangement. In such cases the Council needs to have assurance that the data it receives is of good quality. To ensure a common approach, all third parties shall be expected to adopt the principles of good data quality set out in this Standard.

8.4 Therefore, as part of the Tender process, particularly where it is expected that contract monitoring arrangements will be entered into, those organisations submitting Tenders shall be required to include their own Data Quality Standard or declare that they will adopt the Council Data Quality Standard, and this will form part of the tender selection criteria.

8.5 Provisions for access to data, and the systems that hold and/or produce that data, will form part of any contract to enable the Council to place assurance on the data it receives.

9. Review

9.1 This Standard will be reviewed as and when required.

9.2 The Standard will be supported by an annual Action Plan, which will detail data quality improvement activities.

Contacting Swale Borough Council

The **Customer Service Centre** deals with all enquiries across the Council; it should be your first stop when contacting us. Copies of this Swale Borough Council booklet are available on the Council website www.swale.gov.uk If you would like further hard copies or alternative versions (i.e. large print, audio, different language) we will do our best to accommodate your request please contact the Council at:

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