



# **WEST SOMERSET COUNCIL**

## **Corporate Policy for Data Quality**

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## 1 **Introduction**

West Somerset Council (WSC) recognises the importance reliable information plays in the delivery of excellent customer service. The Council sees data quality as a crucial part of the management of information. The availability of complete, accurate and timely data is acknowledged as a cornerstone for supporting service delivery and demonstrating accountability.

The aim of this document is to set out a framework for collecting, recording, maintaining and presenting data (including information) of the highest quality within West Somerset Council. It is intended that by having regard to this policy, as well as related Council wide policies and procedures, and relevant legislation the Council will facilitate not only the control of the quality of the data it collects, processes and maintains; but also compliance with access to information legislation such as the Freedom of Information Act, 2000

Information is important for the following reasons:

- To support good decision making and effective service delivery
- To monitor the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery
- To plan for the future
- To demonstrate accountability for public expenditure
- To inform stakeholders

Data quality is a crucial pre-requisite to information that is complete, relevant, accurate and timely. It is not possible to apply standard processes to cover the collection, storage and presentation of data, however, a standard approach to the principles of accurate data collection and collation can be applied in order to increase the level of confidence in the quality of data used and that is the objective of this policy.

The core set of data quality requirements can be described by the acronym **ACTIVE** which stands for:

**A**ccuracy  
**C**ompleteness and Coverage  
**T**imeliness  
**I**ntegrity  
**V**alidity  
**E**veryone

An objective evaluation of each of these characteristics provides a framework for establishing standards, assessing data quality performance and setting targets to be achieved.

Specific work on each of the **ACTIVE** dimensions is described in Appendix A. In practice, the various aspects of data quality are all closely inter-linked and cannot be viewed in isolation.

## **2 Scope of Policy**

This policy applies to all employees of West Somerset Council, although it is recognised that certain staff and officers will have a greater responsibility for securing high levels of data quality.

This policy is intended to cover all areas of activity associated with data and information that is collected, managed and used (including data provided to and received from external agencies) by West Somerset Council in the delivery, provision and monitoring of services. Data Quality incorporates all performance measures, including financial reporting and information.

## **3 Responsibilities and Champions**

Data quality is the responsibility of everyone within the Council however certain roles will contribute more directly to improving data quality:

- **The Member Champion** has senior Member responsibility for data quality and is responsible for communicating the importance of data quality to other Members.
- **Cabinet Members** are responsible for working with officers to improve data quality within their portfolio, ensuring identified problems are solved and identifying decision making needs.
- **Corporate Management Team (CMT)** has overall management responsibility for data quality, including ownership of this policy, and is responsible for implementing the data quality strategy and identifying strategic information needs.
- **Group Managers** are responsible for ensuring that data produced in their service areas is accurate, timely and meets relevant guidance, definitions and standards. The Group Manager for Support services has overall strategic responsibility for Data Quality.
- **Performance & Data Quality Group** are responsible for implementing corporate systems and processes to enable data quality standards to be met, act as a liaison point for auditors/inspectors, support staff in meeting audit requirements and annually reviewing this policy in consultation with CMT.
- **Internal Audit** review the Council's data quality and information management arrangements and carry out a risk based programme of audit work.
- **All staff that input, store, retrieve or manage data** must ensure that it is accurate, timely and meets relevant guidance, definitions and standards. Staff who have specific responsibility for data quality have a relevant statement within their job description. There will be a named officer responsible for the calculation of each National Indicator.
- **Partners** that provide performance information must have robust data quality arrangements in place to ensure that all information provided meets the Council's data quality standards. The appropriate systems and checks must be undertaken to ensure we are confident with the quality and accuracy of data being used, which is supplied by partners and from external sources.

## **4 Quality Assurance and Validation**

Within the Council the validation of data will be via the following methods:

Hard copy data:

- At the point of collection, staff should validate the data they collect from individuals or receive from external sources
- Once information is produced for reporting purposes data should be validated for accuracy and consistency via a recognised formal and evidenced process

Soft copy data:

- The Council has many electronic systems for processing data and each will have a validation process appropriate to the system and the data itself

For both hard and soft copy, if any issues of data quality are raised during validation exercises, relevant staff will be informed; system changes made (where applicable) and remedial action documented in the system documentation manual – or other relevant documentation.

It is the Council's intention that, wherever possible, data will be corrected at source.

### **Ensuring relevant & reliable data, working with partners to secure data quality**

The council ensures it secures good quality data through ACTIVE Data Quality Management (see section 7).

The council uses the principle of 'collect once and use numerous times' (COUNT) to underpin data collection and storage. Arrangements for collecting, recording and reporting data are integrated into business planning and management processes, supporting the day-to-day work of staff. Staff understand the reasons for collecting data and how the data are then used. The council clearly defines data requirements, and these focus on strategic objectives and service and people needs. The council considers risks to securing data quality as part of its risk management arrangements and takes appropriate action to manage any risks identified.

The council recognises the valuable contribution staff can make to improving systems and processes for securing data quality. This includes identifying problem areas, obstacles and risks to securing data quality (and therefore producing fit-for-purpose information). The council can demonstrate that improvements in arrangements are driven both from the top of the organisation down, and upwards from managers and staff.

The council clearly defines the approach to recording and reporting data (for example, in its own guidance such as a set of policies or procedures). The council communicates the scope and impact of these policies and applies them consistently. Staff have the knowledge and competencies appropriate to their role in securing data quality. The council trains staff to understand and apply the policies, procedures and guidance, and manages performance.

The council clearly defines, documents and effectively communicates:

- responsibilities for data quality;
- arrangements to comply with legal requirements or relevant national guidance; and
- the risks arising from poor data quality.

These are well understood by staff. Senior management receives appropriate information on data quality issues and takes appropriate action.

There are sound governance arrangements, based on risk, covering data quality for partnerships. For example, data sharing protocols, statements, or service level agreements. The council has also made demonstrable efforts to understand its partners' data flows and data requirements. This helps highlight where possible risks may occur (for example, system transfers) and enables partners to focus resources effectively.

### **Information to support decision making**

Members and officers receive fit-for-purpose information to support their decision making that is:

- relevant to the decision and clear;
- of sufficient quality for the decision to hand; and
- presented in a way decision makers understand.

Presentation takes account of the decision maker's preferences, skills and available time. Information is suitably summarised, for example based on data collected at the appropriate geographical level and over an appropriate time period. It may be triangulated with other available sources of relevant information and supported by professional advice where necessary.

Using resources, for example IT systems, to collect, record, sort and consolidate data effectively will help reduce the administrative burden as well as help to ensure more accurate and timely data. Action is taken to limit the use of manual intervention to produce information. For example, producing information for reporting does not routinely require data transfer for manipulation by small and local systems (for example, databases and spreadsheets). Arrangements are also in place to minimise multiple data sources. The council actively uses data supporting reported information in the decision making process, rather than producing it as a secondary administrative requirement.

## **5 Training and Awareness**

All staff need to recognise the importance of data quality and how they can contribute. The importance of data quality will be addressed with all relevant staff as part of the induction process at the commencement of their employment and will form part of the discussions held during their Performance & Development Reviews (PDRs). Specific/Further training will be identified as part of the PDR process. All staff responsible for data quality will receive appropriate training in the use of systems employed for data collection.

It is the responsibility of individual managers to ensure staff are aware of policies, guidance and procedures in relation to data quality and that associated training needs are identified. All staff will be made aware of the Corporate Policies relating to security and confidentiality of data collection, use of ICT and passwords (these policies give more information on staff responsibilities in relation to data security and sharing of data with third parties). Updated policies will be made available/accessible to all staff via the Portal.

For advice and queries with this policy please contact the Corporate Information Officer or Human Resources.

## **6 Summary**

This document highlights the Council's commitment to improving data quality. It is a high level policy, which is intended to be supported by Service specific data quality processes and procedures, as well as other, related Council wide policies and procedures

## **7 ACTIVE Data Quality Management**

### **Accuracy**

Is the data correct and is it valid?

### **Completeness and Coverage**

*Completeness* describes the proportion of individual data items that are populated in a set of *recorded* data.

*Coverage* assesses the extent to which all relevant records have been captured.

Data must be complete and accurate. Completion rates will be compared to national and local targets where available and the results presented using "traffic light" principles.

### Timeliness

Information for decision-making needs to be based on data that is accurate, complete and up-to-date. Experience has shown that data quality suffers when long delays occur and backlogs build up and it is often difficult to recover from these situations. Different timeliness criteria will be appropriate for each element of the Council's services, as detailed in service plans.

### Integrity

Data integrity embraces all the ACTIVE characteristics. It is also concerned with the physical security of data and technical considerations about how data is stored managed and processed. All these factors can have an adverse affect on data quality and any information derived from it. Users need to be confident not only of the accuracy and completeness of data, but also that it has not been tampered with or corrupted once entered and processed through our computer systems.

### Validity

Data must be valid in the context in which it is being used. Granting a 20 year old an Old Aged Pensioner's Travel pass is almost certainly invalid. Seemingly valid data can be invalid because of the context in which it is being used and this is much harder to spot.

Modern computer systems that make use of drop-down lists promote first level validation by ensuring that data selections fall within a pre-defined set of terms. Further validation can be achieved through the application of rules and mandatory fields. Systems based solutions should be used wherever possible as they enforce valid data at the point of entry.

Data quality is greatly enhanced when data providers understand the 'upstream' context from where the data is generated and the 'downstream' uses that are going to be made of the data collected. This is reinforced when data providers or their immediate colleagues are actually users of the information themselves or of data provided by other parts of the service.

Service Specialists have a crucial role in promoting data quality by ensuring all staff are adequately trained and fully understand their link in the 'data chain'.

### Everyone

All staff are responsible for the accuracy, completeness, timeliness, integrity and validity of the data, even where the recording of this data is delegated to other staff.

Some staff will have specific responsibilities for data which link to both their job description. Data recording is not a matter of "I'll fit it in when I can", or "It distracts from my day-to-day work".

The COUNT principle should also be considered as part of ACTIVE Data Quality Management:

**Collect Once, Use Numerous Times**