

Audit Summary Report

October 2007



Data Quality Review

South Somerset District Council

Audit 2006/07

The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively, to achieve high-quality local and national services for the public. Our remit covers more than 12,000 bodies in England, which between them spend £100 billion of public money each year. Our work covers local government, housing, health, community safety and fire and rescue services.

As an independent watchdog, we provide important information on the quality of public services. As a driving force for improvement in those services, we provide practical recommendations and spread best practice. As an independent auditor, we monitor spending to ensure public services are good value for money.

Status of our reports to the Council

Our reports are prepared in the context of the Statement of Responsibilities of Auditors and Audited Bodies issued by the Audit Commission. Reports are prepared by appointed auditors and addressed to members or officers. They are prepared for the sole use of the audited body, and no responsibility is taken by auditors to any member or officer in their individual capacity, or to any third party.

Copies of this report

If you require further copies of this report, or a copy in large print, in Braille, on tape, or in a language other than English, please call 0845 0560566.

© Audit Commission 2007

For further information on the work of the Commission please contact:

Audit Commission, 1st Floor, Millbank Tower, Millbank, London SW1P 4HQ

Tel: 020 7828 1212 Fax: 020 7976 6187 Textphone (minicom): 020 7630 0421

www.audit-commission.gov.uk

Contents

Background	4
Scope and Objectives	4
Conclusions	5
Acknowledgement	5
Findings	6
Management arrangements (stage 1)	6
Checks on performance indicators (stages 2 & 3)	9
Appendix 1 – Recommendations	10
Appendix 2 – Agreed changes to PIs	12
Appendix 3 – Action Plan	13

Background

- 1 Public services need reliable, accurate and timely information with which to manage services, inform users and account for performance. Service providers make many, often complex, decisions about their priorities and the use of resources. Service users and members of the public more widely, need accessible information to make informed decisions. Regulators and government departments need information to satisfy their responsibilities for making judgements about performance and governance.
- 2 Much time and money is spent on the activities and systems involved in collecting and analysing the data which underlies performance information, yet there remains a prevailing lack of confidence in much of this data. As increasing reliance is placed on this information in performance management and assessment regimes, the need for reliable data has become more critical.

Performance information and decision making

- 3 Good quality data is the essential ingredient for reliable performance and financial information to support decision making. The data used to report on performance must be fit for purpose, represent an organisation's activity in an accurate and timely manner. At the same time there must be a balance between the use and importance of the information, and the cost of collecting the required data to the necessary level of accuracy.
- 4 Public bodies can improve the quality of their data by identifying the performance information that is important to them and their stakeholders, and securing the quality of the data to support these information needs. This is more likely if the performance information is routinely used for the day to day planning and management of services, and the people who collect the data understand its importance.

Scope and objectives

- 5 The Audit Commission has developed a three-stage approach to the review of data quality comprising:

Stage 1	Management arrangements The objective is 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 audited body's arrangements to secure value for money (the VFM conclusion).
---------	---

Stage 2	<p>Completeness check</p> <p>An arithmetic check of calculations for Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs), and selection of a sample for testing based on risk assessment. The sample has been drawn from two key service areas: environment and housing.</p>
Stage 3	<p>Data quality spot checks</p> <p>In-depth review of a sample of PIs (from a list of specified BVPIs and non-BVPIs) to determine whether arrangements to secure data quality are delivering accurate, timely and accessible information.</p>

Conclusions

- 6 South Somerset District Council has data quality arrangements in place which are performing well and consistently above minimum requirements.
- 7 The Council is making good progress since last year's data quality review and is effectively developing its arrangements to secure the quality of data used to manage and report on performance. The Council defines its expectations and requirements. There are a number of effective systems and processes in place to secure the quality of data and the Council has the right capacity to ensure good data quality. There are effective arrangements in place to ensure that good quality data is used to manage performance and help deliver service improvement. As a result, the Council is a better position to use its information to good effect.
- 8 The Council has improved its data quality in indicators BV82a and BV82b and BV183b. A review of BV199a, b and c has been carried out for the first time this year and these BVPIs were accurately calculated. However, some minor improvements to record keeping are recommended. In addition, as a result of the stage 2 and stage 3 audit, a reservation has been recorded against the HIP HSSA indicator.
- 9 The Council is invited to develop an action plan and set out responsibilities and target dates to address recommendations for improvement which are set out in Appendix 1.
- 10 Appendix 2 notes changes to performance indicators that have been agreed with the council following data quality spot checks.

Acknowledgement

- 11 Our thanks are due to council officers and councillors during this review.

Findings

Management arrangements (stage 1)

- 12 An assessment of the Council's corporate management arrangements for data quality is based on evidence obtained from the following sources:
- knowledge of the Council and its performance management arrangements, including the results of previous audit and inspection work, and reviews of performance indicators;
 - document reviews; and
 - interviews and discussions with officers and councillors.
- 13 This information was used to make judgements on the Council's arrangements in the following five areas, using the Audit Commission's key lines of enquiry:

Review theme	Audit focus
Governance and leadership	Is there a corporate framework of management and accountability for data quality, with a commitment to securing a culture of data quality throughout the organisation?
Policies and procedures	Are there appropriate policies and procedures in place to secure the quality of data recorded and reported by the organisation?
Systems and processes	Has the organisation put in place systems and processes which secure the quality of data as part of the normal business activity of the organisation?
People and skills	Has the organisation put in place arrangements to ensure that staff have the appropriate knowledge, competencies and capacity for their roles in relation to data quality?
Data use	Has the body put in place arrangements that are focused on ensuring that data supporting performance information is also used to manage and improve the delivery of services.

- 14 The Council's arrangements were assessed overall, by using the following criteria:
- Below minimum requirements – inadequate performance
 - Meeting minimum requirements – adequate performance
 - Consistently above minimum requirements – performing well
 - Well above minimum requirements – performing strongly.

Stage 1 conclusions

- 15 South Somerset District Council has arrangements in place which are consistently above minimum requirements and therefore performing well.
- 16 A summary of the Council's strengths and areas which it needs to improve its management arrangements include the following:

Governance and leadership

- 17 Clear officer and councillor roles are supporting a stronger and more consistent approach to data quality. The Council's data quality strategy is aiming at the right areas and is supporting a clearer and stronger corporate approach. This is a clear improvement on last year. There is a clear link to other strategies including the corporate plan and with corporate governance arrangements. Appropriate data quality is in place.

Recommendation

R1 Ensure that the Council's data quality strategy continues to be effectively integrated into service planning arrangements and into other strategic documents.

Policies and procedures

- 18 The Council is defining its expectations and requirements in relation to data quality. Its data quality strategy is underpinned by a good set of policies, procedures and guidance. Staff have access to these. Policies cover many aspects of partnership working and these are currently being updated. The Council has addressed weaknesses in this area since last year. However, the data quality strategy is new and its impact is unclear.

Recommendation

R2 Ensure that the data quality strategy is regularly reviewed and assessed for impact. For example, reviewing the strategy in accordance with the Council's document review. Measures of success could include an assessment of the accuracy and quality of performance information provided to and from service managers, and from partners.

Systems and processes

- 19 The Council is effectively developing its systems and processes to help secure the quality of data. Arrangements for the recording and reporting data are well integrated into the Council's wider business management processes. Control and security arrangements are good, however, formal protocols or standards have not been developed or reviewed for all relevant partnerships.

Recommendations

- R3 Ensure the approach to both internal and external data sharing is consistent and adopt formal data-sharing protocols as appropriate to the size and nature of each partnership.*
- R4 Clarify whether staff understand and follow data quality policies and procedures and apply them consistently throughout the organisation.*

People and skills

- 20 South Somerset District Council is clearly communicating the responsibilities of staff and councillors in delivering its aims for data quality. Specific skills and responsibilities in relation to data quality are identified. The Council is providing training to ensure that staff and councillors have the necessary skills and knowledge in relation to data quality, however, the impact of training is not always clear.

Recommendation

- R5 Continue to ensure that staff and councillors are clear about the quality of performance data that they are expected to give and receive.*

Data use

- 21 There are effective arrangements for the use of data for performance management and service improvement. Reported performance information is actively used in the decision making process. Performance information is subject to an effective system of internal control and validation, however, processes for checking all external data are currently underdeveloped.

Recommendations

- R6 Demonstrate that external data that is used to measure performance is appropriately checked, in particular for:*
- satisfaction data and public health data on groups of citizens that may be harder to reach; and
 - financial data from groups that receive council grants or partnership funding.

- 22 The Council is invited to develop an action plan which sets out responsibilities and target dates to address the issues set out in Appendix 1.

Checks on performance indicators (stages 2 & 3)

- 23 Our stage 2 and 3 checks included detailed spot checks on the following performance indicators:
- BV82a-recycling performance.
 - BV82b-composting performance.
 - BV199a, b and c - cleanliness of public spaces.
 - BV183b-average stay in hostel accommodation.
 - HIP HSSA - private sector homes vacant for more than six months.

Stage 2 and 3 conclusions

- 24 BV82a - The Council has improved its arrangements for the verification of data provided by ECT. For example, spot checks of the contractor's weighbridge tickets are undertaken by council staff to ensure their accuracy. The indicator has been accurately calculated in accordance with relevant audit guidance. Supporting working papers are adequate and there are suitable checks in place for documentation provided by third parties.
- 25 BV82b - The improvements made in the production of BV82a are mirrored in the calculation of this indicator.
- 26 BV199a, b and c - The Council's calculation of these indicators is well supported by clear and concise working papers. However, some weaknesses were found including not indicating the time when surveys were undertaken and in undertaking surveys after litter collections. Despite some differences to audit guidance the indicators are fairly stated.
- 27 BV183b - Despite early problems in validating the reported figure, further work undertaken by council staff helped clarify how the indicator was calculated. As a result the indicator is now calculated in accordance with the guidance and therefore is fairly stated. Improvements to working papers and system documentation are placing the Council in a better position to improve the accuracy and quality of documentation.
- 28 HIP HSSA - No improvements have been made due to long-term absences within the housing management section. During the course of audit work, new arrangements for the collection of this indicator were introduced by the head of revenues. Unfortunately this was not carried out in time to meet audit deadlines. Therefore a reservation was made for this indicator.
- 29 Appendix 2 outlines changes to performance indicators that have been agreed with the Council following data quality spot checks.
- 30 Recommendations for improvement are also shown in Appendix 1 and should be included in the Council's action plan contained in Appendix 3.

Appendix 1 – Recommendations

The following recommendations are made to help strengthen the Council's data quality management arrangements:

Review theme	Recommendations from stage 1
Governance and leadership	Ensure that the Council's data quality strategy is effectively integrated into service planning arrangements and into other strategic documents as appropriate.
Policies and procedures	Ensure that the data quality strategy is regularly reviewed and assessed for impact. For example, reviewing the strategy in accordance with the Council's document review and service planning timetable. Measures of success could include an assessment of the accuracy and quality of performance information provided to and from service managers, and from partners.
Systems and processes	Enhance the approach to both internal and external data sharing is consistent and adopt formal data-sharing protocols as appropriate to the size and nature of each partnership.
People and skills	Continue to ensure that staff are clear about the quality of performance data that they are expected to aim for, give and receive.
Data use	Demonstrate that external data that is used to measure performance is appropriately checked, in particular for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • satisfaction data and public health data on groups of citizens that may be harder to reach; and • financial data from groups that receive council grants or partnership funding.
Review theme Recommendations	Recommendations from stage 2 and 3.
BV199a, b and c cleanliness of public spaces	Ensure that times of surveys are recorded on all working papers where this is a data field. Ensure that surveys are undertaken in accordance with relevant guidance, such as within relevant hours of the day, and avoiding inspection immediately after litter collections.
BV183b average stay in hostel accommodation	Improve the management arrangements, monitoring and review of this indicator in line with improvements already identified by the Council.

Review theme	Recommendations from stage 1
HIP HSSA private sector homes vacant for more than six months	Improve the quality of supporting working papers and demonstrate that the new proposed system and audit trail is fully effective.

Appendix 2 – Agreed changes to PIs

The following changes to performance indicators were agreed following stage 2 and stage 3 audit work:

Performance indicator	Changes agreed (and recommendations)
BV183b	This figure will be amended to 12.03 weeks for the 2006/07 year.

Appendix 3 – Action Plan

Page no.	Recommendation	Priority 1 = Low 2 = Med 3 = High	Responsibility	Agreed	Council comments	Date
7	R1 Ensure that the Council's data quality strategy continues to be effectively integrated into service planning arrangements and into other strategic documents as appropriate.	2	CDC	Yes	Service Planning guidance ensures all key strategies are embedded at a delivery level.	March 2008
7	R2 Ensure that the data quality strategy is regularly reviewed and assessed for impact. For example, reviewing the strategy in accordance with the Council's document review. Measures of success could include an assessment of the accuracy and quality of performance information provided to and from service managers, and from partners.	1	CGG CDC Performance Officer	Yes	Strategy details the monitoring and review process to be adopted.	June 2008
7	R3 Ensure the approach to both internal and external data sharing is consistent and adopt formal data-sharing protocols as appropriate to the size and nature of each partnership.	2	CDC & HoS	Yes	Partner data sharing protocol in place. Review of partnership undertaken as part of service planning arrangements. Partnership governance arrangement framework in place.	March 2008

14 Data Quality Review | Appendix 3 – Action Plan

Page no.	Recommendation	Priority 1 = Low 2 = Med 3 = High	Responsibility	Agreed	Council comments	Date
8	R4 Continue to ensure that staff are clear about the quality of performance data that they are expected to aim for, give and receive.	2	CDC	Yes	Data Quality training regularly delivered to all key staff and those with data quality responsibilities.	March 2008
8	R5 Demonstrate that external data that is used to measure performance is appropriately checked, in particular for: - satisfaction data and public health data on groups of citizens that may be harder to reach; and - financial data from groups that receive council grants or partnership funding.	1	CDC CDC CDHWB Head of finance	Yes	External survey (BVPI 2006) conducted by MORI showed sample size too small for hard to reach groups. SSDC carrying out equalities impact assessments for individual services the results of which are used to identify 'data gaps' and systems to be introduced to address these areas through service planning. Revised grant agreements to include periodic sample checks on submissions from groups. Partnership agreements clearly outline monitoring arrangements.	March 2008
9	R6 Ensure that times of surveys for BV199a, b and c (cleanliness of public spaces) are recorded on all working papers where this is a data field. Ensure that surveys are undertaken in accordance with relevant guidance, such as within relevant hours of the day, and avoiding inspection immediately after litter collections.	2	CDE	Yes	Processes to be updated to ensure recommendations at embedded in to our processes.	March 2008 and ongoing

Page no.	Recommendation	Priority 1 = Low 2 = Med 3 = High	Responsibility	Agreed	Council comments	Date
9	R7 Improve the management arrangements, monitoring and review of indicator BV183b (average stay in hostel accommodation) in line with improvements already identified by the Council.	2	CDHWB	Yes	Arrangements have already been adopted and new practices put in place	March 2008 and ongoing
9	R8 Improve the quality of supporting working papers for the HIP HSSA indicator (private sector homes vacant for more than six months) and demonstrate that the new proposed system and audit trail is fully effective.	2	CDHWB	Yes	Arrangements have already been adopted and new practices put in place.	March 2008 and ongoing