

# Data Quality

South Hams District Council

Audit 2007/08



---

# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Summary conclusions</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Detailed findings</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Appendix 1 – Action Plan</b>	<b>10</b>

---

## 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.
-

# 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**

<b>Stage 1</b>	<b>Management arrangements</b> 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).
<b>Stage 2</b>	<b>Analytical review</b> An analytical review of <b>2007/08</b> BVPI and non-BVPI data and selection of a sample for testing based on risk assessment.
<b>Stage 3</b>	<b>Data quality spot checks</b> In-depth review of a sample of <b>2007/08</b> 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.

---

# Summary conclusions

## Stage 1 – Management arrangements

- 5 The Council's overall management arrangements for ensuring data quality are consistently above minimum requirements.
- 6 Our detailed findings attached highlight a number of areas of strength but also some areas where improvement is required. These are reflected in our recommendations and action plan (appendix 1).

## Stage 2 – Analytical review

- 7 Our analytical review work at Stage 2 identified that all the PI values for the specified BVPIs fell within expected ranges, with the exception of BVPI 82b ( Household waste management, composting).The Council have provided a satisfactory explanation of this variance and have provided evidence to demonstrate that it represented an improvement in service provision.

## Stage 3 – Data quality spot checks

- 8 Our review and spot checks of PIs was restricted to the two compulsory housing benefits PIs. We found that both these PIs were materially fairly stated (a misstatement of more than 10 per cent is considered as being material).
- 9 In total we reviewed 55 housing benefit claims:
  - 25 new claims within BVPIs 78a and
  - 30 changes of circumstances within BVPI 78b.
- 10 The review identified 5 claims in which data had been incorrectly recorded (1 new claim and 4 changes of circumstance).
- 11 A recommendation for strengthening data quality in this area is included in our action plan (appendix 1).

---

## Next steps

- 12 The council is asked to complete the action plan at appendix 1 and to monitor its implementation.

---

## Acknowledgement

- 13 Out thanks are due to officers who helped us during the data quality review.

---

# Detailed findings

---

## Management arrangements (Stage 1)

**14** Overall, the Council's corporate arrangements for data quality are consistently above minimum requirements

### Governance and leadership

**15** The Council has put in place a robust corporate framework for management and accountability of data quality and remains committed to securing a culture of data quality throughout the organisation.

**16** The framework includes a clear set of data quality objectives and clearly defined responsibilities for data quality at a corporate, service and member level.

**17** The Council has continued to develop good arrangements for its monitoring and reviewing of data quality in response to internal and external audit reports.

### Policies

**18** The Council has put in place an organisational data quality policy to support the delivery of its data quality objectives. The policy is supported by more detailed procedures and guidance at both a corporate and service level.

**19** We noted that Internal Audit's review of performance data has identified that procedures and guidance are not always followed by staff. As a result, the data used for the monitoring and reporting of performance is not always accurate, although internal audit arrangements result in errors being corrected at a later stage.

**20** Internal Audit's findings are supported by our spot checking of housing benefit performance indicators at Stage 3.

Recommendation
<b>R1</b> The Council should review its arrangements to ensure that procedures and guidance at both a corporate and service level are fully understood and followed by officers and staff involved in the production of performance data.

### Systems and processes

**21** Our review identified that the Council has put in place systems and processes designed to secure the quality of data as part of its normal business activity. There is a robust and secure corporate system in place for the collection, recording, analysis and reporting of data used to monitor performance.

**22** The Council will need to continue to develop its systems and processes which support performance management in a partnership context. Without these systems and processes in place there is a risk that the data supplied by partners and other third

parties may be less reliable than the Council's own data or may not be supplied on a timely basis.

### Recommendation

**R2** The Council should continue to develop its partnership arrangements for securing data quality.

### People and skills

- 23** The Council has clearly communicated to staff their responsibilities in relation to data quality and has put in place arrangements to ensure that staff have the necessary skills to carry out these responsibilities.
- 24** Although these responsibilities have not yet been formally incorporated into job descriptions in all cases, staff are clear what is expected of them and managers monitor performance and identify training needs through the appraisal process.
- 25** The capacity of the Council to provide advice, training and support to staff on data quality issues has been strengthened through the merger of the South Hams and West Devon Improvement Units. The work of Internal Audit in auditing performance data helps to identify staff with additional training needs. These arrangements are increasing the Council's capacity to deliver its data quality objectives.

### Recommendation

**R3** The Council should incorporate data quality responsibilities into staff job descriptions.

### Data use and reporting

- 26** We identified that the Council has strong arrangements for the use of performance data to monitor and report on performance but its procedures for validating this data could be improved.
- 27** Performance data is presented clearly in the annual report and other performance reports, with explanations provided where there are variances from expected levels of performance. The data is regularly reviewed by officers at a corporate and service level and by members who have direct access to the corporate performance information system.
- 28** The Council's validation procedures include an Internal Audit review of all BVPI data. However, this is carried out after the data has been submitted to the Audit Commission and published in the performance plan which means that any post audit corrections to the data have to be published at a later date.

### Recommendation

**R4** The timing of validation procedures should be reviewed with the aim of improving the accuracy of data used to inform decision-making and report publicly on performance.

## Detailed findings

### Analytical review (Stage 2)

29 An analytical review of the following BVPIs was carried out. The findings are shown below.

**Table 2 Analytical review findings**

<b>2007/08 Performance indicator</b>	<b>Assessment</b>	<b>Comment</b>
Our Stage 2, analytical review work identified that all the PI values for the specified BVPIs and non-BVPIs fell within expected ranges, with the exception of BVPI 82b.		
Average time for processing new claims for housing and council tax benefits (BV78a)	Variance from 2006/07 and value within Audit Commission parameters	Mandatory spot check undertaken, see Stage 3
Speed of processing: change in circumstances for housing and council tax benefit claims) (BV78b)	Variance from 2006/07 and value within Audit Commission parameters	Mandatory spot check undertaken, see Stage 3
Recycling performance (BV82a)	Variance from 2006/07 and value within Audit Commission parameters	No comment
Composting performance (BV82b)	Variance from 2006/07 attributable to real performance improvement.	Identified an increased public awareness of recycling facilities particularly composting and improved reporting mechanisms post service restructure.
Percentage of pedestrian crossings with facilities for disabled people (BV165)	Variance from 2006/07 and value within Audit Commission parameters	No comment
Cleanliness of public places (BV199a, b and c)	Variance from 2006/07 and value within Audit Commission parameters	No comment

### Data quality spot checks (Stage 3)

30 Our review and spot checks of PIs covered the two compulsory housing benefits PIs. Our findings are shown below.

**Table 3 Spot check findings**

Performance indicator	Assessment	Comment
We concluded that both of the housing benefit PIs were fairly stated but identified a significant number of recording errors. Our findings and conclusions are detailed below;		
Housing Benefits - Average time for processing new claims for housing and council tax benefits. BVPI 78a	Fairly stated	<p>Sample test of 25 new claims, (consisting of 10 council tax, 10 rent allowance and 5 Non HRA claims).</p> <p>Our spot check identified one claim in which data had been incorrectly recorded. This error was due to the user entering an incorrect determination date.</p> <p>The remaining new claims sampled were fairly stated and the overall error rate was within the materially tolerable limits.</p>
Housing Benefits - Speed of processing: change in circumstances for housing and council tax benefit claims BVPI 78b	Fairly stated	<p>Sample test of 30 changes of circumstance (consisting of 10 council tax, 10 rent allowance and 10 Non HRA claims).</p> <p>Our spot check identified four claims in which data had been incorrectly recorded. Three of these errors were due to the users entering incorrect start or determination dates.</p> <p>The remaining error related</p>

## Detailed findings

Performance indicator	Assessment	Comment
		<p>to a claim made by telephone, which had not been followed by written confirmation from the claimant, as required by HB/CTB circular - A3/2007</p> <p>The remaining changes of circumstances sampled were fairly stated and the overall error rate was within the materially tolerable limits.</p>

- 31** Although the error rate from spot checks is within the tolerable limits and is materially correct overall, there were still a high percentage of errors, 5 in the 55 tested (9.09%).
- 32** Housing Benefit staff had not received any formal data quality training during the year. Training should be implemented, focusing on problem areas, to help ensure the integrity of benefits data quality in the future.

### Recommendation

- R5** Housing benefit staff should be trained to ensure that they are fully aware of data quality requirements.

# Appendix 1 – Action Plan

Page no.	Recommendation	Priority 1 = Low 2 = Med 3 = High	Responsibility	Agreed	Comments	Date
	Data Quality					
	R1 The Council should review its arrangements to ensure that procedures and guidance at both a corporate and service level are fully understood and followed by officers and staff involved in the production of performance data.	3	Improvement Programme Manager and Head of Improvement Unit	Yes	Meetings are to take place with Heads of Service prior to the preparation of Service Plans where this will be stressed. A Half Yearly meeting of all officers responsible for data production will take place to reinforce procedures	5 January 2009
	R2 The Council should continue to develop its partnership arrangements for securing data quality.	2	Improvement Programme Manager and Head of Improvement Unit	Yes	This will be fully developed within the preparation work for CAA.	5 January 2009
	R3 The Council should incorporate data quality responsibilities into staff job descriptions.	2	Heads of Service and Human Resources	Yes	Data quality responsibilities are already included in some posts. They will be include in all appropriate staff job descriptions either as posts change or at next appraisal whichever is earlier.	6 January 2009

## Detailed findings

Page no.	Recommendation	Priority 1 = Low 2 = Med 3 = High	Responsibility	Agreed	Comments	Date
	R4 The timing of validation procedures should be reviewed with the aim of improving the accuracy of data used to inform decision-making and report publicly on performance.	3	Internal Audit	Yes	<p>The reason why the audit of BVPIs has previously been carried out after the submission to the Audit Commission is purely one of resources. The small Internal Audit team have many essential tasks to fulfil between April and June each year, some subject to the scrutiny of the Audit Commission e.g. Annual Governance Statement etc. The BVPI audit was the single biggest area in the Internal Audit Plan for 2008/09 (7%), given the high number of Indicators receiving coverage.</p> <p>There is no requirement to complete the audit of BVPIs prior to submission to the Audit Commission, but with the introduction of the new and lower number of National Indicators Internal Audit will make efforts to cover the key indicators before the results are sent</p>	13 January 2009

Page no.	Recommendation	Priority 1 = Low 2 = Med 3 = High	Responsibility	Agreed	Comments	Date
	R5 Housing benefit staff should be trained to ensure that they are fully aware of data quality requirements.	3	Jane Hayward Benefits Manager	Yes	<p>There are a large number of regulations which govern the start date of a claim and therefore there is a high risk that the Officer can choose an incorrect date to enter onto the system. For this reason Benefit Assessment staff receive high levels of training on the rules including regular refresher training. SHDC belongs to the Devon Training partnership for Benefits, this being a cost effective way to deliver intensive training. During this financial year all assessment staff have been on a program of refresher training which includes training on effective dates.</p> <p>In addition the service has a dedicated Quality Assurance Officer who's sole role is to check for errors on a sample basis (often targeted at individual assessors) and to look for any emerging patterns to inform our training plans. Errors are reported by her to individual assessors on a case by case basis, as well as forming part of their individual performance meetings held on a 3 monthly basis with their line management. If individual error rates are considered to be particularly high for that 3 months then the assessor is given a target to improve this before the next meeting.</p>	27 January 2009