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**The Council Plan  
2023-2027**

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**Data Quality Guidance**

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## 1.0 Introduction

This guide forms part of a set of guidance documents developed to support the delivery of the Council Plan 2023-27. The purpose of this guide is to support the Council and its partners to improve and maintain data quality. Good quality data leads to accurate performance information which in turn informs better decision-making, prioritisation, and planning. The guide presents a set of standards based on best practice research, the adoption of which will lead to improved data quality and consistency across the Council and its partners.

## 2.0 Definitions

The terms 'data', 'information' and 'insight' are often used interchangeably. This guide focuses on data; the basic facts from which information can be produced by processing or analysis. A set of key definitions is set out below:

- Data – the numbers, words or images that have yet to be organised or analysed to answer a specific question.
- Information – produced through processing, manipulating, and organising data to answer questions, adding to the knowledge of the receiver.
- Knowledge – what is known by people interpreting the information received adding relevance to clarify the insights the information contains.

## 3.0 The Importance of Data Quality

Maintaining good data quality supports the Performance Management Framework and the 'analyse, plan, do, review' business planning model. It provides the foundation for on-going business improvement and helps us to:

- Present a fair picture of performance to enable informed decision-making and effective service planning.
- Measure the effectiveness and efficiency of our services to the public.
- Benchmark cost and performance with our peers.

Performance data is also used by external assessors to inform Audits, Peer Reviews and Ofsted inspections to judge our performance as an organisation. This places a bigger emphasis on the need to demonstrate that the underlying data is reliable and of good quality.

Producing data that is fit for purpose should not be the end in itself but an integral part of our operational, performance management and governance arrangements. Organisations that put data quality at the heart of their performance management systems are most likely to be actively managing data in all aspects of day-to-day business and turning this data into reliable insight for decision-making.

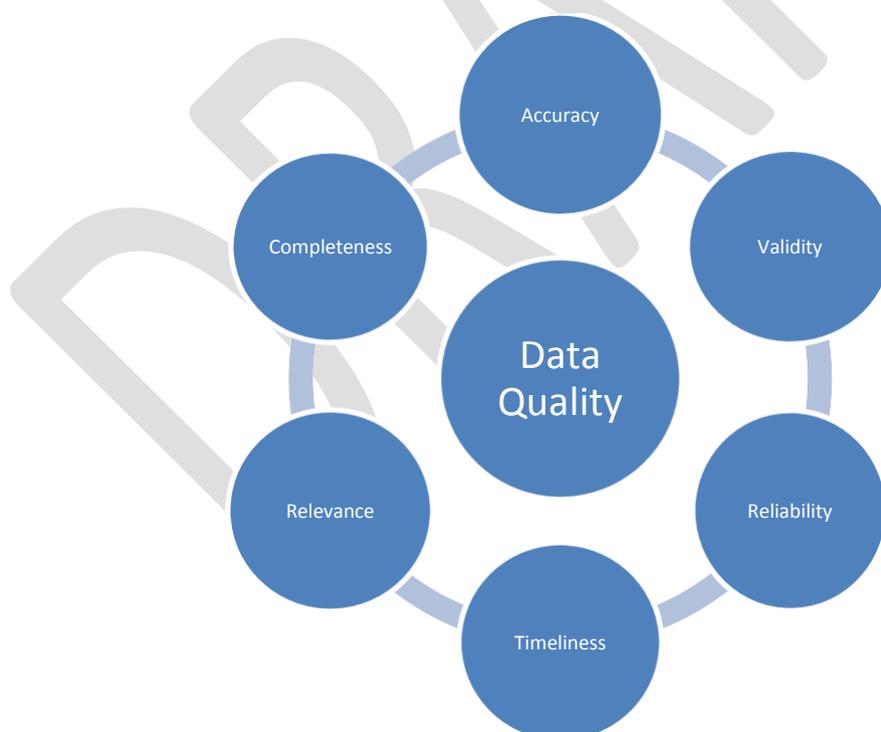
## 4.0 Responsibility for Data Quality

Good quality data is the essential ingredient for reliable performance and financial information. The data must be fit for purpose representing, in an accurate and timely manner, an organisation's activity. A balance must also be achieved between the importance of the information achieved and the cost of collecting the supporting data. To achieve this balance there is a need to determine the information priorities and appropriate systems to secure the quality of data to support these needs.

The risk in not identifying and addressing weaknesses in data quality or the arrangements that underpin data collection and reporting is that information may be misleading, decision-making may be flawed, and resources may be wasted. There is also a danger that good performance may not be recognised and acknowledged.

## 5.0 Standards for Good Quality Data

Data quality can be described using six key characteristics or standards. These provide the basis to assess that quality of data and take action to address potential weaknesses:



**Figure 1: Data quality key characteristics**

### **Accuracy**

Data should be sufficiently accurate for their intended purposes. Data should be captured once only and as close to the point of activity as possible, as this is most likely to ensure their accuracy. The need for accuracy must be balanced with the importance of the uses for the data as well as the cost and effort of calculation. In some cases, it may be appropriate to accept some degree of inaccuracy where timeliness is important. Where compromises are made on accuracy, those resulting limitations of the data should be clear to users. However, this is unlikely to be appropriate in the case of published performance indicators.

### **Validity**

Data should be recorded and comply with relevant requirements including the correct application of any rules or definitions. This will ensure consistency between periods, measuring what is intended to be measured. Where proxy data are used to compensate in the absence of actual data, organisations must consider how well these data are able to satisfy the intended purpose.

### **Reliability**

Data should reflect stable and consistent data collection processes across collection points and over time. Managers and stakeholders should be confident that performance progress reflects real changes rather than variations in data collection approaches or methods.

### **Timeliness**

Data should be captured as quickly as possible after the event or activity and must be available for the intended use within a reasonable time-period. Data must be available quickly and frequently enough to support information needs and to influence service or management decisions.

### **Relevance**

Data captured should be relevant to the purposes for which they are used. This entails periodic review of requirements to reflect changing needs. Quality assurance and feedback processes should regularly be carried out to ensure the quality of such data.

### **Completeness**

Data requirements should be clearly specified based on the information needs and data collection processes matched to these requirements. Monitoring missing, incomplete, or invalid records can provide an indication of data quality and can also point to problems in the recording of certain data items.

These standards must be balanced with the importance and intended use of the data concerned. In some cases, data may be considered fit for purpose despite some known limitations: for example, some degree of accuracy may be sacrificed to produce data more quickly where this is a priority. Where data quality limitations exist, these must be clear to the users of the data. The existence of a clear and checkable audit trail is also essential.

## **6.0 Managing Data Quality**

### **6.1 Governance and Accountability**

In terms of hierarchy, the Council Plan is the primary strategic driver for the Council. The Plan outlines the key priorities for the borough and the approaches that will be pursued towards delivering against these priorities.

An outcome framework has been developed in support of the Wirral Plan which sets out the key outcomes we are seeking to achieve and the key performance measures we will use to demonstrate that we are delivering these outcomes. The framework highlights the sources of data that will be used to evidence progress and appropriate benchmarking where this is available.

A Performance Management Framework (PMF) guide has been developed this sets out the governance and accountability arrangements for delivering the Council Plan and the underpinning deliverables.

The PMF will be reviewed and refreshed on an annual basis to ensure the performance measures being used continue to be relevant and new measures are developed where appropriate. The annual review will also be used to quality assure the data being used as part of those performance measures.

### **6.2 Policies and Procedures**

There is a need to ensure data are recorded accurately and in accordance with prescribed definitions. These definitions will be set out in the design of an indicator. For each measure, a specification that sets out data sources and how the data will be used to measure performance will be developed. The specification set out how each measure fits into the national and local policy context, any available benchmarking and where appropriate a set of tolerances for performance reporting to determine whether performance is on or off track throughout the year.

### **6.3 Systems and Processes**

Arrangements for collecting, recording, and reporting data are integrated with the business planning and management processes of the Council. Where possible, data should be collected and reported once only, on the principle of 'getting it right first time', with limited, if any, manual intervention. The aim should be to avoid waste in the form of time and money spent on duplicated recording, cleansing data, interfacing between different information systems, matching, and consolidating data from multiple databases and developing or maintaining multiple, often outdated, systems. This will help to reduce the burden of administration as well as helping to ensure more accurate and timely data.

The Council utilises information technology to optimise the collection, integration and

reporting of data to increase efficiency. This includes the utilisation of Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) to access datasets and reporting tools to automate reporting.

Across the Council and its partners, numerous information systems and databases are used. Periodically these will need to be reviewed to ensure they are fit for purpose and that data is being collected in line with relevant policies and definitions.

## **6.4 People and Skills**

All staff involved in managing data and performance management must be accountable for data quality and understand the need to follow prescribed definitions and agreed procedures. The performance management framework sets out clear lines of reporting and accountability within the performance management process.

There is a need to ensure that staff at all levels, have the appropriate knowledge, competencies, and capacity for their role in relation to data quality. This should be reviewed through staff performance appraisal processes, with any training or development needs being identified and provided.

## **6.5 Data Use and Reporting**

To ensure the Council can evidence progress in delivering the pledges set out in the Council Plan, data collected will be used to support published performance reports. These in turn will be actively used to support the decision-making process. Where performance measures are reliant on data being provided by other organisations, data sharing protocols will be developed to ensure there is clarity regarding data use and that appropriate controls and security are in place.

## **6.6 Single Source of Truth**

The Council operates to a 'single source of truth' concept which works to ensure that wherever possible everyone in an organisation bases business decisions on the same data. The Council utilises digital reporting tools directly linked to key systems and data sets that delivers intelligence and data in an accessible way that can be used by across the entire organisation. This provides a range of benefits to the organisation including all stakeholders using the same data and insight to make decisions and reduced organisational costs and increased efficiency.

## **7.0 Key Contacts**

For further data quality and performance management guidance contact Wirral Intelligence Service:

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