

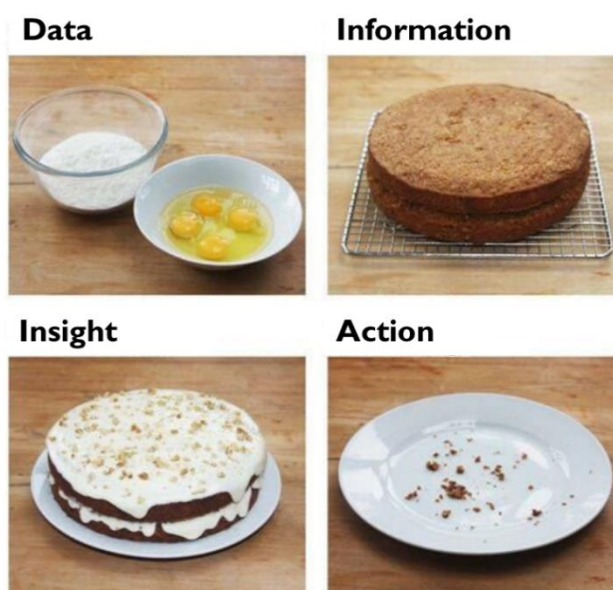
Appendix A – What do we mean by data?

Discussions with officers from across the council, as part of the Data Review in 2021, highlighted the varying ways that we perceive data. Often this will depend on the officer's role. For example, in our survey many officers from front-line services indicated that they primarily use data for casework and their interaction with data is through line of business systems (e.g. Liquid Logic). Other officers perceive data more terms of quantitative reports or dashboards, while some look at it more broadly, for example in terms of service user feedback or customer complaints, which is often in the form of qualitative data.

These are all valid views, but the difference in perception highlights the need to be clear about our definition of data.

One useful distinction to make is the difference between data, information, and insight. Each of these are slightly different, though also closely related. We can use the analogy of baking a cake to illustrate the differences and interconnectedness of these terms.

Using this analogy, we can define each of these terms as follows:



Data is the raw ingredients for our cake, such as flour eggs and sugar. These ingredients are distinct and will have some value on their own. In real terms, this could be just about anything, from a number inputted into an IT system, to a sentence written in a report, to the words spoken during a meeting. All these things are data, and do have value, however they can lack meaning when looked at in isolation or outside of their context. Like the ingredients for our cake, we want to make sure that our data is well looked after, managed, accessible and secure. It is important that we know where to find it when we need it, that we can trust in its quality, that it is not out of date, and that we don't mistakenly choose the salt when we wanted the sugar! This is why building the foundations and

establishing cross-council data governance is a core component to the SCC Data Strategy. If we can't ensure that our raw ingredients are good quality, accessible and secure, then the cake we end up baking isn't going to taste very good. In material terms it means that any information or insight that we generate is unlikely to be valid, and therefore won't lead to robust evidence-led decisions.

Information is the cake once the raw ingredients have been combined. Like data, information is all around us, but unlike data it has meaning and context and can be used to support decision making. Information includes things like emails, documents, reports, spreadsheets, and dashboards. Generally, it requires somebody to have taken lots of data and combined it together for a specific purpose. Like data, information also requires careful governance and management. Within the council this is provided by policies and functions around Information Governance and Records Management. The main drawback is that information often does not help to move us forward. This is because it is usually assembled by taking a 'data-first' approach, whereby the focus is on bringing together lots of different data to see what it tells us, rather than focussing on a specific outcome that we want to achieve.

Insight is the cake once it has all the toppings, flavours, and decorations that the customer has requested. The important distinction here is that insight starts with what the customer wants, and the outcome that we want to achieve. Good insight therefore takes an outcome-first approach rather than a data-first approach. It is this nuance that means that insight can lead us to action, whereas information often does not. After all, if you ordered a chocolate cake, but instead got a carrot cake, you might still eat it, but you probably won't be too happy about it!

We found this distinction between data, information, and insight useful while developing the SCC Data Strategy and for having conversations with stakeholders who have slightly different perceptions of what we mean when we talk about data. Generally, within the SCC Data Strategy when we refer to data we use this as an encompassing term to cover data, information and insight.

From the perspective of scope, the SCC Data Strategy touches on elements across data, information and insight, though is primarily focussed on data (through the Build the Foundations area of focus) and insight (through the New Approaches to Insight area of focus).

As well as this key distinction, there are various other factors that it is useful to consider when talking about data. This includes where data is sourced from, its type (e.g. quantitative or qualitative data), and the purpose for which it is used.

Within the council, data may be sourced directly from our residents and service users, from publicly available datasets, from partners and may increasingly be coming from digital devices such as sensors. Depending on the source and its quality we are likely to have varying degrees of trust in the data that we collect.

Data can also come in different formats, for example quantitative or qualitative data. An example of the latter is unstructured data that we collect from residents and service users through research and engagement activities.

In terms of its purpose, there are broadly three ways that data can be used by the council:

1. To power processes
2. To facilitate better and more robust decision making
3. To build trust with our residents

Because data exists everywhere in the organisation, it is not possible for any one individual or team to have full ownership or accountability for our data, or for driving improvements in how we use our data. Therefore, a key part of our strategy is how we introduce the appropriate governance, policies, and skills to enable all officers at all levels to be empowered to manage and use data more effectively.

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