



National Audit Office

DATA ASSURANCE SUMMARY REPORTS

Department for Education

Background and scope

1 In May 2012, the Department for Education (the Department) published its updated business plan for the period 2012–2015. This sets out the Department’s vision, coalition priorities, structural reform plans, departmental expenditure and information on how it is going to become more transparent, with performance measured using input and impact indicators.

2 The National Audit Office has undertaken to review the data systems underpinning each of these indicators. Our first review was carried out in 2011-12 and a summary report of our findings was published.¹ This report covers our second review of the Department for Education’s data systems. In addition, our review includes an assessment of the information culture in place at the Department.

3 Our conclusions are summarised as numerical scores. The ratings are based on the extent to which departments have put in place and operated internal controls over the data systems that are effective and proportionate to the risks involved.

4 This report provides an overview of the results of our assessment. It does not provide a conclusion on the accuracy of the outturn figures included in the Department’s public performance statements. This is because the existence of sound data systems reduces but does not eliminate the possibility of error in reported data.

¹ Available at: www.nao.org.uk/publications/1213/review_data_systems_for_dfe.aspx. Summary reports on each department are available at: www.nao.org.uk/search/pi_area/data-assurance-summary-reports/type/report

Our findings on the information strategy and performance measurement

5 We found that there is a generally good understanding of the need to manage data and robust governance and secure storage arrangements among the Department's staff. However, we found that the Department's information culture has weaknesses because the Department does not have a formal, organisation-wide information strategy. Not only is this a Cabinet Office requirement, but the absence of a formal information strategy increases the risk that information is mismanaged, or the Department fails to realise the potential uses of available information. We found, for example, from our discussions with various staff that some prefer to bypass established data systems and store information locally, or that there is a lack of confidence in using some systems. The Departmental Review,² published in November 2012, recognises this and proposals have been made to develop a strategy for Management Information.

6 We also found that, while the owners of information understand their roles and processes, end-to-end information processes are not always defined or documented. As the Department embarks on a period of significant changes, including those to its staffing, the experience and understanding built up over a number of years risks being lost without strong definition or documentation. This increases the scope for error or inefficiencies in the Department's data systems. Efficiency in data management will be key for the Department, as it must have sufficient assurance that data quality remains robust with fewer resources than previously available.

7 The Department has not formally linked the coalition priorities set out in its business plan with input and impact indicators to enable performance to be assessed. Assumptions must be made to create links between the indicators and priorities meaning that performance against coalition priorities is not transparent and restricts accountability.

8 Operational performance information reported to management covers all major aspects of the Department's work. Since our last report, the Department has reformed the way it reports information to the board. Previously, reports were given on each of the Department's objectives. Under the current system, particular priorities in a given month are reported on in detail, with the remainder reported in summary. This risk-based approach means that the Department can focus on key issues.

Our assessment of data systems

9 We examined five business plan indicators, comprising:

- The number of primary and secondary schools below the floor standard.
- The gap between children receiving free school meals and the rest at ages 11, 16 and 19 and the gap between looked-after children and the rest at ages 11 and 16.
- The percentage achieving the English Baccalaureate at age 16.
- The number of free schools opened nationally.
- Overall absence figures.

² Available at: www.education.gov.uk/a00216847/dfe-review

10 The table in **Figure 1** summarises our assessment of the data systems underlying these indicators.

11 We found that all the business plan indicators assessed had systems in place. The data systems are largely well established.

12 We also found that the Department makes use of data derived from the Schools Census to report on indicators including free school meals and absence figures. The Schools Census is prepared by all schools once per term, and data uploaded into the 'Collect' data system provided by the Department. The onus is placed on schools to ensure that data is correctly input into their own system and, as the data is used by schools as part of their own management information systems, the Department considers the risks to data quality to be low.

13 For the free schools indicator, we found that the system currently in place is appropriate for the number of free school openings seen to date. As the free schools programme expands, there is a risk that the current system may not be adequate to handle such increases and may require development in the future as a result.

Figure 1

A summary of the results of our data assurance exercise

Score	Meaning	Indicators we reviewed
4	The indicator's data system is fit for purpose and cost-effectively run	Number of primary and secondary schools below the floor standard The percentage achieving the English Baccalaureate at age 16
3	The indicator's data system is fit for purpose but some improvements could be made	Number of free schools opened nationally Overall absence figures The gap between children receiving free school meals and the rest at ages 11, 16 and 19 and the gap between looked-after children and the rest at ages 11 and 16
2	The indicator's data system has weaknesses which the Department is addressing	
1	The indicator's data system has weaknesses which the Department must address	
0	No system has been established to measure performance against the indicator	

Source: National Audit Office

Recommendations

14 We recommend that the Department publishes, alongside the indicators that make use of data derived from the Schools' Census, how the risks associated with data collection have been addressed so that those using statistics derived from the Schools' Census are aware of the risks to data quality.

15 We recommend that the Department considers the anticipated number of future free school applications and openings and determines whether the current system is robust enough to adequately manage an increase in activity.

16 We recommend that the Department produces a departmental-wide information strategy, building on the strategy for Management Information arising from the Departmental Review. This should set out how information should be used and managed and how processes should be clearly documented and understood.

17 We recommend that the Department's input and impact indicators are formally linked to the coalition priorities to enhance transparency and accountability.