

# Information Sharing

## Q & A

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## **1. Why is information sharing important?**

Information sharing is key to the Government's goal of delivering better, more efficient public services that are coordinated around the needs of the individual. It is essential to enable early intervention and preventative work, for safeguarding and promoting welfare and for wider public protection. Information sharing is a vital element in improving outcomes for all.

As local areas move towards partnership working and integrated services, professional and confident sharing of information is becoming more important to delivering the benefits of these new arrangements.

## **2. Why is there a need for guidance on information sharing?**

Many practitioners recognise the importance of information sharing and there is much good practice. However, in some situations they feel constrained from sharing information by uncertainty about when they can do lawfully. This is especially in early intervention and preventative work where information sharing decisions may be less clear than in safeguarding or child protection situations.

The Government understands that it is important that people remain confident that their personal information is kept safe and secure and that practitioners maintain the privacy rights of the individual whilst sharing information to deliver better services.

It is important that practitioners understand when, why and how they should share information so that they can do so confidently and appropriately as part of their day-to-day practice.

For those who have to make decisions about information sharing on a case-by-case basis, the information sharing guidance and associated materials aim to support good practice in information sharing by offering clarity on when and how information can be shared legally and professionally, in order to achieve improved outcomes

## **3. What are the implications of the Data Protection Act?**

The Data Protection Act 1998 is not a barrier to sharing information but provides a framework to ensure that personal information is shared appropriately.

## **4. What are the key factors to consider when deciding whether to share or not to share information?**

The decision to share or not to share information must always be based on professional judgement about the safety and well-being of the person, in accordance with legal, ethical and professional obligations, supported by the *HM Government Information Sharing*:

*Guidance for practitioners and managers* and informed by training and experience.

Obtaining explicit consent for information sharing is best practice. Ideally, consent should be obtained at the start of the involvement as part of working with the individual or family to agree what support is required. Where consent cannot be obtained or is refused, or where seeking it is inappropriate or unsafe, then the question of whether there is a sufficient public interest must be judged by the practitioner on the facts of each case.

The guidance outlines seven 'golden rules' for information sharing and provides further information in the form of seven key questions about information sharing to inform decision-making.

#### **5. What do children, young people and families think about information sharing?**

It is important to maintain a balance between the need retain the trusted relationship between practitioner and individuals and the need to share information to benefit and improve their life chances. Consultation and research has indicated that children and young people feel that it is ok to pass information on about them if they can be sure that it would result in getting help that would be of benefit to them. They want to be fully involved and informed throughout.

#### **6. Why was the existing cross-Government guidance updated?**

The existing cross-Government guidance was first published in April 2006 and was widely endorsed by a range of professional bodies. This guidance has now been updated to reflect current policy and extended to cover all practitioners, including those working with adults and families, as well as those working with children and young people.

#### **7. What is the purpose of the information sharing guidance?**

The aim of the information sharing guidance and associated materials is to support good practice in information sharing by offering clarity on when and how information can be shared legally and professionally, in order to achieve improved outcomes. This guidance will be especially useful to support early intervention and preventative work where decisions about information sharing may be less clear than in safeguarding or child protection situations.

#### **8. How has the revised guidance been developed and what does it include?**

The development of the cross-Government guidance has been led by the DCSF in partnership with the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) and in consultation with a range of practitioners, national organisations and representative bodies. It is

based on and supersedes the HM Government guidance, first published in April 2006.

The revised HM Government information sharing guidance consists of a package of materials which includes:

- *Information Sharing: Guidance for practitioners and managers*
- *Information Sharing: Pocket guide* containing a summary of the key decision making considerations from *Information Sharing: Guidance for practitioners and managers*;
- *Information Sharing: Case examples* which illustrate best practice in information sharing situations;
- *Information Sharing: Training materials* available for local agency and multi-agency training, and for use by training providers; and
- *Information Sharing: Further guidance on legal issues* which is a summary of the laws affecting information sharing.

## **9. Who is the guidance for?**

This information sharing guidance is for front-line practitioners who have to make decisions about sharing personal information on a case-by-case basis whether they are:

- providing services to children, young people, adults and/or families
- working in the public, private or voluntary sectors, as an employee, a contractor or a volunteer

This includes practitioners working in health, education, schools, social care, youth work, early years, family support, offending and criminal justice, police, advisory and support services, culture and leisure.

The guidance is also for managers and advisors who support these practitioners in their decision making and for others with responsibility for information governance.

## **10. Does the guidance apply to all instances of information sharing?**

No. This guidance focuses on supporting front-line practitioners who have to make case-by-case decisions about sharing personal information, it does not provide any detailed guidance for staff in agencies or government departments whose information sharing practice is governed by statute and specific policies or agreements.

It also does not deal in detail with arrangements for bulk or pre-agreed sharing of personal information between IT systems or organisations other than to explain their role in effective information governance.

### **11. How does the guidance relate to my own organisations policies and procedures on information sharing?**

Individual agencies may have developed specific guidelines and processes for sharing information. Practitioners will need to use the guidance in conjunction with their agency's policies and procedures and where applicable, their professional code.

### **12. What is an information sharing protocol?**

An Information Sharing Protocol (ISP) is a signed agreement between two or more organisations or bodies, in relation to specified information sharing activity and/or arrangements for the routine of bulk sharing of personal information.

An ISP relates to a specific information sharing activity and explains the terms under which both (or all) organisations have agreed to share information and the practical steps that need to be taken to ensure compliance with those terms.

### **13. Is it necessary to have an Information Sharing Protocol to share information with another practitioner?**

No. Information Sharing Protocols (ISP) are not a legal requirement and are not required before front-line practitioners can share personal information. By itself, the lack of an ISP must never be a reason for not sharing information that could help a practitioner deliver services.

*“An Information Sharing Protocol is not a useful tool for managing ad hoc information sharing which all practitioners find necessary. Most importantly it is not intended to be a substitute for the professional judgement which an experienced practitioner will use in those cases and should not be used to replace that judgement”*  
(Information Commissioners Office)

### **14. How should I be supported by my organisation to share information?**

Practitioners need to understand their organisation's position and commitment to information sharing and to have confidence in the continued support of their organisation where they have used their professional judgement and shared information professionally.

Employers should aim to establish an effective information sharing governance framework and a supportive environment for information sharing. An information governance framework must always recognise the importance of professional judgement in information sharing at the front-line and should focus on how to improve practice in information sharing within and between agencies. These should be communicated to the front-line so that practitioners have confidence in their

organisation's commitment and support for professional information sharing.

Organisational policies and processes need to support good practice in information sharing. Commitment needs to be across the board.