



Reimagine Local Government

Councils can save more than just cash by sharing data



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- Better data sharing in the public sector can save lives and money
- The duty to share information can be as important as the duty to protect it
- Local authorities are yet to realise the full value of their data and are wary of sharing information
- Cross-sector structures and the right leadership is the first step to combating the problem

Local authorities have a moral obligation to share data inside their organisations and with other public agencies. The prize is great, data sharing has the potential to improve and save lives, but too few councils are yet to understand its potential or are too uncertain to lead.

Just think: if a social worker sees a client's breathlessness has got worse, shouldn't their healthcare provider know? If the client smokes, isn't it worth telling the fire service to check their smoke detector? If police are called to a disturbance at the client's home, couldn't that be a useful pointer for social workers to consider a wider set of interventions?

Yet few, if any, public bodies reliably share data in this way. On a curve showing their maturity in using data, local authorities are typically low down in the bottom left-hand corner; uncertain of how to proceed.

Sharing data can be as important as protecting it

Why such reluctance to share data? Fear and uncertainty is too often the reason. The Data Protection Act and other pieces of legislation have become compliance mechanisms in the minds of local government staff. To them, they represent the possibility of punitive action when things go wrong, rather than a framework to get things right.

For instance, colleagues working in health report that too often, the first six Caldicott principles on patient information are rigidly followed at the cost of the seventh: "The duty to share information can be as important as the duty to protect patient confidentiality." Local authorities have a leading role to play in driving the balance between privacy and sharing.

Sharing information does not just improve outcomes. With economic challenges present and intensifying, using data to stratify risk in local populations will be an important way to work more efficiently, manage demand and allocate resource. To make that a reality, local government has to overcome several barriers.

First, we need to recognise that cultural transformation is required within and across organisations. The fear and uncertainty around data sharing pervades all levels from the chief executive to the intelligence officer, to those on the front line.

This quickly becomes a deterrent to even starting out on the journey. Everyone involved in the local care economy needs to regard data sharing as a priority in order to provide more integrated care and overcome organisational boundaries.



From there, local authorities may need to create a cross-sector structure focused on the issue. For example, Greater Manchester is working with KPMG to create a data-sharing agency, GM-Connect. This organisation has a mandate to drive outcomes focused data sharing across the conurbation. It will play a leading role in breaking down information silos and applying data to the most vexing problems facing our public services.

Establishing new organisations won't be possible – or necessary – every time. It is, however critical that senior leaders give somebody the mandate to champion data sharing and make it happen. This individual must be capable of winning hearts and minds but also possess the technical acumen to provide challenge and rigour where needed.

Here another challenge lies – senior sponsorship. Leaders must be bold and committed when driving the data sharing agenda. Data sharing strategies must be visionary, realistic about the barriers but compelling about the benefits. Cross sector buy-in is critical to success and this starts with the quality of the leadership.

This in turn leads to a requirement to focus on influencing stakeholders. Using a problem solving ethos is one way to do this. Defining shared use cases creates the basis for collaboration and fuels commitment.

Get the information governance right

Managing risks means getting information governance right. It has to be front and centre of any local authority's approach to data sharing. It means respecting the privacy of data, while at the same time not neglecting the seventh Caldicott principle – the duty to share information.

In Manchester, we've been doing this by speaking about "information coaching" rather than "information governance". Because for local authorities looking at data sharing, it isn't really about governing: much of that is set out by national or even European legislation. Instead, we need to coach on how we can achieve the best possible service via the use of information – working with the legislation as an enabler rather than a reason not to do something.

After all, would you rather your information be locked away, unused and forgotten in a dark corner, or used safely and securely to save lives and give communities the services they deserve? Most people would agree with the latter – local authorities should too.

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