

Working together to solve problems

The introduction of the draft Digital Economy Bill and the section on data sharing has real opportunity to modernise and improve effectiveness of how public authorities work together to tackle the tricky issues affecting the population.

To most, data sharing brings visions of the Big Brother state and an Orwellian future; only recently Google's DeepMind sharing agreement with the NHS drew significant concern of a wholesale giveaway of data. The draft bill seeks to quell some of this concern by being very specific – data can only be shared between public bodies to achieve a “specified objective” set out in Regulations and that will benefit the individuals involved.

We already share data in very defined ways, such as our successful part in the Universal Services Delivered Locally pilot for the Department for Work and Pensions to share data to support those affected by the imminent roll out of Universal Credit with the tools and information they need. This saw effective working across Council departments, DWP and local voluntary and community groups to support impacted residents.

The Bill offers a welcome opportunity to deliver better, efficient services. Areas we could make real differences in might include:

- Families with multiple, complex issues – similar to the Troubled Families programme, where data from various public bodies is needed to ensure we focus resources on those initiatives that have the biggest impact. The ability to accurately evaluate success also helps the creation of better services
- Effective housing provision – ensuring joined up working between public institutions such as prisons, hospitals, mental health facilities etc. to ensure when people leave their care we have time and resource to find them appropriate housing rather than putting them into Temporary Accommodation – an expensive and often distressing option
- Dealing with isolation – ensuring we know where people who are likely to be feeling isolated live, so we can help prevent the negative physical and mental impacts of isolation
- Those not in education, employment or training – ensuring we understand who these people, mostly young people, are and what other services they encounter. We can then provide support to encourage independence as well as preventing the development of severe health issues we know can often develop with long term unemployment
- Effectively supporting vulnerable individuals and those who care for them - enhancing an integral part of our duty to local communities. Often the whereabouts of these households are unknown as they will interact with many public authorities - not necessarily local authorities, inhibiting the focussed support these households receive. Without this collective support, issues can degenerate and carers' health can also decline
- Improving health and wellbeing – knowing someone has particular service needs would allow service providers to collaborate, helping to deliver stronger continuity of care which would result in better patient outcomes and satisfaction

The Draft Bill is a positive step forward to purposefully influence how public authorities can cooperate for the benefit of our populations. We look forward to seeing the supporting code of practice, which should outline the process of including suitable safeguards while providing clear direction so all organisations are empowered to proactively share data. The Bill should also be accompanied by the delivery of technology solutions that make this easier, consistent and more secure.