A Problem Shared:
sharing data across local public services

Background

Across the public sector, data-sharing continues to be raised as a barrier to delivering more joined-up services to citizens. Not only do information silos prevent early intervention, but the current lack of integration means that too often individuals are required to provide the same information to multiple agencies, creating duplication and increased room for error. The inability to join-up different data entries about citizens can also mean that vital signs of risk or vulnerability are missed – sometimes with disastrous consequences.

For policing, data-sharing also poses a number of specific challenges. In particular, archaic and often incompatible IT systems can mean sharing intelligence across even force borders may be difficult, while access to data from other agencies such as local health institutions remains in some areas simply impossible. With both interactions with individuals suffering from poor mental health, and cases involving the safeguarding of children increasing, the inability to access key information from other agencies, such as social services, may mean forces are taking decisions based only on a partial picture of the issue at hand.

In the second of a series of policy dinners in partnership with KPMG, attendees explored a number of these issues. The session began with a look at the work of the Worcestershire Office of Data Analytics (WODA) which has already begun to overcome some of these barriers and is seeing some promising results.

There was a broad consensus among attendees that the key challenges facing the delivery of increased data sharing between agencies are not about the availability of suitable technology. Instead, it was argued that it is the complexity of legal frameworks, information governance arrangements, and most importantly gaining the buy-in of both agency leaders and operational staff that pose the biggest threat to improving public sector information sharing.

Agreeing a shared vision

It was argued that a key lesson from the current work in Worcestershire is that partners must ensure that a shared vision is established from the outset. This should include both how information sharing will work and the benefits of a more integrated approach. Once agreed, frameworks and guiding principles should be formalised within a binding document. Representatives from WODA suggested that a written agreement signed by all parties can help prevent individual agencies from withdrawing from data-sharing arrangements at particularly tough moments, and therefore help ensure the longevity of new partnerships.

As part of this shared vision of success, it was also argued that it is vital that all partners understand the scope of the ambition. Successful information sharing in one area may be agencies being able to send or access spread sheets from another institution, whereas in others there may be the desire to build interactive data portals which provide tiered access to a number of partners – and in some cases even citizens. Here, contextual factors such as financial constraints, current structures and IT systems, as well as the skills of the workforce, all have a role to play and require consideration right from the early stages.

Demonstrating value through incremental change

In addition to the use of binding data sharing agreements, it was argued that to gain buy-in from

senior leaders and other key stakeholders, the value of new practices must be demonstrated from the very beginning – not just when a full programme has been implemented. This could include, for example, highlighting individual cases where greater information has led to a better resolution or being able to evidence the financial benefits of reducing duplication. Attendees agreed that developing champions for change at the executive level is an essential ingredient to the successful implementation of new ways of working.

It was also highlighted that by introducing new programmes incrementally, it is possible to identify barriers to change and to learn from each step of the process. Here, it is essential that agency leaders are given sufficient autonomy and the freedom to fail fast, without fear of reprimand.

Building the evidence base and driving value for money

It was acknowledged, however, that policing has – and continues to have – an inadequate understanding of both the financial costs of their day to day activities and the outcomes which flow from these. It was argued that without this baseline it can be hugely challenging to demonstrate improvements to service levels. In particular, it was contended that much greater focus needs to be placed on conducting robust evaluations following the introduction of new systems or programmes.

In the context of data-sharing it was also argued that if it is not possible to evidence current inefficiencies with robust financial data then it will be hugely challenging to make the case for investing in the necessary systems and skilled individuals to get new partnerships off the ground.

In addition it was highlighted that we need to get better at 'sharing information about information sharing'. There are increasingly examples of best practice emerging within this field and more should be

done to ensure that these case studies are reaching the ears of other organisations – not only to engender confidence that much can be achieved, but also to share the lessons learned.

Engaging key stakeholders

In addition to the senior leadership teams within agencies, it was argued that individuals working within information governance also play a vital role. Shifting the culture within these teams so that people are more predisposed to support rather than object to data-sharing can have an impact on the wider workforce – most simply because their expertise means other people will have confidence in new arrangements. In Worcestershire, for example, concerted efforts have been made to turn information governance professionals into 'Information Sharing Coaches' who are focused on the benefits of sharing data more widely rather than the risks of doing so.

For frontline practitioners, attendees acknowledged that the twin pressures of reduced resources and growing demand means they are under increasing amounts of pressure and may feel unable to dedicate time to engaging with these types of change programmes. It was argued, however, that through explaining that for a small upfront investment of time there can be sizeable long term efficiency gains and their job can be made much easier, that individuals may be more likely to prioritise working with new partners and systems. Again, it was strongly emphasised that people change, as opposed to introducing new technologies or systems, can be the most challenging element of an ambitious reform programme.

Data as a means not an end

Due to the various legal, governance and technical barriers highlighted above, it was suggested that sometimes successful information sharing can be seen as the end rather than the means. Attendees were keen to argue that data sharing alone shouldn't be held up as an example of success. Instead, the focus must shift to making best use of access to new information and the impact this may have on outcomes for citizens. For example, sharing data about potentially vulnerable people should only be viewed as valuable where agencies are able to intervene early as a result.

In addition, to ensure data is turned into valuable insights, it was argued that it is sometimes likely that information will need to be transformed into a format which is accessible to frontline practitioners. Data from health professionals, for example, may often be presented in complex medical terminology and will therefore need to be translated into clear and concise language which provides police officers with the necessary facts on which to base a decision about vulnerability and risk.

Data-sharing to support informed decision-making

Some attendees suggested that in policing it is increasingly accepted that the risk of not sharing information is often greater than the risk of sharing data inappropriately. In particular, it was highlighted that in the context of serious case reviews, often one of the key areas of failure is agencies not having the necessary information about vulnerable individuals. This is essential for frontline staff to be able to make well-evidenced decisions.

It was suggested, for example, that access to real-time information from multiple agencies via tablets or smart phones could prove hugely valuable to officers who are out on the beat – particularly in the context of dealing with people suffering from poor mental health. While the use of new forms of technologies is becoming more commonplace in a number of forces, it was suggested that for many officers it can still be hugely frustrating that they

cannot access key data at the point they are coming into contact with individuals with complex needs. Ensuring forces continue to empower officers to make better informed decisions should therefore remain a key priority – particularly given this would also have benefits in the form of increased efficiency.

Consent and the need to engage communities

Despite widespread support for data-sharing, attendees acknowledged that greater integration across agencies should not come at the cost of citizens' rights to privacy. It was suggested that one way to overcome this may be through consulting the public about what types of information it would be valuable to share, and most importantly actually gaining consent from individuals to do so when the need to share information arises. This may of course prove challenging with particularly vulnerable communities such as individuals suffering from poor mental health where giving consent can be problematic.

As a potential compromise, it was suggested that using new datasets to at least alert officers to the need to consult with – or refer individuals to – other agencies may be a valuable initial step, particularly in the context of mental health.

Data-sharing for prevention

In addition to providing real-time insight for practitioners taking complex decisions about risk and vulnerability on the ground, a number of attendees drew on examples where bringing together large datasets can enable a significant number of crimes to be predicted with relative accuracy. It was argued that armed with this intelligence there is much greater room for both the police and other agencies to intervene early and prevent criminality from occurring in the first place. Data from primary care and Accident and Emergency departments, for example, can allow practitioners to identify vulnerable individuals who may be being exploited, or are the victims of domestic violence, much earlier than interactions with criminal justice agencies. This type of data sharing would also have the advantage of not compromising the privacy of individuals' data.

In addition, it was argued that bringing together data on school absences and antisocial behaviour can also enable practitioners to identify young people who may be at risk of falling into criminality – an activity that is currently being trialled in Worcestershire.

While resources within public agencies may be tight, some attendees highlighted that the academic community is well-placed (and well-equipped in terms of expertise) to undertake this kind of activity. Not only are they able to take a step back from day-to-day operational concerns, but they also have more time available to them to conduct in-depth work.

The key, it was suggested, is that agencies work closely with academics to both ensure that they have access to all of the necessary data, but also so that their research is geared towards being applied in practice – rather than being too grounded in theory. In Essex, for example the police have worked closely with academics to be able to understand patterns of burglaries across the region.

Of course, it was noted that there is the need to ensure that data is handled appropriately by external organisations. Public agencies need to feel confident that the privacy of service-users will not be compromised. Here, attendees drew on the example of the new secure datalab being hosted by University College London, which provides a high-security environment for researchers to handle sensitive datasets, as one way to promote confidence. It was also argued that much can be achieved through using anonymised datasets, which can still provide valuable insights from a preventative perspective.

Building a data-savvy workforce

A theme highlighted throughout the session was the challenge of attracting individuals with the required skills and expertise to policing and other public agencies. Data scientists in particular command a high price in the open market – most notably within the city – and are therefore likely to require at least a relatively competitive level of remuneration to take up a public sector role.

In addition, it was suggested that to be successful key positions such as chief data officers in newly formed partnerships will not only need expertise in data science, but must also have experience of problem solving and an awareness of wider issues in social policy. This is essential for data-sharing arrangements to be designed with a focus on improving outcomes – but again may make filling these posts challenging within the context of austerity.

Looking ahead, attendees advocated using apprenticeship schemes to equip the future generation with the necessary skills as well as continuing to promote specialist degrees which focus on data science and analytics. Encouragingly a number of attendees present suggested that they had seen an increased interest in these kinds of qualifications.

Top down or bottom up?

There were some contrasting views about the role of local actors versus the need for greater government intervention. Some attendees argued that to avoid duplication – for example the cost of different legal experts drafting multiple data-sharing agreements – there is a need for the Home Office to set standards. It was also suggested that ministers could publicly provide greater clarity about what are acceptable and unacceptable data sharing practices to engender confidence among practitioners. Others, argued that a heavy-handed top down approach may stifle local innovation and also fail to take into

account regional variations, such as differing accountability structures.

It was agreed however, that there is currently little political will to drive change. The current Home Secretary[1] has emphasised the need for policing to be a 'self-reforming' service and much focus has been placed on the role of Police and Crime Commissioners in creating innovative ways of working within forces.

Attendees were clear therefore that forces should not be waiting for a clear mandate from the centre. There was confidence that where specific forces are able to demonstrate successful data-sharing practices – and the impact of these – then other forces will follow. It was argued that success is infectious and therefore publicising examples of best practice at a local level is an important vehicle through which to see wider change.

Challenges from the health sector

Despite the challenges highlighted above, it was argued that within policing there is a growing appetite for information sharing – and a growing acceptance that not sharing data may prove more damaging than sharing it inappropriately.

By contrast, however, it was suggested that the health sector remains much more guarded about what they are willing share. In particular it was highlighted that general practitioners may be more likely to err on the side of caution. As independent business people, they have more to lose personally if information is deemed to have been inappropriately shared.

At a national level, some attendees also highlighted that existing payment structures – particularly around admissions and conducting operations – may not provide practitioners with the incentives to share data. Under current arrangements if early intervention leads to individuals not needing to be admitted to

hospital, then no payment will be made. This type of financial model does not therefore support a focus on prevention.

It was acknowledged, however, that in light of the current national focus on integrating health and social care, some of these attitudes may well be broken down – particularly where newly elected Metro Mayors have the power to pool budgets.

Finally, attendees highlighted that in many areas data sharing is occurring simultaneously at different levels and in different directions which has the potential to pose tensions. Police forces, for example, are facing challenges within their own organisations as well as needing to share data with other forces about offenders or cross-border offences. Balancing integrating with partners from other services will therefore be an important challenge to overcome in the coming years.

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With thanks

The Police Foundation and KPMG would like to thank all of our attendees for their contributions to this session. Any further comments or feedback is very welcome and should be directed to **liz.crowhurst@police-foundation.org.uk**.

Attendees

The session was held under the Chatham House rule, however a full list of attendees can be found below.

Eric Applewhite	Interim Programme Director, GM-Connect
Professor Kate Bowers	Professor of Security and Crime Science, University College London
Simon Clifford	Director of Technology and Digital Transformation, Office of the Northamptonshire Police and Crime Commissioner
Elizabeth Crowhurst	Policy Officer, The Police Foundation
Neil Crump	Head of Digital Transformation, Worcestershire County Council
Dr Paul Dawson	Research Manager, Evidence and Insight, MOPAC
Michelle Eaton	Strategic Development Officer, Essex Centre for Data Analytics
Christine Elliot	Senior Advisor, Collaborate
Andy Higgins	Senior Research Officer, The Police Foundation
Dr Vicki Harrington	Director of Strategic Change and Performance, Essex Police
Lord Toby Harris	Member, Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy
Dr Tom Kirchmaier	Researcher, London School of Economics and Political Science
Andrew Lea	Policing Market Lead, KPMG
Robert Leach	Acting CEO, The Police ICT Company
Dr Peter Langmead-Jones	External Relations and Performance, Greater Manchester Police
Lawrence Morris	Head of Police Practice and Improvement, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary
Dr Rick Muir	Director, The Police Foundation
Bernard Rix	Chief Executive, CoPaCC
Lauren Tyczynska	Marketing, KPMG
Richard Walker	Associate Director, Public Sector Advisory, KPMG

About the Police Foundation

The Police Foundation is an independent think tank focused on developing knowledge and understanding of policing while challenging the police service and the government to improve policing for the benefit of the public. The Police Foundation acts as a bridge between the public, the police and the government, while being owned by none of them. **www.police-foundation.org.uk**

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