Centre of Excellence for Information Sharing

Information Sharing:

Easy to say harder to do well

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Centre for Knowledge, Innovation, Technology and Enterprise (KITE)

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Author biographies

Professor Rob Wilson is the Chair of Information Systems Management at Newcastle University where he directs a university research centre (KITE) and teaches in the Business School. His research interests are in public service innovation and sociotechnical systems: the role that data, information and information systems play in organisational innovation and inter-organisational relationships.

His research has been influential in policy making and information systems thinking and is covered in detail in a recent co-authored book Digital Government @ Work (with Ian McLoughlin) published by Oxford University Press. His contributions to information sharing debates have been cited by a range of bodies and most recently used as part of a review of legislation undertaken by the Law Commission and he currently acts as an academic advisor to the Centre of Excellence for Information Sharing.

The Centre for Knowledge, Innovation, Technology and Enterprise (KITE) is a Research Centre based at Newcastle University. Members of KITE have a long standing interest in the challenges of sharing information posed by the uses of information in governing and delivering public services.

In collaboration with the Centre of Excellence for Information Sharing KITE is leading an Economic Social Research Centre (ESRC) Seminar series entitled 'Information Sharing in Policy and Practice: What needs to be shared (and not shared) when we share information?'

The aim of the series is to create better conversations between the academics, policy makers and practitioners working in the area of sharing information to improve practice. To register an interest in participating in the series please sign up via www.ncl.ac.uk/kite/esrc_seminars

Professor Andrew Gray straddles the academic and practice communities with a primary interest in the governance and management of health and related personal services as they struggle with being both business-like and not like a business.

His university career culminated as Professor of Public Management at Durham University and the founding head of its School for Health (that included Durham's reconstituted Medical School). Since 2001 he has provided research, development and teaching services through his business, Academic Services for Public Management and is a Visiting Fellow, Centre for Knowledge, Innovation, Technology and Enterprise, Newcastle University.

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Executive summary

- Information sharing is easy to say, but harder to do well. The information sharing literature is dispersed over a wide variety of academic disciplines, policies, and professional contexts. The term is used in different ways, and is taken to mean different things, in all these contexts.

- Information sharing contexts have a bearing on attitudes to information sharing, but not necessarily information sharing intention and/or information sharing behaviours. For instance, the doctor-patient relationship is quite different from the relationship that a local authority has with a customer using a transaction-based service such as setting up a street party. In turn, this relationship is quite different from the information needed for the conversations that organisations in partnership have about planning and commissioning services.

- Concerns about information sharing are often based on professional codes of ethics confidentiality and ways of working ('cultural norms'), but can also arise from a lack of confidence in the systems and resource scaffolding, supporting or facilitating information sharing, such as legislation or information systems.

- Previous experience in health, care and education services, where dispersed public services are managed using approaches such as information governance, suggest that it is highly unlikely that a 'one size fits all' or purely bureaucratic or procedural approach to information sharing, based on the requirements of one organisational perspective, is going to 'solve the problem' on its own.

- An increase in the number and interconnectedness of information sources leads to increased complexity, rather than greater simplicity. For example, in the case of troubled families, learning more about the family members and their respective needs often leads to the requirement for more and better local coordination of agencies and interventions.

- Dealing with complexity requires the development of appropriate tools and interpretative skills (both individually and collectively) for those involved in public services. For example, individuals and organisations need to understand the provenance of information that is being shared – who published what, about whom, when, with what context, and with what authority – and they need the skills and tools to make judgements based on all of these issues.

- It is possible to describe a more sophisticated approach which could lead to better service co-ordination, practitioner confidence, information sharing behaviour and service delivery: local service communities could work together to improve their information sharing relationships (internally and externally), in parallel with improvements in systems and resources.

- For the purposes of this review we have focussed on the social policy and public administration literatures. A wider-ranging and more in-depth set of reviews could identify key messages for partnerships, sectors, organisations and practitioners, drawing on a wider range of literatures including knowledge management, organisational learning, clinical communications and information science literatures.

The review

Information sharing is easy to say, but harder to do well. The information sharing literature is dispersed over a wide variety of academic disciplines, policies, and professional contexts (for instance 6 et al. 2004; Dawes et al. 2010). The sheer scope and scale of data and information potentially available has begun to establish what has been referred to as an 'information economy'. (Wilson et al 2013a). This economy includes personal information; performance information; service management/commissioning information; transaction data; and other sources of organizational and community-generated data. Commentators claim the world as increasingly 'data' rich or 'overloaded'. The important issue for organisations and practitioners working in a mixed economy of public service delivery which are the origins and provenance of the information they are working with, the conditions under produced, places with, and purposes for which it may be shared.

The term information sharing is used in different ways, and is taken to mean different things, in all these contexts. Identifying attitudes to information sharing requires a clear conception of information sharing itself (PIU 2003, 6 et al 2004, 6 et al 2005, Vaughan et al 2006). The literature tends to focus on the policies and practices of sharing (DCA, 2003, DCSF-DCLG 2008, DH 2013), the factors associated with sharing (Yang and Maxwell 2011), and the reported need for more of it (Dawes 1996). This is often at the expense of what sharing entails in what contexts, with notable exceptions (Wilson et al. 2011a). An added complication in recent times is an increasing societal interest in public rights to access data held about themselves (Richter and Wilson 2013, Whiddett et al 2006), in the relative weights attached to personal data and the public interest (Oswald 2013), and in the requirements for more effective service provision (Wilson et al 2011a, Wind-Cowie and Lekhi 2012, Windsor 2014).

Literatures tend to focus on process and system properties – data protection, governance, etc. (Information Commissioner's Office 2012). Some use data and information as synonyms; the Data Sharing blog, for example uses the term data throughout although some would regard the scope of its interests as encompassing information - i.e., purposefully ordered data (Data Sharing 2014). Some make attempts to distinguish information and its properties and the sharing and its contexts (Dawes 2010, 6 et al 2005, Wilson et al. 2011a, Cornford et al 2013a). The tone of this literature both in the policy sense has implications for the information sharing itself and is classified either in procedural or managerial terms.

From the academic perspective various typologies have been proposed. One expresses information sharing as "Ideal – Open – Overcautious – Chaotic" (Richardson and Asthana 2006). Others foreground the need for a number of parallel conversations between a range of stakeholder groups covering principles and values; policies and strategies; processes and systems; practices and people; politics and participation (Cornford et al 2013b). A professional/organisational culture version from 6 et al. (2005) describes four positions in relation to sharing information 'Isolate', 'Hierarchy', 'Individualism', 'Enclave'. Others have proposed a sociotechnical approach taking a whole systems approach to the information sharing problem including the need to take into account challenges of governance, infrastructure and identity management (Vaughan et al. 2006, McLoughlin and Wilson 2013).

Clearly different groups have variations in attitudes to information sharing. Work on the provision of services suggests that the same person may hold markedly different attitudes to information sharing when performing different roles and sharing with different organisations. Thus, a government official administering a service may hold a more favourable view of information sharing than he or she would as a service user or as a member of the public. This might reflect not only the difference of role but their own personal interest, their understanding of the benefit that will follow sharing, or the support for and against sharing that they have in these contexts. This is where the literature bulges with testimony.

Among the findings reported are the following assorted factors linked to attitudes to information sharing:

- Fear of sharing data and misconceptions around what can and cannot be shared (Socitm 2011, Wilks 2014)
- Relative policy emphases on stewardship ("need to know") and usefulness ("need to share") (Dawes et al 2009; Dawes 2010)
- Patterns of interrelationship between professionals (6 et al. 2004, Richardson and Asthana 2006, Wilson et al 2011b)
- Subjective self-worth and norms, organizational climate, anticipated reciprocal relationships and anticipated extrinsic rewards (Bock et al 2005)
- Professional versus client view of evidence (Haidet and Paterniti 2003, Wilson et al 2011b)
- Management's support for knowledge sharing, and perceptions of a positive social interaction culture; and gender as a significant moderator: female participants required a more "positive social interaction culture" than their male counterparts before they would perceive a knowledge sharing culture as "positive" (Connelly and Kelloway 2003)
- Professional, programmatic, and organizational risks (Dawes 1996)

Information sharing contexts have a bearing on attitudes to information sharing, but not necessarily information sharing intention and or information sharing behaviours. For instance, the doctor-patient relationship is quite different from the relationship that a local authority has with a customer using a transaction-based service such as setting up a street party. In turn, this relationship is quite different from the information needed for the conversations that organisations in partnership have about planning and commissioning services. The literatures identify a wide range of those whose attitudes are important to information sharing policies and practices. Inevitably, perhaps, we report a wide variety of attitudes to information sharing. To make more manageable the discussion of these groups we have distinguished between groups and attitudes in public policy for information sharing and those in and towards the practice of sharing in service provision.

Therefore in public policy for information sharing we identify (1) citizens and (2) governments as policy makers (Bellamy and Taylor 1998, Bellamy et al. 2005, Socitm 2013). This is where the bulk of the literature's attention is focused (e.g., Law Commission 2014, Oswald 2013a, Dawes 2010, Macdonald and Ritchie 2005, Bellamy et al. 2007, Bellamy et al. 2008, Socitm 2013). It is replete with surveys of different sorts of the general public or citizenry, its awareness of and attitude to information sharing. Deloitte (2013, 2014), for example, reports a Mori survey that 80 per cent of those surveyed were aware that data are collected is

about them by private as well as public organisations, and that over a quarter of 15-34 year olds were not aware that companies collect data about them. More importantly for our purposes, respondents were eight times more likely to oppose than favour data sharing of this sort (with higher social groups even more so) and that the majority wanted stronger laws and more use of anonymisation. Deloitte (2012) ascribes these worries primarily to a lack of transparency on the part of data gatherers.

Concerns about information sharing are often based on professional codes of ethics/confidentiality, ways of working ('cultural norms'), but can also arise from a lack of confidence in the systems and resources scaffolding, supporting or facilitating information sharing, such as legislation or information systems. Among service providers there is a range of support for information sharing (6 et al. 2004, Gannon Leary et al. 2006; Baines et al. 2010). Dawes (1996) reported that more than 8 in 10 judge information sharing to be moderately to highly beneficial. But, others are more reserved...

"Because a balance needs to be struck between maintaining the trust of people around sensitive information and sharing information to achieve better outcomes for vulnerable people"

(respondent quoted in Wilks 2014).

The obvious assumption to draw regarding information sharing attitudes is that they directly influence, shape or determine sharing behaviours in practice. Our review shows little investigation of this relationship. However, Acquisiti and Ross (2006) provide a warning. In their study of Facebook membership and usage among college students, they...

"Detected little or no relation between participants' reported privacy attitudes and their likelihood of providing certain information" (2006: 15).

There is a hint here that behaviours and practices are programmed responses, while attitudes are deliberative responses (Kahneman 2012). We should not necessarily assume, therefore that expressed attitudes to information sharing are predictors of sharing behaviours. One of the assertions often made by those working on the challenge of information sharing is that "it's the culture that counts" and there is evidence that this is the case (6 et al. 2005). In their description of information sharing cultures in which practitioners exhibit a range of anxieties about the requirement to pass on client information especially across agency boundaries. But, we can be more discriminating as the culture does not exist in a vacuum and is produced by complex interactions between a range of social, organisational, professional and technical factors (including professional codes of practice, measurement of outcomes and so on (see Baines et al. 2010; Lowe et al 2013).

Context seems important especially for service providers who deal with individual clients. Much work has been done in the health field particularly with regards to doctors. Doctors who play a range of roles in the caring and sharing of information learn to think about what information to share with a patient, but also what that patient may wish to have shared with another health practitioner and other service providers. They also have to make judgements balancing duties of confidentiality and care against the law, and guidelines for clinical practice (e.g. DH 2013). They also need to account for the use of the information in their records for payments, audit and research. Experience in health, care and education services, where dispersed public services are managed using approaches such as information governance, suggest that it is highly unlikely that a 'one size fits all' or purely bureaucratic or procedural approach to information sharing is going to 'solve the problem' on its own.

The literature is very clear, however, that these attitudes extend not only to service users but also service partners especially with the increasing pressure to integrate services. Attitudes to information sharing in supply chains are reported as "uncertain" (Li and Lin 2006) or multifaceted reflecting other attitudes about the "trustworthiness" of the "tangle of actors" involved in coping with running programmes and institutions (Dawes et al 2009, Wilson et al. 2011). It may also be part of a portfolio of attitudes about the way shared information is to be used including in the reporting of outcome quality for integrated provision (Wilks 2014) a factor enhanced amplified (some might say aggravated) by the contractualisation of public services both within the public sector and across private and third sector providers (see also Wilson et al 2011b and Wilson et al. 2013).

Information technology and the increasing number of organisations operating in the delivery of public services has led to increases in the production of information both in terms of volume, range and means of sharing. This is a double edged sword and leads to increased complexity, rather than greater simplicity.

An increase in the number and interconnectedness of information sharing sources which demonstrates this is the case of troubled families (Cornford el al 2013a). Learning more about the family members and their respective needs often requires considerable coordination of agencies and interventions. If we recognise that boundaries also perform a function – they are 'protective'; it is barriers that are 'obstructive' (Vaughan et al. 2006) - then we can consider the 'wicked' situations in which the information is not well founded, contradictory or ambiguous and in which this information is seen to require significant, often collective, interpretation or sense-making (Wilson et al. 2011b, Cornford et al 2013b, Wilson et al. 2013). Varied professional cultures of information management, technical and classificatory standards and "epistemic regimes" contribute to such interpretative flexibility.

Greater availability of information, both individually and at the level of 'big data,' with its capacity to identify many correlations, can only increase the demand for sense-making and interpretation (Boyd and Crawford, 2012; Lycett, 2013; Cornford et al, 2013b). We are concerned with what we might call multi-agency clients or service users, rather than individuals, including collectivities such as "troubled families" (Cornford et al 2013a) or gangs (Ruppert, 2013). In these cases it is not enough to share the individual's record or even a set of individuals' records, but rather an overview (or range of overviews) showing how individuals relate to one another is required. What is more, such collectivities can span spatial boundaries and even jurisdictions (e.g. Leicestershire's Multi Agency Information Sharing Hub).

If these factors are also seen as the conditions in which sharing is practised it is not hard to understand why the default state is for information not to be shared (Dawes et 2009). There is a gap here between the assumptive world of policy design (that the required information sharing will be generated to suit the situation) and that of sharing practice (sharing should take effect only when conditions are fully supportive).

Our conclusion from this review is therefore unsurprising: there is a very wide range of attitudes to information sharing associated with a very wide range of contexts and that those seeking to promulgate the sharing of information need to be relatively sophisticated in their approaches to improving practice.

The approach

The procurement specified a briefing note based on a scoping type of literature review to identify aspects of the attitudes to information sharing that the new Centre of Excellence for Information Sharing might address.

Specifically the project was asked to identify:

1. **Attitudes among citizens, service users, public service provider professionals, public service commissioners, and public policy leaders to different modes and contexts of information sharing**
2. **The extent of variation in these attitudes**
3. **Causes of variation in these attitudes**

This review is designed to be indicative rather than authoritative – bringing out emphases and gaps rather than adjudicating on the evidence of attitudes to information sharing. For such an indicative approach we have deduced the following structure of questions:

- **Q1. Information sharing: what does it entail in what contexts?**
- **Q2. Attitudes and their populations: whose attitudes and what are they?**
- **Q3. Factors associated with these attitudes: what are the internal predispositions and external factors associated with sets of attitudes to information sharing?**

We employed standard search techniques to identify potential bibliographic and documentary sources. For the purposes of this review we have focussed on the Social Policy/Public Administration literatures and the 'grey' literatures where emergent policy thinking is often accessible. We reviewed these sources for contributions to the three research questions set out above. Those selected are listed in 'Selected Sources' at the end of this briefing note. A wider ranging and more in-depth reviews could identify more systematically key messages for partnerships, sectors, organisations and practitioners.

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