

# Information is power

Tom Simpson and Vivienne Brunsdon look at knowledge sharing in the public sector, and ask what can, and what can't, we share?

In order to appropriately serve their local communities fire and rescue services require up-to-date reliable information about those communities. This information can then be used to ensure that resources are targeted appropriately in order to keep the community safe. Such information comes from a variety of sources, both internally and externally from other agencies.

Overall clustering of demographic information, such as the use of mosaic groups, provides a useful picture of the global community, but it cannot provide information about individual households or the circumstances and needs of individual people within that household. This limits the ways in which particular community needs can be addressed and limits the possibilities of creating accurate risk profiles. Fire and rescue services are able to gain large amounts of information to fill this knowledge gap through collecting high quality data themselves during the interventions they carry out and the incidents they attend.

This can help provide an understanding of the local communities and the particular risks within it. However, such data sources are inevitably somewhat limited and do not necessarily provide the full information that a service might need. Other public agencies are often aware of high-risk individuals long before fire and rescue services become aware of these people. Supplementing Fire and Rescue Service data with information from other public agencies can therefore enable the development of much more accurate risk profiles, enabling measures to be put in place that decrease the likelihood of particular incidents occurring.

Unfortunately obtaining information from other agencies is not always straightforward. Research carried out by the Cabinet Office in 2007 (*Data Protection and Sharing – Guidance for Emergency Planner and Responders*) suggested that the principles of The Data Protection Act (1998) were being misinterpreted by public authorities, leading to data not being shared when it was actually legitimate to do so. A key problem identified by the research was the mistaken belief that an individual had to have given explicit consent to their data being shared with another public authority before such

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*The authors state that fire and rescue services are able to gain large amounts of information to fill this knowledge gap through collecting high quality data themselves during the interventions they carry out and the incidents they attend*  
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[www.fire-photos.co.uk](http://www.fire-photos.co.uk)

sharing could occur.

The research also found that there was an erroneous belief that information can only be shared if it was going to be used for exactly the same reason it was originally collected for. Such misinterpretations of the Act have prevented personal data from being shared between public authorities when it was not only legally allowed, but in the public's best interests that it should have been shared. Such misinterpretations are not the exclusive concern of other agencies but may also exist within fire and rescue services themselves, limiting the exchange of information in both directions and even blocking data sharing between FRSs.

In an attempt to facilitate future data sharing, Nottinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service is in the process of developing a guidance document on this topic. This documentation is intended to act as a reference resource for staff within NFRS in





order to guide them when making and answering requests for information both internally and externally. In addition, the document will be offered to those external agencies NFRS works with and will also be offered to other fire and rescue services who feel they might also benefit from the guidance.

### Two Versions

The document will come in two versions – an extended document and a brief version. The extended version will highlight the procedures staff should follow when they are processing, storing and sharing information of all different categories, both internally and externally. It will identify the measures which need to be put in place to ensure that all information is accurate and reliable, and details how restricted information should be securely stored so that unauthorised access does not occur.

It will clearly explain the legislation highlighting the categories of information a fire and rescue service can legally share with the public, and what aspects are prohibited from sharing because of legislation such as the Freedom of Information Act (2000) and Environmental Information Regulations (2004), with relevant parts of these legislations defined within the document. In addition the

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document will explain what forms of personal data can be shared across public authorities; highlighting that information concerning an individual can ultimately be shared between public authorities if the reason for disclosure is to protect the welfare of an individual or the public. In this case, the relevant legislation to consider is the Data Protection Act and the guidance will consequently highlight the relevant aspects of this Act. The shorter version of the document will contain all the key messages of the longer version but will not include all the details of the legislation, instead merely providing references for the reader to access themselves.

This guidance document is not by itself going to solve the problem of failing to share information when it is legitimate to do so, but it is hoped that it will help the data sharing process and act as a useful reference point for NFRS to consult when establishing whether or not they can legitimately request or share information.

This should leave NFRS in a much stronger and more confident position when storing, sharing and requesting information. It is hoped that because of the resultant improvements in the data sharing process, NFRS' improved intelligence will have a positive impact on its planning and safety provision, benefiting the local community.

