



## Research Article

# Unlocking data: Decision-maker perspectives on cross-sectoral data sharing and linkage as part of a whole-systems approach to public health policy and practice

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## Plain language summary

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A lot of information is generated every day by services such as health care, education, housing and social care, as part of their day-to-day work. This is often called 'secondary data' when it is used for research. Sharing and linking together secondary data from different sources can be used to help us better understand how to make people healthier by improving the circumstances in which they live. Although there has been a lot of research looking at issues with sharing National Health Service data, we know much less about how secondary data from other services are used by government officials, council officers, and people working in public health when making decisions which might affect health.

This project aimed to identify practical ways that secondary data could be better used to help develop policies and design services that improve people's health and reduce health inequalities. We reviewed published studies and three existing projects which linked secondary data between the National Health Service and other public services. We held workshops with decision-makers from local and central government, National Health Service public health teams, Health and Social Care Partnerships, the third sector, organisations which support research, and public representatives to discuss these findings and how they use evidence in their work.

Workshop participants agreed that sharing and linkage of secondary data from different services could be used for public health decision-making more than it is at present, but that this requires change in multiple different areas, rather than one simple solution. Participants identified six guiding principles and 21 detailed recommendations. Principles included aiming for useful rather than perfect; ensuring all voices are heard; being ambitious; being fair; learning from feedback; and recognising both benefits and risks. Recommendations included a considered approach to which data sets should be shared; standardising oversight of data sharing; using existing data sets efficiently for different research purposes; investing in staff training; and promoting a public conversation about data sharing and linkage, and its benefits and risks.