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Information Sharing Between Services in Respect of Children and Young People

The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) is contacted regularly by practitioners seeking advice and guidance on whether they can share professional concerns about their clients/patients and, if so, what level of information may be shared. Often, the Data Protection Act 1998 (the Act) is viewed as preventing such sharing and it can be feared that non-compliance becomes a barrier, even though there may be a concern about a child's or young person's wellbeing. While it is acknowledged that practitioners need to be sure their actions comply with all legal and professional obligations, fear that sharing genuine concerns about a child's or young person's wellbeing will breach the Act is misplaced. Rather, the Act promotes lawful and proportionate information sharing, while also protecting the right of the individual to have their personal information fairly processed.

Most practitioners are confident about appropriate and necessary sharing where there is a child protection risk. The problem can be where the circumstances do not yet reach the child protection trigger yet professional concerns exist, albeit at a lower level. Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) introduced eight indicators of wellbeing: safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, respected, responsible and included (SHANARRI). In many cases, a risk to wellbeing can be a strong indication that the child or young person could be at risk of harm if the immediate matter is not addressed. As GIRFEC is about early intervention and prevention it is very likely that information may need to be shared before a situation reaches crisis. In the GIRFEC approach, a child's Named Person may have concerns about the child's wellbeing, or other individuals or agencies may have concerns that they wish to share with the Named Person. While it is important to protect the rights of individuals, it is equally important to ensure that children are protected from risk of harm.

Where a practitioner believes, in their professional opinion, that there is risk to a child or young person that may lead to harm, proportionate sharing of information is unlikely to constitute a breach of the Act in such circumstances.

The Act requires that an individual's data be processed fairly and lawfully and that specific conditions/justifications for processing are met. The Act provides

several conditions/justifications for processing, only the first of which rely on consent and, where required, it should be fully informed and freely given. However, the issue of obtaining consent can be difficult and it should only be sought when the individual has real choice over the matter. Where circumstances exist such that consent may not be appropriate, for example where an assessment under the SHANARRI principles raises concerns, the Act provides conditions to allow sharing of this information, such as 'for the exercise of any other functions of a public nature exercised in the public interest by any person' or 'in the legitimate interests of the data controller or the third party to whom the data are disclosed so long as it is not prejudicial to the child', and procedures should be clear about those circumstances which may necessitate processing without consent.

It is vital that data controllers put appropriate and relevant protocols in place and that they are conveyed to practitioners to provide them with a support mechanism for the decision making process. It is also vital that a recording process is included in the protocol so that the decision – including the rationale behind making it – is formally recorded. Such protocols will assist in providing confidence to practitioners in the event the decision is challenged.

It is very important that the practitioner uses all available information before they decide whether or not to share. Experience, professional instinct and other available information will all help with the decision making process as will anonymised discussions with colleagues about the case. If there is any doubt about the wellbeing of the child and the decision is to share, the Data Protection Act should not be viewed as a barrier to proportionate sharing.

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