Ask the children

Zoë Hilton and **Chris Mills** summarise their research on what young people think about the government's information sharing proposals.

A key duty of the Children's Commissioner for England is to bring children and young people's views into the national public arena. Major changes are underway to how information on children and young people is gathered and shared. How do they view these changes? The Commissioner asked the authors to conduct a small research project to find out.

Improved sharing of information about children and young people is central to the government's *Every Child Matters* strategy (HMSO 2003). The report of Lord Laming's enquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié concluded that the failure of agencies to share information effectively was an important cause of the tragedy (Department of Health, Home Office 2003). Accordingly, Section 12 of the Children Act 2004 provides for the setting up of an information sharing database containing a record of each of the 11 million children in England. In December 2005, Beverley Hughes, the Minister of State for Children, Young People and Families, announced that the government had approved the necessary expenditure with an intended completion date of 2008.

of Commons 2005). In addition, unease about critical issues such as security, confidentiality and access arrangements was also expressed by the Committee.

The Information Commissioner has also raised concerns about children's and young people's rights to privacy and the need to justify the sharing of information (Information Commissioners Office 2005). These themes are developed in detail in a report for the Information Commissioners Office by the Foundation for Information Policy Research(Anderson *et al. 2006)*.

Between September 2005 and January 2006, we convened seven separate focus group discussions across England and one group in Wales to explore young people's views of the database and general issues around information sharing . In all, 71 children and young people were consulted. They included young people in mainstream youth settings, groups of homeless young people, young people in care and young offenders. Importantly nearly all had been in contact with various types of welfare practitioners and professionals and so had experience of information about them being shared (or not shared) by those

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The database (originally called the 'Information Sharing Index' but now re-named 'ContactPoint') will include information identifying the child, parents or carers, school and GP. It will not include detailed 'case information', and consent will be required for 'sensitive services', but it will contain the name and contact details of agencies and practitioners involved with the child. Additionally, an indicator will be included denoting whether an assessment has been completed.

It is intended that the database will facilitate information sharing between practitioners who have concerns about a child or young person. The government hopes that it will thereby enable earlier identification of specific needs, and earlier and more effective action to address them.

These proposals have attracted considerable criticism. In April 2005, a report of the Education and Skills Select Committee voiced concerns that current research evidence does not demonstrate that information sharing of this type is the best way of improving outcomes for children (House

trying to help them or provide them with services. A 'toolkit' of scenarios was used to help the children and young people discuss the issues and express their views.

The research found a number of of concerns (Hilton and Mills 2006). Although some of the children wrestled with understanding what the proposals would mean in practice, the overall tenor of their responses was critical. The young people strongly stated that their confidences should be respected. They expressed concerns about the quality of data in information systems and asserted their rights to access and to quality check their own 'files'. They were particularly reluctant to share information of a sensitive nature (for example concerning sexual health) and some said that they would prefer to forego vital services if their need for privacy in these areas was not respected. They placed emphasis on data security and expressed cynicism about the extent to which IT systems can be made secure.

The young people were concerned about the possibility of labelling and self-fulfilling prophesies

as a result of information sharing. They expressed the view that some problems could be exacerbated, rather than improved, as a result of information sharing, especially where a child was being bullied: in the school context young people expressed strong anxieties about the security of personal information. Many described experiences where information had been passed around the school without their permission. Overall, the young people insisted that all information sharing should be linked to the provision of services which they need and that information should only be shared without the consent of the young person if a high threshold of risk has been reached.

The young people saw trust as being central to the issue of sharing information. As one fifteen year-old respondent put it: 'I think it's about trust, trust is an important thing especially between children and adults ... if there's no trust there, they ain't going to tell you nothing. If you break that trust and you do tell someone else next time you have another situation like that, they ain't going to tell no one and it could have more serious consequences ....'

The policy implications of this research are clear. Although the young people accepted that information sharing may sometimes be in their best interests, they wished to retain control of what was shared and when it was shared. They implied that if they were unable to trust practitioners and agencies with their personal information, then it would sometimes be withheld. Therefore, the government needs to devise information sharing initiatives which will win the support of children and young people. There is no evidence from this research that the ContactPoint database project has succeeded in this regard. However, in response to these and other findings, the Government has undertaken to involve children, young people and families in the development of ContactPoint and to seek their views. (Great Britain: Department for Education and Skills 2006).

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