

# BETTER TOGETHER: PREVENTING REOFFENDING AND HOMELESSNESS

## SPOTLIGHT ON INFORMATION SHARING

Supporting an offender demands regular sharing of information. So why can it be so hard to get right? Over half the survey respondents reported difficulties getting the right information from other agencies. But where it worked, people said it made a real difference to cross sector working.

Information about support needs, risk assessments, support plans, outcomes, and monitoring are among the types of data which needs to be shared both between and within the sectors. With these in mind, we pull together the principles people said make a difference.

### 1. Getting the full picture

**‘We get the watered down version. If there is an agreement about what can be shared it’s easier, but anything outside of this can be difficult, we get Data Protection thrown at us.’ [hostel manager]**

‘Selective disclosure’ was perceived as a significant stumbling block to getting the information which is needed, particularly among some hostel staff who felt they couldn’t always obtain the right data from probation. Lack of trust and fear about confidentiality seemed to be bound up with this, alongside low awareness about what data exists and why it’s needed. At the same time, it was felt that some homelessness agencies don’t appreciate the legal frameworks which some in the criminal justice sector operate within, which does sometimes restrict what data can be shared.

**‘Probation does face restrictions which the voluntary sector doesn’t always appreciate. We are seen as un-cooperative. Having protocols in important to back up our decisions about why we can’t share some information.’ [Probation manager]**

**Getting it right:** have a clear policy or protocol which outlines what information can be shared, how and when this will be done. Make sure this is a living protocol and filtered down to all staff – it is important internal sharing happens as well as with external agencies. Openly discuss your information needs with each agency so there is a shared understanding of why you need certain information. ‘There is a reason for sharing information. It’s not because we’re nosy, it’s because we need it to support the client effectively. We need clear messages about why information is needed.’ [Service manager, hostel]

### 2. Dealing with risk

**‘The different models of risk have caused us problems in the past. we get lots of people who experience problems due to an overzealous risk assessment because they set light to a bin when they were 14 years old...the risk assessment system used by statutory organisations has always seemed very clinical whereas our model is focused on establishing a holistic picture.’ [Service manager, hostel]**

Information sharing in the context of 'risk' was seen as a challenge by both sectors. There was a sense that different perceptions or interpretations of risk between agencies can lead to inappropriate referrals being made and exclude clients from accessing some services. Agencies stressed that sharing information on risk needs to be done alongside other information to establish a more overall assessment, not be taken in isolation: information on their levels of engagement, and support needs were also vital components.

**Getting it right:** get a shared understanding of what is meant by risk and how this is assessed is important- the risk of re-offending, as well as the risk of tenancy breakdown. Agree what information is reasonable and necessary to be able to assess this. Establishing a wider picture of risk can help provide a more shared level of understanding between agencies and ultimately support the client more effectively.

### 3. Be proactive at sharing

**'We don't usually see other organisation's support plans and they don't see ours unless they request it. I have never had one of my support plans requested by another agency.'**  
[Support worker, hostel]

Agencies felt other agencies can do more to proactively share information about outcomes and the progress of their clients. Often information sharing arose when it was requested or formally required, not because agencies proactively shared support plans or progress reports. This left many untapped opportunities for better joint working as well as ways to join up support to the client more effectively

Interviewees provided many examples of where lack of information sharing and joined up working had had a negative impact on the client. This was also echoed by clients:

**'Nobody seems to talk to each other. I got breached for attending an appointment set by the court – it's not joined up at all.'** [Client]

**Getting it right:** identify, with the client, the relevant agencies to share support plans and other information with, for example on positive outcomes they have achieved. Feedback on the outcomes you are measuring – often they will be relevant to other agencies even if their framework being used is different. Also be clear in your own organisational policies about the points at which you'll contact other agencies if the clients' needs change or certain behaviour occurs – for example if they enter custody, contacting the hostel so they don't automatically lose their tenancy.

### 4. Informed consent

Of the clients we spoke to not all had given consent or had an informed discussion with their worker about how their information would be shared. Yet nearly all wanted their information to be shared so it would help better co-ordinate their support, minimise duplication and avoid duplication.

Be upfront with the client about why their information needs to be shared and explain the process. Be clear when and how it will be passed on. There are a range of resources to help ensure consent is consistent, informed and in line with legal frameworks.<sup>i</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> As a starting point, see our research on similar data and consent issues for our Critical Mass research project: [www.homeless.org.uk/toolkits-and-handbooks/critical-mass](http://www.homeless.org.uk/toolkits-and-handbooks/critical-mass)