

# STATISTICS USER FORUM

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## Statistics Users Forum submission to the Data Sharing Review

### *Introduction*

The Statistics User Forum (SUF) was set up in 2004 by the Royal Statistical Society, and provides an umbrella organisation for more than 20 groups of users of statistics, representing the shared views of this very diverse community. The members meet three times a year to exchange news and opinions. These meetings and SUF's many other activities are supported by a secretariat hosted by the Royal Statistical Society (RSS), and grant funding from the Economic and Social Research Council. More information about SUF is available at [www.rss.org.uk/suf](http://www.rss.org.uk/suf).

We do not wish to make an extensive submission, but rather to commend those made by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and the Local Government Association (LGA). We identify what we consider to be the key points made in those submissions.

Our observations reflect the belief that public policy is best based on evidence drawn from the analysis of good quality statistics, rather than anecdote or hunch. A proportionate approach to data sharing can help achieve that end. We note that both ONS and LGA stress the importance attached to privacy and confidentiality.

### *1. The benefits of data sharing*

1.1 Further data sharing (for example, in relation to migrants) can lead to better policy formulation, resource allocation and service delivery. As ONS notes, 'wider sharing of personal data (with the appropriate safeguards which are already built into the Act) for purely statistical purposes would strengthen democracy.'

1.2 Data sharing can reduce the numbers of requests for information, thus reducing compliance costs (for example, in relation to VAT-related surveys)

1.3 Data sharing reduces the need for costly surveys, thus saving public money.

### *2. Areas where benefits could be achieved*

2.1 Much greater use could be made of the administrative records held by government departments. A key advantage of these sources is that they offer, potentially, complete population coverage and hence much greater reliability than sample surveys.

2.2 Administrative records can be particularly useful in providing statistics for small areas, which require geographical identifiers.

2.3 The linkage of administrative records from different departments can be a powerful way to examine the complexities of social, economic and demographic relationships. Linkage requires individual-level identifiers.

### *3. Barriers and solutions*

3.1 The administrative costs of obtaining consent from individuals after collection for use for purposes not specified at the time of collection can be prohibitive, negating the savings achieved through using administrative records rather than survey data or inhibiting data sharing amongst partner organisations.

3.2 The Statistics and Registration Service Act (SRSA) only authorises sharing involving ONS, and on a bilateral rather than multilateral basis.

3.3 The criminalisation of disclosure of personal information under the SRSA could create a disincentive to release data which is not, in fact, disclosive.

3.4 'Approved researcher' status offers an avenue for using personal information to produce statistical aggregates. Such status should not be confined to academics.

3.5 ONS observes that other EU countries have implemented provisions in the EU data protection directive more positively from a statistics and research perspective. The UK Statistics Authority should review these other approaches and consider how they might be applied in the UK.

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