

# Institute for Policy Research



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## Connecting data across public services in Bath & North East Somerset

### About this research

This summary describes the 'Connecting Data across Public Services in Bath & North East Somerset' project, a research partnership between the University of Bath Institute for Policy Research, Bath and North East Somerset Council and the local Clinical Commissioning Group.

The objective of the research is to realise the benefits of connected 'big data' by generating new insights into public need and service effectiveness and developing an evidence-base to inform policy and practice innovation. Policy making processes are currently being shaped at the intersection of a number of competing agendas: the drive to make better use of existing and new forms of data in evidence-informed decision-making; the challenges of significant public sector spending restrictions; and the benefits and challenges of information sharing and linked data.

By recognising and managing the dynamics and tensions between and within these agendas, this project anticipates that the findings will directly inform policy and practice priorities for public services and residents of Bath & North East Somerset, and develop our understanding of the processes and techniques by which big data can benefit policy making.

The project is funded by a Transformation Challenge Award.

## Research aims in context

There is a great deal of expectation attached to the promise of 'big data' to illuminate patterns and trends in human interaction and transaction, and inform policy and practice decisions. The term 'big data' is usually employed to describe a wealth of new, diverse and regularly updated forms of data (both structured and unstructured data) that presents new challenges associated with how data can be connected, linked and analysed, but also has great social and economic value as the basis for decision making (OECD, 2012).

The UK Parliament has classified 'big data' as a key issue for 2015 (House of Commons, 2015). The potential contribution that 'big data' can make to the policy-making process is being shaped at the intersection of a number of interconnected agendas.

Efforts by government at all levels to ensure policy is informed by rigorous and reliable evidence have been revitalised by the challenges of significant budget restrictions, the impact of austerity and a changing demand for services. In this context, it is increasingly apparent that efficiencies will not be achieved in the usual ways (e.g. through minor adjustments to procurement or back office configurations). Delivering on both ambitious policy objectives and reduced public spending will require a robust evidence-base on which to consider radical service reforms.

The importance of sturdy information governance protocols and procedures has become ever more pertinent, as instances of highly visible data security breaches amplify public and professional perceptions of risk associated with sharing and linking data. At the same time open data is seen to offer a vital mechanism for enhancing the transparency and accountability of governments and empowering engagement with public policies.

These agendas do not always sit in easy alignment with each other, and tension and disjunctions between them are realised acutely where the use of big data in the policy making process is practiced at the local level.

Since April 2014, Bath and North East Somerset (B&NES) Council, NHS B&NES Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) and an interdisciplinary team at the University of Bath Institute for Policy Research (IPR) have been involved in a co-produced research project to explore the potential for connected data to inform citizen-focused local policy and practice.

Funded by a Transformation Challenge Award, the principle aims of the project are to create, pilot and evaluate a process to change the culture of information sharing across public services; identify mechanisms (technologies and processes) for safely linking data; and realise the benefits of big data by generating new insights into public need and service effectiveness to guide policy and practice development.

Realising the benefits of big data starts from the premise that there remains a need for local policy making processes to be problem-led and theory informed. Our approach involves the co-definition of policy problems and the application of innovative techniques for analysing linked administrative data and aggregate area-level statistics to better understand local need and co-produce solutions. Our partnership is founded on the principles of knowledge-exchange, to enable sharing of ideas and ensure that the learning from the project is genuinely co-owned.

The approach that this project develops is being piloted through application to two current policy priorities for the Council and the CCG; diabetes care services and financial wellbeing of B&NES residents. It is anticipated that the findings of the project will contribute to both the development of policy and practice, and to our understanding of processes and techniques that realise the benefits of big data for local government.



## For more information

Professor Julie Barnett is a member of the IPR Leadership Team and Professor of Health Psychology.  
e-mail: [j.c.barnett@bath.ac.uk](mailto:j.c.barnett@bath.ac.uk)

Dr Hannah Durrant leads on the Research Strategy of the IPR.  
e-mail: [h.durrant@bath.ac.uk](mailto:h.durrant@bath.ac.uk)

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e-mail: [ipr@bath.ac.uk](mailto:ipr@bath.ac.uk)

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