Administrative Data Taskforce

What is the Administrative Data Taskforce (ADT)?

The Administrative Data Taskforce (ADT) was established in December 2011 following an announcement by the Minister for Universities and Science, David Willetts. The taskforce was tasked to report to the Government on ways to enable and promote the wider use of administrative data for research and policy purposes.

Who sat on it?

The Taskforce was chaired by Sir Alan Langlands (HEFCE) and supported by Paul Boyle (ESRC). It consisted of representatives from the departments with the largest administrative datasets like HMRC, Department of Health and Department for Work and Pensions as well as academics, the Office for National Statistics and other experts.

Their report builds on earlier work on this issue, for instance the 2008 Data Sharing Review by Richard Thomas and Mark Walport.

What was the outcome?

Three working groups were set up to report back to the Taskforce on; the legal & ethical issues; public engagement; and models of data access. A series of workshops were held involving HMRC representatives, their counterparts in other departments and outside experts.

The outcome of the working groups was the publication of the report *Administrative Data: Improving Access for Research and Policy*, released in December 2012.

What are the recommendations from the ADT report?

The ADT report makes five recommendations:
  a.   An Administrative Data Research Centre (ADRC) should be established in each of the four countries in the UK;
  b.   Single UK-wide researcher accreditation built on best national and international practice;
  c.   Legislation should be enacted to facilitate research access to administrative data and to allow data linkage between departments to take place more efficiently;
  d.   A strategy for engaging with the public should be instituted;
  e.   Sufficient funds should be put in place to support improved research access to and linkage between administrative data.

What would the approach suggested by the taskforce involve?

The approach being recommended by the Administrative Data Taskforce, would in principle allow datasets to be linked across government in a secure manner that would preserve anonymity. The key components of this are a transparent governance process involving data controllers from each department, accreditation of researchers to consistent standards whether they are from academia or government, safe research environments with data security up to at least the level government departments use, and control of research outputs to ensure that the risk of deliberate or accidental disclosure of personal information is very low indeed.

Developments since the ADT report

Following publication of the report, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) established a Technical Group to progress plans for the proposed Administrative Data Research Network (ADRN).

This group looked into the practical issues of setting up the ADRN and made some further recommendations on the establishment of four (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) Administrative Research Data Centres (ADRCs) co-ordinated by an administrative data information coordinating body, the Administrative Data Service (ADS).

The four ADRCs and ADS are currently being procured by the ESRC, with the aim to have an Administrative Research Network set up in autumn 2013.

Read-across to the current HMRC consultation

If HMRC were given a general power to share anonymised individual level data for research and statistical purposes, this would remove the need for the creation of specific legal gateways for each new requirement – a process that can be resource intensive and difficult to schedule in an already heavily subscribed parliamentary/legislative calendar. It would therefore go some way to addressing the recommendation above that legislation should be enacted to facilitate research access to administrative data and to allow data linkage between departments to take place more efficiently.

In undertaking any wider sharing of its data, HMRC would need to ensure that any risks of identification of personal or confidential data were minimised, as is already achieved in the HMRC Datalab (see separate briefing paper). The ADT report makes a number of recommendations about how to achieve that, including anonymisation of data, use of trusted third parties to link the data, use of state of the art safe environments with levels of security commensurate with the sensitivity of the data, accreditation of researchers using the data, and disclosure control on research and statistical outputs. The Administrative Data Research Network and associated governance framework would enable HMRC to ensure that decisions on wider sharing of its data were made in a transparent fashion and that the data sharing and access were accomplished safely.