

Privacy and Responsible Information Sharing for the Western Australian Public Sector – A proposal

# Messages from the Ministers



I believe that the organisation people should be able to trust the most is the Government that serves them.

Privacy is a universal human right. Western Australians should be able to say that their State Government values and respects their privacy as much as they do.

Introducing clear and strong privacy protections for individuals is more important today than ever. The pervasiveness of the internet means that once personal information is released into the public sphere, it can be very hard to control the use of that information.

Our Government has committed to pursuing this legislation because we recognise the community expects the law to enshrine its values and protect them.

I encourage the WA community to engage with this important and long-needed reform.

**Hon. John Quigley MLA**

**Attorney General; Minister for Commerce**



In an increasingly data-driven world, there are incredible opportunities for government to use data to deliver more effective, more efficient, and more seamless services.

Better use of data has the power to improve many things we do, whether it is something as simple as renewing a licence, as complex as improving research into children’s health, or as important as reducing cases of family domestic violence.

With this opportunity comes significant responsibility, and the use of data by Government needs a solid foundation of data protection and privacy measures to ensure both public good and public confidence.

I welcome your feedback on how a responsible approach to privacy and information sharing can deliver a smarter, more efficient WA.

**Hon. Dave Kelly MLA**

**Minister for Water; Fisheries; Forestry; Innovation and ICT; Science**

# Why do we need to act?

Did you know that Western Australia is one of only two jurisdictions in Australia without overarching privacy legislation?

While there is some legislation that regulates the use of confidential information and offers some privacy protections to individuals in particular circumstances, these operate in an ad hoc and sometimes inconsistent way.

Given the vast amount of information and data the WA Government holds, it’s critical that this be addressed as soon as practical.

You have a right to know that your privacy will be protected. You need to be assured that any information held by the WA public sector about you, your family, or your business, will be handled responsibly and securely.

If you feel your privacy has been breached, there should be somewhere in Government that has the right skills and tools to make sure that your complaint is resolved. Government should be diligent and transparent in managing your privacy, and held to account when things go wrong.

Cutting the red tape that unnecessarily locks information up is key to making sure you have access to the best possible Government services. We recognise you should only have to tell us once when you move house, or a loved one passes away. And if you want to get those services online, you should be able to.

In our increasingly complex world, this Government recognises it must do things differently if it is to address our most wicked problems. We can’t improve Aboriginal wellbeing, homelessness or youth suicide by doing what we’ve always done.

Sharing information between agencies is fundamental to unlocking new insights and making sure Government can work as one to address society’s most pressing needs.

*“We consider that State privacy legislation is essential to support and enable current and future health and social research in WA, and to improve outcomes for Western Australian citizens.”*

**Malcolm McCusker AO QC Chair of the Governing Board, Western Australian Health Translation Network**

# How can we better protect privacy?

At first glance, privacy and data sharing might appear to have competing aims – one is restricting the flow of information and the other is facilitating it.

But the WA Government sees these two important considerations as complementary. We should not be considering expanding the sharing of data without first making sure we have the right privacy framework to safeguard citizens’ personal information.

The WA Government is proposing to introduce a whole-of-government framework to govern the way the public sector manages the information it holds. This will create uniform rules across the WA Public Sector that will require agencies to consider your privacy whenever they collect, use or share your information.

At an agency level, the WA public sector has processes to protect personal and sensitive information. There are also avenues to penalise public servants who have misused information. However, the laws that currently regulate privacy and the disclosure of personal information are complex and inconsistent across Government, and there is no specific body to oversee privacy in the WA public sector.

The Government has looked at privacy protections elsewhere in Australia and overseas, and sees many benefits in learning from their experience in these areas and aligning proposed privacy and data sharing legislation with other jurisdictions where practical and appropriate.

*“I welcome the development of WA data sharing legislation to provide a strong framework to ensure that data is used for public good whilst protecting individual privacy. As a child health researcher, the use of data to answer important questions about issues that affect children and their families is integral for the prevention and treatment of illness and adverse outcomes. Data collected by government agencies is an important resource which needs to be used by government and researchers to ensure policy, programs and interventions are achieving the best outcomes for Western Australians.”*

**Professor Fiona Stanley AC Patron, Telethon Kids Institute**

# What’s wrong with the status quo?

The absence of overarching privacy legislation in WA has contributed to difficulties in sharing information with other States and the Australian Government.

This means that we sometimes miss opportunities that would be beneficial to Western Australians. Our health researchers are not able to get access to all the information they need, and sometimes WA government agencies miss out on opportunities to properly find out whether taxpayer dollars are delivering the best possible outcomes.

WA Government is a large and complex organisation working across the biggest State in Australia. The lack of information sharing means that sometimes we don’t get the best outcomes, despite the hard work of frontline services.

It is in the community’s interests that the WA Government breaks down these barriers and encourages responsible information sharing that will result in better outcomes in key areas such as health, safety, education and planning.

For example, in 2019 the Auditor General reported on improving Aboriginal Children’s Ear Health. Otitis Media is a treatable ear disease that can cause permanent hearing damage. The Auditor General noted that “the many entities, organisations and medical practices involved in identifying, diagnosing and treating Otitis Media in Aboriginal children across WA collect their own specific data. However due to privacy concerns, they do not share patient information, even at a de-identified and aggregated level... Because the data is not shared, no one knows how bad the situation is for Aboriginal children at a whole of state level at any specific point in time, and there is no baseline to measure performance.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

A whole-of-government framework to govern the way the public sector manages the information it holds will provide greater protection because it will ensure consistent and clear rules and responsibilities when information including personal information is collected, stored, managed and used.

*“Greater availability and use of public sector data has the potential to bring significant benefits to the community, such as improved government policy and service delivery, more transparency, and improved accountability.”[[2]](#footnote-2)*

**Business Council of Australia**

# What are the benefits for me?

We live in a society that is constantly changing. We expect our services to be more accessible and able to meet our needs quickly and efficiently.

How many times have you been asked for the same information from different government agencies?

Wouldn’t it make life easier if:

* Instead of having to have a range of different licences, such as your Driver’s Licence, a Fishing Licence, a Plumbers Licence, and so on, you could just have one that gets updated automatically when you tell Government you’ve changed address?
* When a loved one passes away, you only need to tell WA Government once, instead of having to tell many different agencies?
* You got married and changed your name, and you only needed to tell the WA Government once?
* You could get all your WA Government services online through a single portal, instead of having to go into different government department offices?

ServiceWA, a WA Government initiative aimed at making life easier for Western Australians, is being trialled in Bunbury. It will enable access to 85 everyday services — either face-to-face or via an online portal — from five WA Government agencies.

This initiative is just the beginning. Introducing this legislation could address any legal barriers to realising the full potential of this service to reduce unnecessary interactions with Government and enable better services for you.

This is particularly important when you are dealing with multiple agencies in times of stress, such as supporting a loved one with mental illness, seeking help with disability services, or navigating the police and justice systems.

Making use of the rich, but currently fragmented information that Government holds would allow us to identify issues early and prevent issues that might affect you or your family.

In South Australia, the [Energy4Life](https://www.dpc.sa.gov.au/responsibilities/data-sharing/current-projects/energy4life) initiative matches South Australian suburbs undergoing long power outages with residents with electricity-dependent medical issues. For example, a person on a dialysis machine could be at risk without access to power for such a long period. Energy4Life prompts SA Health to login for more information on an outage and provide Red Cross with details of people at risk.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Sharing data is important to businesses, too. The Victorian Government “[My Victoria](https://myvictoria.vic.gov.au/)” portal is a free, easy to use business insights tool that aims to help small business identify gaps in the market and grow their businesses.[[4]](#footnote-4) The NSW Government [Easy to Do Business initiative](https://www.nsw.gov.au/improving-nsw/premiers-priorities-2015-2019/improving-government-services/) helps people get their businesses off the ground. It has condensed 48 forms and 75 regulations into one single digital form and allows access to 13 government agencies through a single digital solution.[[5]](#footnote-5)

# How does sharing information help society?

The biggest problems facing our community are complex and do not have a simple solution — for example, improving the health and wellbeing of children, or reducing illicit drug use. When Government agencies work together to tackle complex issues, rather than in silos, everyone benefits.

The biggest impact that can be made by Government is often in the areas where the problems are the most difficult. When information is shared between public sector agencies, it can help deliver practical insights into how we can better deal with our seemingly intractable issues. It can also support a more effective public service by identifying those who would benefit most from services and support.

In South Australia, the [Vulnerable Children Project](https://www.dpc.sa.gov.au/responsibilities/data-sharing/current-projects/vulnerable-children-project) facilitates information sharing between agencies to provide frontline workers and strategic decision makers with a fuller picture of South Australia’s vulnerable children and their families. This provides a near real-time dashboard to the Department for Child Protection’s Child Abuse Report Line to inform decision making at strategic and operational levels. The dashboard features integrated, securely shared data from across government.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Here in WA, the Index of Biodiversity Surveys for Assessment has centralised biodiversity data collected each year. This information helps builds a better picture of WA’s flora and fauna, supports environmental assessments and improves strategic planning and management.

Data linkage has also helped the Government to develop strategies that ensures better care for our most vulnerable citizens. This has significant socio-economic benefits, identifying children at risk and allowing earlier intervention.

The WA Data Linkage System, which confidentially and securely links data while protecting individual privacy, has been used in more than 800 projects in universities, government and hospital settings and often involved collaboration with diverse research groups. The use of these integrated data sets has helped inform policy, innovation and research and, importantly, there has not been a single breach of private information since its inception in 1995.

By sharing information and integrating data sets, researchers and policy makers gain new insights into difficult issues and are better able to develop solutions.

*“Through better access to data and the capacity to engage in data linkage, the State Government can open up the possibility for services to better measure outcomes and demonstrate return on investment, and to better understand risk factors and target at risk cohorts to enable earlier intervention strategies.”[[7]](#footnote-7)*

**Western Australian Council of Social Service**

# What sort of information can be shared?

The WA Government collects and holds a lot of information. Some is not sensitive, such as information about the environment we live in. Other information is highly sensitive, such as details about an individual’s health and financial circumstances.

It is proposed that sensitive information held by the WA public sector be kept confidential unless there are overriding and very important reasons to disclose or share that information.

Sometimes it is necessary to share personal information to ensure community safety. As an example, the WA Government introduced ‘No Jab, No Play’ laws to allow the Department of Health to protect under-vaccinated children at school during disease outbreaks. In order to achieve this, schools must be able to share the information they hold about children’s vaccinations with the Department of Health.

This means the Department of Health can identify children whose vaccines are not up-to-date, so they can be made to stay safely at home if there is a disease outbreak at their school.

However, in other examples, such as in health researchers exploring links between mental health and the justice system, or Government making informed decisions about where to build new schools, only aggregated, de-identified is necessary.

In order to provide clarity and to reassure the community, the WA Government is considering which activities it should permit within the proposed legislation, and provide guidance to agencies on approved purposes for sharing information. These might include, for example, activities to ensure better delivery of government services, such as reducing requests for the same information; to protect an individual; or to reduce a threat to health or safety.

There will be scope to exclude particularly sensitive kinds of information from the legislation. These might include, for example, information that relates to criminal investigations or proceedings, or is subject to active police operations.

*“Data is a rapidly emerging resource that has been described as the new gold. Western Australia’s capacity to harness its data and information assets is key to the State’s capacity to prosper in the digital era and solve complex societal challenges. This includes building on Western Australia’s exceptional data linkage capabilities which have been utilised for decades to solve numerous health challenges. I am pleased to support the development of Western Australian legislation that will facilitate sharing of data whilst protecting privacy.”*

**Professor Peter Klinken AC, Chief Scientist of Western Australia**

# Who would get access to public sector information?

The Government will need to provide clear rules for what information can and can’t be shared, who with, and for what purposes.

With changes in technology people are more aware of and concerned about who has access to their data and what is it used for. It proposes only to share information within Government and with trusted third parties so better decisions can be made about the types of services provided and how best to implement them. The Government wants to better tailor services to meet the needs of individuals, families and communities and to gain better insights into the solutions needed to fix complex social problems.

Where appropriate and beneficial, information would be shared within and between public sector agencies, or with trusted third parties. These could include other Australian governments, or non-government organisations providing services to the community on behalf of the Government.

The WA Government also has important relationships with external stakeholders, such as research groups. For example, sharing data could help support better research into child health.

Before a public sector agency could share information, it would be required to ensure the third party is compliant with WA’s standards of data sharing, can ensure confidentiality and can deliver on the purposes for which the information is being shared.

Government will be transparent about how information sharing decisions are made, and who information is shared with.

*“In my role as a community health nurse, information sharing is essential to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children together with my own safety in the workplace.  More timely and joined up information sharing would assist me to better assess and manage a family’s risk with the aim of keeping children, families and community nursing teams safe and well.*

*As a community nurse this should include information about the child, situations involving family violence, substance misuse or any circumstance which pose a risk to families and/or staff. Whilst we have clear policy which support the safety of nursing teams, children and their families, improved information sharing will be of great benefit in ensuring we all work together to support families and their care providers.”*

**Barbara Colborne, Clinical Nurse, Child and Adolescent Community Health**

# How will the Government ensure that information is shared safely?

The proposed legislation will require public sector agencies to consider privacy in everything they do when collecting or using personal information. Agencies will be legally obliged to ensure the privacy of citizens is a primary consideration.

A structured, risk-based decision-making process will be provided to enable agencies to assess whether information should be shared or not.

It is proposed that this process be built upon the data sharing principles that underpin the Australian Government’s proposed [Data Sharing and Release legislation](https://pmc.gov.au/resource-centre/public-data/issues-paper-data-sharing-release-legislation).

The set of five principle-based criteria — Safe Projects, Safe People, Safe Data, Safe Settings, and Safe Outputs — must be applied and satisfied before an agency can share information with another party.

**1) Safe Data**

Is the data to be shared appropriate for the proposed purpose?

If the data is to be de-identified, how will this occur?

**2) Safe People**

Is the organisation receiving the data an appropriate recipient?

Do their staff have the right level of skills and experience?

Will they restrict the information to the right people?

**3) Safe Settings**

Is the environment in which the data will be stored, accessed and used appropriate?

Does it have the right level of security?

What is the likelihood of deliberate or accidental disclosure?

**4) Safe Outputs**

Is the proposed publication or disclosure of the data analytical work appropriate?

What is the risk of identifying individuals?

**5) Safe Projects**

Is the purpose for which data is to be shared and used appropriate?

Is it for the public good and will it provide value?

Are there unreasonable risks or detriments if the sharing does not occur?

In making a decision whether to share personal or sensitive information, government organisations will need to be supported to understand potential risks and make informed decisions about whether or not to share information.

The WA Government is also investing heavily in improving public sector cyber security, and will work to build the public sector’s ability to ensure the safety of information.

# Who will ensure accountability and transparency?

A key consideration of the consultation process will be determining the appropriate standards for privacy. The Government is considering the appointment of a WA Privacy Commissioner to support accountability for the public sector in meeting these standards.

It is envisaged a commissioner could facilitate transparency and ensure compliance, be responsible for promoting privacy within the public sector and ensure privacy principles are upheld.

WA Government is also considering that a Chief Data Officer could be appointed to support the WA public sector in using, sharing, linking and analysing information. The Chief Data Officer would establish and monitor standards for information sharing and advocate for best practice in the use and management of data in the public sector.

# What happens if my privacy is breached?

At the moment, if you believe a public sector agency has breached your privacy, there is no specific pathway for complaints to be made and resolved. It is proposed that a Privacy Commissioner could be responsible for receiving complaints and ensuring they are resolved appropriately. The handling of privacy breaches in other jurisdictions will be considered in considering the commissioner’s responsibilities.

# How do I share my feedback?

The Government recognises that privacy is of the utmost important to Western Australians and acknowledges the need to consult thoroughly to ensure any legislation protects the integrity of information while enabling it to be shared in an efficient and safe manner where it is deemed advantageous.

We encourage you to take the time to read the discussion paper in full and share your feedback, either via our online portal at wa.gov.au/privacyproject or in writing via

Email: [privacy@dpc.wa.gov.au](mailto:datasharing@dpc.wa.gov.au)

Mail: Public Sector Reform Unit

Department of the Premier and Cabinet

Locked Bag 3001

West Perth WA 6872

All feedback must be received by **Friday 1 November 2019.**

We invite you to join us at the State Library of Western Australia for a free information session to learn more about Privacy and Responsible Information Sharing in the public sector, and ask any questions you may have around what this means for you:

Wednesday 4 September

5:30pm – 6:30pm

State Library Theatre, Perth Cultural Centre, 25 Francis Street, Perth

Register here: <https://privacyproject.eventbrite.com.au>

**Acknowledgement of Country**

The Government of Western Australia acknowledges the traditional custodians throughout Western Australia and their continuing connection to the land, waters and community. We pay our respects to all members of the Aboriginal communities and their cultures; and to Elders both past and present.

1. Office of the Auditor General. 2019. Improving Aboriginal Children’s Ear Health [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Submission to: New Australian Government Data Sharing and Release Legislation 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Government of South Australia. Department of the Premier and Cabinet. Energy4Life. Available from: <https://www.dpc.sa.gov.au/responsibilities/data-sharing/current-projects/energy4life> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Government of Victoria. Open data. Available from: <https://myvictoria.vic.gov.au/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. NSW Government. Improving government services. Available from: <https://www.nsw.gov.au/improving-nsw/premiers-priorities-2015-2019/improving-government-services/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Government of South Australia. Department of the Premier and Cabinet. Vulnerable Children Project. Available from: <https://www.dpc.sa.gov.au/responsibilities/data-sharing/current-projects/vulnerable-children-project> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Submission to: Data Linkage Expert Advisory Group, A review of Western Australia’s data linkage capabilities 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)