



Is the Data Protection Act being weakened?

The government has ditched yet more of the protections on personal data contained in the Data Protection Act with new legislation that will allow the sharing of data between public and private sectors.

The move follows the decision by the cabinet to allow data to be "normally shared" between public sector bodies, if the sharing is in the public interest.

The new bill specifically allows data to be exchanged in the name of preventing fraud. Both public and private sector agencies will have access to information about a person's tax, employment, and benefits status, as well as any pensions and other personal financial information.

Medical information is specifically exempted from being shared.

Further, the bill paves the way for personal data from various repositories to be collated and compared, which could reveal suspicious patterns of behaviour. Civil rights campaigners are concerned that these powers could be used without any evidence of wrongdoing against the person being investigated.

But the serious crime bill also contains provisions for function creep: that is for the Home Secretary to extend the bill beyond its original scope. The powers could be used for prevention of other crimes, not just fraud, for tracking missing offenders, and for recovering debt, according to reports.

According to *The Guardian*, the bill's explanatory notes also set out how the scope of the national fraud initiative will be extended to include central government databases, such as passport office information, and the driving license records.

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