

# 8 million school pupils' personal and sensitive data released to press from Department for Education



## Project Aims

Individual, identifiable and sensitive pupil data are released to third parties from the National Pupil Database without telling pupils, parents and schools. This Department for Education (DfE) FOI request aimed to obtain understanding of any due diligence and the release process: privacy impact and DfE decision making, with a focus on its accountability. This was to enable transparency and scrutiny in the public interest, to increase the understanding of how our 8 million children's personal data are used by government, commercial third parties, and press.

I publicly requested via FOI on [whatdotheyknow.com](http://whatdotheyknow.com) unpublished documents in July 2015 after a year of asking questions in private email. Information improving transparency of the oversight & release of children's personal, sensitive data is now bringing change and I hope will lead to improvement. Without free FOI access this would not have been possible.

Chancellor Mr. Osborne spoke on November 17 about the importance of online data protection:

*"Each of these attacks damages companies, their customers, and the public's trust in **our collective ability to keep their data and privacy safe.**"*

*"Imagine the cumulative impact of repeated catastrophic breaches, eroding that basic faith... needed for our online economy & social life to function."*

The Chancellor perhaps has no idea the government is compromising our entire future adult population's online security by giving away their personal data.

FOI enabled me as a member of the public to ask and respond to government and schools to improve practices in the broad public interest. If there was a cost to this process I could not afford to follow up in depth. The cost of a few FOI requests has therefore been low I believe compared with the immeasurable cost of these continued public data security risks.

## The request

The request was for documents that should exist:

1. Privacy impact and its assessment process
2. Ethics review process documentation
3. A list of any audits carried out since Dec 2012 of all third party data recipients
4. Research applicants' assessment criteria
5. Approvals' panel Terms of Reference (TOR)
6. The measurement of benefits achieved from release of the data to third parties and press

## Project Outcome

Materials were released in August 2015. These documents are still not published on the Department for Education's website but are publicly available on [whatdotheyknow.com](http://whatdotheyknow.com).

These showed details of the data release practices:

- no privacy impact assessment.
- no documented ethics assessment
- no post-release audit process, and at the time of the FOI request had not performed a single one
- the itemised applications for releases of identifiable and sensitive pupil data to journalists on multiple occasions since 2012

I was able to use this information in conversation with Schools Minister Nick Gibb MP to begin a process with the Department to get changes made. The Department has since completed at least one audit of data recipients and plans more.

They have begun to consider public engagement and the risks their departmental processes pose to young people's privacy and digital identity.

These policies and practices exposed in the public domain are starting to result in change that will benefit all of our children, families and future citizens and collective cyber security. At the time of writing work is in progress at the Department.