What is the Community Health Index (CHI)?

National Services Scotland (NSS) was asked to set up an advisory group to advise the Chief Medical Officer and the Directors of Public Health on appropriate access to the Community Health Index (CHI).

CHI is a database in wide use throughout NHSScotland. It contains data on patient demographics and some clinical information on aspects of healthcare screening and surveillance. The CHI number is, effectively, an NHS number and its use as a patient identifier makes it increasingly important to the implantation of "eHealth" (electronic health records (EHR) and other information and communication technologies (ICT) being introduced to healthcare in Scotland).

CHI consists of a series (eight) regional database linked by a search index. It is also linked to, or exchanges data with, a number of other systems including the CPC systems (Community & Prevention Care), and the National Health Service Central Registrar (NHSCR).

A number of organisations act as data controllers for different parts of the system and many health service employees have some level of access to CHI. The system is used for a range of purposes in addition to just identifying patients e.g. in linking records; moving patient notes between general practitioners, payments to practitioners and preventing fraud.

No single body has responsibility for CHI; the data controllers for CHI are the 15 NHS Boards. Decisions on access and use have traditionally been taken by the appropriate Directors of Public Health in their role as CHI data custodians. This has resulted in variation in access to and of CHI between one NHS Board area and another. It has also meant that timely and unanimous decisions on access at national level have at times been difficult to achieve although this has been facilitated more recently by one of the DPHs taking the lead in this area.