



# **Children's MARS Information Sharing Guidance**

**Advice for practitioners providing safeguarding  
services to children, young people, parents and  
carers**

**April 2021**

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## Introduction

Information sharing is essential for effective safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and young people. It is a key factor identified in many serious case reviews (SCRs), where poor information sharing has resulted in missed opportunities to take action that keeps children and young people safe.

This guidance is based on [Information Sharing](#) (2018) HM Government and has been produced to support practitioners in the decisions they take to share information, which reduces the risk of harm to children and young people and promotes their well-being.

This guidance does not deal in detail with arrangements for bulk or pre-arranged sharing of personal information between IT systems or organisations other than to explain their role in effective information governance.

This guidance reflects the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and Data Protection Act 2018. It is also written within the context of the Children's MARS Memorandum of Understanding which can be found on the [Children's MARS website](#).

### Who is the advice for?

This advice is for all frontline practitioners and senior managers working with children, young people, parents and carers who have to make decisions about sharing personal information on a case-by-case basis. It might be helpful for practitioners working with adults who are responsible for children who may be in need.

For guidance around sharing information for the purposes of learning and audit, there is an Information Sharing Agreement for learning through Scrutiny and Assurance activity available on the [Children's MARS website](#).

## The seven golden rules to sharing information

1. Remember that the GDPR, Data Protection Act 2018 and human rights law are not barriers to justified information sharing, but provide a framework to ensure that personal information about living individuals is shared appropriately
2. Be open and honest with the individual (and/or their family where appropriate) from the outset about why, what, how and with whom information will, or could be shared, and seek their agreement, unless it is unsafe or inappropriate to do so
3. Seek advice from other practitioners, or your information governance lead if you are in any doubt about sharing the information concerned, without disclosing the identity of the individual where possible
4. Where possible, share information with consent, and where possible, respect the wishes of those who do not consent to having their information shared. Under the GDPR and Data Protection Act 2018 you may share information without consent if, in your judgement,

there is a lawful basis to do so, such as where safety may be at risk. You will need to base your judgement on the facts of the case. When you are sharing or requesting personal information from someone, be clear of the basis upon which you are doing so. Where you do not have consent, be mindful that an individual might not expect information to be shared

5. Consider safety and well-being: base your information sharing decisions on considerations of the safety and well-being of the individual and others who may be affected by their actions
6. Necessary, proportionate, relevant, adequate, accurate, timely and secure: ensure that the information you share is necessary for the purpose for which you are sharing it, is shared only with those individuals who need to have it, is accurate and up-to-date, is shared in a timely fashion, and is shared securely (see principles)
7. Keep a record of your decision and the reasons for it – whether it is to share information or not. If you decide to share, then record what you have shared, with whom and for what purpose

## **The GDPR and Data Protection Act 2018**

The GDPR and Data Protection Act 2018 introduces new elements to the data protection regime, superseding the Data Protection Act 1998. Practitioners must have due regard to the relevant data protection principles which allow them to share personal information.

The GDPR and Data Protection Act 2018 places greater significance on organisations being transparent and accountable in relation to their use of data. All organisations handling personal data need to have comprehensive and proportionate arrangements for collecting, storing and sharing information.

The GDPR and Data Protection Act 2018 do not prevent, or limit, the sharing of information for the purposes of keeping children and young people safe.

To effectively share information:

- All practitioners should be confident of the lawful basis and processing conditions under the Data Protection Act 2018 and the GDPR, which allow them to store, and share, the information, including information which is considered sensitive, such as health data, known under the data protection legislation as ‘special category personal data’
- Where practitioners need to share special category personal data, for example, where information obtained is sensitive and needs more protection, they should always consider and identify the lawful basis for doing so. The Data Protection Act 2018 contains ‘safeguarding of children and individuals at risk’ as a processing condition that allows practitioners to share information, including without consent (where in the circumstances consent cannot be given, it cannot be reasonably expected that a practitioner obtains consent or if to gain consent would place a child at risk). However, practitioners should be mindful that a data protection impact assessment for any type of

processing which is likely to be high risk must be completed, and therefore aware of the risks of processing special category data

- Information can be shared legally without consent, if a practitioner is unable to, cannot be reasonably expected to gain consent from the individual, or if to gain consent could place a child at risk.
- Relevant personal information can be shared lawfully if it is to keep a child or individual at risk safe from neglect or physical, emotional or mental harm, or if it is protecting their physical, mental or emotional well-being.

## Sharing information

Sharing information is an intrinsic part of any frontline practitioners' job when working with children and young people. The decisions about how much information to share, with whom and when, can have a profound impact on individuals' lives. Information sharing helps to ensure that an individual receives the right services at the right time and prevents a need from becoming more acute and difficult to meet.

Poor or non-existent information sharing is a factor repeatedly identified as an issue in Serious Case Reviews (SCRs) carried out following the death of or serious injury to, a child. In some situations, sharing information can be the difference between life and death.

Fears about sharing information cannot be allowed to stand in the way of the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children at risk of abuse or neglect. Every practitioner must take responsibility for sharing information they hold, and cannot assume that someone else will pass on information, which may be critical to keeping a child safe.

[Professor Munro's review of child protection](#) concluded the need to move towards a child protection system with less central prescription and interference, where we place greater trust in, and responsibility on, skilled practitioners at the frontline. Those skilled practitioners are in the best position to use their professional judgement about when to share information with colleagues working within the same organisation, as well as with those working within other organisations, in order to provide effective early help, to promote their welfare, and to keep children safe from harm.

[Lord Laming](#) emphasised that the safety and welfare of children is of paramount importance and highlighted the importance of practitioners feeling confident about when and how information can be legally shared. He recommended that all staff in every service from frontline practitioners to managers in statutory services and the voluntary sector should understand the circumstances in which they may lawfully share information, and this it is in the public interest to prioritise the safety and welfare of children.

## Being alert to signs of abuse and neglect and taking action

All practitioners should be alert to the signs and triggers of [child abuse and neglect](#). Abuse (emotional, physical and sexual) and neglect can present in many different forms. Indicators of abuse and neglect may be difficult to spot. Children may disclose abuse, in which case the

decision to share information is clear, as actions must be taken to respond to the disclosure. In other cases, for example, neglect, the indicators may be more subtle and appear over time. In these cases, decisions about what information to share, and when, will be more difficult to judge. Everyone should be aware of the potential for children to be sexually exploited for money, power or status, and individuals should adopt an open and inquiring mind to what could be underlying reasons for behaviour changes in children of all ages.

If a practitioner has concerns about a child's safety or welfare, they should share the information with North Lincolnshire Children's Services and/or Humberside Police.

For more information see:

- [One Family Approach - Helping Children and Families in North Lincolnshire Document 2021-2024](#)
- [Children's MARS Policy and Procedures Assessing Need and Providing Help](#)

Security of information sharing must always be considered and should be proportionate to the sensitivity of the information and the circumstances. If it is thought that a crime has been committed and/or a child is at immediate risk, the police should be notified immediately.

## **The principles**

The principles set out below are intended to help practitioners working with children, young people, parents and carers share information between organisations. Practitioners should use their judgement when making decisions about what information to share and should follow organisation procedures or consult with their manager if in doubt.

The most important consideration is whether sharing information is likely to support the safeguarding and protection of a child.

### **Necessary and proportionate**

When taking decisions about what information to share, you should consider how much information you need to release. Not sharing more data than is necessary to be of use is a key element of the GDPR and Data Protection Act 2018 and you should consider the impact of disclosing information on the information subject and any third parties. Information must be proportionate to the need and level of risk.

### **Relevant**

Only information that is relevant to the purposes should be shared with those who need it. This allows others to do their job effectively and make informed decisions.

### **Adequate**

Information should be adequate for its purpose. Information should be of the right quality to ensure that it can be understood and relied upon.

### **Accurate**

Information should be accurate and up to date and should clearly distinguish between fact and opinion. If the information is historical then this should be explained.

### **Timely**

Information should be shared in a timely fashion to reduce the risk of missed opportunities to offer support and protection to a child. Timeliness is key in emergency situations and it may not be appropriate to seek consent for information sharing if it could cause delays and therefore place a child or young person at increased risk of harm. Practitioners should ensure that sufficient information is shared, as well as consider the urgency with which to share it.

### **Secure**

Wherever possible, information should be shared in an appropriate, secure way. Practitioners must always follow their organisation's policy on security for handling personal information.

### **Record**

Information sharing decisions should be recorded, whether or not the decision is taken to share. If the decision is to share, reasons should be cited including what information has been shared and with whom, in line with organisational procedures. If the decision is not to share, it is good practice to record the reasons for this decision and discuss them with the requester. In line with each organisation's own retention policy, the information should not be kept any longer than is necessary. In some rare circumstances, this may be indefinitely, but if this is the case, there should be a review process scheduled at regular intervals to ensure data is not retained where it is unnecessary to do so.

## **When and how to share information**

When asked to share information, you should consider the following questions to help you decide if, and when, to share. If the decision is taken to share, you should consider how best to effectively share the information. A flowchart follows the text.

### **When**

Is there a clear and legitimate purpose for sharing information?

- Yes – see next question
- No – do not share

Do you have consent to share?

- Yes – you can share but should consider how
- No – see next question

Does the information enable an individual to be identified?

- Yes – see next question
- No – you can share but should consider how

Have you identified a lawful reason to share information without consent?

- Yes – you can share but should consider how
- No – do not share

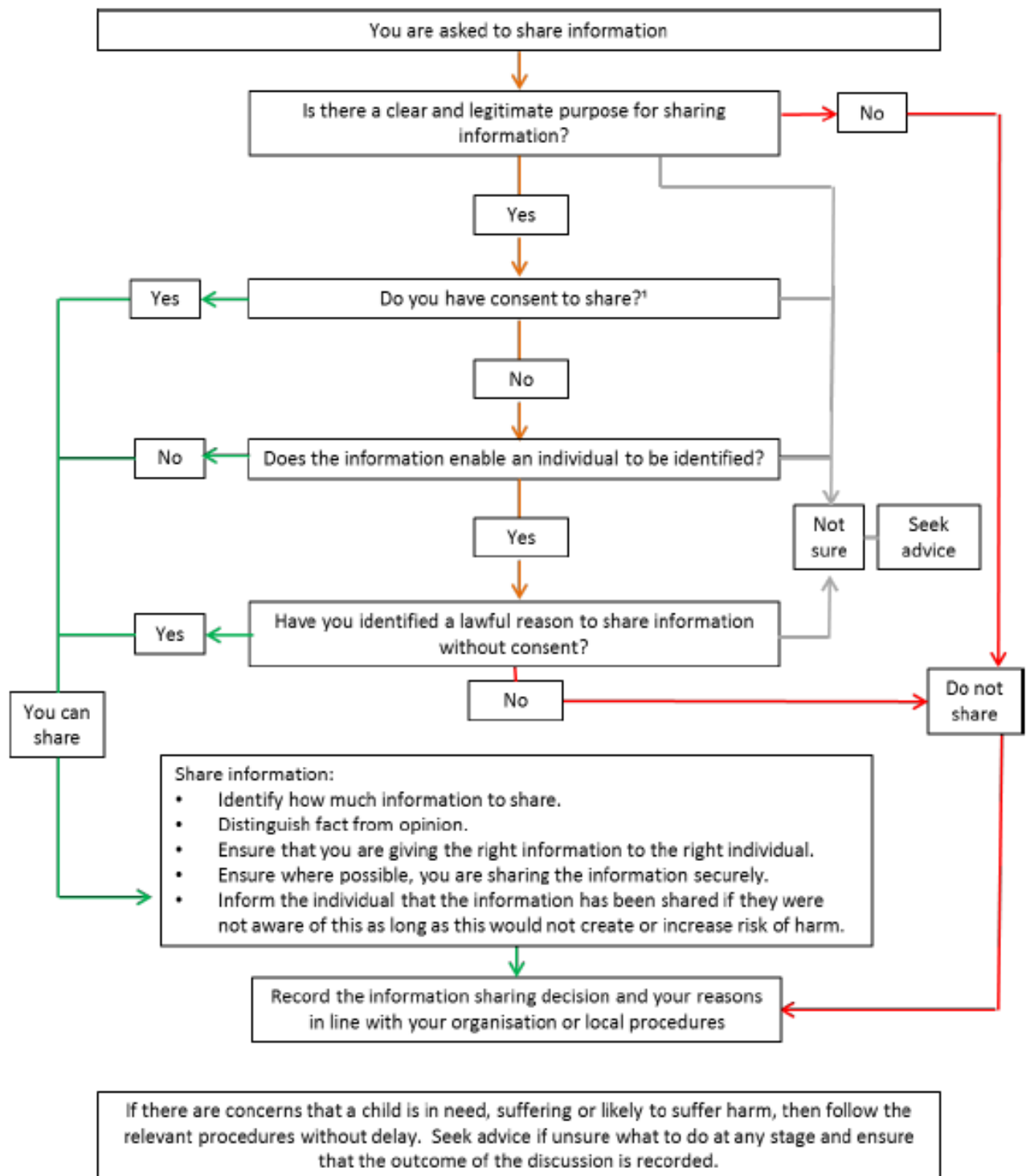
## **How**

- Identify how much information to share
- Distinguish fact from opinion
- Ensure that you are giving the right information to the right individual
- Ensure where possible that you are sharing the information securely
- Where possible, be transparent with the individual, informing them that the information has been shared, as long as doing so does not create or increase the risk of harm to the individual.

All information sharing decisions and reasons must be recorded in line with your organisation or local procedures. If at any stage you are unsure about how or when to share information you must seek advice on this. You should also ensure that the outcome of the discussion is recorded.



## Flowchart on when and how to share information



1. Consent must be unambiguous, freely given and may be withdrawn at any time

## Myth busting guide

Sharing of information between practitioners and organisations is essential for effective identification, assessment, risk management and service provision. Fears about sharing information cannot be allowed to stand in the way of the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people at risk of abuse or neglect.

Below are common myths that can act as a barrier to sharing information effectively:

### **The GDPR and Data Protection Act 2018 are barriers to sharing information**

No – the GDPR and Data Protection Act 2018 do not prohibit the collection and sharing of personal information for the purposes of keeping children safe. They provide a framework to ensure that personal information is shared appropriately. In particular, the Data Protection Act 2018 balances the rights of the information subject (the individual whom the information is about) and the possible need to share information about them. Never assume sharing is prohibited – it is essential to consider this balance in every case. You should always keep a record of what you have shared.

### **Consent is always needed to share personal information**

No – you do not necessarily need the consent of the information subject to share their personal information.

Wherever possible, you should seek consent and be open and honest with the individual from the outset as to why, what, how and with whom, their information will be shared. You should seek consent where an individual may not expect their information to be passed on. When you gain consent to share information, it must be explicit, and freely given.

There may be some circumstances where it is not appropriate to seek consent, either because the individual cannot give consent, it is not reasonable to obtain consent, or because to gain consent would put a child or young person's safety or well-being at risk.

Where a decision to share information without consent is made, a record of what has been shared should be kept.

### **Personal information collected by one organisation cannot be disclosed to another organisation**

No – this is not the case, unless the information is to be used for a purpose incompatible with the purpose it was originally collected for. In the case of children in need, or children at risk of significant harm, it is difficult to foresee circumstances where information law would be a barrier to sharing personal information with other practitioners.

Practitioners looking to share information should consider which processing condition in the Data Protection Act 2018 is most appropriate for use in the particular circumstances of the case. This may be the safeguarding processing condition or another relevant provision.

## **The common law duty of confidence and the Human Rights Act 1998 prevent the sharing of personal information**

No – this is not the case. In addition to the GDPR and Data Protection Act 2018, practitioners need to balance the common law duty of confidence, and the rights within the Human Rights Act 1998, against the effect on children or individuals at risk, if they do not share the information.

If information collection and sharing is to take place with the consent of the individuals involved, providing they are clearly informed about the purpose of the sharing, there should be no breach of confidentiality or breach of the Human Rights Act 1998. If the information is confidential, and the consent of the information subject is not gained, then practitioners need to decide whether there are grounds to share the information without consent. This can be because it is overwhelmingly in the information subject's interests for this information to be disclosed. It is also possible that a public interest would justify disclosure of the information (or that sharing is required by a court order, or other legal obligation or statutory exemption).

In the context of safeguarding a child or young person, where the child's welfare is paramount, it is possible that the common law duty of confidence can be overcome. Practitioners must consider this on a case by case basis. As is the case for all information processing, initial thought needs to be given as to whether the objective can be achieved by limiting the amount of information shared – does all of the personal information need to be shared to achieve the objective?

## **IT systems are often a barrier to effective information sharing**

No – IT systems, such as the Child Protection Information Sharing Project (CP-IS), can be useful in supporting information sharing. IT systems are most valuable when practitioners use the data that has been shared to make more informed decisions about how to support and safeguard a child. Evidence from the Munro Review is clear that IT systems will not be fully effective unless individuals from organisations co-operate around meeting the needs of the individual child. Professional judgement is the most essential aspect of multi-agency work, which could be put at risk if organisations rely too heavily on IT systems.

## **Useful resources**

### **Children's MARS guidance**

- [Information sharing agreement for learning through scrutiny and assurance](#)
- [Children's MARS Memorandum of Understanding](#)
- [Integrated Multi-Agency Partnership \(IMAP\) information sharing agreement](#)
- [One Family Approach – Helping Children and Families in North Lincolnshire 21-24](#)
- [Policy and Procedure for Assessing need and providing help](#)

### **Other relevant statutory guidance and advice**

- [Working Together to Safeguard Children \(2018\)](#)
- [Keeping Children Safe in Education \(2020\)](#)
- [What to do if you are worried a child is being abused \(2015\)](#)
- [The Information Commissioners Office \(ICO\) website](#)

- [Guide to General Data Protection Regulations \(GDPR\)](#) – Information Commissioner's Office (ICO)
- [Practice guidance on sharing adult safeguarding information](#)