

Child protection records retention and storage guidelines

Guidance to help organisations understand the principles of keeping and managing records about child protection concerns.

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Background

If an organisation needs to hold records about a child or adult for any reason, it should have policies and procedures in place regarding the retention and storage of that information.

As part of its safeguarding policy and procedures, every organisation should also have clear guidelines for the retention, storage and destruction of child protection records. This includes records which relate to:

- concerns about a child's welfare and safety

- concerns about possible risks posed by people working or volunteering with children.

Each nation of the UK has legislation and guidance about the retention and storage of child protection records. Some sectors, such as education, have their own specific guidance. Sometimes an official inquiry will issue additional instructions requiring records to be retained for longer periods of time.

We've put together an overview of the things all organisations need to consider when deciding how to retain and store child protection records.

For more role or organisation-specific information and guidance on data protection and record retention, contact your organisation's Data Protection or Legal team or ask your umbrella group or governing body for advice (Information Commissioner's Office, 2023).

Guiding principles of records management

According to **data protection principles** (Information Commissioner's Office, 2026a), records containing personal information should be:

- adequate, relevant and not excessive for the purpose(s) for which they are held
- accurate and up to date
- only kept for as long as is necessary.

UK Data Protection Law sets out the way child protection records must be stored and retained and the circumstances under which information can be shared (Gov.uk, no date).

➤ Find out more about the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and child protection

Your organisation should:

- know the reason why you're keeping records about children or adults (for example, because they relate to child protection concerns)
- assess how long you need to keep the records for
- have a plan for how and when the records will be destroyed.

To keep personal information secure, you should:

- compile and label files carefully
- keep files containing sensitive or confidential data secure and allow access on a 'need to know' basis
- keep a log so you can see who has accessed the confidential files, when, and the titles of the files they have used.

If you are creating records about the children or adults that take part in your services or activities, you should make sure they understand what records you hold, why you need to hold them and who you might share their information with and why (for example as part of a multi-agency child protection team) (Information Commissioner's Office, 2024).

It is important that the **lawful basis** for any action taken on children's data is clearly defined, according to the reason why you need to **collect, store, use or share the data** (Information Commissioner's Office, 2026b; 2026c). The most common lawful bases suitable for safeguarding purposes are:

- **Public task** – the collection, storing, use or sharing of children’s data is necessary for you to perform a task in the public interest or carry out your official authority.
- **Legitimate interest** - the collection, storing, use or sharing of children’s data is necessary for pursuing a legitimate interest, such as a commercial or individual interest or a wider societal benefit.
- **Recognised legitimate interest** – the collection, storing, use or sharing of children’s data for five specific lawfully pre-approved purposes including crime prevention and safeguarding.
- **Legal obligation** - the collection, storing, use or sharing of children’s data is necessary for complying with a common law or statutory obligation

(Information Commissioner’s Office, 2023; [2023]; 2026b; 2026c).

If you are collecting data about the children who you work with, or provide a service for, you might need to share that with other agencies if there is a child protection or safeguarding concern.

Data protection law allows you to share information when required to identify children at risk of harm and to safeguard them from harm (Information Commissioner’s Office, 2023).

The Department for Education (DfE) has also published **statutory information sharing duty guidance** for **England** that sets out what information to share and when to share for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children (DfE, 2026c).

Concerns about children’s safety and wellbeing

If anyone in your organisation has concerns about a child or young person's welfare or safety, it's vital all relevant details are recorded. This should be done regardless of whether the concerns are shared with the police or children's social care.

Keep an accurate record of:

- the date and time of the incident or disclosure
- the date and time of the report
- the name and role of the person to whom the concern was originally reported and their contact details
- the name and role of the person making the report (if this is different to the above) and their contact details
- the names of all parties who were involved in the incident, including any witnesses
- the name, age and any other relevant information about the child who is the subject of the concern (including information about their parents or carers and any siblings) what was said or done and by whom
- any action taken to look into the matter
- any further action taken (such as a referral being made)
- the reasons why the organisation decided not to refer those concerns to a statutory agency (if relevant).

Make sure the report is as factual as possible and avoid opinions. Any interpretation or inference drawn from what was observed, said or alleged should be clearly reported as such.

It's important to bear in mind that opinions relating to an individual can count as personal data and can mean the individual has a right to request access to the report. However, this is not always the case, such as in some [requests relating to social work data](#) (Information Commissioner's Office, [2022]; 2024).

The record should always be signed and dated by the person making the report. If possible, records should be electronic as these are more secure than paper records.

You may find it helpful to create a standard electronic form for recording concerns. This ensures all the necessary information is collected consistently.

➤ [Find out more about recording concerns about a child on NSPCC Learning](#)

Storage of child protection records

Your records should be kept confidential and stored securely.

- Information about child protection concerns and referrals should be kept in a separate child protection file for each child. The child protection file should be started as soon as you become aware of any concerns.
- It's good practice to keep child protection files separate from a child's general records. You should mark the general record to indicate that there is a separate child protection file.
- Data protection law allows you to share information when required to identify children at risk of harm and to safeguard them from harm. If you need to share records (within your own organisation or externally), make sure they are kept confidential and that a lawful basis is established when sharing externally. This can include **Recognised legitimate interest** for child protection purposes (**Data (Use and Access) Act 2025**; Information Commissioner's Office, 2026b). Use passwords and encryption when sharing electronic files.
- Staff and volunteers should never use their own devices to make and store records unless there is a clear reason established by the organisation, such as an exceptional agreement to meet an individual's specific needs.

- If the person responsible for managing your child protection records leaves your organisation, make sure you appoint somebody to take over their role and arrange a proper handover.
- You can also keep a confidential central 'concerns log' that allows you quick access to an overview about all safeguarding and child protection concerns reported to you. The concerns log should give you an overview of outstanding concerns and actions and enable you to report on the number and types of concerns you are receiving. It shouldn't include any personal data (NCVO, 2018).

Retention periods: child protection records

You should make sure there are set retention periods for data relating to child protection concerns.

Some agencies, for example in the education and health sectors, have their own guidance for the retention of child protection information.

Schools

In schools in **England** and **Wales**, the file should be kept until the child is 25 (Department for Education (DfE), 2026a; Welsh Government, 2022).

In schools in **Northern Ireland**, the government recommends that child protection files should be kept until the child's 30th birthday (Department of Education, 2020).

In schools in **Scotland**, most records under Education Welfare, including child protection referrals and Additional Support Needs records, should be kept for 5 years after the date of leaving school education (Scottish Council on Archives, 2017).

Child protection files should be passed on to any new school a child attends (Department of Education, 2020; Department for Education (DfE), 2026b).

In some cases, records should be kept for longer periods – see the 'Exceptions' section below for more information.

Recording concerns about adult behaviour

Sometimes concerns might be raised about an adult who works or volunteers with children. This could be because they've:

- behaved in a way that has harmed, or may have harmed, a child
- committed a criminal offence against, or related to, a child
- behaved in a way that indicated they are unsuitable to work with young people
- behaved in a way that conflicts with the standards and values of your organisation (a low-level concern).

A low-level concern includes behaviours such as inadvertent or thoughtless behaviour, behaviour that might be considered inappropriate depending on the circumstances and behaviour which is intended to enable abuse.

➤ [Learn more about responding to low level concerns](#)

You should keep clear, accurate and comprehensive records of all allegations made against adults working or volunteering with children, including:

- what the allegations were
- how the allegations were followed up

- how things were resolved
- any action taken
- decisions reached about the person's suitability to work with children.

Storing records relating to adults

Records relating to concerns about an adult's behaviour should be kept somewhere secure, confidential and appropriate, such as in the person's confidential personnel file. A summary of the concern could also be added to a central 'concerns log', or similar overall record of concerns your organisation keeps, with personal data removed.

The person may ask for a copy of their personal data held under the [right of access](#) (Information Commissioner's Office, 2025).

Retention periods: concerns about adults

You should make sure there are set retention periods for data relating to allegations. You should also make sure that processes are in place for all types of case outcomes. Information should be retained even if the person stops working or volunteering for the organisation.

In some cases, records should be kept for longer periods. See the 'Exceptions' section below for more information.

Some sectors, including education, have guidance on retention of records relating to child protection concerns about an adult's behaviour around children which might indicate that the person poses a continued risk of harm.

Schools

The rule for the education sector in **England** and **Wales** is that you should keep the records in their personnel file at least until they reach normal pension age or for 10 years, whichever is longer (Department for Education, 2026a; Welsh Government, 2014). This applies to volunteers and paid staff.

In **Northern Ireland**, the Department of Education recommends that records of allegations against a member of school staff should be retained indefinitely unless they are completely exonerated (Department of Education, 2020).

For low-level concerns, which do not meet the threshold for a child protection referral, the Department for Education (DfE) suggests records in **England** should be retained at least until the individual leaves the school's employment (DfE, 2025).

Exceptions to retention periods

There are some situations where records need a longer retention period. For example, if:

- the records have been maintained for the purposes of research
- the information in the records is relevant to legal action that has been started but not finished
- the records have been archived for historical purposes (for example if the records are relevant to legal proceedings involving the organisation)
- the records could be needed as part of an official inquiry. Retention requirements will be set out in directions issued by the inquiry and must be followed.

Where there are legal proceedings, it is best to seek legal advice about how long to retain your records.

Some records are subject to statutory requirements and have a specific retention period. This includes records relating to:

- children who have been 'looked after' by the local authority
- adopted children
- registered foster carers
- residential children's homes.

You should check the legislation to see which rules apply to your organisation. Links to the legislation in each of the UK nations is available below.

You should also check whether your insurance company, regulating body or local safeguarding agencies make any stipulations about retention periods.

When records are being kept for longer than the recommended period, files should be clearly marked with the reasons for the extension period.

Vetting and barring checks

You shouldn't store copies of vetting and barring check certificates unless there is a dispute about the results of the check. Instead, a confidential record should be kept of:

- the date the check was completed
- the level and type of check (standard, enhanced or barred list check and the relevant workforce)

- the reference number of the certificate
- the decision made about whether the person was employed (with reasons).

If there is a dispute about the results of a check, you may keep a copy of the certificate for no longer than 6 months.

Destruction of child protection records

When the retention period is finished, any remaining paper records should be incinerated or shredded in the presence of a member of the organisation or entrusted to a firm specialising in the destruction of confidential material. At the same time, any electronic versions of the record must be purged.

If not shredded immediately, all confidential records should be held in a secured plastic bag, labelled as confidential and locked in a cupboard or other secure place; or placed in a confidential waste bin.

If your organisation or part of an organisation (for example a club, team or project) is closed down, you should make arrangements for the ongoing management of records. This includes the review, retention and disposal of records.

Reviewing your child protection records retention and storage policy

You should review your child protection records retention and storage policy regularly to make sure it is effective and continues to comply with current legislation and guidance. This should be carried out as part of a wider review of safeguarding policies and procedures.

If you make changes to your child protection records retention and storage policy, it's best practice to keep a copy of the original version, including a record of the changes you made and why. You should clearly mark the old version so it's clear it has been superseded.

Summary: key points to consider

You should consider the following questions when developing or reviewing your child protection records retention and storage policy.

- Is our record-keeping in line with data protection principles?
- What records will we retain and for what purpose?
- How will the records be stored and who will have access to them?
- How long should we retain records for?
- Do we need to follow any statutory requirements about the retention of our records?
- What arrangements do we need to review records?
- What arrangements do we need to destroy them?
- Does our insurer stipulate anything about record retention periods?
- Does our regulatory or inspection body (if applicable) set out any minimum expectations about record keeping, retention and destruction?
- Do our local safeguarding agencies provide guidance on record retention and destruction that we are expected to follow?

Further information

If your organisation has a Data Protection or Legal team, they will be able to provide you with more information and guidance on data protection and record retention as it

relates to your organisation. For smaller organisations, ask your umbrella group or governing body for advice (Information Commissioner's Office, 2023).

NCVO provides further guidance on [data protection for the voluntary sector](#).

Key legislation affecting the retention and storage of child protection records includes:

UK wide

[UK General Data Protection Regulation 2016](#)

[Data Protection Act 2018](#)

[UK Data \(Use and Access\) Act 2025](#)

The Information Commissioner's Office has guidance on the [Data \(Use and access\) Act 2025](#) and provides a [guide to the GDPR](#) to help organisations comply with the different requirements for [each legislation](#).

England

[Fostering Services \(England\) Regulations 2011](#)

[Children's Homes \(England\) Regulations 2015](#)

[Statutory guidance on adoption for local authorities, voluntary adoption agencies and adoption support agencies](#)

[Statutory guidance on information sharing to safeguard children and young people](#)

Northern Ireland

[Adoption Agencies Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 1989](#)

[Foster Placement \(Children\) Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 1996](#)

Children (NI) Order 1995 – guidance and regulations – volume 4 – residential care

Scotland

Guidance on Looked after children (Scotland) regulations 2009 and the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007

Wales

Adoption Agencies (Wales) Regulations 2005

Fostering Service (Wales) Regulations 2003

Children's Homes (Wales) Regulations 2002

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