

ContactPoint: Shielding Fact Sheet

What is shielding?

Some people may have some of their details hidden on ContactPoint to prevent their location being visible on the system – this is called shielding. Shielding is for people whose circumstances may mean that they are at increased risk of significant harm, or for other reasons specified in statutory guidance (see below - 'When to shield').

A shielded record will show only the child's name, date of birth, gender and unique ID number. Shielding is not unique to ContactPoint; it is already in place in a number of systems.

When to shield

Shielding requests for ContactPoint must be assessed on a case-by-case basis. Guidance provided to local authorities sets out the limited circumstances in which shielding would be appropriate. Essentially these are when there are strong reasons to believe that not shielding a record would be likely to:

- place a child at increased risk of significant harm;
- place an adult at increased risk of significant harm;
- prejudice the prevention or detection of a serious crime; or
- in the case of adoption, put a child's placement at risk.

By increased risk of significant harm we mean that:

- one or more individual(s) are likely to cause significant harm to the child and/or their parent/carer; *and therefore*
- the child and/or their parent/carer are being, or will be, protected at a location that is not known to the individual(s) posing the threat.

The Children Act 1989 introduced the concept of significant harm as the threshold that justifies compulsory intervention in family life in the best interests of children.

Examples of when it might be appropriate to shield a record include where:

- a child is placed for adoption where there is little or no contact with birth parent(s) or other family members;
- a child and/or their parent/carer are fleeing abuse or domestic violence; and/or
- a child and/or their parent/carer or family member are subject to police protection.

The need to shield a record may also arise in very limited circumstances that are not covered by the categories above. For example, the records of siblings or other children who live with or who are closely related to a child whose record has been shielded.

Shielding is one of a range of measures that should be considered where there are concerns that an individual may be at risk of harm. Existing procedures relating to the protection of those at risk should continue to be followed.

How a record is shielded

Practitioners – In most cases practitioners will ask for a shield to be applied to a child's record. They will do this on the basis of what they already know about the child's circumstances, or as a result of concerns raised by the child/young person and/or their parent/carers. Practitioners who are ContactPoint users, and have the appropriate access rights, can request a shield directly on the system. Practitioners who are not ContactPoint users should contact their local authority to request that a child's record is shielded.

Local authorities work with relevant services (e.g. adoption teams and domestic violence units) to identify and review records that should be shielded.

Public - Anyone who has reason to believe their/their child's record should be shielded on ContactPoint can contact their local authority directly. Local authorities will apply the criteria set out in guidance to determine whether it is appropriate to shield the record.

Multiple shielding requests

A record can have a number of shielding requests applied to it at any one time. Therefore when a practitioner identifies a record which they believe should be shielded, it is essential that they register their own shielding request against it, even if it already has a shield applied. This will help local authorities ensure that a record is only unshielded when there are no outstanding reasons for shielding.

Local authority reviews

Local authority ContactPoint Management Teams should undertake an initial review within seven days of the shield being requested, to determine whether or not the record should be shielded. Reviews of the shielding decision should be undertaken every six months thereafter. As part of their reviews, local authorities should take into account any views expressed by the child/young person and, where appropriate, their parent/carers and any relevant involved practitioners.

Removing a shield

A practitioner should remove their shielding request from a record when they judge that the shield is no longer necessary. To ensure that shields are not removed inappropriately, the record will remain shielded until the local authority reviews the record and makes a final decision to remove the shield.

Access to shielded records

To ensure that ContactPoint does not inadvertently confirm or indicate an individual's location, no records will be returned if a search is made using information from any non-visible field. A practitioner will only be able to find a child record by inputting information that is visible on a shielded record.

Relevant people in local authority ContactPoint Management Teams will have access rights to view hidden information on shielded records so they can, where there are child protection concerns, 'broker' contact between users working with the same child.

ContactPoint users with child protection responsibilities, such as police officers or social workers, may be granted an access right that enables them to override the shield and gain access to the hidden information. Any attempt to override the shield will prompt a message reminding the user that this will trigger an immediate investigation. Where they choose to proceed, they will only be able view the hidden information until they log out of the record. If they require access to the same information again, they will have to repeat the override process. If another user searches for the child record, it would still appear shielded to them.

Background

The policy and processes for shielding has been developed in consultation with a variety of organisations including Barnardo's; The Children's Society; Women's Aid; British Association of Adoption and Fostering; Metropolitan Police; Greater London Domestic Violence Project; Children and Family Courts Advice and Support Service; Association of Chief Police Officers; Haven Refuge and local authorities. Provision for shielding is made in the Regulations (*The Children Act 2004 Information Database (England) Regulations 2007*) and further details are set out in the ContactPoint statutory guidance.