



## The ContactPoint database

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ContactPoint, or the Children's Information Sharing Index, as it was originally called, was introduced by the previous Labour Government following concerns that professionals working with children lacked adequate resources to identify children vulnerable to abuse.

Legislation was introduced in 2004 allowing the Secretary of State to require local authorities to establish databases in connection with their duties to safeguard children. Under those provisions, ContactPoint was launched in 2009 as an online directory containing basic information on all children in England and accessible to frontline professionals such as teachers and social workers.

Following the 2010 General Election, the Coalition Government made it clear that it intended to scrap ContactPoint in due course. The database was shut down on 6<sup>th</sup> August 2010. The Government is currently considering the feasibility of replacing ContactPoint with a new signposting service for professionals working with vulnerable children.

This note provides background information on the ContactPoint database.

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**1 A Children’s Information Sharing Index**

**1.1 Introduction**

[Lord Laming’s inquiry](#) into the murder of Victoria Climbié in 2001 identified a lack of priority given to safeguarding measures by local authorities, and also deficiencies in the existing structures to effectively detect and respond to cases of child abuse.<sup>1</sup> One of the key recommendations that emerged from the inquiry was that the Government should explore the benefits of setting up and operating a national database on all children.<sup>2</sup>

The *Children Act 2004*, which implemented many of the recommendations in Lord Laming’s report, includes a regulation-making power to allow the Secretary of State to require local authorities to establish and operate databases containing information about children.<sup>3</sup> The provision was used by the previous Government to establish the Children’s Information Sharing Index under the *Children Act 2004 Information Database (England) Regulations 2007*.<sup>4</sup> Subsequently renamed as ContactPoint, the index was a directory intended to support better and quicker communication among practitioners across education, health, social care and youth offending in the statutory and voluntary sectors. It contained basic information on all children in the England and inclusion on the database was a legal requirement.

ContactPoint was a key element of the Government’s [Every Child Matters](#) programme to transform children’s services by supporting more effective prevention and early intervention. ContactPoint’s objectives were to:

- help practitioners identify quickly a child with whom they had contact, and whether that child was getting the universal services (education, primary health care) to which he or she was entitled;

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<sup>1</sup> Lord Laming, [The Victoria Climbié Inquiry](#), January 2003

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, recommendation 17

<sup>3</sup> Section 12, *Children Act 2004*

<sup>4</sup> [SI 2007/2182](#)

- enable earlier identification of needs and earlier and more effective action to address those needs by providing a tool for practitioners to identify who else was involved with a particular child; and
- be an important tool to encourage and support better communication and closer working between different professionals and practitioners.

For each child in England, until their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, the index was to hold:

- basic identifying information: name, address, gender, date of birth and a unique identifying number based on the existing Child Reference Number/National Insurance Number;
- basic identifying information about the child's parent or carer;
- contact details for services involved with the child: as a minimum school and GP practice, but also other services where appropriate; and
- a means to indicate that a practitioner was a lead professional and/or had undertaken an assessment under the Common Assessment Framework.<sup>5</sup>

It was not proposed that ContactPoint should contain individual case files on children, such as case notes or details of any assessments, medical data or exam results.

### 1.1 Implementing ContactPoint

In 2004, trailblazer pilots were conducted to assess the feasibility of implementing a children's information index.<sup>6</sup> Nine local authorities piloted a range of IT applications for local indexes. The local authorities were: Bolton; Knowsley; Lewisham; Camden; Sheffield; Telford and Wrekin and Shropshire; Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland; and East Sussex. These pilots had the common element of holding basic information on every child in at least part of their local area. Each trailblazer was originally given £1million of funding with a further £87,000 to 2005-06 to support further national index development work.

A Government study of the indexes concluded that implementation was operationally and technically feasible.<sup>7</sup> The case for proceeding with the implementation of the index was approved collectively by the Cabinet Sub-Committee on Domestic Affairs (Children's Policy), including Ministers from a wide range of Government Departments including the then Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, Treasury, Health, Home Office and the then Department of Constitutional Affairs.

The working title for database, the Children's Information Sharing Index, was replaced by 'ContactPoint'. The first stage of delivering ContactPoint commenced in January 2009 when 19 Early Adopter organisations – 17 local authorities in the North West of England and two national voluntary sector partners, Barnardo's and KIDS – began training their ContactPoint management teams.<sup>8</sup> The second stage of delivery began over the summer of 2009 for early

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<sup>5</sup> Department for Children, Families and Schools, *ContactPoint Policy Statement*, June 2007

<sup>6</sup> 11 local authorities took part as trailblazer authorities, of which 9 authorities developed IT applications akin to an index to support information sharing

<sup>7</sup> Every Child Matters, *Learning from Information Sharing and Assessment Trailblazers*, December 2005

<sup>8</sup> WMS, Department for Children, Schools and Families, *Safeguarding*; 26 January 2009

adopters to train management teams in other local authorities and national partners.<sup>9</sup> It was proposed that all local authority ContactPoint management teams should have access to ContactPoint by autumn 2009, followed by full access to local authorities once training had been completed.<sup>10</sup>

The estimated development and set-up cost of ContactPoint was £224 million. The estimated maintenance costs in 2009-10 was just under £44 million including inflation, of which most was expected to go directly to local authorities to fund staff to ensure the ongoing running, maintenance, operation and security of ContactPoint.<sup>11</sup>

## 1.2 Safeguards

### ***Data protection and access***

Access to ContactPoint was to be restricted to trained and vetted practitioners who required access to do their jobs. That included education, health, social care and youth justice professionals plus certain voluntary organisations. All practitioners had to be security cleared including enhanced Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) disclosure, and required a username, PIN, security token and password to access the index. Access would have been through secure government networks or through accredited organisations only and was to be audited and monitored. Users would not have been able to download any child data from the index, for example onto a computer desktop or memory stick.

The following PQ asked about the steps the Government was taking to avoid data theft from ContactPoint:

**Lord Moynihan:** To ask Her Majesty's Government what steps they are taking to avoid data theft or loss from the ContactPoint database.

**Baroness Morgan of Drefelin:** ContactPoint is an online directory to enable the delivery of co-ordinated support for children and young people. It will be the quick way for practitioners to find out who else is working with the same child. ContactPoint will contain basic identifying information about all children and young people in England up to their 18th birthday and contact details for their parents/carers and for services working with the child or young person—nothing more. It does not and will not contain any financial information (such as bank details) or case information (such as case notes, assessments, medical records, exam results, comments or subjective observations). ContactPoint was developed, and is being implemented, taking a cautious, step-by-step approach. We are implementing ContactPoint in accordance with national information security policy and standards. ContactPoint therefore has a significant set of appropriate security measures and controls in place. Our security measures and management of those are continually assessed. This includes assessment by independent bodies, including, and approved by, CESG, the UK's National Technical Authority for Information Assurance. All ContactPoint users must state clear reasons for accessing a child's record and all use of the system will be subject to monitoring and audit. Sanctions are in place for misuse under the provisions of the Data Protection Act and Computer Misuse Act.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> WMS, Department for Children, Schools and Families, *Safeguarding – Progress in delivering ContactPoint*; 12 May 2009

<sup>10</sup> HC Deb 15 July 2009 c464-5W

<sup>11</sup> HC Deb 9 March 2009 c184W

<sup>12</sup> HL Deb 13 July 2009 c184WA

### **Data retention**

For most children ContactPoint would have held information until they reached 18 years of age. There was a facility for the records of some young adults to stay on ContactPoint until they reached 25, but only for very limited reasons and only with explicit consent of the young person. A child's record would then have been archived for six years and subsequently destroyed.<sup>13</sup> Exceptions to the six year rule were set out in the Database Regulations and related to cases involving child protection investigations.<sup>14</sup>

### **Shielding**

ContactPoint was to contain information on all children in England – it would not have been possible to opt out of, or have a child's name removed from, the database. All local authorities would however have been able to shield or hide a proportion of data on children where there are child protection concerns. This additional precautionary measure would have been appropriate for records of children who are at risk of significant harm, for example, children with particular vulnerable circumstances, such as children from families on police protection schemes, or where one parent had been the victim of domestic abuse, or in certain cases where the child had been adopted. A shielded record would have shown only the child's name, date of birth, gender and unique ID number.

Shielding requests for ContactPoint were to be assessed on a case-by-case basis. Local authorities would have been required to apply criteria set out in guidance to determine whether it was appropriate to shield a record.

### **Access to information by the public**

Children and young people, and parents when acting on a child's behalf, would have been entitled to ask to see the information that was held about them on ContactPoint, subject to the provisions of the *Data Protection Act 1998*. This is known as a Subject Access Request. Local authorities would have been required to manage requests locally. Further information on access to personal information under the *Data Protection Act* is available in the Library standard note [Data Protection: Access to Personal Information](#).<sup>15</sup>

## **2 The closure of ContactPoint**

Both the [Conservative](#) and the [Liberal Democrat](#) 2010 General Election manifestos included commitments to scrap ContactPoint. On coming to power, the Coalition Government's [Programme for Government](#)<sup>16</sup> included a joint pledge to close a number of databases and registers, including ContactPoint, in what was described as a move to restore civil liberties.<sup>17</sup>

In a written ministerial statement on 22 July 2010, Tim Loughton, the Parliamentary Under Secretary for Children and Families, confirmed that ContactPoint would be shut down on 6<sup>th</sup> August 2010 and subsequently decommissioned.<sup>18</sup> The statement explained that, although the Government recognised the needs of professionals to have a quick and reliable method of accessing information on a child, it did not believe ContactPoint was the answer:

It has always been our view that it was disproportionate and unjustifiable to hold records on every child in the country, making them accessible to large numbers of

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<sup>13</sup> Regulation 7, *Children Act 2004 Information Database (England) Regulations 2007* (SI 2007/2182)

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>15</sup> SN/HAS/830

<sup>16</sup> HM Government, *The Coalition: our programme for government*, May 2010

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p11

<sup>18</sup> WMS, Department for Education, [Decommissioning ContactPoint](#), 22 July 2010

people. Accordingly, we are exploring the practicality of a new national signposting service which would focus on helping practitioners find out whether another practitioner is working, or has previously worked, in another authority area with the same vulnerable child. Social workers in particular, and potentially other key services like the police or accident and emergency departments, may need this information very quickly. Such a service must aim to ensure that these children are not 'lost' to social care services when they move. We are working closely with our partners to assess the feasibility and affordability of such an approach.<sup>19</sup>

At the same time, local authorities and other partner organisations were issued guidance on the decommissioning process. A letter to the relevant partners explained that once ContactPoint was shut down, statutory duties placed on them under regulations in connection with the database would no longer apply.<sup>20</sup> The appropriate changes to regulations would be made in due course.

The Minister has asked Professor Eileen Murnro, as part of a [wider review into child protection](#), to explore the practicality of a new national signposting service to alert practitioners of concerns about vulnerable children.<sup>21</sup> The Minister made it clear that if the review considered a new database as a solution, it should only contain details of children known to be at risk.

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>20</sup> Department of Education, [Letter to Directors of Children's services from the Director-General, Tom Jeffery on Decommissioning ContactPoint](#), 22 July 2010

<sup>21</sup> HC Deb 17 January 2011 cc591-3W