**Information Sharing Outside the University in Student Wellbeing Emergencies**

The purpose of this document is to provide clarity about how the University makes decisions about sharing information in an emergency. It includes examples of scenarios and identifies who should make these decisions.

Emergency contacts in the form of trusted contacts[[1]](#footnote-1) and next of kin details are collected from students at enrolment and re-enrolment and held on the student record. This information is held securely and is only accessible to staff in particular roles who need to have such access. Students are able to amend these details at any time.

**Sharing information in an emergency**

**Emergency Contacts:**

Staff will make every reasonable effort to secure consent from students before involving their contacts. However, in an emergency, it may not be appropriate, possible or practical to do this. There are some circumstances in which the university will share information with Emergency Contacts on a basis other than consent. These circumstances are where we have identified a serious concern for welfare or a threat to life of the student - or another person - and where we reasonably believe that the sharing of the information is necessary to protect their vital interests, or that of another person.

**Emergency Services:**

If emergency services require information on a student to protect their life, or that of another - for example to provide urgent medical care – the University does not require the consent of the student to share this information, and in many cases, it will be impractical to obtain it. In emergency situations, do not delay any actions needed by emergency services by attempting to obtain consent.

**What the law says**

UK Data protection law (the UK General Data Protection Regulation and the Data Protection Act 2018 )contains provisions that allow organisations, including universities and other public bodies, to lawfully share information about a student, including sensitive information where needed, when there is a concern that they may be at risk of serious harm.

In September 2021, the Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO) noted that “university and college staff should do whatever is necessary and proportionate to protect someone’s life. Data protection law allows organisations to share personal data in an urgent or emergency situation, including to help them prevent loss of life or serious physical, emotional or mental harm”

**Deciding to share information in an emergency**

Where the University believes that a student is at risk of serious harm we are able to share information with emergency services and/or with Emergency Contacts. This can be shared without consent if it is not appropriate, possible or practical to obtain. This decision is normally taken by a senior manager in Student Wellbeing Services. Usually two managers will take this decision together and they may take advice from the University’s Data Protection Office. These roles are familiar with the relevant legal frameworks and with supporting students experiencing mental health problems. In the event that a senior manager is not available, or where there is not time to take this action, where you reasonably believe the sharing is necessary to protect the student’s or another’s life, you may share their personal information as appropriate.

We would usually inform the student of our intention to get in touch with their Emergency Contact.

The University will inform the student, when and why it has contacted an Emergency Contact unless we reasonably believe it would create further risk to them or others to do so.

**Considering the individual context behind each decision**

Wherever it is possible to do so, university staff seek a student’s consent before sharing information with their Emergency Contacts. However in some cases this will not be possible or appropriate. In such cases staff will make a case-by-case decision about whether a student is at risk of serious physical, emotional, or mental harm, and what further action to take, including sharing information. This decision will be sensitive to the particular context and informed by an assessment of the risk to the student by a safeguarding lead or their delegate. Situations that are likely to meet the ‘serious harm’ criteria include where a student:

* has suffered a serious physical injury, including those relating to self-harm
* has not been seen for an extended period of time, cannot be contacted AND we have specific reason to be seriously concerned for their wellbeing
* Is experiencing a mental health crisis
* Is known to have attempted to take their own life
* Is known to be at risk of serious harm beyond a level at which the university can reasonably manage/monitor the risk
* is behaving in ways which may pose a significant risk to their own or others’ safety and wellbeing

If there is no risk of serious harm identified, the University must not communicate with an Emergency Contact or anyone else acting on the students’ behalf without explicit authorisation from the student (which should be recorded in writing).

When making the decision to share information the university considers:

* any potential risks involved and how they might be mitigated
* any preferences that the individual had previously expressed to the university
* the current personal circumstances of the student as known at the time
* the extent and depth of information shared that would be proportionate in the circumstances particularly if there are known or suspected sensitivities
* the balance of ensuring a student’s safety with respecting their privacy and their wishes
* how to ensure that the student understands what information has been shared with whom about them and why
* how to resume normal communication with the student themselves when it is appropriate to do so
* Whether it is necessary or appropriate to contact the emergency contact

If we contact an Emergency Contact about a particular incident, this does not mean that we will have an ongoing dialogue with them. In cases where we have contacted an Emergency Contact, we encourage wherever possible, that they make appropriate contact with the student to ensure connection, openness and that a supportive framework is in place.

Please note that we may receive *non welfare* related requests from the Police for crime prevention and detection reasons and in those situations, we are often instructed not to notify the student. Advice should be taken from [imps@reading.ac.uk](mailto:imps@reading.ac.uk) in the first instance.

**Record keeping**

Staff responsible for decisions about information sharing will keep records about the decisions they have taken, including what information they have shared, who they have shared it with and the rationale behind the decision to share or not share information.

*Approved by The University Board for Teaching & Learning and Student Experience Oct 2024*

1. A trusted contact is someone students feel comfortable for the University to contact in the event of a serious concern about their health, wellbeing or safety. A trusted contact may or may not be a family member. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)