

**What to do if you believe a child or young person  
might be at risk of suicide**

*Approved by*

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This guidance has been produced for everyone who engages directly with children and young people in their day to day work and who may become aware of a young person's suicidal thoughts or intentions. It is specifically aimed at professionals who have no training or expertise in the field of mental health and who do not have a role in the formal assessment of risk.

The purpose of this guidance is to ensure that the wider children's workforce has an understanding of the process to be followed in Norfolk where concerns about possible risk of suicide exist. Everyone has a responsibility to identify young people at risk, including the risk of suicide, and to share information when action may be required to protect a child or young person. Professionals may also have a role in the implementation of a co-ordinated multi-agency Safety Plan or Risk Management Plan following completion of a detailed risk assessment by specialist mental health services or children's social care.

For self-harm please follow the NSCB guidelines.

We would like to thank the Worcestershire Safeguarding Board for allowing us to adapt their guidance for us here in Norfolk.

## 1. Introduction

It is estimated that two young people take their own lives every day in the UK and that about 24,000 attempted suicides relate to children and young people aged 10 – 19 each year. Whilst females are more likely to attempt suicide, twice as many males die following suicide.

Nine young people under the age of 18 years died as a result of suicide/self-inflicted harm in Norfolk during the 10 year period 2005-15, significantly more than our statistical neighbours. Twice as many boys as girls have killed themselves, with hanging the most frequent cause of death. It is not possible to be specific about the numbers of attempted suicides due to difficulties in establishing whether a self-harm episode is an attempt at suicide or not.

The Norfolk Suicide Review (2015) found that most of the young people who died were not known by specialist services such as CAMHS, social care, youth offending, etc., but schools had concerns about young people, over half of them were self-harming, and over half of them expressed suicidal thoughts to friends and on social networking sites. There was no evidence of assessment of suicide risk, multi-agency risk assessments or implementing fully informed risk management strategies.

The aims of this guidance are to:

- Develop a shared language which supports effective information sharing
- Standardise the response of agencies and practitioners to identifying and responding to young people who may be at risk of suicide by providing a referral pathway
- Provide tools for practitioners to support the early identification of risk
- Provide information about the respective roles of services and referral criteria

## 2. Principles and values

***Any child or young person, who expresses thoughts about suicide, must be taken seriously and appropriate help and intervention should be offered without delay.***

- It is acknowledged that suicide issues can be extremely challenging for practitioners, family members and communities
- Assessments should be based on the unique experiences and feelings of each young person and not on the perceptions of adults
- Young people should not be stigmatised or discriminated against because of suicidal thoughts or behaviour
- It is acknowledged that belief systems can impact on individual attitudes towards suicide
- A co-ordinated response by agencies is in the interests of young people at risk of suicide
- Confidentiality and consent issues should not be barriers to effective joint working
- Creating a safe and supportive environment should be a key aim.

### 3. Definitions

**Suicidal behaviour** is any deliberate action that has potentially life threatening consequences, such as taking an overdose. It can also include repeated risk taking which constitutes a risk of death.

**Suicidal thoughts** imply that someone is thinking about taking their own life. This differs from young people who, as part of normal growing up, might explore the meaning of life. Further conversations will usually establish whether someone is thinking about suicide.

**Suicide** is the act of deliberately ending one's own life. It is possible to die unintentionally as a result of a serious self-harm episode.

**Self-harm** is the term used when someone intentionally injures or harms themselves. It is a common precursor to suicide and children and young people who self-harm may kill themselves by accident.

**Suicide prevention** is the process of identifying and reducing the impact of risk factors associated with suicidal behaviour, and identifying and promoting factors that protect against engaging in suicidal behaviour.

### 4. Identifying risk factors

***If a practitioner is concerned that a child or young person is at risk of suicide they should make a referral to the appropriate agency with responsibility for specialist mental health assessments. The process for doing so is set out in Section 5 of this guidance.***

A risk assessment is only valid at the point that it is completed and needs to be updated in response to changing circumstances. Significant information can be obtained from the young person, but information will need to come from other sources, such as parents/carers, peers or professionals.

Risk factors give an indication of the potential for serious harm to occur, but cannot provide an accurate prediction of what will happen. Risk factors can be seen as 'alarm bells' – the more alarm bells that are ringing the greater the concern - however one significant risk factor can also trigger a young person having suicidal thoughts or behaviour.

#### **Personal History**

- Previous self-harm, suicidal thoughts or suicide attempt
- Substance use
- Evidence of mental health problems, especially depression, psychosis, post-traumatic stress disorder or eating disorder
- History of experiencing physical, emotional or sexual abuse
- Loss or bereavement – could include loss of relationships or social status (anniversaries can be significant)
- Pressure on social media
- Family factors – instability (divorce, separation, changes of care giver, repeated house moves), conflict, arguments, domestic violence

- Family history of suicide, mental illness or substance misuse
- Issues of gender or sexual orientation
- Children and young people who may have been radicalised
- Bullying

### **Personal functioning**

- Changes in anxiety levels, problem solving skills, social withdrawal, feelings of hopelessness, personal appearance, sleeping and eating habits
- Altered mental states, e.g. feelings of agitation, hearing voices, delusional thinking, aggression, intoxication
- Statements of suicidal intent: letters, comments, Facebook status, social media messages, text messages, etc.
- Tendency to impulsive behaviour
- Running away from home
- Anger, hostility or anti-social behaviour
- Use or increased use of drugs/alcohol
- Feelings of ambivalence about the future e.g. no reason for living, no purpose in life
- Difficulty in coping with exam stress

### **Verbal warning signs**

- 'I can't take it any more'
- 'Nobody cares about me'
- 'I can't see the point any more'
- 'Everyone would be better off if I weren't here'
- 'Nothing matters any more'
- 'I'm going to top myself'

## Levels of risk

<b>High Risk</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Previous suicide attempts</li><li>• Frequent suicidal thoughts which are not easily dismissed</li><li>• Specific plans with access to potentially lethal means, e.g. time, location and method</li><li>• Evidence of current mental health problems</li><li>• Significant or increasing drug or alcohol use</li><li>• Situation felt to be causing unbearable pain or distress</li><li>• Increasing self-harm, either in frequency or potential lethality or both</li></ul>
<b>Medium Risk</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Suicide thoughts are frequent but still fleeting</li><li>• No specific plan or immediate intent</li><li>• Known current mental health issue</li><li>• Use/increased use of drugs or alcohol</li><li>• Situation felt to be painful but no immediate crisis</li><li>• Previous, especially recent, suicide attempt</li><li>• Current self-harm or thoughts of self-harm</li></ul>
<b>Standard Risk</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Suicidal thoughts are fleeting and soon dismissed</li><li>• No plan of how they would attempt suicide</li><li>• Fewer or no signs of low mood</li><li>• No self-harming behaviour</li><li>• Current situation felt to be painful but bearable</li></ul>

## 5. Referral pathway – suicidal thoughts and suicidal behaviour

*'There is no evidence that asking a young person whether they are having suicidal thoughts will put the thought in their mind if it were not there before. There is, however, a great deal of evidence to suggest that being able to talk to clients about suicide is extremely important in providing a safe space for them to explore their feelings.'*

Rudd (2008), Barrio (2007)

**If you have concerns that a young person has suicidal thoughts or behaviours you must follow the steps as laid out in this guidance.**

### Information Gathering conversation

Possible questions for an information gathering conversation are contained in Appendix 1. You will need to start the conversation by explaining the reasons for your concern, these questions aim to guide you through a conversation in which you can find out about suicide risk, which will inform your next actions. The conversation should be supportive and take account of the young person's individual situation and his/her needs.

**If the young person does not engage with the conversation, then follow advice in Section 6: young people who refuse to engage.**

**If there are no concerns about suicidal thoughts or behaviour and Standard Risk of suicide is indicated:**

- If the young person is standard risk in respect of suicide but has additional needs (not impacting on welfare) then consider a referral to the Early Help Hub or to other services (details Appendix 5) if appropriate.
- If the young person is standard risk in respect of suicide but has other needs which impact on their safety or welfare, please consider making a referral to Children's Social Care via the MASH team (details Appendix 3).
- If the young person is standard risk in respect of suicide but is showing early signs of mental health and emotional problems, please consider making a referral to Point 1 (details Appendix 3).
- Give consideration to the impact on the young person's support network

**If your conversation indicate Medium or High Risk of suicide:**

- Explain limits of confidentiality and consent to share issues
- Contact the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) for consultation and/or referral

You should also:

- Liaise with parents/carers (where possible)
- Inform Children's Services if you think that the child may already be open to social care
- Inform the young person's GP

- Refer to MASH if the young person or parents/carers refuse to engage
- Give consideration to the impact on the young person's support network

### Immediate Medical Attention

- If suicidal actions have been disclosed or if the level of self-harm has resulted in a significant physical injury (e.g. recent overdose or serious cutting) it is important to ensure that the young person is assessed urgently in order to ascertain whether any immediate medical treatment is required. Take the young person to the Accident and Emergency department at the local hospital or consider dialling 999 and asking for an ambulance.
- Inform the young person's parents/carers.

### **If a young person tells you they are imminently about to take their own life**

- Do not leave the young person on their own.
- If urgent assistance is required contact the emergency services.
- Ring the CAMHS Access and Assessment team for an emergency assessment to be arranged (office hours and out of hours).

### Safety Planning

You could also consider helping the young person to put together a safety plan.

### SAMPLE SAFETY PLAN

It is best to have someone complete this before a crisis so they can refer to it as a protective measure.

<b>1. Warning signs of crisis</b>
<b>2. Coping strategies – what I can do to take my mind off it</b>
<b>3. Who or what is good in my life</b>
<b>4. Contact details of someone who I trust to get help</b>
<b>5. Contact details of agencies I can get help from</b>
<b>6. What makes life worth living</b>
<b>7.</b>



## 6. Important things to remember

<b>Do</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Take suicide gestures seriously</li><li>• Listen, be non-judgemental and think about what you say</li><li>• Ask direct questions early on to establish the level of risk</li><li>• Ask about other problems such as bullying, substance misuse, bereavement, relationship difficulties, abuse, sexuality issues</li><li>• Check how and when parents/carers will be contacted</li><li>• Encourage contact with friends, family, trusted adults</li><li>• Ensure immediate support for the young person is in place and that medical attention is provided if necessary</li><li>• Consult with specialist services for advice</li><li>• Make sure you record your assessment, concerns and actions in line with your agency's procedures</li><li>• Make appropriate referrals</li><li>• Engage with processes for developing Risk Management and Safety Plans</li><li>• Ensure actions to be taken by your agency to manage risk are implemented</li><li>• Consider protective factors and provide ongoing opportunities for support and monitoring</li><li>• Respond to escalating concerns about the risk of suicide</li></ul>
<b>Do Not</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Promise confidentiality</li><li>• Make assumptions or react without considering all of the risks</li><li>• Dismiss what the young person is saying</li><li>• Presume that a young person who has threatened to harm themselves in the past will not do so in the future</li><li>• Disempower the young person</li><li>• Dismiss self-harm or expression of suicide thoughts as attention seeking</li></ul>

## **7. Young people who refuse to engage**

If a child or young person is at risk of significant harm (S47 Children Act 1989) you have a duty to share concerns and information relevant to the risk. Some young people refuse to engage with specialist services but may choose to engage with other professionals.

- Seek guidance from your line manager and/or safeguarding lead
- Consult with MASH (Children's Services) about what action to take next if no engagement from young person or parent/carer
- Consult with CAMHS about what action to take next. CAMHS may offer to remain in contact with any such professionals to help them to work with the young person and their family.
- Contact the young person's parents/carers (unless child protection concerns preclude this)

If you find yourself in this position you must share information and seek support and guidance from specialist agencies (as well as your line manager).

## **8. Engagement with parents and carers**

- Consider how and when parents/carers can be contacted. When parents/carers are informed they can become part of the assessment, safety planning and risk management. Informing parents/carers can be very stressful for the young person. Some young people may be relieved that someone else liaises with their parents/carers and engages with them to be supportive.
- If the young person does not wish their parents/carers to be informed then workers should explore the reasons for this and seek the support of their manager/supervisor
- If the young person has disclosed that their self-harm or suicidal thoughts/intentions are a response to alleged abuse by their parents/carers then workers should consult their line manager/safeguarding lead and follow their organisation's procedures for reporting child protection concerns without delay

## Appendix 1 – Information Gathering Conversation and Flowchart

If a young person's presentation/behaviour causes concern that they may have suicidal thoughts or intent, have an **Information Gathering Conversation**. Feel free to ask other relevant questions.

Tell me, is something troubling you (home, family, school, friends)? How is this making you feel?
How often have you had these thoughts?
Are other people also concerned about you? Who, why?
Have you ever felt like hurting yourself? Have you ever hurt yourself?
Have you ever felt like ending your life?

If the answer is no, then you will not need to go on with the **suicide specific questions**, but you may wish to continue with further questions (see below), in particular if the young person is self-harming.

How often do you think about suicide? How long have you been having suicidal thoughts? When did you last think about suicide? Are you currently thinking of ending your life?
What makes you think of suicide (e.g. worries, fears, loss)? Have you ever made a suicide attempt?
What stops you acting on these thoughts?
Have you thought about how you would kill yourself/Do you have a plan? Do you ways of taking your own life? (tablets, weapons, other?)
Is anyone aware that you think about suicide (family, friends, professionals)?
What helps to stop you thinking about taking your own life?

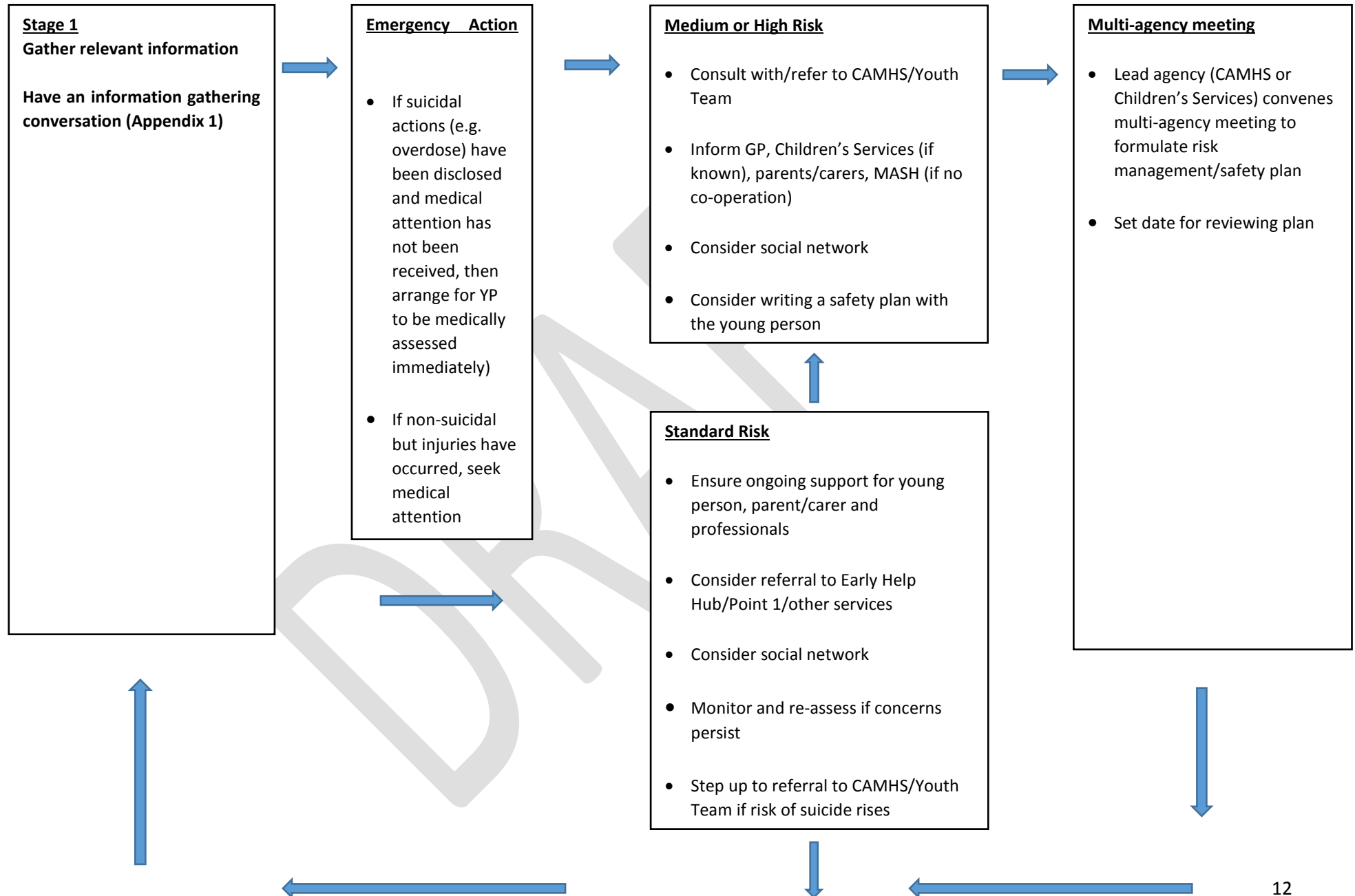
Further questions:

Are you at risk of harm from others (bullying, threats, abuse)?
Do you use drugs or alcohol? Does this make you feel better or worse?
What helps to stop you thinking about harming yourself?
What helps to stop your self-harming behaviour from getting worse?
Are you getting support with your feelings (from family, friends or professionals)?
How are you feeling generally at the moment (mood, health, social life)?
What do you think needs to happen to improve the situation and make you feel better?

Name.....

Signature.....

Date .....



## Appendix 2

### Links between self harm and suicide

In the majority of cases self-harm appears to be a way of coping rather than an attempt at ending life. It may be an attempt to communicate with others, to influence or to secure help or care from others, or a way of obtaining relief from a difficult or overwhelming situation or emotional state. In these circumstances, somewhat paradoxically, the purpose of the self-harming behaviour is to preserve life, although this can be a difficult concept for practitioners to understand.

A small minority of young people who repeatedly self-harm may go on to attempt suicide, although this may not what they intend to do and death can occur accidentally. The difference between self-harm and suicide is not always clear, however. Self-harm is a common precursor to suicide for the relatively small numbers of young people who make deliberate attempts to end their lives and so repeated incidents of self-harm should be considered a risk factor when assessing the risk of suicide.

In their separate forms, self-harm and suicide generally differ in terms of the intent that lies behind the behaviours.

Practitioners should feel able to communicate with young people about their self-harming behaviours. It is important to gather information about self-harm and the young person's thought processes associated with the behaviours in order to start to understand the risks; either of serious risk to the young person's health or wellbeing, of the risk of death by misadventure, or the risk of intentional suicide.

## Appendix 3:

### Guidance on sharing information

The purpose of sharing information is to ensure young people who are at risk from suicidal thoughts and behaviour receive help and support appropriate to their level of need.

#### **Seven Golden Rules to sharing information** (Information Sharing: HM, March 2015)

1. Remember that the Data Protection Act 1998 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 if you are in any doubt about sharing the information concerned, without disclosing the identity of the individual where possible.
4. Share with informed consent where appropriate and, where possible, respect the wishes of those who do not consent to share confidential information. You may still share information without consent if, in your judgement, there is good reason 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 certain of the basis upon which you are doing so. Where you 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 most important consideration is whether sharing information is likely to safeguard and protect a child.** If at any stage you are unsure about how or when to share information, you should seek advice and ensure that the outcome of the discussion is recorded. If there are concerns that a child is suffering or likely to suffer harm, then follow the relevant procedures without delay.

## **Appendix 4:**

### **Roles and responsibilities**

All people who come into contact with children and young people, including professionals who deliver specific services to some groups of young people (e.g. youth workers, sport coaches) are likely to meet young people who are engaging in self-harming behaviours, who are expressing suicidal thoughts or intentions, or who have attempted suicide previously. Everyone plays an important role in terms of identifying young people who are at risk of suicide, making an appropriate referral, and playing an important part in safety planning and risk management.

- **Accident and Emergency Department**

Accident and Emergency Departments at local hospitals are able to assess and respond to the treatment needs of young people who have self-injured or taken overdoses. A & E Doctors can undertake immediate risk assessments where there is a risk of suicide and, if required, access advice from CAMHS or the all-age out of hours mental health services. Generally speaking young people who are expressing suicidal thoughts or behaviours, but who have not physically injured themselves or taken an overdose, should not be taken to Accident and Emergency Departments in the first instance, but CAMHS should be contacted for the initial risk assessment.

- **Children's Social Care Services**

Children's Social Care is the lead agency for responding to children and young people for whom there are welfare concerns or where there is a risk of significant harm. Young people who demonstrate self-harming behaviours or who express suicidal thoughts or intentions will not automatically require a service from Children's Social Care, however consideration should always be given to making a referral.

A referral should always be made where there are concerns about the reasons for the young person's suicidal thoughts or intentions, such as abuse or neglect, or where young people are at high risk of suicide and refuse CAMHS support, and/or when parents or carers are refusing to engage.

If you are uncertain as to whether a referral should be made to Children's Services you are encouraged to seek advice from MASH (multi-agency safeguarding hub).

The MASH contact details are: 0344 800 8020

- **Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and Youth Services (under 25's)**

CAMHS and Youth Services provide support to children and families where the young person is experiencing emotional, behavioural or mental health difficulties. Young people who are demonstrating self-harming behaviours and are at medium or high risk, or who are expressing suicidal thoughts or intentions may require a service from CAMHS.

The Provider will accept referrals from Primary Care, Norfolk's Targeted CAMH Service (Point 1), Midwifery, Community Paediatrics, School Nursing, Health Visitors, LD CAMHS providers (Starfish), Acute Hospitals (incl. Emergency Departments), Norfolk Constabulary, Norfolk's commissioned Substance Misuse Service (Under 18), SENCOS and any professional competent to undertake an initial mental health assessment (screening). CAMHS do not accept direct referrals from parents or carers.

Referrals are made via the Access and Assessment Team: 0300 790 0371

Professionals can also call their local CAMHS service for consultation:

Central Norfolk: 01603 201400

West Norfolk: 01553 609933

Great Yarmouth: 01493 337601/2

<https://whatstheDealwith.co.uk/contact-us>

- **Early Help Hub**

The Early Help Hub is about ensuring help and support is available as soon as needs emerge. It is also about strengthening support for communities and universal services, enabling families to be more resilient and reduce the need for intrusive crisis level interventions. It is a partnership made up of voluntary and statutory agencies.

Breckland – 01362 654515

East – 01493 448188

Broadland – 01603 430120

North – 01263 739004

Norwich – 01603 224101

South – 01508 533933

West Norfolk and

King's Lynn – 01553 669276

or the central number: 01603 223161.

Email: [earlyhelp@norfolk.gov.uk](mailto:earlyhelp@norfolk.gov.uk)

For further information about an Early Help response please visit the Early Help website at: [www.norfolk.gov.uk/earlyhelp](http://www.norfolk.gov.uk/earlyhelp)

- **General Practitioner (GP)**

GPs are trained to consider the mental health of patients in primary care consultations and play a significant role in the prevention, detection and management of mental health issues in respect of their patients.

A young person's GP will be able to make an initial assessment of the risk of suicide and take the appropriate action to address this risk. They will also take responsibility for making a medical assessment of the need for treatment following a serious self-harm incident or suicide attempt. Out of hours responses are available and information about how to access these will be publicised by the GP's surgery. Professionals do not need to contact the GP to access CAMHS/Youth service support for a young person.

- **Norfolk Police**

The Police will respond when there is an imminent risk of suicide or serious self-harm. In any such emergency police should be called on 999.



Police are able to use their powers of Police Protection under The Children's Act 1989 or utilise s.146 of the Mental Health Act to detain any person who is at significant risk of harm and detention is required either to protect that person or for the protection of others.

In specific circumstances, where the risk of suicide is identified following a missing person investigation, Police will conduct a post-missing visit in conjunction with a Mental Health Nurse.

When referrals are made to MASH Children's Social Care Services Police will, where appropriate work with partner agencies to ensure that information is shared to assist in making a robust safety plan for any young person at risk of suicide.

- **Point 1**

Point 1 offer professional support for infants, children and young people experiencing the early signs of mental health and emotional problems.

The emotional wellbeing service is available to any child or young person living in Norfolk or registered with a Norfolk GP. It offers short-term interventions to address the early signs of mental ill-health, to ensure infants, children and young people go on to achieve their full potential in life. Services are delivered by Ormiston Families, working with the youth charity MAP and Norfolk and Suffolk Foundation Trust (NSFT).

<http://point-1.org.uk>, Tel. 0800 977 4077

- **School Nursing Service**

The team provides School Nursing Services to all children of statutory school age and their families and/or carers. Children and young people can be seen in a variety of settings, including their school, a health clinic or at home. School Nurses offer one to one confidential appointments and 'open access' clinics for young people in High Schools (support and advice is given on a variety of issues including self-esteem, anger management, contraception / sexual health issues, mental health, self-harm, relationships, diet, smoking etc).

They also offer ChatHealth: a confidential text service for 11-19 year olds in Norfolk, Tel. 07480 635060

ChatHealth is an easy way for young people to confidentially seek help about a range of issues, make an appointment with a school nurse, or find out how to access other local services including emotional support or sexual health services. Messages sent to the dedicated number are delivered to a secure website, and responded to by a school nurse. Out of hours, anyone who texts the service will receive a bounce back message explaining where to get help if their question is urgent, and when they can expect a response. Texts are usually replied to within one working day.

- **Voluntary Services**

There are a number of voluntary agencies that may offer support to children and young people who self-harm. Please see the Norfolk Directory for further information:

<http://search3.openobjects.com/kb5/ncc/directory/home.page>

## Appendix 5:

### Useful national organisations/websites

**NHS Direct** 111 [www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)

**Childline** 0800 1111 [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk), <https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/your-feelings/mental-health/coping-suicidal-feelings/>

**Papyrus** 0800 684141 [www.papyrus-uk.org/](http://www.papyrus-uk.org/)

Confidential support and advice for prevention of young suicides  
Mon – Fri 10-5pm and 7-10pm

**Royal college of Psychiatrists**

<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/problemsdisorders/feelingoverwhelmed.aspx>

**Young Minds** Parent information service 0800 018 2138 [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk) For anyone concerned about a child's mental health

**Mindinfo** 0845 766 0163 <http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/>

**SelfharmUK** is a project dedicated to supporting young people impacted by self-harm, providing a safe space to talk, ask any questions and be honest about what's going on in your life. It also has an online course that gives you an opportunity to think more about self-harm and work out what your next step might be.: [www.selfharm.co.uk](http://www.selfharm.co.uk)