

# MASTERING DATA SUBJECT ACCESS REQUESTS

*A step-by-step guide for handling DSARs  
with confidence*



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A hand holding a sign that says "HELP" above a pile of crumpled paper.

# HELP

## INTRODUCTION

Handling Data Subject Access Requests (DSARs) can be daunting and requires careful attention to ensure compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

Individuals have the right to access their personal data but fulfilling these requests isn't always simple. Your team must balance various obligations – safeguarding third-party privacy, maintaining confidentiality, and meeting deadlines. DSARs that involve multiple data subjects, repeat requests from the same individuals, and high volumes of sensitive data can also add further challenges.

DSARs are inherently complex and it's common for professionals to have differing views on how to approach them. If you're unsure at any point, it is important to seek advice and guidance from your Data Protection Officer (DPO) or a specialist.

**This guide takes you through the key aspects of completing a Data Subject Access Request (DSAR). Though it isn't exhaustive or specifically tailored to your company or your sector, we highlight the key considerations you'll need to address.**

# YOUR STEP-BY-STEP DSAR GUIDE

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# WHAT IS A DSAR?

**A Data Subject Access Request (DSAR) is a formal demand made by an individual (a 'data subject') to access the personal data an organisation holds or processes about them.**

There is no specified way for individuals to submit a DSAR. They can use a wide variety of channels – e.g. email, phone call, social media, or even a third party.

Organisations operating across the EU and UK have a legal obligation under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) to respond to a DSAR.

DSAR responses must be free of charge and include:

- ✓ Confirmation of whether you are processing the individual's data
- ✓ Clear information about how the data is being used and the retention period
- ✓ A copy of their personal data, usually in electronic format



**In our experience, the average DSAR response requires around 27 hours to complete.**



**According to EY Law's latest survey of 2023, 60% of respondent organisations reported an increase in DSARs, with trends suggesting this rise is continuing.**



# TIME FRAMES FOR RESPONDING

Under the GDPR, you have one calendar month to respond to a DSAR, with the clock starting on the day you receive the request.

If the data subject hasn't provided enough information for you to identify the data, you can ask them for clarification – this will pause the response clock until you receive the necessary details.



**Advice:** *If the response deadline date falls on a weekend or a public holiday, you have until the next working day to respond.*

## EXTENSIONS

If a DSAR involves large volumes of data, sensitive data, or spans numerous jurisdictions, it may be considered complex and eligible for an extension of up to a **maximum of two months**.

In this instance, you must:

- ✓ Document your decision and the reasoning behind it
- ✓ Communicate your decision to the data subject as soon as possible and within the initial one-month period

From that point, you have two months to respond, regardless of how much of the original one month is left.

## STEP 1: VALIDATING THE REQUESTOR

A first and crucial step in processing a DSAR is to validate the identity of the requestor. This ensures the request is legitimate and determines the rights available to the individual, including the appropriate processing approach.

How to validate an individual's identity:

- **Request formal documentation:** Encourage the individual to submit their request in writing with an official ID copy (passport, bank statement, etc), although they are not obliged to do so
- **Verify contact details:** Confirm the email address they have used to contact you aligns with the one you hold on record
- **Phone the data subject:** Call using the number listed in your database, not one provided in the request
- **Asking security questions:** Pose questions only the data subject would know the answers to



**Advice:** Watch for information security threats from bad actors attempting to gain access to data. Train staff to spot red flags and always verify information against internal data.



# RECEIVING A REQUEST FROM A **THIRD PARTY**

A DSAR can be submitted by a third party who is acting on behalf of the data subject, such as an agency or through a DSAR platform.

In this instance, you should:

- Confirm the identity of the data subject, either directly or via the third party
- Ensure the data subject has given explicit consent to the disclosure and they understand what the DSAR process entails
- Check that the third party is legitimate and has the authority to act on their behalf



**Advice:** *f the requestor cannot be positively identified and you believe there is no applicable right of access, the request should be refused. You may wish to seek expert advice before making any decisions.*



## STEP 2: ACKNOWLEDGING AND PROCESSING THE DSAR

**It is important to actively manage the entire lifecycle of a DSAR.**

By accurately logging and recording each action and decision, you not only demonstrate your adherence to the GDPR but also create essential documentation in the event of a dispute with the data subject. It is also vital for proving your compliance to a regulator such as the UK's Information Commissioner's Office (ICO).



### ACKNOWLEDGE THE DSAR

Acknowledge the request by sending a communication to the data subject as soon as practically possible, detailing the terms of engagement and response time frame.

### LOG THE DSAR

Use a DSAR log to maintain a record of all requests received, the date of receipt, tasks and responsible personnel, and timeframes.

### RETRIEVE THE INFORMATION

Retrieving the requested information will require a thorough and organised approach. This will likely involve searching multiple systems, departments and data repositories.



## STEP 3: DETERMINING WHAT TO REDACT

There are often occasions when providing personal data in a DSAR conflicts with other privacy rights or could prejudice legal provisions or interests.

To protect these rights, certain information should be removed or redacted from the disclosure.

### HOW TO HANDLE CONFIDENTIAL CONTENT

Information is deemed confidential if it has been given in confidence or attracts a duty of confidence. Confidential information must be redacted within the DSAR disclosure, unless there is an overriding public interest.



**Advice:** If an individual has marked an email 'private and confidential', this does not automatically trigger the confidentiality exemption. You should assess the content and context to determine if it genuinely qualifies under the exemption.

### HOW TO HANDLE THIRD PARTIES

When compiling a DSAR response, information about other individuals might also be included.

In these situations, a balance must be struck between the requestor's right to access their data and the privacy and legal rights of the third party.

## STEP 4: RESPONDING

### Best practices for responding to a DSAR

#### COVERING LETTERS

It's good practice to include a covering letter or accompanying explanatory material as part of your DSAR response. In addition to the statutory information, a cover letter should:

- Confirm the details and nature of data processing
- Be easily accessible, using clear and plain language
- Explain the rationale for any redactions and appropriate exemptions used

#### SECURE DELIVERY

Your delivery method should align with the requestor's preference, where possible. And regardless of the method, you should ensure delivery is safe and secure. We recommend using measures such as password protection and document watermarking.

#### REQUEST CLOSURE

After responding to a DSAR, close the case on any internal registers or databases. Include the response date, actions taken, and decisions made. This helps prove compliance in case of a dispute and keeps a record of what information was shared and with whom. Also, retain a copy of the data supplied, as it can save time if the data subject has further questions or complaints.



# WHAT ABOUT EXEMPTIONS?

Under the GDPR, data subjects have rights, but there are situations where certain rights may be exempt.

## WHEN DO EXEMPTIONS APPLY?

Exemptions typically apply to specific sections of data, not an entire DSAR. These include situations where the data included could:

- Compromise legal proceedings
- Prejudice safeguards
- Impact ongoing investigations

## DOCUMENTING EXEMPTIONS

Every exemption must be clearly justified and documented, including the specific exemption applied, the reasoning behind it.



**Advice:** If refusing the request in its entirety on excessive or manifestly unfounded grounds, you must explain your reasons for refusal, the right to complain to the local jurisdiction regulator, and the ability to enforce rights through judicial remedy.





## DSAR PROGRESS CHECKLIST

Use this checklist to guide you through the key steps when processing a DSAR.

- ☐ Logged the request
- ☐ Validated the identity of the requestor
- ☐ Established the type and scope of the request
- ☐ Acknowledged the request in writing
- ☐ Performed searches and/or contacted relevant departments to undertake searches
- ☐ Considered the application of any exemptions
- ☐ Considered whether any 3rd party personal data needed redaction
- ☐ Watermarked the response
- ☐ Produced a covering letter
- ☐ Sent response securely
- ☐ Recorded our decision making and closed on the DSAR Log

You can also refer to our [DSAR white paper](#) for additional information.



# WHY CHOOSE THE DPO CENTRE?



Handling Data Subject Access Requests (DSARs) can be complex, time-consuming and legally sensitive. That's where we can help.

## EXPERT-LED, SCALABLE SUPPORT

With one of the largest teams of specialist data protection professionals and a dedicated DSAR team, we provide tailored support to fit your organisation's needs. Whether you need full end-to-end management or assistance with specific tasks.

## CONFIDENCE IN EVERY RESPONSE

Outsourcing your DSARs to us means peace of mind.

With our expertise, you reduce risk, save time, and stay compliant, allowing your team to focus on core business priorities.

## KEY BENEFITS

- ✓ Designated DPO and specialist DSAR Officers working with your team
- ✓ Stress-free compliance, with end-to-end DSAR management
- ✓ Flexible pricing options, including pay-as-you-go and retainer plans

**Get in touch today** to discuss how we can support your DSAR needs.

## WHO WE'VE WORKED WITH

We have delivered consultancy, interim support, EU and UK representation, DSAR response, and Data Protection Officer services to over 1,000 organisations across a wide range of industry sectors since 2017.



Medical and  
Healthcare



Software and  
Technology



Retail and  
eCommerce



Finance and  
Insurance



Education, Schools  
and Colleges



Charities and  
Not-for-profit



informa





## Copleston High School

'Our appointed DPO's in-depth knowledge and guidance supported us with all our compliance needs, including help with complex DSARs and service level agreements.'

David East, Head of MAT Standards Gippeswyk Community Educational Trust (GCET)



The Prostate Cancer Clinical Trials Consortium

'The DPO Centre's team are always on hand to answer any queries we may have and to help us respond to any Data Subject Access Requests from any trial member across the EU.'

Drew Davies, Contracts Manager at PCCTC



'Overall, working with The DPO Centre greatly reduced the significant challenge of dealing with this DSAR, and the guidance provided will no doubt prove useful in dealing with any others that we may receive in the future.'

Richard Rothern // Director, Unbar Rothern



## EATON HOUSE SCHOOLS

'The DPO Centre was instrumental in helping us manage a complex data subject access request. We hadn't processed anything with this volume of data before, and they provided us with the expertise and support we needed to meet the deadline.'

Liam Corbett, Bursar at Eaton House Schools

## About The DPO Centre

The DPO Centre is a leading fractional Data Protection Officer (DPO) resource centre, offering specialist support and guidance, including expert Data Subject Access (DSAR) Response services.

With offices in London, New York, Toronto, Dublin, Amsterdam, and a network of establishments across all 27 EU Member States, we provide access to one of the largest teams of experienced and highly qualified data protection professionals. Since 2017, we have supported over 1,000 clients globally, across sectors including Finance, Life Sciences, Healthcare, Technology, Retail, Charities, and Education.



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