**MIRRA (Memory – Identity – Rights in Records – Access) research project data deposit interview transcripts: group one**

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| Title | *MIRRA (Memory – Identity – Rights in Records – Access) research project data deposit interview transcripts: group one* |
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| Keywords | *identity, information rights, memory, care-experienced, records* |
| Description | *This archive represents the fieldwork data from an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded project ‘MIRRA’, based at UCL and led by Professor Elizabeth Shepherd. It began in October 2017 and was initially funded until October 2019. The project consisted of a detailed study of the public and voluntary sectors in England responsible for the management of child social care records and data. The research team considered both current and historic (from 1970) recordkeeping practices. The central research question was: how can we better understand the information rights ecology in the public and voluntary sectors in order to support individuals and public authorities in navigating it?*  *A participatory approach was adopted, in which a small group of care-experienced people were recruited as ‘co-researchers’. Members of this cohort had all sought access to records of their childhoods at different stages of their lives. Primary data collection was undertaken using a mixed methods approach, gathering qualitative data from respondents from four communities of knowledge, expertise and practice: care-experienced people, social workers and information professionals and academic researchers. Despite the participation of individuals and groups with different skills and expertise, the research was nevertheless oriented towards the perspectives and viewpoints of care leavers themselves, as the people with a personal and emotional stake in social care records. Their expertise and knowledge was given precedence in the research design and outcomes. This was particularly important in rebalancing the distribution of power in relation to care records, which is usually tipped in favour of practitioners and policy-makers. This archive contains verbatim (albeit anonymised) transcripts from individual interviews, focus groups and workshop meetings.* |
| Participants | *In total, over 80 individuals provided data to the project between March 2018 and June 2019. These include 21 adult care leavers. Demographic information was not formally collected from contributors, as the project focused on qualitative narratives of personal experience. However, detailed biographical information could be gleaned from their testimonies. The care leavers ranged in age from 18 to 85 years old; all had experienced foster and/or residential care in England between the late 1940s and 2018. Approximately one third had been in the care of voluntary organizations for all or some of their care experience, and the others exclusively looked after by local authorities. They were in care for varying lengths of time, in different parts of the country and for different reasons. Each person had a unique journey, entering and leaving care at a different age, representing the diversity of care over time and place. This diversity impacted on the types, form and extent of care records available from their respective childhoods, reflecting changes in recordkeeping practices over the 80-year period (Hoyle et al., 2019). The rich data from the 21 care experienced testimonies, although not generalizable, represent a significant and detailed exploration of the issues they wished to raise. Sixteen care-leaver contributors had accessed their care records; four had made a conscious decision not to; and one was in the process of doing so.* |
| Funding | *Arts and Humanities Research Council. GRANT TITLE: Navigating the public information rights ecology: a recordkeeping perspective on supporting information rights.**Grant Ref: AH/P008941/1* |
|  | *The MIRRA project created a number of resources to support the rights of care leavers, and to help social care practitioners, information professionals and academic researchers fulfil their duties and responsibilities.  Links to all of them can be found at:*  [*https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/mirra/resources/*](https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/mirra/resources/)  *A full list is:*  ***Podcast***  *Miriam Antcliffe, Research in Practice Research and Development Officer, speaks to John-george and Darren who share their personal stories of accessing their care files as adults:*  [*https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/content-pages/podcasts/reflections-on-accessing-care-records-and-supporting-good-recording/*](https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/content-pages/podcasts/reflections-on-accessing-care-records-and-supporting-good-recording/)  ***Project Leaflets***  *MIRRA Research Leaflet: Description and Actions* [*https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/mirra/files/2019/07/MIRRAUpdatedLeafletWebVersion.pdf*](https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/mirra/files/2019/07/MIRRAUpdatedLeafletWebVersion.pdf)  *MIRRA Poster: Findings*  [*https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/mirra/files/2019/07/MIRRA-poster-A1\_v03-003.pdf*](https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/mirra/files/2019/07/MIRRA-poster-A1_v03-003.pdf)  ***Case Study reports***  *Care Leavers Experiences*  [*https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/mirra/files/2019/07/Care-Leavers-Experiences.pdf*](https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/mirra/files/2019/07/Care-Leavers-Experiences.pdf)  ***Practitioner Perspectives***  [*https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/mirra/files/2019/07/Practitioner-Perspectives.pdf*](https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/mirra/files/2019/07/Practitioner-Perspectives.pdf)  ***Film***  ***Short Film***  *A short film from 2019 introduces the MIRRA research project themes*  <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xs28tczL3yA>  ***Research Symposium***  *All of the presentations from our symposium on 18th July 2019 were filmed and can be found on YouTube via the link below.*  [*https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLIxEKZAfBRCij3qPuX98ucTnAhq2a09QH*](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLIxEKZAfBRCij3qPuX98ucTnAhq2a09QH)  ***Family Connect website***  *FamilyConnect helps adults who have been adopted or in care find answers to questions about their origins. MIRRA has been working with*[*Family Connect*](https://www.familyconnect.org.uk/)*, who have been fantastic in supporting our work.*  [*https://www.familyconnect.org.uk/*](https://www.familyconnect.org.uk/)  ***Project publications***  [*Hoyle, V., Shepherd, E.,  Flinn, A. and Lomas, E (2019) “Child Social-Care Recording and the Information Rights of Care-Experienced People: A Recordkeeping Perspective” in the The British Journal of Social Work  https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcy115 (*](https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcy115)*Open Access – Free to All*[*)*](https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcy115)  *Shepherd, E., Hoyle, V., Lomas, E., Flinn, A., Sexton, A. (2020). Towards a Human-Centred Participatory Approach to Child Social Care Recordkeeping. Archival Science. 20(4), 307-325.*[*http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10502-020-09338-9*](https://eur01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fdx.doi.org%2F10.1007%2Fs10502-020-09338-9&data=04%7C01%7C%7C24d1f78b423e438b9dc808d8b334b6bc%7C1faf88fea9984c5b93c9210a11d9a5c2%7C0%7C0%7C637456386271647459%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C1000&sdata=8KI3OO1oQvxE1%2BHIfh8uz2JC6eDrsh4DFrkt8hn78fQ%3D&reserved=0)*Gold Open Access.*  *Hoyle V, Shepherd E, Lomas E, Flinn A (2020). Recordkeeping and the life-long memory and identity needs of care-experienced children and young people. Child and Family Social Work.*[*https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12778*](https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12778)*Gold Open Access.* |

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

Interview held 23rd April 2018 between G011 (pseudonym) and Victoria Hoyle, at Liverpool Central Library.

BEGINNING OF INTERVIEW

**Victoria**

So if you could start by giving me a little bit of background about your care experience, to set the rest of the interview in some context.

**G011**

Ok, I first went into care in 1972 at four months old. I didn’t know that though until later on - I’ll come back to that later - I always thought I was four years old. So, I was four and my sister was two, we were taken into care, my mum’s rights were taken off her because of the situation that she was in and we were placed into foster care. So from that age of four…I mean I’d have to have the chronological order thing in front of me because there were so many times that we went backwards and forwards, I couldn’t tell you how long we were in one place without looking at the information in front of me. But we were passed from pillar to post up until I was seven, so for three years we’d be with one foster carer for six months or whatever and then we would go back home and then my mum would have another breakdown and we’d go back and then we’d be somewhere else. And I think there was a foster home in [place name], I was fostered in [place name] when I was four months old, again I didn’t find out that until later on. So, my mum’s got bi-polar disorder, my dad left, again when I was four, and that was part of the reason that we were taken away. My mum was actually given a choice, it was either us or my dad, so she wasn’t happy about it but there you go, things were different back then, we’re talking forty one years ago now, things were different. You didn’t get the support and help that you get now, although even now it’s not the greatest is it? So yeah it was just years of going in and out of care. I remember things like waking up in this house and our curtains and our bedding were there and it totally confused me. They’d done it thinking that that would help us, a bit of familiarity and it totally confused me. I was like why are our curtains and our bedding… at the age of four thinking that. That’s the background really. My mum fought to get us back when I was seven, and we went home and sort of briefly for those two years things were ok. We had what was called home-makers back then, which I suppose they support you to stay in your own home, support the family, they’d come along and support my mum or whatever. So for two years it was ok-ish, and then just before I was nine we were burgled by the next door neighbour and that sent my mum spiralling again into a bi-polar…you know her mental state suffered. We were actually rehoused because of that, we were rehoused onto a lovely estate and my mum still lives there now, she’s lived there for 30 years, and we moved there the day before I was nine. So that was good for my mum because she was moved to a nice area, that helped her with her mental state and stuff, but from nine until sort of eleven there was a lot of bouts where my mum would try to commit suicide and I grew up with that, I thought it was normal, I thought everybody’s parents did it. She’d barricade the door up with furniture, we couldn’t get in, and then I’d be cooking the tea for my sister, I’d be doing the shopping, I mean my mum would say to me ‘I’ll give you some pennies for cleaning the bathroom’ but I basically took over the mum role. So that went on for a while as well and these home-makers would come in while my mum was in hospital and it was really confusing, and then I got to adolescent stage as well, where you hormones are everywhere and we had these home-makers coming in. I remember again we were fostered when I was 10, we were fostered up the road, we went on holiday with them, I hated that. And then when I was 12 I got my first boyfriend and that was like a major stress point for my mum, I’d had this mothering role and all of a sudden she wanted to take that away from me so I was really confused. I couldn't have worded that back then like I can now. She wanted to take that control back, and I was like ‘well, no’ and I’d give myself a curfew and say ‘no, I’ll be back at 9.30pm’. And she took my bike off me so I couldn’t go out and I remember going and taking the bike, and I just had no idea what was normal, so I was trying to give myself some kind of stability. Very confused as a teenage girl. Anyway I was threatened then that if I didn’t do as I was told blah blah blah I would be put into care. Now she threatened me with going into care but I never believed her because it’s not the kind of thing that normal parents would hopefully…hopefully parents wouldn’t…I mean people can bandy that around but… I mean to threaten me with care… This is where emotional abuse comes into it as well, there was a lot of that went on. My mum would say things to me like ‘you’re making me ill’, ‘if you don’t do such and such I’m going to end up in hospital’, if I don’t conform to a certain way then I will be put into care, and that went on, and that messed with my head a lot as well, until eventually she did call the police to me this time and they did come to take me away. So of course I’m screaming the place down, I used to have these screaming fits, because I couldn’t control my emotions, it was just too much and I would scream and jump up and down and bang on the floor and I’d be smashing and I’d be banging doors and smashing, throwing things and screaming, absolutely screaming so that the neighbours would ring the police because they thought I was being murdered. And eventually they did come and…I can’t remember now if they came and took me into care…and then another time I decided that I wasn’t going into care so I was going to run away instead so that they couldn’t put me in care, because we’d had this history of being in care and I didn’t want to go back. So I ran away at the age of 12, it was the middle of November or something, it was freezing, and yeah… that’s right, I hadn’t actually been put into care at this point by a threat…so I ran away and I slept in a subway and in a telephone box and on a train station, I slept rough for a week. There was a girl that I’d met, bless her she was only 15 and she put me up in her auntie’s house and I did get a night there, but they found out what was going on and they did the right thing by their child, they told me to ‘get back home now’ so I was left, and I’d met up with this boyfriend that I was seeing at the time, that’s where I’d gone because I had nowhere else to go, I was trying to find a friend from school but I couldn’t find her house, I was on the streets basically. And then the boyfriend that I’d been seeing, I did meet up with him, and he phoned the police, so he did the right thing really. They came and got me and took me back home and I remember sitting in the back of the police car and my mum opening the door and she was like ‘take her away’, and I did get taken into care. Even now that makes me feel a bit emotional. You know what, I get upset every time I’m talking about it but I’m fine, I’m not effected day to day anymore, but when you’re talking about it you’re raw, yeah. [Has a drink of tea] Cup of tea makes it all better doesn’t it? So yeah, she was like ‘take her away, I don’t want her.’ So I was taken into [place name], so I’d been in [Place name] before at some stage, as I say we were just in and out until I was 12 anyway.

**Victoria**

Was this a children’s home?

**G011**

Yes, a children’s home. This was actually…it’s not there anymore, they’ve all been knocked flat these places that we lived…[Place name] was an assessment centre so it wasn’t a home that you stayed in, it was a home that you went to assess you, obviously. So I went there and I absolutely loved it…well saying that, hang on let me get this right, no…first time I went in I didn’t love it, this was the first time I went in, it was awful, because you know my mum had just rejected me. I was in this home with all these other kids who’ve got whatever going on and yeah it was awful. I went from there to a foster parent and I was with them for 11 months, that was an absolute nightmare, because they had an adopted daughter who hated me, or I thought she hated me, she picked on me. I never ever said anything to anyone because I thought she was their daughter and they’d always side with her and never listen to me because I was just…what’s the word they use now, there’s a word they use now for a person in care, I’d never seen it before until a couple of weeks ago. They just initial you.

**Victoria**

LAC?

**G011**

That’s the one, I was a LAC, so that’s how I felt back then. Back then I was just a kid in care, my opinion or my whatever it didn’t matter, they were going to side with their own daughter, so for 11 months she picked on me and until in the end I blew, I absolutely blew, which is what I tend to do. It would build up and then I flew into an absolute rage, battered her, and then the mum slapped me across the face and said ‘look what you’ve done’. This kid she’d had alopecia as a baby – I didn’t know that – I’d ripped half her hair out, it was a quite nasty fight but then the dad came and said ‘hang on, I’ve watched’ – and this is his own daughter – he said ‘I’ve watched, she’s been picking on her for 11 months it’s about time G011 stood up to her’ and I couldn’t believe it. He’d seen but never said anything, and I thought it would cause murder between them, so I thought oh they’re going to get divorced because of me, I need to get out of here. I didn’t want it to be my fault, so I said I want to go back into care. They told me I couldn’t go back into care because I was there to be punished for my behaviour, so I always thought, yeah, my fault. So I’d had all this growing up with my mum blaming me for everything, making her ill and being in hospital and her bipolar and her overdoses, and then they say this to me in the foster parents, ‘you’re here to be punished’, and it really messed with my head. And then they messed with me as well because she said no I had to stay there, she actually smashed my room…I mean, bless her, I did actually go back there years later and we were ok, I took one of my babies up, and she’s dead now, she died of cancer quite a long time ago, but I did go back and it didn’t matter anymore if you know what I mean…but at the time she smashed my room up because I’d gone up and I was having a bit of rage, so she came up and she said ‘here let me help’, so she smashed my room up, smashed all these little ornaments that I’d had since I was a kid. They meant…I know it sounds stupid but they were these little frogs that I’d won when I was nine and they were like sentimental, I was proud because I’d done something good and they meant something to me and she smashed two of them. I’ve still got one, I’ve still got it in my cabinet, this little diddy frog. So I did end up being moved from there and went back to [Place name], because that’s where you went, to assess where you needed to go next and all that, so I think I was 14 at this point. I must have been 12 turning 13 when I ran away, and then when I got to them I was 13 turning 14, so I went back to [Place name] and met my best mate. I thought she was a boy, still mates with her, still really close with her. She bounced in and I thought she was a boy, and me and her just hit it off and she was what kept me…she made my life worth living this girl. So we had such a laugh in there me and this girl, but you couldn’t stay there, and I knew that I would have to move on to another home. Now what they did…oh another home I’d been in as well I’d been in [Place name], that was when I was about nine, me and my sister were in there actually, so she’d have been about 8, we were 7, 8, 9 something like that, we were young kids anyway, we were in [Place name] for a while, so I knew people from there who had moved on and were in this next home that I went to. So I decided that I would move on to [Place name] which was sort of the automatic place then…there was a few others, there was [Place name], there was another one I’ve forgotten the name of it now…but [Place name] was ten minutes away from [Place name] and I decided, I made my decision, I knew I needed stability even at 14, I said ‘right, I’m going there.’ Over those years from sort of 11 to 15, so say over those four years, what they’d always done…it was never supposed to be me being in care permanent. I would go into care and then there’d be a plan put in place with all the agencies, like your social worker and your doctor and all that, and you’d have a case conference and they’d decide, you know, how you’d been doing and what was happening next, and it was always the plan for me to go home. So I would start off with a weekend, or a day and then a day and a night and then a weekend, gradually they’d build the time up and eventually I’d go home, do something wrong, and then I’d be back in care, and this was till I was 14, 15. I got to a point where I was fed up of going back and forth into care so decided to stay in care. So I moved into [Place name] when I was 14 and then [Person’s name] followed me, my mate, because she was broken hearted that I’d gone and I was made up when she came in. When I first went into this home I got bullied because it was like an initiation, they all ganged up on me, and I remember that first night in there lying in my bed and just feeling really lonely and I didn’t have any friends in there, I cried myself to sleep, when I woke up the next morning these girls that had been picking on me…the mattress was turned up, puke stained, they’d both tried to take overdoses and were in hospital. That was what you lived with, it was just what went on. As I say, a couple of months later [Person’s name] arrived, so me and [Person’s name] were together and we just went everywhere together, we did everything together, we robbed the kitchen together, we hid in each other’s wardrobes and the staff, the night staff… and you know what I’m friends with night staff and staff now, they’re in my Facebook, they’re so lovely they’ve met my kids, you know it’s lovely that we’re still friends. So that takes me on till I was 15, a couple of months on I met a lad in there who I thought was a staff member, because in the home they had adjoined flats, so in the home it was independent living but you were still attached to the home and you had staff. So where the two flats were and it was like an L shape the offices were underneath the flats, so I just waltzed in to this flat one day… Am I rattling on now?

**Victoria**

No, it’s ok.

**G011**

I’ll go on forever. I walked into this flat and I was like ‘oh are you staff?’ and he said ‘you could say that’ and didn’t tell me he wasn’t staff, he was 16 this lad, and I ended up seeing this lad who was in the home, he wasn’t staff at all, and it was just…just totally the wrong…it was a disaster, because I was messed up, he was messed up, really bad relationship where we were hitting each other, all the screaming from me kept carrying on because I was confused all the time. I ended up pregnant at 15 and that…I was in total denial over all that, and then one of these case conferences came up and I pleaded with them please not to mention it because I was embarrassed and it was, you know, it was a really hard thing, I was a kid, a messed up kid and now this had happened to me. When I went into the conference it was the first thing that was plastered all over the minutes of the meeting. I was mortified and ran from the room screaming. That then put another black mark against my name and I was further made to feel I was the one in the wrong. He didn’t want to know, he went off, he went off somewhere for Christmas and left me to go through a termination on my own. I feel like I had no choice about the termination. I was taken into the office, I wasn’t even told ‘yes you are pregnant’, I was taken into the office and very sternly the boss said me ‘well what are you going to do now?’ and I was like ‘well I don’t even know’. She said ‘what are you going to do about this situation you’ve got yourself in to?’ and I said ‘well I haven’t had the results back’ and she said ‘well you are, what are you doing about it?’ And she was quite…there was no emotional support for me going through that, and I was told you’re booked in, you’re going this day and that’s what’s happening, and I know even at 15 you’ve got your own free will but I kind of felt that I had to go along with what they were telling me to do, and it was easy for me to do that, to have that decision made for me because I couldn’t cope with it. I was too young and it would have been an absolute disaster. So the relationship with the guy, two and a half years I was seeing him, eventually after humungous fights he left that building then, he went on from independent living, he had to move out and he went to like a hostel. I was going down there. One night I got so drunk I fell back and hit the back of my head and knocked myself clean out, I was out. The next morning when I woke up, I woke up in his flat, nobody had come looking for me, nobody had said anything about me being missing, it was like… I could have been dead, I could have killed myself, nobody was interested you know when I went back…and ok it was my fault, I was out getting drunk in his flat, and he should have been responsible, he was 18 at this point and I was 15 but… So as I say, bad relationship, eventually we did split up, because he kept leaving me and I kept begging him to come back and I’d beg and plead with him and eventually it got to one point where he left it so long that was what I needed to break free from him. And I realised…and he wanted me back then. The staff kept saying to me ‘Oh just leave him alone, he’ll come back running’ and I was…I think what had happened, because I was so frightened of rejection all through my life, he was rejecting me as well and I had to cling on to that, and keep fighting to keep hold of him, and then when he eventually went they were right he did come back but I didn’t want to know then. So, at 16 I decided I was going to move out, and I did well at school, considering what I went through I did really well. I didn’t get the grades I could have got if I hadn’t had all that mess going on, I’d have had all top A, B grades, as it goes I got like a B+ for…it’d be called Design Technology now but it was Art… I got a B+, and I got a C for Home Economics it was called then, and I did pass all my exams, they were low marks but I passed every single one, even French. So I went on and did catering from there, I joined college to do catering and then I moved to my own flat, which was called [Place name]. They were all attached and it was a couple of buildings in [Place name] and I moved in there. I was there for a while, the college was over the road. I passed my first year exams…what I actually did was…I wanted to do craft catering, because I wanted to design wedding cakes, I wanted my own business. I knew what I wanted but I couldn’t say it and when they interviewed me they told me I was over qualified because I’d passed all my exams and they put me on general catering, which is a harder course, and they obviously thought I could cope with it and I felt like I had to do as I was told again and I couldn’t say ‘well actually I really want to design wedding cakes and birthday cakes and run by own business’. I just couldn’t say it, I felt like I had to do as I was told. So I passed all the first year exams on general, got to the second year and I ended up taking drugs, cos I felt like I was in this situation that I didn’t want to be in, the girls that I was living with…there was like this hostel, it was three houses with a staff room in the middle, but the girl that I was living with planned to have my room robbed because…whatever reason, I can’t remember now…she planned to have my room robbed, so I ended up having everything in my bedroom with a lock on it. I had to stash food away because you’d come into the kitchen and your food would be gone, the pans…I mean I came in one day with my sister and there was smoke and I said ‘ooh what’s that smell?’, goes upstairs to my room for 20 minutes, came back down - there was nobody in the house, there’d been nobody there since I’d come in - and there was a pan with rice on the stove that had burnt the colour of my tights, it was black cinders and there was smoke everywhere. The house could have burned down and that was what I was living with. I came in another time and there was vodka and coke vomit on the carpet, it didn’t get cleaned up it got left there. There were kids doing knives on the electric bar fire, it was just…it was just horrendous, until in the end I lost my temper and banged a cup on the staff room window. That’s all I did, just lost my temper, and I got evicted. So I ended up having to go back to my mum’s and she was not happy, I’ve got the photos to prove it [laughs]. I went back to my mum’s when I was 18 for about 2 weeks until they found housing, cos I was 18 now anyway, I needed a flat and I needed to move on. So they chucked me out, lived at my mum’s for two weeks, that was horrendous. I was getting the bus and I was going to work every day. I’d moved on from catering then and I’d gone in to care in the community, I was working in [place name] Hospital in the day ward, and I was getting the bus down there every day. I kept my nose clean like that, kept my little jobs and stuff like that, I’d got rid of the ex-boyfriend and all that. Ah I’ve forgotten a bit…just before I got kicked out I’d met my first husband. He was in one of the other buildings that was about a fifteen minute walk away and that was [Place name], they were like flats, they’d originally started as mother and baby homes, he’d been put in there, obviously I won’t divulge why he was there because that’s his story not mine but he walked in one day and he was a lovely looking lad, very clean, very smart, and me and him got together and we were just what we needed at the time. We ended up engaged at 17. Anyway, again still with a messed up head I couldn’t cope in a relationship and he was a bit of a lad, eventually I kicked him out he was stealing money from me, he was taking my bankcard. I’d say to him ‘there’s my bankcard, go get a tenner and we’ll go get a chippy tea’ - we lived right opposite a chippy - and he’d go and he was stealing money. And then he was stealing money from his brothers, and one of his brother turned up at the flat and smashed our window, and you know it was quite a volatile relationship and there were lots of fights and screaming again and all the rest of it, and then my bank statement had come and I found all this money had gone… I got rid of him in the end, I said ‘Right I’ve had enough, I don’t want to be in this relationship’ and then this thing with the staff member had happened, where I’d smashed…and I got kicked out. As far as I was concerned I was never going to see him again, moved to my mum’s, got a flat on the [Ford] Estate. Now I didn’t want to move to the [Ford] because I knew that that was where my mum and dad had lived together and they’d been divorced and to me it was like a bad memory and I was going back to my childhood. Didn’t want to go back there. So I got moved to this flat when I was 18, got no choice, they told me if I didn’t take it then I was out and my mum didn’t want me as well. I knew I had to get out of my mum’s because I knew that she didn’t want me there. So I moved to this flat and I got a care in the community grant and a leaving care grant, which added up to £900 which was a lot of money then, and I was assigned a social worker and a home-maker to help me spend the money, in case I spent it on drugs or drink, which… that wouldn’t have happened. One good thing that I took from my mum was how house proud she was and about building a home. I mean I had things like a kettle and a toaster, a deep fat fryer you had then – I wouldn’t dream of having one of them now but back then…and I had like my washing basket and what else? You know just like all your household things, a little stereo…I’d collected a lot of things, saved my money up. So when I moved into the flat I needed things like a couch and a carpet and a bed and curtains and stuff like that, so they were around to help me. As soon as the money had gone they were gone and I was completely just left totally alone. I remember the TV license fella knocking on my door for the person that lived there before, but of course because I answered the door they copped me with no TV license, I didn’t even have carpet on the floor and I was actually fined, they didn’t take into consideration my circumstances and I was fined, so that was another thing on top. And then it was the year that the poll tax came out, a year on I hadn’t been notified about this poll tax and got a massive bill, so I had that, and then the next thing this ex-boyfriend who I’d dumped knocked on my door. So I really wished that they hadn’t given him my information, I don’t know why they’d told him where I was, but he knocked on my door and I was so lonely, I had no family or anything, I ended up back with him and within a couple of months I was pregnant again with my daughter. She’s 27 next month. So I had [Person’s name], but we were stuck in that flat and the flat had damp, I was really poorly, I got bronchitis, we had a fight and he broke my rib when I was seven months pregnant, I was bruised round the neck where he’d had me round the neck. I remember two of my school friends knocking and I had a scarf and I was sitting like that [gestures to show how she concealed the bruises]. So again, it was quite violent, it wasn’t just him it was me as well, I was violent as well, a really bad situation to bring a baby into, but because I’d had this other pregnancy that’s all I wanted was to have this baby, despite my head being a mess and everything, my way of…I think I thought I was going to fix everything by having a baby and a family and doing everything correctly and not as my mum had done it. I just wanted a family and I wanted people to love, so I ended up… we got married when my daughter was six weeks old, and I literally got pregnant that night, the wedding night, and I was pregnant with my son, so he’s 26 next month, and I’d had him and I got caught with our [Person’s name], so they’re literally 24, 25, 26. There was 13 months between the two boys, so three kids really close together and then a year later I was getting divorced. [sighs] That kind of brings you up to some kind of… [laughs] the messes that I made from being in care and how it affected me and the bad choices that I made because I didn’t really have guidance. I mean there’s a lot more I could fill you in on but that’s the basics.

**Victoria**

So at some point then you came to a place where you wanted to go back and look at your records, of this time in care, what triggered that? What were your motivations?

**G011**

A few things triggered it. Moving on from having the three children, when my son was 7 months old he had a really bad injury which… social services became involved again…they thought one of us had done it, we were accused of hurting him, so the children were actually taken off…oh excuse me I was pregnant with the third, I was pregnant with [Mike], the other two were 1 and…he would have been about 7 months so she was about 13, 14 months something like that. He’d had this injury, I was pregnant, and we had to go along to an assessment centre. At this assessment centre they went back to my childhood then, they started asking questions like ‘What’s your first good memory?’ ‘What’s your first bad memory?’ ‘Where did you grow up?’…just lots of questions about your childhood. When they asked me what was my happiest memory I just…I froze, I just couldn’t think of anything. [pauses to take a breath] I couldn’t think of anything, and when I told them what I’ve just told you now and a lot more of the other stuff about the emotional abuse - I had no name for that then, I didn’t know that that manipulative behaviour… [pauses to take a moment] I always think I’m going to be alright and I never am. I’ll be fine. [pause] I really struggled for this happy memory and when the conversation carried on and I spoke about how my mum had sort of threatened me with care and I’d always had that hanging over my head, that I had to be perfect, and it wasn’t just that I couldn’t be naughty or…it was normal teenage stuff, it was just normal behaviour and because she couldn’t cope with it she would blame me and would threaten me with care or whatever, and it was only when they said to me ‘That is emotional abuse’ that the penny dropped inside my head. I’d have been 22 at this point and it literally was like a massive…like I say, a penny dropped, a massive awakening, and they said to me [pauses for breath] they said to me ‘It wasn’t your fault.’ [pauses] Every time I think I’m getting over stuff it does come back. It still hurts. It was only when they said that that I realised yeah it wasn’t my fault, I was a kid you know, so that was the first sort of…the first penny that dropped and my life turned around at that point, didn’t get better overnight by any stretch because you know I then had my third baby, we fought to get the kids back home, the kids came back home but they came back the day after I took [Person’s name] home so it was like having triplets. So, again, you know…these people who are supposed to be supporting you just didn’t think about what they were doing. It was such hard work and the pressure on me and my husband having these three babies, and what we’d gone through was traumatic, and our son… we didn’t know if he was going to be brain injured and all the rest of it and that put great pressure on us and he [G011’s husband] left when the little one was 11 months old, so they were 11 months, 1 and 2 or nearly 3. So he left me and I was on my own. That whole time when I was on my own our whole house was like a building site because we’d moved at this point and we had a house, a lovely house, and I decided I was going to do this house up, and I was like my mum in that respect, the house was lovely and it was decorated and I saved my money and I had a brand new couch and a lovely carpet. You know I did the house really nice and I painted clouds on the ceiling and mountains and little flowers and birds and fish, and I painted the kid’s walls and you know I wanted to be a better mum than my mum had been. Something that somebody said to me once…I said ‘I’m never going to do that to my kids’ and he said ‘Well what are you going to do instead?’ cos you don’t realise how you’re behaviour…how what you’re doing is an effect of what happened before, and there was a lot of…probably I tried to control my kids too much and wanted them to be perfect and wanted them to have this perfect life, and it doesn't work like that and I had a lot of problems… anyway, I’ll move on to what you asked me. I told you if I get off on a tangent I’ll get lost. The second thing was I’d gone to my mum. During this process where I was now on my own, a single parent with these three babies, there came a point where I wanted to know where I’d been, I wanted to know who’d fostered me, because there was like little chunks of my life missing, like where I’d gone to school? Did I have any friends? How long was I there? All this stuff and I remember I asked my mum, I said ‘Mum where was I fostered?’ and she said to me – I couldn’t believe this – she said ‘I don’t know’. And I just thought how can you not have known where we were? It wasn’t kept a secret, we were fostered, we weren’t moved off the face of the planet, and I was absolutely devastated that…cos for me we’d had this situation where my kids had been taken away… I knew, I was there every day, we were still their parents, they were with their nana and grandad so we were there every single day, there wasn’t a moment when I didn’t know where my kids were and I couldn’t believe that she didn’t know where her babies were. We were little babies. And then somebody mentioned to me…I can’t remember who…somebody mentioned to me ‘Why don’t you get your files?’, and I was like well if my mum can’t tell me where I was maybe they can. So I must have got an address to write to somewhere and say I wish to access my care leaver’s files and that’s what spurred me on to do it, because I wanted to know, I wanted to fill in these bits that were missing in my life, so that’s why I did it.

**Victoria**

So you wrote to…?

**G011**

I think it was the council.

**Victoria**

And what was the process like?

**G011**

Well this is it, I’ve heard loads of stories about how people can’t get their information, how they’ve had to go run rings…but for me? Dead easy. It was so easy. I think I actually went in to the council building and on the reception it was actually a home-maker that I knew, that’d had us, and I think she gave me the address and said you need to write to…I think that’s what happened, I’m not dead certain on that, but I know it was dead easy for me to get the address and write the letter, and then I got a letter back saying that they would need to compile these files, because they had to go through them from the Data Protection Act, and it would be so many weeks or whatever it was, and I think it only took about three months, and then I got a second letter through to say that my files were now ready for me to view, could I go along to [Place name] Children’s Centre…which funnily enough that’s where I live now [Place name], I had to go all the way from [Place name] to [Place name] back then… and I went along to [Place name] Children’s Centre where I was in a small room, a bit like this, a bit of a library, and this lady who is absolutely fantastic, I’m still friends with her now, she sat with me every step of the way. She brought it out and she warned me first, she said ‘Before I bring it out, I’ve read your story’ and again, one of the first things she said to me was ‘I’ve cried reading your story’ she said ‘I just want you to know it wasn’t your fault’ and you know that second reassurance that it wasn’t my fault and I’ve got to stop blaming myself…but even now I analyse everything. I do. If something’s my fault I get so wound up about it and I have to apologise. I’m always apologising and I’m always forgiving people, people tell me all the time I’m too forgiving. And I just…I don’t know, I suppose that’s just how it affected me, it’s not a bad thing is it really? But she had gone through my file personally and she had post-it noted a lot of areas where there was sensitive issues, stuff that I might not know about, she’d just post-it noted…and there was hundreds of these post-it notes, and when it come out it was like that [gestures to show how big the file was] and I thought ‘oh my god, it’s a book’. And it was all in chronological order. There was two files actually, I can’t remember why there was two, I think one might have been health visitors and doctors and then the other one would have been foster carers and homes and stuff, and then this sheet of paper that was all chronological on there. She sat with me while I read through some of it but there’s no way I would have got through it in a day, and she said ‘that’s yours to take home’ because I thought ‘have I got to leave it here?’ But she was like ‘no you can take that with you, if you need me ring me, I’m here, don’t go through this alone.’ And I did, I took it home and I read through lots of it, there was a lot of bits that brought memories back that I had forgotten, and there was some other stuff in there and I thought ‘what the heck is this about?’ because there was some shocking stuff in there about like…for instance foster parent’s opinion of me…they thought I was very sexualised and that I was very… promiscuous would probably be the word… and I really wasn’t at that stage. I was completely innocent at that stage, it was before I’d got pregnant or anything, and they thought I was up to all kinds. They really did think the worst of me! Reading that file…I mean funnily enough I remember the night that I got taken to that foster parents where I was for 11 months. The first week I was there I had really bad stomach ache, they thought I was pregnant, they had a doctor out and I had to have an internal, and I remember I was mortified because I’d never done anything, you know it was not the case at all, it was wind! After the doctor had gone I let go a load of wind [both laugh] but they thought I was pregnant. So that’s what we’re talking about…all my life growing up you’re a LAC and that’s how you were treated. What was I going to say then? I’ve gone off on one again haven’t I? [pause] Files! Yeah so there was all that stuff in there, they thought I’d been messed with, they were wondering why I was like that. And I think what it was, I probably did come across like that because I didn’t know how to…that was me trying to get affection or attention, because I’d never had any. I was totally rejected growing up and I think I probably did come across like that but I never meant to come across like that. And…what else was in there? There was just a lot of things that I didn’t know and I was like really shocked, and then there was really hurtful things about the pregnancy and stuff, that was all in there. And there was a lot of stuff…and again, reading it through I did realise that it wasn’t my fault because the health visitors or whatever were writing from their point of view and they could see the whole picture, although it’s their opinion you’re not necessarily…you know what I mean, it’s not necessarily 100% accurate because it’s an opinion, but what they were seeing was me being rejected and things. Like we’d go to a meeting room to see my dad and my dad used to wind me up and he was very…what’s the word…he just used to wind us up until we’d be frustrated and upset but my mum would always take my sister on her knee and I’d be stood there…and they actually worded it as ‘G011 is largely rejected’, the rejected child. And it wasn’t just a one off incident there was several different health visitors and doctors all saying the same thing, so because I was able to read that I was then able to say to myself ‘yeah I really wasn’t to blame’. But what I also realised going through that was that no one else was to blame either. It’s not about pointing the finger, it’s about getting over what you’ve gone through the best you can, dealing with it, and by blaming anybody for anything you’re still being eaten up by it anyway. You’ve got to learn to forgive people, so that was what I learned from reading my file. I mean it didn’t happen overnight, again it was a couple of year’s process, and then I turned it into a book.

**Victoria**

So you took the copy away with you, did you read through all of it, did you focus on specific bits?

**G011**

No, I read through it chronologically because that’s quite me actually, I like order, so yeah I did go through it like that.

**Victoria**

And was there anything that had been taken out, any redactions?

**G011**

Yeah, well that confused me because I think…I was told that things had been taken out, I didn’t know that word then ‘redacting’ I only learnt that word through this project… I remember her saying ‘we’ve had to black out some things for data protection’ and I had them up to the light, trying to see through these black splodges. I did think it was pointless because I knew who they were talking about anyway, because it would be like ‘G011 and blank went to blank blank blank’ and if it was a memory I remembered I knew who it was anyway. [laughs] And it would have…I mean sometimes I think they’d actually slipped up and missed a bit anyway, and there were names there, so it was pointless because that stuff happened and it’s only me…I don’t know, I didn’t understand it I suppose. It was annoying, it annoyed me, and you know I spent a lot of time holding them up to the light trying to see through it. [laughs] Confusing.

**Victoria**

You said that you’d heard about your right to access the records through somebody, but that you weren’t aware of redaction and things, so that whole Data Protection Act and your right to the information, nobody had never talked about that when you were in care or anything?

**G011**

No, no, I didn’t know you could get your files. I didn’t know you had files. I didn’t even know, I would never have even…I mean I was so naive and just trying to survive, I would never even have imagined that they were writing everything down about me. I think if I’d have known that I’d probably have been mortified, that they were writing everything down about me and everything that had happened, I’d had no idea at all. So no, not until years later.

**Victoria**

So you were never asked to contribute anything to your records or anything like that?

**G011**

No, I know they do that now, but they definitely didn’t back then. I didn’t even know about them, so no, I was never asked and I was never told on leaving care that I could access them, which… one of the reasons I got involved with this is I think it’s so important that care leavers are told of their rights and that they are told that they can access these files, because again for me it’s putting the pieces of the jigsaw together, it’s your life. And - I think I’ve said this before as well - if you’re in a normal family environment you’ll go back and visit and on occasion you’ll get your photo albums out you know, or you’ll be talking and ‘oh do you remember when this happened?’ and you’ll all have a reminisce about stuff. You know in some families that's just not the case, and you know it [the file] is part of who you are and your stepping stones to becoming the person that you are now.

**Victoria**

In the file was there anything personal like that? Any photographs or cards, letters?

**G011**

There was a letter that I’d written to a social worker when I was about nine, and I’d have never believed they would have copied a letter that I’d sent and it was on Paddington Bear paper, and I’d written this little letter. I think there were a couple of photos, and I also got access to the foster parents, which was one of the main things I’d done this for. I got access to two sets of foster parents and I did go and visit one of them, I went to their house, which was surreal and they still live there now. He’s died though, the guy, the mum still lives there, and I think I spoke to the other ones on the phone, so yeah, it was like again putting the… I’ve done that and now I can just put it to bed now, it doesn’t matter anymore, I’ve filled that little gap in. I did get my dad’s… they weren’t supposed to give it me but I did get an address for my dad, because I was desperate to find my dad. I hadn’t seen my dad for 10 years…you see this was another part of going back. When I was 14 I tried to find my dad and I did get an address off my mum I think and I went to the flat, knocked on his door and he answered but I didn’t know what he looked like and he denied that he was my dad, and I was with this boyfriend I’ve told you about before that I’d met in the home, with the boyfriend and his best friend and we’d all gone and knocked on the door. My dad had answered, very funny guy but denied he was my dad, he just kept saying ‘oh, it’s a sad case, it’s a sad case this’ and I went away but something didn’t sit right, and then a couple of days later he actually phoned social services and said ‘my daughter’s turned up on the doorstep and I want to see her’. So then it was all arranged and it was like for god’s sake I can’t even go and see my dad like a normal person, it’s got to be a meeting and a date and a time, and that was very…that annoyed me as well, that it all had to be recorded. I was only going to see my dad, and maybe that’s because of the situation where my mum and dad had divorced I really don’t know, no one explained it again. No one ever explained to me why I was in care in the first place, never ever was it explained to me. Nobody ever explained what had happened between my mum and dad, I never found out…this is another thing…I never found out until I read the file that my dad had…they wrote him down as having multiple personalities. He’s got Asperger’s, I know because I found him about… If I just fill in the gap before I confuse you. I saw my dad a handful of times when I was 14 and then I went to visit him this day, I was absolutely distraught, it was freezing cold, it was snowing, got to his flat and they were knocking the flats down and he was gone and he hadn’t told me. So he disappeared and I didn’t see him again for about 22 years, and then when I got my file I’d got the address and I went back, I went to the address and it was a council building, it was a council block, it wasn’t a proper flat, and I remember knocking on the door and no one answered and I was like it’s a joke. And my mum said to me ‘It’s probably a joke because your dad was a bit of joker’, so I left it for 9 years. Nine years later I went on Friends Reunited or Family Reunited or whatever…Genes Reunited. Goes on Genes Reunited and finds an uncle that I’d never met before, knew his name but I’d never met him, and I phoned him and I got hold of him…crazy…I was 33 I think, can’t quite remember how old I was now…it was probably about 8 years ago… and this uncle I was chatting away to him and I said ‘I’ve been looking for my dad’ and he said ‘oh…’ and he gave me the same address and I went ‘no I’ve been there, he doesn’t live there’ and he went ‘yeah he does’. I went ‘no it’s a joke’ and he says ‘no it’s not, I’ve been there, I’ve stayed with him.’ I couldn’t believe it! So I went the next day and I got my dad and we’ve been in touch ever since. He’s not got multiple personalities he’s got Asperger’s. He’s not diagnosed but I know he’s got Asperger’s because my son has autism and they are so alike, it’s unreal, and my dad…he’s lovely, he’s a lovely man, he’s very set in his ways no doubt, I can see he has got that winding up…he does like to wind people up and he’s a bit of a joker, but I think it was probably taken out of context, because I know him a lot better now. He still doesn't understand why my mum divorced him, and he’s still on his own, and my mum…they both still love each other, it’s so hard when you see both of them, they both still love each other and they’ve never remarried or anything and it was just this really bad situation they were in forty whatever years ago and they didn’t get the support and help that they needed and there you go. So they’ve never seen each other, but we’ve got a wedding next year, my son’s getting married next year and they’ve both been invited so it could be that they meet each other for the first time in 40 odd years. Crazy, yeah, crazy. So I don’t see my dad that often, but he’s there, I phone him and stuff like that. And my mum, my mum is still…long story.

**Victoria**

You mentioned right at the very start that when you read your file you found out for the first time that you were taken into care first at four months and that was…

**G011**

That was a complete shock, but then when I read some of the things, I remembered them, even though I was only four months old. I was four months and I have memory that was triggered. I was fostered in [Place name] because [laughs] this is the way it was worded, my mum couldn’t cope and they lived on the 7th floor of the flat, they were worried about my safety. That’s how it was worded, like it could be an issue. So I was taken into care for…I couldn’t work out whether it was four weeks or four months on the thing, that wasn’t very clear, I’d have to look back at that wouldn't I? I was fostered with a lady called Mrs [person’s name] or something, I’ve never been able to trace her, who lived on [Rockville] Street in [Place name] and I was like wow [Place name] I’d lived two seconds away from where it was, but there was a little thing in there about me having a rash because I’d had a woollen shawl on me, and I remember it, it’s so weird, and I am allergic to wool.

[Recording was paused for a comfort break.]

**Victoria**

So you’ve already talked a bit about this, so we might cover some old territory, but when you’d accessed the records, what kind of impact did it have on you, at first and then in the longer term?

**G011**

Huge, massive impact. That first penny drop moment where I was told emotional abuse and it wasn’t my fault was the first little start, but then when I got the file it totally changed me. I realised as I’ve said before that there’s no point looking for people to blame, I mean I know people’s situations are different and people maybe are to blame for things in other circumstances, but in this situation…I then was able to accept that my mum had an illness and although she did emotionally abuse me and I did have a really rough upbringing and it’s messed with my head, the only person that was going to sort my head out was me. And it was realisation of all those things, there was a lot of stuff in there that I was able to put the pieces together and map my life together and then put it behind me. What I did with my file was I wrote my first book and that was therapy, because I was able to pick and go through it very carefully. You know sometimes when you read something you’ll skim over and you don’t absorb it properly, but when you’re writing… I not for one second wanted my book to come across as I was accusing anybody or blaming anybody because that’s just not me and I had worked out that nobody was to blame for anything, so when I wrote…I feel that I wrote very compassionately, and diplomatic as well, it was nobody getting blamed for anything anywhere at all, it was telling my story though and as I went through all that… I remember when I got to the end…and it took me… you know I’d written it initially and then I’d put it aside, left it for a bit because I couldn’t cope with it, and then a couple of years later I felt that the time was right and I went over it again and then I was able to add more memories in, and again it’s all in this kind of chronological order even in my book, and it was therapy and helped me to move on. I remember getting to the end of the book and knowing that it was right and that it was ready for publication and it was a massive relief and I cried, I just let it all out. And I just felt like, as in a book, it’s a chapter now that I can leave behind and move forward, so I mean there was a lot of drama happened even from getting my files and moving on from there, I’ve been married three times, I’m on my third husband, but I’m happily married now…it’s actually our 11th wedding anniversary in two weeks. I had my other son, he’s 12, he has autism so life’s, you know, a mad rollercoaster. But I think I’m alright now whereas, you know… I do tend to analyse things a lot still but I’m not that needy grasping for attention person that I was when I was younger, you know I think I’m able to give a lot more now through my experiences, it’s made me want to help other people. I believe in turning negatives into positives, that's something I got from it as well, from that initial getting that [the file] and going [gasps] ‘It’s a book!’ I really did turn it into a book and that whole negative, you know horrible experience of me growing up has been turned into something positive, so that’s how I feel getting my file affected me.

**Victoria**

Do you feel that it had any impact on anyone else in the family, like your mum or your sister?

**G011**

Oof, well, when I first said I was applying for my file my mum was not happy at all. She said ‘why do I want to go raking up the past?’ She threatened to sue. She told me I had no right to have that information, she really wasn’t happy about me getting it at all, and then of course years later when I actually published my book that wasn’t good either because she threatened to sue me, take me to court. She wanted me to send it to her brother so he could go through it first and make sure there was nothing in there that there shouldn’t be. Yeah, it wasn’t…she told me I wasn’t allowed it basically and she wasn’t happy, because she knew I was going to find out the truth, that’s how I feel anyway. My sister…she was never put into care as I was, she was kept at home, but she’s if not more damaged than I was, even now, she’s still very very damaged and I have mentioned files because I think it would help her but she is…even with my dad, although I found my dad six, seven or eight years ago, she doesn’t want to know, absolutely doesn’t want to know my dad, he’s not met her yet, but me and my dad are like that [crosses fingers] and I think it’s such a shame she cannot let go. She’s very…whereas I was very extrovert and out there you know she was very introvert, I don’t know, we were both affected differently, but whereas I’m kind of… I mean I’d never say I was over it, I just had a little cry in the toilets because I’ve gone ‘ooooh’ and let it all out you know [laughs]…but my sister she just can’t deal with it you know, and even when you see her, it’s like she’s a ghost, it’s like she’s dead on the inside and there’s no expression, it’s really sad. She doesn’t speak to me, she hasn’t spoken to me for nine years. My mum hasn’t spoke to me for eight years, and I’ve tried. In fact she fell out with me over me publishing the book and finding my dad, there you go, it’s nine years ago I found my dad. I found my dad around about the October and my mum fell out with me over some family issues that were really trivial, that normal families don’t fall out over, she fell out with me, decided not to speak to me around this time when I’d found my dad and published the book and all the rest of it. I’ve tried over the years…I’ve sent text messages on Mother’s Day, because she’s still my mum, despite everything, you still want that family and you still want your roots. I’ve tried. My sister would not let me have any information so I’ve never been able to contact her, I’ve bumped into her by accident a few times which again that’s in my book as well. When I’ve bumped into her it’s like we’ve never been apart. Because at one stage before I had my last son we were quite close for a while and then… it sounds awful…she ended up going off with my second husband. I never had any children with my second husband but we’d split up and then they ended up together and she’s got two children to my ex-husband. Never fell out with her, never blamed her, I was actually happy for her because she’d been told she could never have children and then all of a sudden she got pregnant and I was absolutely chuffed, so he will be…her son will be 14 this year and [person’s name’s] 13 there’s only a year between them, but they’ve been kept apart and it makes me mad that a situation that we were in when we were kids is now affecting our kids and it shouldn’t. I’m standing here going ‘don't let this happen, we need to break the chain’ but unless the other person does the same you can’t, you know, it takes two to tango doesn’t it? So yeah, they fell out with me, I’ve bumped into my sister a couple of times and it’s like we’ve never been apart and she’ll tell me all what’s happening and I’ll see the boys and say ‘give your Auntie G011 a kiss’ you know, I’m made up, but with her and my son it’s very very… there’s a wall there. I sent my mum, not Christmas gone but the Christmas before, I sent her a Christmas card, we’ve been in touch since then which is weird, she was absolutely made up, but I found out that her and my sister had fall out two years ago, so I’m very aware of the fact that she has contacted me because my sister’s not there and if my sister ever came back on the scene I’d probably get pushed out again because she was the blue eye. Again, reading the file you can see that, but I just accept it, I’m not bothered, I’m like ‘I’ll take anything I can get’ and I don’t mind that, but at the moment my mum’s started playing games again, just recently, so I’ve been…it’s probably why I’m a bit emotional to be honest with you today, I don’t normally get that whingy, I do cope quite well with it, but everything was fine up until Mother’s Day this year and she’s playing these funny games again. But 10 years ago I’d have been on the phone going ‘what have I done?’ automatically, ‘what have I done? What have I said? Have I upset you because you’re not speaking to me?’ blah blah blah, now I’m like walking away. So that’s something I’ve learned to do, it’s took me a long time but I will not play games with any of them. I’ve got, you know, we’ve all got our own problems, life’s hard enough as it is, you’re either in my life or you’re not, and that’s something that’s been a hard life lesson, is you can’t make people love you and you can’t make people want you, you just have to be yourself and then when you’re yourself you know who’s there for you.

**Victoria**

Coming back to the…

**G011**

Sorry!

**Victoria**

Coming back to accessing the files, you had what sounds like a really good experience, is there anything about it that you would change? Any part of accessing the files that you would want different now?

**G011**

Accessing the files… I definitely feel that a care leaver should be given this information, even before they’ve left care. I think in my opinion it’s probably too early for them to access their files while they’re still in care, I think you do need a breathing space. I know other people don’t feel like that but for me I think it would have been too much. You need a breathing space. But they do need to be aware that that is available to them, I mean I’ve already suggested about a care leavers pack where they get phone numbers…I mean in those days I didn’t have a phone so, you know, probably…you could have gone to a public phone box then or somewhere you could access… But it needs to be made easy where… I mean I’ve even said, you know, these little cards, a card with a helpline number or you know for the Care Leaver’s Association, a card with that information on it, with the Facebook page, support groups, dead clear ‘Access to Records: You can access your records so you can fill in the gaps and it can help you’… making it clear I think…this is something that’s just popped in my head now because a lot of people are possibly looking to blame people and I don’t think that that’s a good idea, because it only hurts you at the end of the day…making it very clear that when you are accessing your records it is to help you to move forward, you know, and if there are any issues that come up where there is blame that there’s also those other agencies involved you know. And you don’t know what’s gone on, there’s physical abuse, sexual abuse, all sorts of things like that so all those numbers need to be there, going alongside access to records, so that whatever comes up in that file those can be accessed. Because I don’t think there was anything like that for me, there was no counselling. That’s something that came up in my file that really annoyed me, that I didn't know about, when I was 18 and I’d been discharged my home-maker had a word with the social worker and said ‘do you think G011 could do with some counselling?’ and the social worker replied back to him ‘if G011 wants that level of help, she will ask for it’. Didn’t know it was available so how could I ask for it? To this day I have never had counselling. I feel as if I’ve counselled myself [laughs], so it’s took a lot longer but you know I have got there in the end. But yeah definitely care leavers need to know and they need to have all that information given to them, but not bumph where it’s hard reading, it needs to be really clear. I mean the Facebook support groups are really good.

**Victoria**

And thinking about the content of your file, and the way that things were recorded and the kind of language that was used, if you could change something about the way care is recorded, about the things that are written down or the ways that they’re written down, what would you want to see changed?

**G011**

Some of the things I think could have been dealt with a little more sensitively, like the thing…there was also something came up in my file about my uncle who I found through Genes Reunited, he was actually accused of sexual abuse against his own daughters and my mum was questioned about that, and then I started thinking ‘have I been abused, have I blocked it out?’ Obviously not because I think I’d know but that was something that sort of threw a load of rubbish up that didn’t need to be there, so again being sensitive about what’s in there. And you know…some of the things, the way I was spoken about. I was just… I was still just a child and I was talked about like I was a bad person you know? I think I’ve said this before as well, where a social worker or a health visitor is writing something down they need to try and put some kind of positive outcome there so when, you know, the young person is reading this back it’s not all negative. Definitely being positive.

**Victoria**

Thank you so much.

**G011**

It’s a pleasure.

**Victoria**

That’s the end of my questions. Is there anything else what you want to add on at the end?

**G011**

Thanks for having me.

**Victoria**

No, honestly, I feel very humbled by chatting and hearing your story because it is an extraordinary life that you’ve had and the challenges…

**G011**

You don’t even know what happened after! [both laugh]

**Victoria**

We’ll have to save that for another time! I'll finish recording.

END OF INTERVIEW

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

Interview held 21st March 2018 between G012 and Victoria Hoyle, at Victoria’s office at UCL.

BEGINNING OF INTERVIEW

**Victoria**

So, G012, could we start with you telling me a little bit about your experiences of care and how you went about accessing your social care records?

**G012**

I went into care when I was two years old. My mother is white British, German Jew descent and my father was a Jamaican man living in this country at the time, and my mother was already married and had a relationship with my father. Her family disowned her because my father was black and my mother became ill quite soon after my birth, she had pneumonia. She managed to look after me until I was two years old and then she asked the National Children’s Home, well it was suggested by the health visitor to give her a break, to help to recover from the pneumonia because by then she had already had pneumonia and then got it again. So she went to NCH in [place name] where they were based at the time, and they said the only place they had was a home in…I think in those days it was a lot to do with your ages, a lot of smaller children would stay in different ones, so they only had a space for me in [place name], which is obviously 200 miles away from where my mum lived in [place name]. A lot of this information I’m telling you I got from reading my files. I do remember some it but I don’t remember when I was 2 obviously. And I stayed [there] until I was 12. My mum used to visit me when she could but she couldn’t afford the fare…

**[At this point, two minutes into the interview, the recording device stopped working and the next 20 minutes of audio were lost. Victoria and G012 agreed to recreate this section together from memory and the text in italics below reflects what was said. The recording was restarted for the last 40 minutes of the interview.]**

*The children’s home in [Place name] was different to how children’s homes are now. It was a big old building near the sea and G012 did horse-riding and ballet. She went to school there and because she had been at the home since such a young age it felt normal to her. It was a strict regime, which wasn’t cruel but lacking in affection. Her mother and sister would come and visit sometimes but her mum rarely had the train fare. When they did come they would arrive at 6.30 in the morning and have to walk around Swansea until the home was open to visitors at 9. There were stretches of time when she didn’t see her mum.*

*She stayed at that home until she was 12 and was then returned home to her mother in [Place name], although she didn’t want to go. It was a huge shock to her after having lived in rural Place name for most of her childhood. Her mother was living with a boyfriend, a Jamaican man who was fine but didn’t speak to her much. She felt she had no relationship with her mother after such a long separation. After a couple of years she went back to NCH and to another home, this time in [Place name]. It was run by a husband and wife who lived in a house in the grounds of the home with their two children. At around the age of 14 she went back to live with her mum again, but the relationship was still difficult. Her mum didn’t like her mixing with black people. She would go skating and her mum would tell her not to go because there were too many West Indians there. She left and went to live with a friend’s family for about three months. When the police came looking for her she would hide in the wardrobe. She eventually gave herself up and was taken into care in [place name], although NCH stayed involved. She went to another children’s home but looked after herself, going to [place name] Social Services each week to collect £8 allowance to buy food and other things.*

*Although G012’s experiences of being in the NCH home in [Place name] wasn’t terrible she was the only black child and was often called derogatory names. She remembers asking one of the Sisters ‘What’s a ‘wog’? and was told it was ‘a dirty lazy Indian’ but that’s what they called her. The other children would call her ‘blackie’ and because she was used to it she would respond to that. She was told that one of the reasons she was sent back to [Place name] at 12 years old was because she would want to start having relationships and boyfriends soon and she should be with people of her own colour. She will never forget that.*

*G012 originally requested her file from [place name]when she was quite young, about seventeen and still in care, but didn’t keep a copy of it. She later asked for her NCH file when she was living next door to their family centre, near where NCH had given her a house. She knew a social worker there and he arranged for her to see it. She didn’t read all of it. Although she asked for some copies of things she never received them. She knew that some things must have been removed but wasn’t told what or why. Some years later she requested her NCH file again. By this time their office in [Place name] had closed and the records had all been transferred to Scotland. They were sent down to [Place name] and she saw them in a local authority office. This time she was able to get copies of them, which she still has. Her friend went with her to see them originally, and still to this day she hasn’t read them all. She asks her friend to read them to her sometimes but finds it very difficult. She doesn’t feel like the person described in them is her.*

*Her records contained information from a social worker called [person’s name] and it was difficult to read his reports because he had had a poor opinion of her. He described her as manipulating her mother for money and wearing a ‘grin’ when she met him, which suggested he didn’t appreciate her situation or try to understand what her experiences had been. She feels that there are a number of things in the files that don’t represent her own memory.*

*She was motivated to access her files because she wanted to find out about her father. She had known his name and that he might have had some other children, but not much else about him. The records didn’t contain much, only an old address in Balham which he hadn’t lived at for a long time. She spent years looking for him in the area where he had formerly lived. In 2009 she visited a community centre in Balham and was directed to a barber’s shop, where the owner remembered him. He thought he had had a son but hadn’t seen him for years. Then later that year one of her brothers got in touch with her, after spotting her photograph on an NCH memories website. The photograph had been posted with her name next to it. Her friend Clive, who she knew from the home in [Place name], called her to say that the website had received an email asking to be put in touch with her. It turned out that her brother had been looking for her for years and hadn’t been able to find her until the site had posted a photograph of her. It had come up in a Google search. Her father had passed away, but before he died he had asked her brother to try and find her so that he could make amends to her and her mother. Unfortunately another sister had died by then. It turned out that they had been living very close to one another all along.*

[Recording starts again]

**Victoria**

You said that there were some things that had been redacted from the file…

**G012**

They didn’t tell me they were but I just know they were. I know they wouldn’t have given me the file like that.

**Victoria**

So they didn’t black anything out or make any alterations?

**G012**

No, no. They just took stuff out, they would have taken stuff out.

**Victoria**

So what kind of things do you think that they removed?

**G012**

I think they would have removed stuff, knowing local authorities as I do, I think they would have. There was some dodgy language in there still. [*G012 received a phone call and paused for a moment to check her mobile here.*] There was no evidence they had taken stuff out but I know they had to take stuff away because I knew, and the social worker knew that I knew, that they can’t give me third party information. So there was no third party information, most of it was gone. The thing is I haven’t gone through all the file but what I’ve read so far…it’s difficult to say, I can’t know. It’s not obvious what they have taken out but I know, I just know, they would not have given me the file without taking something out of it. And they will have redacted stuff because there would have been more information about certain things which isn’t in there. You know what I mean? I can remember certain things that would have been, like when I didn’t want to come back to [Place name]. I had meeting after meeting with the Sister in charge, she would call me in after school every day. So I knew they took some stuff out, stuff that’s going to embarrass them too much. I mean they had to leave some stuff in context because everybody knows that at that time language in regards to black minority ethnic people would have been not very kosher. If they’d taken it all out it would have looked ridiculous so they couldn’t have got away with it. They probably had to leave some of it in there. What the file did was it gave a basic story, so I was in care all my life from the age of two and this is what I’ve got [G012 gestured to show her file was about 6 inches deep]. It’s in chronological order, basically ‘G012 is here, G012 went to school da da da’ you know? ‘G012’s nervous, she…’ it’s just basic. They left enough in there to get a picture of who I was but there wasn’t much depth to it. So I could see. And I’ve redacted myself, so I know what people do and I know that they would have got on to their legal team, because they’re very wary of me because they know I’m a social worker and they probably know that I know the system and there were things that I could get them on. I think that was one of their biggest fears.

**Victoria**

You said you had also seen your records from [place name]?

**G012**

I did yeah when I was younger, about sixteen seventeen eighteen.

**Victoria**

So you saw those quite soon after…

**G012**

I think it was just after…I might have still been in care actually, about seventeen. I haven’t got them, I just read them. It would be interesting now, if the lawyers applied for them now they’ve probably disappeared. [laughs] So those files they were really derogatory, they weren’t very nice, from what I remember reading in them. It was a long long time ago, I can’t remember all of it, I remember some of the stuff. It wasn't very nice how they described me. Again, what they were describing was somebody who needed a bit of TLC. You know I was looking after myself. I should sue them, I could sue them, I was left at the age of 14 to look after myself for six months in a house where there was no structure or order. Luckily they were alright with me. If it had been now god knows what would have happened to me. But as I said, the file… I think local authorities need to be less fearful of being honest about what’s in the file, and being honest about what they’re redacting and being clear about why they’re redacting stuff because I think it's a bit of a myth that all care leavers are trying to sue local authorities. Most people are probably quite heart broken when they read their files and so saddened, they haven’t got the energy. That wasn’t what I wanted at all, and most people don’t think like that I don’t think. So there needs to be a different…we just need to change the culture. We need to change the whole care system frankly, but we need to change the culture of access to records and access to files and it shouldn’t be such a taboo thing. ‘Oh god, they want their files, oh blimey, let’s try and put them off.’ It’s not really said like that but it’s subconsciously, an unspoken thing I think anyway. Some people don’t want to read their files, some people don’t want to remember, they don’t want to know. They are where they are. I’m not sure why I wanted to read my files. I think if I’d known my dad I wouldn’t have bothered.

**Victoria**

Do you feel as though there was any particular trigger, when you made the decision to go back and read them?

**G012**

No, I’d always wanted to know. Remember I’d already seen them once before and then intermittently I said I’ll get them. And then I think what I started to think was, I think I had a conversation with somebody about files disappearing and I thought well I better get mine then quick. I think that’s what triggered me, years ago. It was sad, it was sad reading them. I don’t like to because it depresses me, and my life wasn’t even that bad. I’m not saying that at all. I didn’t suffer severe abuse, I suffered some abuse but not severe no. I was speaking to someone the other day about the hierarchy of abuse, so you know if you've been sexually abused once it’s not so bad as if you’ve been sexually abused twenty times, so you know. I think the thing with lots of us care leavers is we have to have resilience, we have to have resilience, and always recognise that people are worse off than yourself that’s what I think. As I say I try and pick out the more positive things that I can get. What I remember mainly from the file is them constantly talking about my mum ‘[person;s name] didn’t come. [person’s name] said that she was coming’. And I picked it up randomly last year or the year before, I just opened the thing and there was this letter and it said that G012 comes downstairs every day – it was Christmas time, I must have been about six – and stands by the front door waiting for the postman. She’s waiting for a Christmas card from her mum because she got one from her sister, and last year she got a Christmas card from her mum but it was signed in her sister’s handwriting. Sometimes my mum wouldn’t come for two years, no one knew where she was, they kept trying to find her, because I think she was getting depressed. She was old, my mum had me when she was 37 so she wasn’t a young mother, not old but you know what I mean. I tell you as well what was interesting, when I first read my files, when they brought them to the family centre like I told you about earlier on, my mother and my sister were absolutely livid and they complained to NCH. They didn’t want me to know the truth, so they never told me the truth and didn’t want me to find out. But I know the truth now, I know it all now.

**Victoria**

You said that other people had told you lies during your childhood?

**G012**

About my dad. I was told my dad was dead. The children’s home told me that my dad was dead.

**Victoria**

Right.

**G012**

It was my sister’s husband who told me, when I came for a holiday at about eight years old that he wasn’t dead. Then when I asked my mum she’d tell me ‘shut up’.

**Victoria**

Was there anything in your file about what they’d told you?

**G012**

No no no no, not what I’ve read so far. They wouldn’t have put that in there. The file focused on this – they’re quite clever in a way – the file focused on ‘let’s give G012 a picture of who she was’ ok. This is what I think. ‘G012 is a happy little girl, although she does present as being very anxious all the time, she’s very nervous. G012…’ there was nothing derogatory about me in there from what I’ve read. I know for a fact that I was a very sweet little girl, that was how I was always described. I talked a lot, but I was not an unkind little girl and I was very receptive to orders. If I was told to do something. I didn’t argue with them. I did what I was told, and they were quite oppressive. But again, it was the times. You can’t complain. That was the time, you know. There’s not a lot I can do about that is there? Everybody was treated like that. But I think, like I said, that we need to change the way in which people access their files. And I also told you about the fact that I was one of the only black children in the children’s home. There was no relevance made to the name calling, how it affected my self-esteem. I was called names on a daily basis, but the kids weren’t being horrible most of the time, it was just what they were doing. Sometimes they were really spiteful and I felt really awful but those things stayed with me all the time. There was no mention of emotional turmoil, there was no mention of how… It did say that I was very mummy oriented and that I found it very distressing when my mum left but they didn’t go into it in the way they could have. Those things have probably been taken out.

**Victoria**

The records that there were in your NCH file, are they the same kinds of records that you would be creating now in your social work?

**G012**

No, no these were just bits of paper you know. They're not like what we have, which are very standard. We use like plans, reviews…it’s more like documents that we use, we use notes but it’s all on the system, it’s all chronological anyway, so there’s no…once you’ve closed those notes off you can’t change them, so in a way its good because they could have changed all sorts. I mean you could still take stuff out, there’s always ways around things.

**Victoria**

So it’s much more structured now?

**G012**

It’s much more structured, but I don’t think, if I’m being honest… I mean I have read some very well written recordings over my years but I’ve also read some recordings that I would be a bit concerned about, not concerned about, but that could have been written about in a bit more a human way. I think in relation to me I wanted to see about the fact that I was called names all the time, I wanted to see who my dad was, I wanted to know exactly what happened because my mum was very defensive, very defensive and as she got older resented me greatly for ruining her life. She didn’t say that, but she did. She liked me but she was resentful and it would come out sometimes when she couldn’t contain it. So she was happy for my achievements when she wanted to be, other times she wouldn't be but I think she was probably angry with NCH but she couldn’t take it out on them. She was a very passive aggressive lady.

**Victoria**

Reading your file, did it change your opinion of people?

**G012**

Yeah, it did. It changed my opinion of [person’s name], that social worker. And it helped me to understand my mum a bit more, but it also changed my opinion of NCH. What was it they said ‘We went to a house in [named] Road in Brixton and was met by two burly coloured men. Warning: do not go to that house.’ And I know the man whose house that was, his son is married to my sister, they weren’t married then and he’s dead now but they wouldn’t have hurt anybody… But there’s a thread throughout the file that shows – they’re quite clever, they probably wanted me to see that thread – that shows that they did try, not the best they could, but they did make an effort to try and find my mum when she wasn’t around. But my mum wasn’t around because she was depressed and she couldn’t afford the train fare, and then they found her and said they would pay her train fare and she wouldn’t come. It was a bit disjointed how they thought about it. So, if I read my files today, if I sat and read them now I’d probably cry, every time I read them I cry, because – I’m going to cry if I talk about it now – I’m not dramatic about it but its emotional, it’s an emotional thing that my mum, poor thing, wasn’t given the help she needed. She wasn’t a delinquent, she just needed a bit of help, and nobody helped her. That was evident in the file. When I read it, it’s like I’m reading about somebody else, it’s nothing to do with me because I feel I’m not that person. I’m G012 and I’m fine and I live my life and I go on holidays and I’ve got my friends and you know I don’t dwell. But if I hadn’t been to therapy for 28 years I probably wouldn’t be able to think about things the way I do.

**Victoria**

You mentioned about your mum and your sister sending you birthday cards and Christmas cards and things, was there those kind of things in the file, were there photos or anything personal?

**G012**

No no no, nothing nothing. And my mum had lovely handwriting and I’ve always loved her handwriting, I had to search for that, it was hard to find her handwriting, anything with her handwriting. There was nothing there, and my mum used to write me letters all the time.

**Victoria**

But none of those were in there?

**G012**

No, no, and Christmas cards, nothing was in there. Oh I didn’t think of that, no. And I think that’s one of the things I remember now, I remember feeling quite disappointed, immediately looking to see…

**Victoria**

To see if there was anything like that?

**G012**

Yeah.

**Victoria**

And is there anything of yours in there, anything that you wrote?

**G012**

No no. My school reports were there. Only my primary school ones.

**Victoria**

When you were in the first home until you were 12?

**G012**

Yeah, but I went to secondary school there. And there’s not every one. There’s a few reports there. I was top of the class. In those days you’d have this little report, handwritten in a nice little thing. I was very clever, I was bright, that’s the thing, I was bright. That’s what it made me think, look how bright I was and I struggled though, I mean I became a social work manager in the end but I could have been successful…not successful, I could have had a different life years ago, my early life. My early adult life wasn’t great. It wasn’t awful, I had laughs and all that but I could have been more successful, I could have done better quicker.

**Victoria**

Was there anything in there that came as a complete surprise to you? Anything, events or something, that you hadn’t remembered?

**G012**

I didn’t remember that my mum had disappeared so many times, that they couldn’t find her. That was a shock. Well it wasn’t really a shock, I knew bits of her life, but that was a bit of a surprise. But you must remember I haven’t read lots of it, and I don’t know if I ever will, because I have to be in a frame of mind to read it. I don’t like reading it. It’s funny, I don’t know why, I’m writing all of this stuff [social work records] all of the time. It’s interesting because my sister has got Alzheimer’s and she’s in hospital, she’s moved today to a nursing home, my niece is with her, that’s why she’s ringing me. And I’ve worked with older people, in residential homes, when I first became a social worker many many years ago, easy as pie, but when it comes to your own family… I don’t go to visit her, not because I don’t care, I can’t bear it. She talks a load of rubbish to me and I can’t stand it. I just don’t want to have to think about it, so I think being in the children’s home, my mum leaving me when I was that small age, I learnt to put this thing up. I remember when my mum came to visit me once, I hadn’t seen her for years, I must have been about 8 and I remember standing there – I didn’t know her – standing there in the passageway and they said ‘Well give your mother a kiss then’ and I thought do I have to but I did as I was told. I knew then, there was nothing, it was gone, there was nothing there. Not because I was being horrible but because I’d had to protect myself. So I think that was what I did and then we never recovered from it. We were fine, we had our ups and downs but we kept in contact. I wouldn’t say it was a dysfunctional relationship but it wasn’t a very loving relationship. We used to laugh sometimes and have a laugh but she could be quite cutting. Anyway, so my mum told me more than what was in the file about her life, what had happened in her life, but it did say…what did I read the other day…I remember what it said, it said they used to take my mum’s sisters… my mum’s sisters were middle class, it’s typical isn’t it, they wouldn't look after my mum because she had a black child, they said she can go there but I can’t go there, they didn’t want the neighbours to see. But the social worker used to buy the sisters presents, and their children Christmas presents. That’s what it said in the file, so they were funny. There was a level of snobbery, you know that they liked them [the sisters] but because my mum had had this black child out of wedlock when she was already married to someone else… So there were things in there, I mean I can’t remember all of it, as I sit and think about it there things in there where I thought ‘Oh blimey, I didn’t know that’, and there’s probably going to be loads more. I’m thinking maybe I should start reading it, when I retire I’ll read it, because I won’t have to go to work. You see, I was in care all my life, well from the age of 2, and what I’ve got is a box, one box of my life and it’s about this thick [gestures about 6 inches deep] and that’s from 2 to 18. In fact I had a social worker until I was 21, not because I needed one, it was an NCH social worker and in fact she works in my office now. In fact I became a manager before she did, yeah. I don’t know, the reason I wanted to get involved in this project, this research, is because I think that… there’s lots of things. The stigma around care leavers is awful, I want to try and deal with that, and also the issue around separation and loss which is so easily forgotten. What we see in files is that ‘so and so was very naughty today, he wouldn’t get up’ or ‘so and so is 18 and he wouldn’t go and sign on with the benefits agency today, he’s so lazy’ and I think to myself why do you think he’s lazy? ‘Well he should have gone…’ Why do you think he doesn’t go? ‘Because he doesn’t want to go.’ Why doesn't he want to go? ‘He doesn’t care.’ He doesn’t care because nobody cares about him, no one has cared about him all his life so why is he going to care about himself? He doesn't care if he hasn’t got any money. He’s used to having nothing. So trying to get people to think about things and how they record stuff in the files, just trying to change the whole way in which we work with care leavers and how we…it is about how we record stuff but it’s more, as I said earlier, why do local authorities make it such a negative thing for them, why is it seen in such a negative way when people want to view their files? They’re always on the defensive that we’re going to use this information to do x, y, z to us, that’s what I think. And I can speak for myself, my own experience with NCH, and I tell you what I was on a documentary in 2012 with George Alagiah called ‘Mixed Britannia’, I was in part three and it was about mixed race people in the UK since the 1900s and he wanted to interview someone who had been in care but hadn’t been adopted and was mixed race. There was lots of people and I’m on it, one bit at the beginning and one bit at the end, and my friend sent NCH an email to the head office, to say one of our ex-girls is going to be on this and you know what they said? Thanks for the heads up. [sighs] Because they were worried. I don’t know what they thought I was going to say, because my memories of there aren’t like…I didn’t witness anything awful…they were unkind and cruel but they were like nuns and that was what they were like. They weren’t particularly cruel to me but I saw them doing things to other people, just not very nice things, but they weren’t battering people. There was no men there, never any men there, only women worked there. But it’s funny you see, they were nervous, they said ‘thanks for the heads up’. I said [person’s name], what do they mean by that then?! I think they’re quite wary of me. I don’t know why. I’ve never said anything derogatory about them, as I’ve just said to you, the children’s home was beautiful, it was a beautiful old building. I know its history. Lovely grounds, you know, and it didn’t even say that. It could have said G012 likes being in the countryside, she does horse riding and she goes to ballet on a Monday. All these things they could have put about what I was doing in my life, I remember those things, so they didn’t give a very…it wasn't a bad picture, but it’s a bit like when I went into the children’s home it says ‘Information about the child – intelligent and half-caste’. Not she likes this and she likes this, she like to do this, there’s nothing like that and it's the same way the file is written. Lots of files are written like that now. They don’t say ‘Johnny likes going to football and when he’s there he likes playing with little boy Jimmy’. You want to know who your friends are. I knew my kid’s friends when they were at school, I ask them what happened to this person and this person. I know. I tell you what I think the problem is. Social work caseloads are too high for a start, so they haven’t got the time and there’s too much emphasis on stats. They have to hurry up, hurry up, get that thing on there. So I think it’s a pretty sad shame actually that in this day and age, after all these years of learning about what care leavers need, that we're still at the stage where files aren’t being recorded right. We’re not supporting young people in the way we should, it’s all very…it’s a bit like, what’s the word…it’s a bit regimented, it’s all regimented, there’s no ease. I think it’s very strange.

**Victoria**

It’s like you said it’s not like where your children come to you, and talk about things that happened in the past. You don’t go to a cupboard and get down The File to talk to them about it.

**G012**

No, no.

**Victoria**

How do you recreate that experience for somebody that has been in care, where the file is all that there might be? If it is very regimented and structured and you’re following a system and there’s not a lot of time it’s very difficult to get that bigger picture isn’t it? Of what someone’s childhood is like.

**G012**

When I was in [place name], I know what it said, it said ‘G012 has been reading pornographic literature.’ What a load of shit. Do you know what I was reading? There used to be a magazine years ago, you won’t know about it, maybe your mum would know it. It was called Loving, and you’d buy it at the corner shop. It was a bit like Jackie magazine, have you ever heard of Jackie magazine?

**Victoria**

Yeah.

**G012**

It was very similar to that. It was nothing, you know. Who’d have sold pornographic literature in those days? And so they said that. They’d say all sorts.

**Victoria**

Did they say ‘pornographic literature’ but they didn’t expand on what it was?

**G012**

No, no.

**Victoria**

So if you go back and look at that it could be anything?

**G012**

Yeah, it was only because I remembered that. I remember them saying to me.

**Victoria**

You can see how easily things can get fixed and be misinterpreted.

**G012**

I remember the woman, at [place name], Sister [name], I can imagine her writing that. [laughs] She was a nice lady but she was completely bonkers in hindsight. She was odd as anything, I remember, and I can just imagine her. She was a Christian, a Methodist, but she turned her nose up at everything. I remember her saying ‘Ugh, it’s disgusting’. She probably saw the magazine and would have thought they’re kissing, it’s foul. I can just imagine her saying that. So when I read it I was able to think well, she would have written that because [laughs] that’s what she would have written. Not to be horrible, that’s how she would have interpreted it, she was quite a nice lady. I suppose it was harmless but someone else reading that might have thought blooming heck she’s reading porn. So I suppose if something happened to me and someone got hold of those files they could say, you know, ‘You see look, you see!’ There are lots of things that are dangerous in the file, that could be misinterpreted. But I have to laugh at them, because I can remember who wrote them. Not all of them obviously but when I got older. As I said we need to be more creative, more sophisticated, we need to think about it, we need to record proper stuff, not so much of the nonsense. People’s feelings, what they felt like, what they experienced, what did they do. That’s what we need to be thinking about. Because I don’t get a feel of myself when I read that. I know myself but what I get is ‘G012 did this and this and this and this and she was unhappy’. It said I was nervous all the way through, it says that and then it says ‘We’ll send her home to [Place name], even though she doesn’t want to go.’ They did some strange things. But I don’t feel bitter and angry about it because I know that I’m fine. I had quite a privileged childhood really in lots of ways. I lived by the sea, I am able to appreciate walking and things. When I see other people that grew up…they haven’t got a bloody clue, you know, so those ten years stability, which are evident in the file, they *are* evident in the file, gave me…when things became more difficult in later life I was still able to think this is what I need to aim for, I need to aim for that. I know what’s right and wrong, I need to aim for this. When my friends were all going out doing naughty criminal things and saying come with me, I'd say I’ll see you tomorrow then and never used to go. Something said to me don’t go, that wasn’t what I wanted to do. That does come across in the file, do you know what I mean? I think they’re very important but I also know, even myself as a social worker, I’m not able to do the work I want to, or record how I want to, because of the workload and as long as social work keeps increasing – we’re just doing more and more and more now – and start to privatise more and more, you’re going to get less and less information about a child on a file. And they need to think of a different way to do it. I’m not sure how to do it. Maybe the child needs to be more involved on what’s put on that file. They can be involved, they take control, like when you visit let’s do a piece of work on the last four weeks. What have you done? What’s it been like for you? How have you felt? Instead of us going away and saying ‘Little Johnny said blah blah blah’ and she said she likes it here and she said this. That it could be something that we do every four weeks, a bit therapeutic for them. They can talk about what they…but we don’t do that. So, when I retire, which might be hopefully soon, my aim is to still try and make a difference. I’m still in touch with care leavers that I work with now who’ve got nobody. I’m not a martyr by any stretch but I do very much feel I don’t want to waste my experience, all the stuff I’ve learnt, all this information I’ve gathered, all the things I’ve seen. I don’t want to die with them, what’s the point? I’ve got to share them, you’ve got to make a difference haven’t you? That’s what I think. It’s something I could do with a local authority background. I think that’s quite a good idea what I just said.

**Victoria**

Yeah I do too.

**G012**

I don’t know, I just feel… [long pause]

**Victoria**

I remember you saying when we did the workshop in January that you were writing something, an autobiography.

**G012**

I’ve been writing. I started writing about twelve years ago, but you know because I’m at work on the computer all day, when I get home I don’t want to do it. And so at Christmas time I’d done 31,000 words. I reckon I’m going to do about another 30,000. I’ve done it chronologically but now I’m starting to change it. It’s not boring at all but my friend who has wrote a book about Bletchley Park – you know Bletchley Park? – she’s been helping me, she said just get it down. Get it down and then we’ll sort the rest of it out. So that’s what I’ve been doing. It’s taken all this time because I started writing it and found it too distressing. That’s when I started looking at my files and I thought I can’t do it, so I didn’t do it for ages and then I started doing it again, so now over Christmas time I wrote 7000 words within two days or three days. When I’m sitting there doing it I like it, so I can finish it, but I thought I’ll probably wait until I leave work or when I’m on holiday.

**Victoria**

You said you looked at your file as part of doing that, do you think that you used…

**G012**

It was a hindrance. It was a hindrance because… the thing is my files could be published because they’re chronological and therefore you can get a picture but then there’s the gaps as I said, that I need to fill in. I used them more writing about the early days, from the age of 2, and I said ‘as in the file it said...’ blah blah blah. I’ve said in the book, I’ve looked at the file and it says x, y and z. Anyway, so that’s my view about files. They’re necessary but I think even now there’s a lack of warmth in the way things are recorded. I went to see a little boy and I said ‘He’s a lovely little baby, he’s a sweet little boy’ and someone read it and they said ‘oh that’s a nice thing to say.’ But that’s what I thought when I went there. He’s such a lovely little boy, a dear little boy he was, I’ve known his dad since he was 6 and now he’s 20, but anyway he’s a lovely boy. And I wrote it, but it's not always appreciated. I’m quite direct and a passionate person and sometimes it can be seen as not professional.

**Victoria**

I remember something you said in the workshop that really struck me, which is that files are not written by someone who loves you, and I think what you said there about sometimes the standard is to speak professionally and that professionalism is sometimes a bit lacking.

**G012**

Lacking in love, and realness really and warmth and depth, but I think to do those pieces of work every couple of weeks with those children and after 10 years you’d see wouldn’t you? This is how it was, this is how you felt, so you’ll know, when you get to 16 and you say ‘let me have a look at my file’, you can see that when you were 7 this is what you said, this is what you said this month and that month. So once a month you’ve got something in your file that you contributed, that you put in there. That they’re aware that they’re writing stuff about their life and how they felt. What they like doing that week. Did they like horse riding, did they like going to the ballet? I hated going to the bloody ballet, but it doesn’t say it in there. I was like an elephant, I hated it with a passion because I couldn’t do it but it was fun, I enjoyed going to the class, but I hated being made to dance because I’d always get the steps wrong, I remember. But I used to laugh a lot, I always used to laugh a lot. I think one of the things that saved me is my ability to laugh at everything, I’ve always done that. People are always telling me, and people laugh at me and I don’t mind that. I’m not intentionally a comedian but [laughs]… I think for me it's a coping mechanism, which is obviously in my genes.

But I was in two different children’s homes and there’s no contrast or comparing, which they should have put down. The places were run very differently, but they didn’t say that. Actually I was in three children’s homes, then I was in the [place name] home, although NCH were still involved with me in the [place name] children’s home. I don’t know why. I think because they had known me for so long they just kept in touch. It wasn’t my idea to do so, obviously [place name] was underfunded. I don’t know what they were up to, but anyway. I’m not going to knock them, they gave me something, I got something from them. I’m remembering more as I’m talking. I got enough to write the first part of my book and I learnt things about my mother that I didn’t know, I didn’t know that NCH spent a lot of time trying to find her. Not lots of time but there was correspondence, you could see. ‘We haven’t seen Mrs Walters for how many months. She hasn't been since last year.’

**Victoria**

You mentioned that you went to a reunion and you were still in touch with some of the people from the home in [Place name] and I just wondered whether or not you found that experience positive?

**G012**

Well the only people I’m in touch with now… I’m still in touch with my social aunt and uncle. Because my mum was never around, when the other children used to go home for holidays – remember in those days children weren’t always taken from their parents, their parents put them into care because they didn’t have any money or because things were going wrong, very rarely were they taken in those days, 1958, 1959 you know. Clive, I’ve kept in touch with him most of the time, I like to speak to Clive. The other people I know are from [place name], there’s only Clive. I’m in touch with my social aunt and uncle as I said, when the others used to go to their parents for the holidays I used to stay there. There was a few of us there, so I used to go to a social aunt and uncle. Auntie [name] and uncle [name], they lived on a farm, I used to go and stay with them in [place name] in [place name]. They’re still alive and I’m in touch with their daughter. Their children have done very well, one’s a doctor, one’s dentist, they’ve all done very well and they invite me to special occasions but I’m not really one of their family. I understand that, but that was very difficult to accept until one day I realised people only give what they can give. They didn’t promise to be my parents, they weren’t, I just used to go for holidays. But I keep in touch with them and they invite me, I went last April for a wedding, so I do keep in touch with them. But they didn’t talk to me when I had my second child because they thought it was disgusting having a second child out of wedlock but they got over it about five years later [laughs]. So anyway, with Clive, it’s nice seeing Clive. I go to the reunion but last year I only knew Clive, and the guy who set the website up and there was a lady there from the home in [Place name] but I only recognised her briefly. I remembered her name. But I think a lot of people from children’s homes don’t want to remember their past, that’s why those people didn’t want their names on there [the NCH memory website]. I did have a meeting, me and Clive, did meet these two sisters, [name] and [name] we met them in [Place name] about six years ago but they didn’t say nice things about the children’s home. That’s what I’m saying, my ability to look at it differently is because I’m very much a… I live my life like this, I watch Anne of Green Gables, I watch Little House on the Prairie, and I do all the things that are escapism. I go and sit in a park by myself because I like it. That’s what gets me through life. So if I was not to be like that I’d probably think back about that children’s home and think you horrible people. I’ve seen them do horrible things to people, not sexually abusive, but emotionally abusive things. They said unkind things, things like that. I only got slapped once, for being rude about a dress I didn’t want to wear, so they weren’t like that.

**Victoria**

Is there anything else you’d like to add, before we finish?

**G012**

No, just make sure you put the story in at the beginning for the context. And you see in [Place name] they didn’t describe the house, in my book I describe everything and it’s quite descriptive. I’m going to have to change it a bit, it’s a bit muddled, but that was important to me, to describe where I was, how we lived. That’s another thing we don’t do in files, we don't describe. They say ‘Placement appropriateness’ and it will say ‘John lives in Tooting with his foster carers, they’ve got a two bedroomed house with a garden.’ It might be a garden two foot wide. In my file it didn’t say she lived in a children’s home with massive fields, like a park, with swings. It was like a park, with woods at the bottom and cows at the end, an orchard. ‘G012 likes to be in the orchard, she likes playing games’ it doesn’t say any of that. So I just hope this does help to improve things, and anything else I can do to make things better for children in care and care leavers, but care leavers are my speciality because those are the ones that are neglected. Once you get to 18, bye bye, see you later. They’re not worried, they’re not thinking about how it’s impacted on you.

**Victoria**

And continues to impact on you.

**G012**

All your life. I’m 61 this year and you know what? I left therapy last year after 28 years and I said to my therapist, lovely lady, I said to her, how on earth do other people cope? I’m not a stupid person, I’m quite emotionally intelligent, I mean I make mistakes all the time but I can understand why I do them. I can analyse them. So how do other people manage it? And I know people from [place name]. Dear, dear, dear. They had a terrible life. So I look and I think I’m grateful, I don’t know who to but I’m just grateful that I managed. Luckily for me I met nice people along the way, I did meet nice people. Not always, I met horrible people too, but I met some nice people who were very protective of me.

**Victoria**

Yeah, and that makes all the difference.

**G012**

Even people who were being horrible to other people, where they could probably see a vulnerability. Well, I better go to my car.

**Victoria**

Yes, go to your car. I will stop recording.

END OF INTERVIEW

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

Interview held 22nd March 2018 between G013 and Victoria Hoyle, at Victoria’s office at UCL.

BEGINNING OF INTERVIEW

**Victoria**

If we begin with you describing briefly your own experiences of the care system.

**G013**

Ok, that’s probably the hardest question and you’ve started with it. My own experiences, I suppose not concentrating on records but just more generally… I was a bit older when I went into care. I was about 12 and stayed in care, I didn’t go back home after that. I went into independent living from there. Sort of mixed experiences really, depending on the type of place that I lived in. I moved several times, which is quite common, and had some very good very nice people who worked in residential homes and some less nice. But I think probably going into care slightly older is better, would be better for anybody, because I was perhaps a little bit less vulnerable, so I wasn’t victimized so much by people in the home although there was victimisation from outside, which is very common. I don’t know, it’s funny because it wasn’t a good experience but actually it’s not one that I regret, because I think that I’m quite a resilient strong person and I think I probably always would have been but I think definitely more so because of that experience. I don’t define myself as a care leaver, and I struggle with that sometimes when people talk about themselves as a care leaver. It was interesting, [name] spoke about it didn't he? I think it’s…yes you’re always a care leaver if you’ve been in care and I think that’s fine to say that but it definitely doesn’t define me, and sometimes I forget, and sometimes I feel disingenuous if I talk about it, if I use that badge. I almost think: am I making it up? Not making it up but emphasising it for any gain or for any attention or for any purpose. It’s only recently I’ve started talking about being a care leaver. In fact I’ve worked in my department for 13 years and my colleagues didn’t know and it was only because it came up at the Post-Care Forum, because it felt appropriate to say that there. Before that nobody knew, because it’s not the most important part of my history and it’s not necessarily the thing that I think about. I don’t think about it in fact. So I don’t have regrets terribly about being in care. It’s interesting because I come from a family that’s very, on the face of it, very functional, and I think that’s perhaps why I feel a bit disingenuous, because my experiences of going into care are not typical. My family is not typical and I’m not typical and my experiences are not typical, and don’t fit into the usual preconceived notions of why somebody might go into care. No family dysfunction or family breakdown. My family are very functional and I’m the one that’s slightly on the edge of that. So it’s a weird dynamic because again I think that now I’m fairly close to my family - not terribly close but probably as close as anybody is with their family regardless of their family history - I almost have to pinch myself, to remind myself that I did have that experience and that my experience from my siblings is completely different. They’re all very close and they’re very close with my mum, and my family is fairly well off and very educated, as am I, so it’s a funny dynamic. Perhaps I think that’s the reason why I didn’t talk about it, not because of shame but because of almost feeling… disingenuous is the word, almost like I was saying it and it wasn’t quite true. It’s only recently that I’ve started to embrace it more and that’s why I do the Post-Care Forum chairing and probably why I was asked to Chair, because I do have that and I do bring that to it. And I’ve realised that it’s actually a useful experience and a helpful experience, so I’m almost proud of it. Pride is not quite the word, but I’ve learnt to embrace it and I don’t see it as a wholly negative experience.

**Victoria**

And I know, from the previous conversations we’ve had that you haven’t accessed your social care records.

**G013**

Yes.

**Victoria**

Has there ever been a time when you’ve thought about doing that?

**G013**

Yes, I think about it a lot. So I definitely first thought about it when I…I probably didn’t think about it until I got the job that I’m doing now, so that’s 13 years, 2005. I thought oh I’ll do it, and then I thought no I don’t know if I want to do it. There are lots of reasons why, there are several reasons why I haven’t done it. I think one of the main reasons why is it’s such a subjective process, preparing files for access, and there is nobody on earth that I feel I want to make the decision about what I can and can’t read. I see it almost as an extension – I think this is one of the reasons why I didn’t do it in the early years – of… I think when I was in care most of the professionals that worked in the children’s homes were not very professional people, it seemed to be a job – and I think residential care is still like that to a certain extent, although it’s regulated more – that people find themselves in and often people who can’t get jobs elsewhere and so there were people who were mechanics or had various other jobs. One of the care home staff was the local drug dealer and he worked there and sold drugs from there. I didn’t value their opinion of me at that time and they didn’t know me and couldn’t claim to, and so I definitely wouldn’t value it now. On top of that, to compound that, they would have been the people who were writing the information that I would then subsequently read through the access to records process. Somebody else now would do that same thing and to me it feels a bit like an extension of that, and that’s my biggest issue with access to records, because it’s not an exact science and you can’t do it in an automated way, you can’t get a computer to do it, it has to be a person. There’s no person that I would trust, no matter who, it doesn't matter, and also it's the voyeuristic nature of it, and I always say to people that this is very voyeuristic and it’s better to recognise that and accept that and to try to bear that in mind when you’re reading and have the respect and regard that you’re seeing something that somebody else hasn’t yet seen. You are making decisions about information that somebody’s going to see that could affect them hugely and I don’t mean so much in the ways that we were talking about on Tuesday at the Post-Care Forum, in terms of redaction. But I think in terms of what people do is, because we’re humans, we can’t not apply some of our own emotion and experiences to the process, that will skew what you do, whether you do that in a negative way or a positive way, and I think it’s a subconscious thing because if you’re very very aware of it as I try to be then I won’t consciously make that decision but I can’t not apply my own empathy or lack of, or like or contempt or understanding or respect or regard to what I’m reading. I think what a lot of people try to do is to make the files slightly nicer and that for me is a travesty. It’s the worst thing to do, to take out really horrible bits and leave in nicer bits because I think what that has the potential to do is to make someone feel awful about themselves rather than awful about the circumstances, or accept and learn from and move on from the circumstances. What you then do is to take responsibility, and a lot of people in care feel responsible for themselves being in care and if you don’t read the bad stuff about other people you will then feel that you were right to blame yourself. So I think it has the potential to be quite a dangerous process and I just have no interest in reading a) what the people who worked in the home wrote about me in the first place and b) what an access to records officer feels is appropriate for me to read and that’s the biggest reason. And the other reason is I now, as chair of the Post-Care Forum, know the Islington officers and so the only way I could get my records is to go to one of them and I can’t because I have a relationship with them now as a peer. I can’t do it in an anonymous way and because I would need that anonymity in order to do it, I wouldn’t want somebody to do some of the things that some access to records officers do, which is try to reach out and strike up a relationship and do all of the things that I then see as an extension of the social work process. No, they’re not in loco parentis, but they do try to do that or represent the organisation that was, and I don’t feel that’s right. Whilst it might be right for some people it’s absolutely not right for me and I would reject it completely. So that’s another reason, and another reason that I don’t is I don’t know what the point is? If I’d gone into care when I was younger and didn’t know things and didn’t know why I’d gone into care, didn’t understand things, then possibly I think that’s when it’s a beneficial process. But going into care as a 12 year old I’m very aware of why I went in to care and I can’t think that it would be anything other than deeply deeply painful and not enlightening and not helpful and it would probably make me angry and I don’t know what I would do with that anger. There is nowhere for me to put it, and I have been angry for a long time, I’m quite an angry person and I’m trying to become less angry. I can’t go to the people who wrote that and say That’s not true, it’s rubbish, how do you know that? I can’t confront anybody. Not confront them in an aggressive way but in an intellectual way I can’t challenge it. Who could I challenge? And I just know it would be rubbish because I have read so many files [laughs], so many thousands and thousands of pages, and I know how files are written. So it would be just a pointless, pointless exercise.

**Victoria**

Did you have any contact with the recording process when you were in care?

**G013**

Funnily enough… I was quite political, I’ve always been quite a political person and I hadn’t, no, it was quite a closed process, but I used to go with a couple of other people I was in care with in the home that I stayed in the longest… we’d just go into the staff room and read it. So I have read it and that’s how I know its rubbish, because it would be writing for the sake of it, and again that’s reflected in the files that I read. When it’s children’s home type information that’s when it tends to be just completely rubbish, because people are not qualified practitioners, so they’re writing a log that they know they have to, when they’re on duty they have to write a log, so they would almost make things up to be able to fill page. It would be things like got up, went out, came back, had dinner, went to bed, just basic stuff. I remember once reading that I'd set off the fire alarms in the home which I didn’t do and I was really offended by that, because I think I thought of myself at 12 – I think it’s probably because I had to – as quite grown up and wouldn't do something that was beneath me. Quite grown up and quite snobby so I would have considered it beneath me and childish to set off the fire alarms and I didn’t do it so that annoyed me and it’s that kind of thing that I know I would probably read. So no, we weren’t invited to be part of the process but I have read things. And we’d always say things like, you know, I’m going to report you to whoever, we’re going to join NAYPIC as it was then, I don’t think it’s around now, which was the National Association of Young People in Care. We’d say, We’re members of NAYPIC and we know our rights and this that and the other. We were quite political and were quite like You can’t say this and you can’t write this and you can’t do that and you’re wrong and stuff like that, and so yeah I had a bit of engagement with the process in that way. I rejected it then which I suppose it why I reject it now.

**Victoria**

So it’s quite interesting given your experiences that you had ended up in the job that you’re in, could you talk a bit about your responsibilities in your current role and what contact you have with care files?

**G013**

Yeah, ok. It’s changed over the years, it’s really evolved considerably and not necessarily for the better. So when I first started… I’ve been with [place name] County Council since December 2005 and I first started as an Access to Records Officer on a six month contract. I was not sure what to do with myself and I saw this job through Manpower agency and I thought I’ll do that, it buys me some time to work out what to do next, and ended up managing the process a few months after in 2006, and I’ve stayed there ever since. When I first started we were based in Children’s Services, so there were two departments with Access to Records Officers. One in Adult Care Services, which did all adult care records, and one in Children’s Services, which was where I worked. In those days we…none of us were practitioners, social care practitioners, but most of us had been involved in social care in one way or another. A couple of people were retired social workers who had worked in [place name] for many years, had retired, were quite a bit past retirement age, and were doing access to records either part time or full time. We worked from home, so it was just a question of coming and picking up files, taking them home and working on them. Although it was after the Data Protection Act 98 we didn’t do it within 40 days, we took a long time, but it was quite a holistic process and we would talk to applicants, we would meet applicants, I would go to applicant’s homes sometimes, which in this risk averse time we would never do now. We’d invite applicants in to County Hall where I worked to look at their files or talk to them and go over things and pick up difficult bits in the file and mark it for their attention and then go over it with them, saying This is a difficult bit, shall we do it together. And then in 2009 we formed a distinct data protection team within [place name] County Council, because we became a little bit more focused on the legislation and timescales and the 40 days, which is something we’d never really bothered about before. We wouldn’t even get cases allocated within the 40 days, we’d take sometimes even a year to do our cases. So in 2009 my previous manager who was head of information governance - who is now my best friend and lives in France, I go to France quite a bit – set up a data protection team and a freedom of information team, and we moved into our corporate area and it became very much about strategic compliance, about 40 days. We had I think about 20% compliance before 2009 and we’ve had 100% compliance ever since then, but what we lost is the ability and the opportunity to engage with applicants, we don’t any more. We do it by phone, and sometimes that means we will be on the phone for an hour or two. We do allow people to come in and pick up their files but generally that’s just to hand them over. Very occasionally, last year I had a man come in to pick up his files and I booked a room and we went into the room and I did that because I knew that he needed it, but it’s not what I’m supposed to do. In fact I’m not supposed to do access to records because I’m manager, it’s not part of my job, but I do. I met him and we spent a couple of hours and he made a disclosure for the first time, which is what I knew was coming I think, that’s why I did what I did. But that’s very very rare. Now what I do is when subject access requests come in I allocate them to somebody in the team. We have five people in the team, which is a luxury, we haven’t had that very often, it’s been one or two or three never five strictly data protection practitioners before, although I have managed records management service and I have managed freedom of information service as well. But this is the biggest team of data protection practitioners I’ve ever had. So I allocate the case to them, or I allocate it to myself, and work on it, make contact with the requestor, introduce ourselves, let them know that we're the practitioner and that we’re working on it, give them the deadline that it will out by at the latest or possibly sooner, and then work through and work through and release files and send them out. Sometimes we might say to people, if you’ve picked up something in the file or by speaking to them… part of speaking to them is part of also, as best you can in a very lay and unhelpful way most of the time, finding out where they’re at and finding out if you think there are going to be any implications for sending information out. A little bit about what they know, but as we talked about on Tuesday I don’t focus on what people know because for me it’s not about giving people what they already know but giving them what they don’t know. I don’t like that school of thought, that you try to find out what they know, it’s not really what I do. And then we send files out, make ourselves available if they want to come back. We’ll often put things in, depending on their age, to signpost them to various resource services. Sometimes we will refuse access if we feel that somebody is very very vulnerable, but that would be something like a recent suicide attempt. We will engage with the person’s social care practitioner if they’re open [as in an open case], if they’re younger and they’re open and knowing that they’ve just left foster care because it’s broken down, if they’ve just moved in to the YMCA or they’re about to go off to university and live in digs in September and this summer. We might say Are you sure? You can have your files but are you sure you want your files? A) where are you going to put them? And b) do you want to go off to university, which is a big thing in itself and a new chapter for you, with all of your history at the forefront of your mind. So that's the extent of our sort of duty of care, or the extent to which we're able to exercise that duty of care, which is not as thorough as I would like it but I have mixed feelings about that anyway. Because I do think access to records is not about social work, I think it’s something else, and finding that balance is very very very hard and as manager of that service, and I’m the only manager that we’ve ever had in that service, I’ve made it my own, I’ve made it what it is. It’s why I haven’t left, because I can’t let go of it, because I love it and hate it in equal measures. I’ve always been struggling to find the balance between it being as hands off, legally compliant, objective and fair and consistent service as one can possibly get, with some support and some care but not foisting yourself on people.

**Victoria**

It sounds as though you get quite a number of requests. Over the time that you’ve been working there have you seen changes in the patterns of request, the numbers of requests, when people make requests?

**G013**

Yeah, definitely. So when I first started it was, in my head, it was predominantly a care leaver service and it has become less about care leavers. So I would say it was something like 70-80% were care leavers, whether recent or going back, any time to about the 1930s or so, and now a lot of it is about litigation and negligence claims, not necessarily against us but maybe against the PCT, the NHS. Lots of times it’s about parents who are going through divorce and breakups and want information to be able to use against the other party for court. Lots of requests are from solicitors, lots of special educational needs tribunal stuff. Because it’s now more widely known about it’s become less about care leavers and social care interaction and it’s just any interaction with local government or third sector organisations. So it’s become a lot less about care leavers, and sometimes when a care leaver case comes in everybody wants it, I want it, because for a start it was and it is my raison d’etre to a large extent but also because it helps to reinforce and remind you why you do the job. Because other stuff can be quite…you can find yourself embroiled in other people’s arguments and often people are using you and you are stuck, and a care leaver case can sometimes be really heart-warming and reassuring and remind you that this is why we do what we do. So it has changed, and in terms of the times… there were always peaks and troughs. New Year, because often people make New Year’s resolutions. It’s a time when people will say I want to find out more about my past. Unfortunately it’s also the time when there are lots of family breakdowns and arguments because family’s get together and see each other and they don’t necessarily spend time throughout the year, so New Year is always the biggest spike. It goes down at holidays because people have other concerns, they may be off, they may be away, they have their children or family members with them, and that used to be very very noticeable. It’s slightly less noticeable, it’s been less of that and just a bit more undulating now. It’s less distinct but yes New Year would always be the busiest time. Christmas, the lead up to the Christmas, would be quiet, and often I won’t send files out to people before Christmas. I will try to hold off until after Christmas, because I think again those are times when you don’t want people to be reading about…and it’s not in itself patronising because it’s not stuff they haven’t lived and I often struggle again when people say about reading about stuff it’s going to upset you. Well living it was more upsetting than reading about it, but it still brings things to the forefront and Christmas is not the time, because we know that there are more suicide attempts and there’s more drinking and there’s more self-harm. So I try to avoid sending out very emotionally upsetting information just before Christmas.

**Victoria**

In terms of the thing that you send out, the file that you send out, what do you do to prepare it? What are the steps in the process that you go through?

**G013**

So if it’s the paper files… and actually that comes back to your last question as well about the changes… so again when I first started at [place name] County Council, we moved to electronic systems in 2008 roughly, so in 2005 everything was paper. It would be about recalling files from the archive, we had an offsite archive which was quite far, sort of Bath area, and some stuff in our attic and in our basements. So we’d have a records management team, which at that time was very linked and I managed that for quite a few years as well. It would be about identifying the client from the information that they’re giving you and sometimes that’s not straightforward, so being quite creative in that process and trying to look and broaden the search if you didn’t find anything. Assuming the files have been located retrieving those, which would often be next day or within 48 hours. We didn’t work electronically in those days so the files would have to be… we’d actually take the physical files that had been recalled, sometimes they were quite mouldy and damp, and we would take them and work from home. We would take them home and take bags and bags of redacting tape of different widths and redact over the bits of information, obscure the bits of information, that needed to be obscured. And I would have imagined there was a lot of breaches that would have gone out, because each file could be sort of four or five hundred pages and there are lots of duplications. You’d be looking and looking and looking and I think eventually you would stop seeing. It’s very difficult to check your work as well when it’s not electronic, it’s very difficult to keep re-reading. All it takes is for you to put a bit of redacting tape in the wrong place and that’s a potential breach. So that was how we worked then for a few years, and then in about 2008, 2007 or 8, we got a redacting software and then what we do is recall the files from archive, photocopy them and scan them in and then work on them electronically using the redacting software, and to a certain extent that’s exactly what we do now. So if its paper files that have been ordered in they will be scanned using a flatbed scanner, which is quite tricky because some of the files are quite old, they have staples in them that have rusted, the paper has deteriorated and sometimes the paper is larger than A4 size as well because it’s legal paper. So you try to scan it the best you can, so it’s not skew-whiff and so it’s legible, you change the resolution to try to make it legible, and if it’s not legible we will try to type up what it says. We will give the illegible copy and we will say We’ve tried using our computer to make sense of this and here is what we think it says. And then we would… and then it might be a combination, a lot of our files now are a combination of paper and electronic. The electronic stuff is easier because it is pulled off the system, downloaded to our network and then opened as a PDF, and we use the software to redact. We do the same thing as with the scanned paper files. And then when they’re ready they will be printed, we’re moving to electronic but it was only because we used a redacting system called E-copy, which is not fool proof and as the Ministry of Justice know only too well, you can use the redacting software on a flattened PDF, which is supposed to be that once it’s been flattened you can’t lift any redactions but in fact some people with knowhow can. The Ministry of Justice had a breach which involved some plans for a prison, that were sent out with redactions and somebody was able to lift those redactions and we then decided that we would not… we had a couple of issues of our own and then we decided that we would not ever send things out electronically and the only way we could do that is to print them off and then scan them in again and then send them electronically, which is too time consuming, too expensive, and we are all about 40 day compliance as well as the other stuff. So we try not to, but we’ve been trialling new software and we’re going to start sending them out electronically now unless people want them in paper, which people also do. So they’re then printed off and packaged up and they’re always sent by next day special delivery to wherever the person wants them to go to or whenever the person wants them sent if they don’t want them sent the next day, be that to a solicitor or the client or their advocate or representative or family member. And we send a letter. Sometimes we draw their attention to certain bits if that’s what they’ve asked for, or to sensitive bits if we feel it’s appropriate to do so, and letter will be very tailored to that person. There’s a template but it’s very tailored and it will talk about conversations we’ve had, things they’ve asked us, things we may have seen, we may apologise for language, and if we think something is missing we may acknowledge that and apologise for that, and then we’ll invite them to contact us if they’d like to discuss what we’ve sent and the process.

**Victoria**

And do many people come back and ask additional questions or want more information?

**G013**

Yeah. Sometimes we have what we call a rolling SAR, because there will be the cut-off point at which we have received their SAR and we have a couple of people who are regularly coming back for information. Sometimes people will call up and say thank you, some people will call and be tearful, sometimes people send thank you cards. And especially with older clients there tends to be a different reaction, you know unfortunately as we know the older generation are much more grateful and perhaps have lower expectations whereas younger people have higher expectations and less gratitude so older people will call and say thank you and talk about things. Sometimes people make disclosures, that’s not uncommon, and we will signpost them to the police usually. Sometimes people make disclosures in the lead up to getting their files, because that’s what they want, they want to see if the information will corroborate their memories and what they’re going to say. And sometimes we never hear from people at all.

**Victoria**

Do people ever talk about the difference between their memories of events and the records that they receive?

**G013**

Yes often, often people will say that they don’t agree with what’s there or they wonder why things that they think should be there aren’t there. Yes. I mean sometimes people say this is exactly as I…you know this is exactly what I wanted, exactly what happened and I’m really glad to have it but more often than not people will say that things should be there. But I think people… And the other reaction as well is that people are often really shocked by how much there is. I think that’s probably the most common reaction, because there are often thousands of pages, it’s very typical for there to be thousands of pages, and people think sometimes that they’re going to get a file and when they realise sometimes that there are twenty files or thirty files or forty files or ten or fifteen they are really shocked by the size of them and the volume and the detailed recordkeeping. So I think that’s more common, that they’re surprised by how much there is rather than how little there is or how it differs in their memory. People are often upset about redactions, but actually we make very very few redactions. I am not at all risk averse, I’m not. And I suppose it’s easy for me to have that view because I’ve been doing the job for a long time but we take very little out, a lot less than other people. We ask pretty much nobody for consent, so they tend to get quite a whole and complete record, with very little bits removed and if they are removed it will have either one of two stamps. It will either say legal or professional privilege – and sometimes I will get the solicitors to waive that anyway, or if it’s an older case I will just make a decision and just waive it on behalf of the organisation – or third party. And third party information as we talked about is a funny old thing and I think people rely on third party when it’s not third party. Third party for me has to be very strictly third party, because when somebody goes in to care nothing is third party, because if it’s the reason why you went in to care it’s not third party, so the line that I would draw will be very different to the line that most people will draw. But I think what comes up most is that people are surprised by how much there is.

**Victoria**

Thinking about the redaction, just to go back to that for a second, I wonder if you could give an example of something that you would redact?

**G013**

An example of something I would redact… I suppose if I had a file that was talking about the reasons why somebody was taken into care and it was talking about mum… let's just say there’s a mum and a child, or let’s say there’s a mum and two children, and they were talking about the mum or family, parents or other extended family members in relation to that child. So they were talking about… perhaps there being drug and alcohol dependency, or mental health issues, or some other reasons why they felt that the parents were unable to cope with the children and were either asking for them to be received into care, or they were being forcibly removed into care, I think I would generally leave in all of that information. So if it was talking about mum’s issues I wouldn’t redact that information because that’s the very reason why maybe the person is being taken into care and for me, as I said earlier, that’s one of the most important things, because I think an overriding feeling that people have when they’ve been taken into care or there has been a family breakdown… children tend to feel responsible don’t they? If their parents get divorced they think maybe it was because of their behaviour or something they did and for me that’s a really important point that I try to give as much information as I can about other people’s issues so that that person is not feeling responsible, even if there is some responsibility. So I don’t whitewash their own or anybody else’s. However, if they then start to talk about mum’s issues as a child, if it said mum had been sexually abused as a child and talked about some issues like that, I may consider taking that information out, because that’s way before the child is born and even though there is some relevance there, because mum’s own childhood experiences are very likely to be the things that are impacting on her parenting ability now, there still has to be a line for me in terms of what’s shared with her children. Because it they don’t know that – and I don’t care if they do know that, I wouldn't ask them, I wouldn't try and find out what they know or they don’t know, to me it doesn’t matter what they know – there’s got to be some element of privacy and I still have a duty of care to that person, and I would take out some of the things that I felt that I needed to to protect mum. If mum wanted to disclose that to her children then it’s up to her, it’s not up to me to do that. But if it was about mum’s current situation, or the situation at that time, then I would leave it in. For example… I know that people have taken things out like, for example, that mum maybe is a prostitute. I wouldn’t take that out, because if mum is a prostitute at the time that the child has been removed into care then that is one of the key issues that are being considered, and whilst it may be upsetting to read that your mum was a prostitute or your mum was a drug addict or your dad was a Schedule 1 offender, it is what it is so I can’t take that out.

**Victoria**

Do you ever receive requests from those other subjects of files?

**G013**

Yes often.

**Victoria**

Yeah, so from the mum for example? How do you deal with those ones?

**G013**

They get difficult, they’re difficult. So we have one at the moment where somebody has made a request and is refusing to have the person - who is one of my most experienced access to records officers - who did her daughter’s file who was adopted, and she wants only me as the manager to do it. I’ve refused actually, I’ve said to the adoption team that I can’t. I’m happy to agree that somebody else does the files but I’m not going to do the files any different and as a manager I have no greater skill than the people in the team, and in fact they can probably do a better job than me because they have the time and I’m not prepared to commit that. There’s no managerial decision that makes this different to somebody else doing it. But in fact what happened there is that the young person had…the adoptee had contacted her mum and said I know all about you and what you did, I know everything about you from the access to records process, so the mum got in touch with us and was very very angry and we said actually No we haven’t, we’ve given her her information, we haven’t given her your information or her brothers’ information, all of whom had been adopted separately. And in fact the woman then phoned us and apologised and said I lied, just because I was angry with my mum and I lied. That’s why now the woman is not wanting or trusting us, even though she knows that her daughter has lied and she’s said that she lied, she’s not trusting us to do it properly. So it can really be difficult and often we do end up embroiled in situations where people are mistrustful of you and are not happy with what they think you’ve done. Sometimes people will ask to see what you’re giving a person before you give it to them, if you ask for consent, which is one the reasons I try and stay away from consent because I think it empowers people in a wrong way, sets them up to think they’ve got some control and they don’t, so I generally don’t ask family members for their consent. But sometimes they’ll say Can I see it before it goes and I’ll say No, because it’s theirs, if they want to share it with you that’s up to them. If you want to give consent do and if you don’t don’t. If you want your own information that’s fine but I’m not going to give you their information to vet and approve. But then often what happens… we had a case recently somebody who was born in the late 50s and he has applied and his brother applied a few weeks after that, because he’d told his brother that there was information there, and so the same officer is doing both because she’s got an understanding at this point of the case and has it on her system and is able to go back into the same files, because they’re family files, and redact them from a different angle. And in fact because mother and father are both deceased, and lots of the siblings are deceased, they’ve both got a very good amount of information and between the two of them if they put them together they’ve pretty much got everything.

**Victoria**

You talked about there being requests coming from young people who have open cases, or people who have open cases, and one of the things that I was curious about was whether or not open and closed case requests are treated any differently? And the extent to which social work practitioners are involved in those open case requests?

**G013**

No, I’d say for the most part they’re not treated differently, no. And another thing, if social workers say Can I see everything that goes out? I say no. I try to keep them at a distance, so we involve practitioners in a very light touch way and sometimes not at all. So, they will only be involved if somebody is young, you know 15 or 16 or 17, 18, 19, not necessarily an adult or a child legally but they’re just young, and if they’re going through a load of upheaval, then what we will ask is This young person has made a subject access request… and sometimes they’ve come through their leaving care worker, because our leaving care staff give an access to records leaflet to every young person, so they know that they can get access to records whenever they want to, so we do positively encourage it and we promote it. So they often will be the people who've said My young person wants access to records, and we will say Is there anything we need to know, that’s fine, is there anything we need to know? Physically will they be able to look after the information? So if a young person is involved in the criminal justice system and they’ve gone into prison or something, or if they’re bed-hopping, sofa surfing… sorry, bed hopping sounds…[both laugh]…I mean sofa surfing or if they are in the YMCA or any sort of temporary lodging, that’s the sort of thing I want to know, it’s more the practical implications rather than the emotional implications. And there are some times when actually we will say to the workers, look we’re really concerned, we’ve read this and they’ll say no they’re insisting they want it and we say well will you support them because all we can do is just send it and can we send it to you please so that you can take and you can be the sort of gatekeeper, and so that then if there is any…if that person then becomes really upset will you please offer to support them? And we sometimes say we need your guarantee because we’re worried, so sometimes we are more social care practitioners than the social care practitioners. I think they think Oh just do it. People are busy and not that involved sometimes with their young people, and they just say this is the process, go off and do it, and we say actually could you please offer some support because we think it may be needed, because there is some very upsetting stuff in these files. And sometimes we know the stuff that the young person doesn't know, because we don’t take out the stuff we think that they don’t know, we leave in as much as possible of what they don’t know, because that’s the whole point. So there is not a great deal of difference in it. We don’t let the social care practitioners take over the process because we don’t want them to vet the files. If anybody else within the organisation asks to see the files before they go out generally I will say no, I will say why? And I will generally say no, because if it makes us look bad, if it makes us uncomfortable, I don’t want anybody to object. I don’t even care if they object but I won’t agree to have anything taken out, so sometimes it’s better if they just don’t see it, it doesn't matter if it gives somebody cause for litigation or to sue us or seek compensation, if we’ve been negligent and its reflected in the files, if we’ve been in any way not providing the service that we should have done to that person at any stage, I’d want that stuff to go out. If we’ve put smiley faces and embarrassing comments that make us look bad as an organisation, I want it to go out, because it reflects the records and regardless of the implications. So I don’t let anybody get involved, to me that’s sacrosanct completely, it has to be us doing it because we have no agenda, we have none.

**Victoria**

You’ve had contact with files I guess from a range of time periods, you said from the 1930s right to the present. In your experiences what are the differences in the content of files through time? It’s changed a lot I would imagine.

**G013**

So so so much. I think if you gave me a file and didn’t tell me what era it was from I’d probably be able to tell you [both laugh], even if it was scanned, even if I wasn’t looking at paper and feeling it, touching it, I’d probably be able to tell just by the language, the sort of pejorative judgemental… and social work is like everything, it’s evolved so much, but the language that’s used and the… you know you see things start to become more politically correct and less judgemental but at the same time less realistic sometimes as well and less helpful. And I think in the older files most of the documents are not written by professional social workers, they’re written by… I guess it was an extension of community elders, church members, who would take some responsibility for helping people in the community who were less fortunate, so straightaway there’s that disparity, it’s not about being equal, it’s not about somebody necessarily having the professional skills, it’s something that obviously we would never do now, you’d never go into somebody’s home to help them. But there was kind of that whole we’ll go in to Mrs So and So’s, she’s feckless, she’s unintelligent, the children are clearly backward and retarded, we’ll go in and we’ll help them, we’ll make everything ok. And that to me is where social work seemed almost to originate from. In the files that I read there are lots of well-meaning but potentially quite harmful people involved in supporting families, and it seems that families who had issues were bad or mad and not anything else. Either the women were of loose morals or drug and alcohol dependent or stupid or retarded or thick or something, and the men were feckless and ineffectual and selfish, and the family would break down because the man would go off and the woman couldn't cope, or the woman would go off and the man wouldn’t even be asked if he could cope or not because he’s a man so he wouldn’t be expected to, the family would breakdown. Very traditional patterns of break down and of writing in the files, and the issues have not changed hugely but our understanding of the family dynamics and life has changed and so the writing has changed. I’ve seen patterns where in… so when the aim was to always keep the children with the family and even if children were being abused, and actually retrospect you know…hindsight is 20:20 so you can look back and you know what was going on in that household, there is a denial sometimes with workers. It couldn’t be anything like that, that sort of thing doesn’t happen. I’ve seen where children have been left, where we as social workers at [place name] have left children in situations where it is quite clear that they’re being sexually abused, physically abused, emotionally abused or all of the above, and felt that we were doing the right thing in keeping the family together and quite, you know, self-congratulatory about the good job that we’re doing. And then it moves into a time when it was take everybody away, and that was the right thing because we’re protecting the children, we put them in these nice children’s homes with these nice matrons who will look after them, this place or that place, when we were effectively putting them there to be abused by someone else. It keeps going full circle and all these patterns emerge and re-emerge as I read stuff over the years. But thankfully what has changed is just the language, for me it’s just one of the hardest things when I read about children being described as ugly or fat or black or you know quite attractive for a negro child or half this or half that or Irish, meaning won’t amount to anything, or drunkards or you know any of that language. I find it deeply painful and I will always draw attention to it in the file, so always say Your files reflect the time that the information was gathered and I apologise for the language that was used to describe you or to describe your family, it doesn’t represent social work practice now but it does represent social work practice at that time.

**Victoria**

What proportion of files would you say contain personal ephemera like photographs and drawings, certificates, birthday cards, Christmas cards, those kind of thing?

**G013**

It’s really funny that you ask that because it’s very small. When we did the project with you on Tuesday [at the Post-Care Forum] and we did the what’s in a file and what we want to be in a file exercise the first two or three post-its we did were photographs, postcards, because they… and it’s funny you know because from a selfish perspective, from an entirely professional perspective, they bring someone to life. It’s really an odd thing when you’re preparing files for access because you can have a conversation with a grown up man who is in his 50s or 60s or 40s or whatever and you have a mental picture of them or you’ve seen their passport or driving license so you have an actual picture of them and you start reading these files and they’re a child, and it's a really vulnerable young person, and then you have that picture of them. Squaring that with this person, it’s an odd sensation, it’s very odd. I think it’s very privileged because you know such intimate stuff and you’re reading it and you become so engaged, I often become very very engaged and I think about and do still think about files that I had years and years and years ago, there are some that I will never ever forget. I can remember their full names and their full history, because they’ve never left me. But often the ones that stick in the mind most are where there has been a photograph of them as a child and I often get quite tearful actually if I get those, but very excited because I will give anything I can to that client and so percentage wise…maybe 5% if that. Very very small, but where there is it’s fantastic. Sometimes there are postcards, very dated 1970s 1960s ones, again you can always tell a period of time by a postcard can’t you? And often it’s their writing which I love, it might be them writing to their mum or their foster parent. Sometimes there are letters from parents, again which I love, and I will always give those and I’ve just done a case, which I did for [name at organisation] – she had a client and she said to me Actually I’ve just realised he was with [place name], can you look and see… no, she asked me for consent to release [place name]’s own information that was in the [their own] files and I said Yes of course, and why don’t we also look and see if there’s anything for them here and there was, there was a family file for him and his two brothers. His parents had come over from Germany as refugees and they’d split up and dad had gone back to Germany and gone to Canada, and there were letters from dad and that was lovely to be able to… letters asking him to help with his naturalisation and stuff like that. So, not often but when you do it’s very very meaningful. I think it’s meaningful for the practitioner and I would imagine it’s very very meaningful to the client when you send them out, and what we do is always send everything and just scan it so there is evidence that it was there. The only time it becomes tricky is if there are two children let’s say, and the client we’re working with has a brother or sister and you think well do I send it or not, because if the other person applies then it’s not fair that the other person has all the photographs.

**Victoria**

So you would send the original photographs?

**G013**

The originals, yes, original letters, original photographs, original everything as much as possible, because having a scanned A4 skew-whiff picture is not the same thing. And the only time I would send scanned copies is if there’s a likelihood that the other person is maybe going to apply, so if there was a picture of them with a brother and I know the brother is dead I will send the picture. If it’s a picture of them on their own I will send the picture. If it's a picture of them with their foster parents or something I will always send it.

**Victoria**

I know from speaking to other people that…and from my own experience of working in archives…that there’s sometimes a lack of contextual information about, for example, the names of children’s homes, when they were opened, even where they were, photographs of those places. In your experience, what’s the kind of level of contextual or historical knowledge of the care in [place name]?

**G013**

It’s little, so I think I would completely concur, there’s very little. It focuses only…it isn’t deemed to be of relevance to a young person, and I suppose it’s not, because they’re writing contemporaneously why would they put any anecdotal stuff in, they’re only focused on an assessment, a visit, or whatever, they don’t have time to add that context. But luckily we have what we call HALS, which is [place name] Archives and Local Studies, and they do keep records of all the old children’s homes going back many many years. Some of them were called nurseries, it was a children’s home but it was called something nursery or some other kind of euphemism to make it not sound like a children’s home or a borstal or whatever it would be. So we are sometimes able to signpost them there for some contextual information and to find out more about the history of this place, we’ll put a leaflet in and say contact them. I’ve had several people phone me, several people who I’ve worked with over the years who are writing books - I’m going to say something that really is not appropriate to say but in my head I call them misery memoirs, and I know that’s maybe something that you can take off later because I know it’s appropriate to say but it’s something that I think of… I know that it’s really cathartic and I think it’s a good thing but there’s only so much in terms of other people’s interest and that’s why I would never write about my experiences, I just wouldn't, but you often get people who are doing that and ask for that kind of contextual information. They want to visit the home. Sometimes I say Well it’s a block of flats now, but this is where it is and you could go and if you want any information for research you can visit HALS, and actually if you are not located locally you can contact them and for a fee they will send you out bits and pieces of information which will give you the history of that building and, you know, anything else. So we’re able to add some stuff now but it’s not in the files, but I understand why it’s not.

**Victoria**

Do you ever provide access to the files for any other requestors? I know you’ve mentioned litigation, so legal professionals are approaching you, but are there any other constituencies of users of this kind of material that you know of?

**G013**

The two main… the first one would be police, and particularly more so with the Independent Inquiry. There’s a moratorium now as you know, and actually we destroy very little – we’re probably more likely to be in breach of data protection retention for not getting rid of information than we are to have…you know we’re a well-established old county council so our archives is very important to us and we don’t get rid of information and we don’t get rid of as much as we actually should, so the moratorium was quite fine with us, we’ve got lots of historical information. So we get lots of requests from police, either investigating current or older abuse allegations, and what I do is I make all information available for the police to view. I don’t give anything to the police because… lots of organisations do but I’m very strongly against doing it because… I don’t know why in a way, it’s quite personal to me I think actually because… I suppose because the police make cases but that’s as far as they go, I don’t trust them, I don’t trust them with the information and then when you have files… because we’re going through a redaction process with files for an applicant, we wouldn’t have time and it wouldn’t be appropriate to redact files for the police to look at because sometimes when you are… and I know from my own experience of preparing files… that when you are looking for let’s say a disclosure or to be able to put somebody at a certain place at a certain time, it’s something very small that will confirm that, something very subtle, and sometimes you don’t know and often it’s reading between the lines, there’s never usually a disclosure or a smoking gun in files, usually it’s a lot more nuanced than that, so I don’t think it’s appropriate to redact files for the police to see but I don’t trust the police with people’s histories and the other thing for me is that it’s never one person’s history. Sometimes the police will say Look I’ve got consent, and I say You may have consent from this person, but you don’t have consent from all the other people that are in these files and I can’t separate off this person’s information apart from everybody else’s so you can’t have it, but what you can do is you can look at it for as long as you like, you can make copious notes, you can bring a computer and you can type your notes, you can put post-it notes on the files and then if you have a case you tell the CPS that we’re holding information that you think is going to be crucial either for or against or whichever and the court can handle it. I trust the courts more, it can go before the court and it can go before all parties there, then I don’t feel like I’m helping a defendant, an alleged perpetrator, or an alleged victim, that there’s no slant as far as the County Council’s concerned, that it’s going fairly before the court, before all parties, and that the court will respect and regard the information in the way that I don’t think the police will. So they are the biggest, the main requests are from police, daily we have police in our office. The next will be social workers who are conducting Section 47 children protection enquiries or Section 17 children protection enquiries in other local authorities. So that will often be where this young person was open to us and now has children and they’re doing parenting assessments or they have concerns and are considering taking children away, and I suppose they want to be able to – which I think is quite a good thing – fairly assess that person’s ability. But sometimes I’m quite funny about those as well for the simple reason that, I will often say to people Because somebody was a care leaver does that mean they’re going to be a bad parent? And if that’s what you’re trying to do I’m not prepared to work with you on that, you know, if the person themselves, the parent, has given consent I’m more likely to agree to it. Sometimes I will say, you know, No, if you have urgent safeguarding concerns why does that person’s history 30 years ago matter? Why? So they’d have to make a link for me between something that’s in the files, so that for example if that person had children…I’m more likely to agree to one where a person’s had children in [place name] that have been removed, then are living in Bedfordshire and are having children. Then I can see a clear safeguarding link, but if it’s to look at that person’s history, no because that’s what we talked about on Tuesday wasn’t it? It’s always there and you can never ever get away from it, and sometimes why should it be that something that happened to you is then used as judgement against you, it’s unfair, so I won’t agree. So sometimes other local authorities, the police, sometimes mental health institutions, sometimes housing, so that would be because if somebody has been in care they have more right to social care housing so it would be to confirm that they were in care, so housing, mental health institutions. Sometimes probation services, police services, prison less so, more often it’s the person themselves who has been incarcerated who wants information. I wouldn’t give it to the prison service or Ministry of Justice for their own use, but sometimes solicitors for pre-sentence reports, so that would be to argue that the person maybe has…that there’s mitigation and that there’s a reason why the person shouldn’t have such a lengthy sentence and again I’ll always try to take those. I’m quite pro-client and anti-institution I suppose, so I try to make that balanced, if its fair and appropriate to share it then I share it, if it’s not I say no.

**Victoria**

You talked at the Forum on Tuesday about the changes with GDPR around rights to amendment and rights to erasure and I wondered if you had a position, a professional one or a personal one or a mix of both, on those questions as to whether or not a care leaver should have a right to amend or destroy their records?

**G013**

Yes, I do, and it’s a conflict in my head. My personal view is that they should. My personal view is why should I, years and years, decades after being in care, why should I have information that’s held about me that’s of no consequence, that’s of no relevance to anyone. It doesn’t need to be kept for 75 years after I’m 18, after I’m dead it’s still going to be there. What for? And that’s not because I fear it, because I don’t, and in fact if I did my professional head would say there’s more argument for it to be kept, but I see no point. And I would quite like somebody to challenge. Because for me care leaver’s files don’t fit in GDPR and they don’t fit in data protection anyway, they don’t fit anywhere in that legislation, so I would quite like there to be challenges. I would be most interested in a challenge by a care leaver, an older care leaver, who could argue and all the files could be brought out and read to prove that they are of no consequence. So yes, personally, I think that I would like the new rights of erasure and rectification to be used as challenge by care leavers and I would be very interested in see what happens with that. On a professional level I understand, I understand why they’re kept, and I also keep things, I keep everything, and when somebody comes and makes a subject access request, and my first thought is I don’t think we’re going to be able to find anything because they were born in 1940 and I find something I’m so so happy and so pleased that we’ve kept it. So I have an internal conflict in my head about retention, and I feel very personal about it, but there have been more times than not that it’s a good thing. It can be used by that person – by that person, not by any other person – especially if it’s somebody who has been abused and somebody who…because as we know disclosures come later, people don’t make disclosures at the time and sometimes if they do they’re not heard, and if somebody now is making an historic abuse allegation and we’ve got information that corroborates that I’m really happy. So I feel mixed, I feel really mixed, but I think that if it's you as the data subject, and you want to challenge it, you should have that right and if you’re happy and you can sign a disclaimer to say there’s nothing in that file that I need or want or I’m going to use at any point in the future, and sign it, get rid of it. You should be able to do that, I feel very strongly about that.

**Victoria**

You mentioned there about the data protection legislation not being an adequate tool to apply to these particular cases, and we talked about that a little bit before we started recording, I wonder if we could just revisit it briefly before we finish, because I know we’re an hour and five minutes now…

**G013**

Are we? Gosh. Just to say, I know you probably have to finish but…

**Victoria**

Well if you’re happy to go on a bit longer I have a couple more questions.

**G013**

Yes.

**Victoria**

So thinking about the data protection legislation and that framework of data protection legislation that surrounds the access process now, what do you think are its weaknesses and its strengths?

**G013**

Current data protection legislation? I see data protection legislation as an enabler. I don’t think its weaknesses are necessarily the weaknesses of the legislation itself but of the interpretation, which is what we talked about earlier. So unfortunately I think data protection has been somewhat hijacked and used as a barrier to information being processed appropriately and people hide behind it. For me that’s one of its strengths and its weaknesses in a way, that actually I think that it is an enabler. The most important parts of data protection legislation for me are about rights, not about exemptions and if you are comfortable with the legislation it empowers you to be able to uphold it, and it’s really easy. *I* don’t see it as a difficult piece of legislation, but I do accept that it is a difficult piece of legislation which is not clear enough and which scares people, and because it’s scary and people are worried about getting it wrong because it’s…the regulator can be punitive and I don’t know that that’s necessarily helpful. Because of that there are so many urban myths and people don’t apply the legislation properly, which means that people’s rights are not upheld properly. So I think that for me is its weakness, and its strength. I think that because data protection legislation applies to data protection breaches and technical security and data subject’s rights all in the same thing I think it overcomplicates access to records, which I think is really really simply and straightforward. And for that reason I wish it was taken out of legislation because it would become less fearful, and not that’s it not something that’s entrenched or something that doesn’t have equal value or importance or legal implications but it’s too muddied by lots of other things that are too scary, and because – as you said before we started talking, about that whole community of access to record officers – there are actually, I couldn’t have put it better, there is a whole community of people who work with care leaver’s files, who don’t know anything about the Data Protection Act and GDPR and breaches and this and that, and don’t need to. It’s so much more about a kind of social care approach but neither are they social care practitioners, and I would like it removed. I would like there to be a piece of legislation on its own, that’s just clear and straightforward and that also encourages support and help and recognises that there’s no ‘care leaver’ cut-off. It’s not that you’re 18 or you’re 25, a care leaver is a care leaver, access to information is vital to that process, if that person wants to have it, and we should be promoting it, we should be encouraging it, not shying away from it. It doesn’t matter what they want it for, whether it’s for litigation or it’s for therapy or it's to take it and burn it, it doesn’t matter what it is. And you are then able to properly skill up and recognise what an access to records officer job is, and that that can be about facilitating access *and* facilitating support. There’s so much missing from access to records at the moment, and I think that GDPR is going to make it worse. Because GDPR is even more scary, and even more complicated, and you know, you can apply GDPR and strict data protection legislation to getting your bank statements from your bank but not to getting a care leaver’s life history. If all they’re focused on is the time [limit], and I agree there should be a time, and I’m 100% compliant, it’s really important to me and it’s my pride, even if I have to sit at 4 o’clock in the morning in my pyjamas redacting, which I do, to make sure that something won’t breach I will do that, but I think that that actually undermines the process because then you have to become focused on time and not on care and compassion.

**Victoria**

Thank you, it’s interesting because of your experience of doing that work and then also feeling personally about the issue, it’s good to have that level of insight I think.

**G013**

It’s definitely helped me and I think the team we have now at [place name] are because I feel so passionately and so strongly. I’m really careful when I select and recruit as well because I’m not looking for lawyers or social workers. There’s something quirky and weird about what we do, and when we interview I’m looking for quirky weird people, and the only thing that I want, which you can’t legislate for, is some emotional maturity, because if you haven’t got it I don’t think you can do this job, and it’s not about your qualifications, it’s about your life experiences and your emotional maturity, and unfortunately emotional maturity is not common and it’s hard to assess at interview. I really look between the lines when I’m interviewing for people who just seem odd and quirky, because they tend to just be better practitioners and have the patience and the empathy that you need.

**Victoria**

I just want to cycle back to a couple of things that have arisen while we were talking that are slightly on their own I suppose. One of them is about digital systems. I wondered how prepared you feel for the continued transition to digital files, particularly in terms of the long term preservation of those files for 75 years? Do you think there is adequate protection and planning in place to ensure that someone coming in 2060 can see records that were created today?

**G013**

No, is the answer, no. It scares me, and it’s really funny, it’s ironic isn’t it, because I think that as archaic as archiving files is, and having paper which is so easily damaged and degradable, it feels more secure to me than digital records. They scare me. I love it, you know, especially in terms of GDPR, the speed of access and the ease of being able to locate and identify and all the rest of it, but no in terms of its longevity no. I don’t think it’s been thought of, I think it’s been assumed, because digital seems so modern and perfect that it’s there and it’s meant to be easy to make sure that you get retention… for example I don’t think that people are destroying information. How do people build in to these systems retention? I don’t think they have. So you have these huge children’s social care systems that don’t have retention built in, so in theory that stuff will be there forever but also all it takes is that network to completely go down and they could have gone. And so no, I think it’s not adequately thought about at all, which is weird and scary, and it worries me what will happen in years to come. I have more faith in the archiving paper records system.

**Victoria**

In your experience with these digital systems and the increasingly complex provision of social care, so the many agencies and organisations that are involved in one child or young person’s life, is that information all being brought together and collated in the same way that it might have been on a paper file or…?

**G013**

It’s disjointed, it’s on separate systems in separate… we touched on this a little bit on Tuesday actually, Darren and I, I can’t remember if it was in speaking to the larger group or in our break out groups… but no is the answer. And I think again because people have assumed that we now have bigger overarching systems…I mean it’s better in a way, and I don’t think necessarily…you said it would come together in a paper file, I don’t think it necessarily did. I think that you’d have the bigger departments or organisations with their paper files, so children’s services would have their paper files, probation services would have theirs, housing would have theirs, the children’s homes would have theirs. A lot of times the children’s home records they don’t make their way into the overarching children’s services paper records, so a lot of that stuff is gone. Once the homes are gone that stuff is lost. So I think that both have distinct disadvantages, but now for example you have the LCS system, Liquidlogic, which seems to be what most children’s services use, and they have various little off shoots of that depending on where the child escalates up. Into children protection it goes this way. If it’s lower level intervention it sort of goes that way. And if it’s just educational intervention it goes that way, and the system is all linked, so in theory that’s really good, so long as people are only staying within the key main things that we think of as normal pathways. As soon as it moves off from that, and if it goes into criminal justice or any other arena, those are different systems and they’re not centralised, so I think that we have more hope of being able to collate and gather your ‘normal’ everyday information, where most practitioners are engaged with a family. But anything else will probably be lost, but I think it was when it was paper anyway.

**Victoria**

This is going to be my last question, and it's a bit of an open one. It’s sort of what we talked about at the Past Care Forum. If, in your personal experience and also your professional experience now, you could change the way in which social care is recorded, how would you want to see it changed?

**G013**

It’s a difficult questions actually Victoria, because I respect and I recognise the difficulty of being a social care practitioner, and I suppose like lots of institutions whether it’s healthcare professionals or police or social care professionals, the reason why you do the job in the first place is to engage and to provide a service. But then what ends up having to happen is you have to do the administrative stuff and the more risk averse we are, and the more boxes need to be ticked, the more you find the balance shifts and you’re doing more of that and less of the practical stuff. So I think it would be a little bit…I think what I were to say would be idealistic and possibly slightly unrealistic, but I would like recordkeeping to be done with the people that you’re engaging with wherever possible, and actually a lot of the access to records requests we get are because people are not doing that. Not so much care leavers ones though. But if a young person is involved, or any person, contributing to the decision-making processes in the very very first place then they will know what's been written, because they’ve contributed to the decision that’s being written about or the meeting that’s being minuted or whatever the scenario is. And I think there would be less mistrust and less need for access to records in the way we sometimes have it now, which is because people think that they’re not being involved in the processes, and these are adults so…you know, people come in, they judge, they go and they write about it, and that information is used against them and not for them, and I think if that could shift slightly then I think that people would be less shocked when there’s access to records because their voice would be there. Sometimes there’s never the voice of a young person, and those cases are really hurtful for me. They tend to be the older ones but sometimes…I remember having to apologise a year or two ago to somebody – it was a very sad – because it was like they didn’t exist. The social worker was going out and doing home visits, but didn’t talk to the child or didn’t even talk about the child. They commented a bit on the home and the cleanliness and tidiness and such, but the child was almost invisible, and that to me is one of the worst things. It’s almost worse than having nothing, because you’ve got this stuff with a person’s name on it but it’s as if they didn’t even exist. I imagine to myself that that must have been very painful to the person, because they probably felt they didn’t exist at the time, and here arrive these documents that prove it, that nobody really gave a damn. So I would like it to be a lot more participatory, because I feel that that would be… it would be better not only in terms of recordkeeping but in terms of service provision, it makes for better service provision if you don’t have a them and us attitude. Unfortunately at [place name] we very much have a them and us attitude and I know that…and I suppose that's where my having been in care comes…in any engagement with clients you are there to provide a service, you are not there to judge and you have to recognise that there is an imbalance of power and you have to try and bridge that as best you can. You can’t always but you can try to, so that’s one of the things that I would like to see. And actually, that you can see records as they’re being…you know, if you’re sharing information and you’re giving people copies of everything there’s nothing to hide, and I think sometimes practitioners hide behind the records and I think still now I’m surprised by how many people are surprised that the information that they compile and author is shared. They’re still surprised when I say things like If you put a smiley face in a file, if you write that…I try to give scenarios like If you go into a client’s house and the house is dirty and you feel the children are being neglected and that the parents are lacking in parenting skills then you need to evidence that, because that may well be part of how you prove and evidence your decision making process if your decision is to remove those children. But the way in which you write that and how you write it can really vary, and whilst you shouldn't be scared to write this type of thing because people might see it, just the use of stuff like correct grammar, correct punctuation and use of language and use of descriptive language can just make all the difference to how you have assessed the situation there, if you can remain professional at all times. But people just don’t do that, they preface emails with How are you? and I’ve just come back from holiday and stuff. That is in client’s files, and I find that really upsetting, because I feel that it reinforces to clients that actually you’re almost an afterthought, that the person’s first communication was about themselves and then you, or about several clients all in one. I hate that, because it’s almost saying yeah well a, b and c, 1, 2 and 3, rather than you. There are so many ways that you can make records more palatable, so many ways that you can do that.

**Victoria**

I think it’s those subtle insights that are really key. One thing I don’t know is how much training social work practitioners generally receive in recording but those kind of detailed observations about how what you might perceive to be a pleasantry at the start of an email, or being efficient by including lots of information in one email rather than sending three… I think that’s the kind of subtle detail that doesn’t occur to people if they’re not thinking in terms of the future subject of the record.

**G013**

Yeah, absolutely. So in terms of the email where they talked about three clients and you then…you asked me earlier about information that’s redacted… for us that’s the only sort of information that’s redacted but then when that person gets that email and they read the bits about them, they just assume that the bits that are redacted are also about them, and it’s really difficult to say It’s not about you. When we talked about third party information on Tuesday, *that’s* third party information, that’s the only kind of thing that is third party. Nobody else is a third party, they are part of your family dynamic at that time and their information for me is not off limits, it’s strictly third party information that’s off limits, but it gets mixed up and it’s really difficult to explain, because either way it feels disrespectful. Even is they accept and agree that yes, it’s third party, it feels like then it’s just…you know there was no importance placed on that individual.

**Victoria**

Thank you very much. Is there anything else that you want to add before we stop recording?

**G013**

I think I’ll probably get on the tube and think I could have said this and I could have said that, so no but perhaps if there’s anything I wanted to add I could drop you an email?

Victoria

You can definitely. Ok, I will stop recording now.

END OF INTERVIEW

[After the interview, on Monday 26th March, G013 emailed with an additional thought, which is copied below]

One of the things that I thought of on my way home from meeting you last week was the role of Ofsted and the CQC [Care Quality Commission] and how not only access to care records but also participation and contribution to the recording could be supported by Ofsted and made a mandatory part of the registration and inspection of care homes.

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

Interview held 19th June 2018 between G015 and Victoria Hoyle, at [Place name] Youth Justice Centre.

BEGINNING OF INTERVIEW

**Victoria**

Ok, so if first you could just start by giving me a bit of background about yourself and how you came to access your care file?

**G015**

Ok, so, I…my care experience wasn’t massive, it was about two years, two and a half years from the age of seven to nine, ten. And the thing…so I’ve had an interesting conversation quite a few times about this, is that the system, it would have been difficult for them to make me aware that I could access my care files, given the fact that at that age I wouldn’t have remembered and I wouldn’t have been able to, so I don’t know what the way around that is. But I came to work for [Place name] City Council and, actually worked in Children’s Services for 5 years before I became aware that people can access their care files. So I was actually working in Children’s Services and I still didn’t know that children could access care files, not in Children’s Services it has to be said, not in children’s social work services it has to be said, but when I went to work for the Family Intervention Service I came across somebody who told me that… actually it was a bit weird because they said, before they started talking to me, ‘I know who you are’ which is just really strange… but they said you know you can access your care files and they put me in contact with the Care Leavers’ Association, hence I met [p100]. And he just basically said to me ‘yes, you can access your care files, this is the number, you know, this is how you do it and off you go.’ So I then ring up [Place name] City Council, said you know ‘I’ve you know been in care and I believe I’ve got the right to access them care files’ and they said ‘you have, we’ve got 40 days to respond to your request, thank you very much’ and I think within 30 days a CD came through the post with all my care files on. Simple as that really.

**Victoria**

So no one spoke to you any further than that, they just sort of told you ‘yes you can, this is the date, the timescale that you’ll get it in’ and that was it?

**G015**

Yeah. And when it landed in my post box, I mean it’s difficult to…you know, the feeling…so I’m working in Children’s Services, but the feeling of anxiety before I put that in my laptop was incredible. The minute I opened…I mean I’m thinking…to be fair I’d kind of probably forgot about it or didn’t know when it was going to come, opened my letter box, pull it out, open the envelope, see that it’s a CD, read the [Place name] City Council, this is your care files. I mean it was incredible to think that I was…you know I knew I’d been in care, I can remember actually being in care, I’d had certain perspectives of what had happened from people that had a reason to give me their views of what happened. So I knew, I was in position where I knew I was going to get other people’s perspectives and they would be very different, and so to think that once I put that disc in my laptop and that information was going to pop up, created so much feeling inside me, it was incredible. And the ironic thing is that, I mean I was in a relationship with somebody at the time, I’m not saying it was a perfect relationship anyway but, basically that getting them files meant that the relationship was over, because she didn’t understand. We were supposed to go to the Dominican Republic in two days, and having no understanding of what I was reading, her viewpoint when she came back was ‘why are you reading it now, we’re about to go on holiday in two days?’ She knew that I was fixated and I was just into this thing when really I should have been excited about going on holiday, so it was just really awkward really because she didn’t get how important that information was to me and felt that my priority should have been us and the holiday, so it was just… I mean I’m not saying we were in this great relationship and that was what finished it but it certainly was the straw that broke the camel’s back, yeah.

**Victoria**

So did you get the disc and go straight away to look at it?

**G015**

Yeah, of course yeah. She came in from work and I couldn’t even talk to her, I couldn’t talk to her. Like she came in from work and she was expecting, you know, ‘we’re going on holiday in two days’ and I was gone, I was in a different place, Dominican Republic wasn’t even a thought process of mine, so she’s come in from work, she didn’t know that that was coming that day, and she came in from work, put her bags down, starts talking to me, and I’m not even acknowledging, I’m just umming and ahhing to her you know? And then I said to her you know ‘I’m reading’ and yeah it was just a bit of an issue. [laughs] Just a bit of an issue.

**Victoria**

Did you just read through it all?

**G015**

I couldn’t read through it all, no, it was too much information, but the…the privilege I would say that I had is that I know the difference between an assessment and a case diary and I know a case entry and I know… you know I went through all of that and I just sieved straight through to what the assessments were cos that would tell me a chronology of events in a way that would be quite quick to read. So what I did was…that’s exactly what I did, I looked straight for the assessments as to why I came into care, the placement transitions, things that I knew to look for because I work in this field. I would imagine that if you didn’t work in this field and you didn’t know how to do that…I mean I can’t imagine it actually. You’d just start from page 1 and it doesn’t come like that, it comes...some pages have dates of birth and loads of information that even I don’t really understand, they must have been something to do with case files or recording at that time, but I didn’t understand it. So if I didn’t know what I was looking for I’d have sat sieving through all of that and that must be incredibly difficult to go through.

**Victoria**

Yeah a lot of people have said they’re just a bit overwhelmed, and there seems to be a lot of repetition and they don’t really understand why some information is in one place and other information is in another place, so yeah…

**G015**

One of the biggest things that jumped out to me was is that whoever had edited it, what they’d done is they’d took out information about my brother in one page but then in the next page there was stuff in…it didn’t make sense, it was clumsy. Whoever’d gone through that had gone there with the intention of taking out third party information, however, they’ve not…and I can imagine, that was incredibly important information to me as I’ve just discussed, but if it’s not that would…I mean, what kind of job is that, you know? If that’s an add-on for somebody to sit down and sift through all that information and decipher what’s third party, what’s not third party, what’s important information, what’s not important information, would be a really repetitive and mundane job to do and I could tell that that’s what had happened, that they’d skim read the entire thing, but why wouldn’t they do that? You know, depending on what their role was, if it’s to do that and they understand how I’m going to receive that, maybe they would go through it in finer detail, but maybe the forty days timescale puts pressure on them, I don’t know, but they’d definitely been clumsy with it.

**Victoria**

So they had redacted or blacked out certain sections?

**G015**

Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Victoria**

And what kind of…from the context could you tell what it was they blacking out? Was it third party mostly?

**G015**

Mostly third party. So there was a sexual perpetrator who came in our house, his name was taken out. Again, working in this field I understand why that is but it was a bit, you know, it still sits uncomfortable with you that hold on a minute, I was a victim and my siblings are a victim of this person’s behaviour and I think I can remember his name anyway but, you know, this person’s then protected from me finding out their name. I mean even if an offence gets committed now by a perpetrator that victim finds out who they are, when they go to custody and when they’re released so yeah it seemed a bit odd.

**Victoria**

Yeah, that is a bit…that could just be somebody not understanding the rules because…was this person ever convicted of offences, those offences?

**G015**

Yeah, yeah.

**Victoria**

Then that should be a matter of public record so, then they shouldn’t have been taken out, but I think when, like you were saying, somebody is doing this as an extra add on to their job or it’s not something that they know a lot about information like that they might feel is particularly risky to give to you, so that’s probably why it was taken out.

**G015**

There is another issue. I mean I… so basically there was that incident, that was my sibling actually, so the tests on me came back inconclusive, I could sit here and say well I don’t think that happened but I’ve got no idea. Across the road my auntie lived there and my cousins – I mean it’s ridiculous really to think about it – but there was also exactly the same thing that happened over the road in that house with a different perpetrator, but they…all three siblings then they went into care and they got adopted, but in my care files that’s not there, and what I do know is that they came and spoke to us about that side of things, so I don’t know whether our information will be in their care files possibly and maybe that’s not about my care experience and that’s why it’s not in there, but what it does is it’s almost like I’m not getting a true picture, if that makes sense, cos I would be interested to see what was going on with that, but I would have no rights to access their care files to find that information out either, so yeah. I think someone mentioned this before, but it…it does fill gaps, it does explain… I described it to somebody recently, it definitely give me a better picture of what went on and filled missing information for me, but it also left me thinking about unanswered questions as well, so it was like two-fold really. But I’d rather have done it than not, even, you know, with as much of it as was redacted, if I look back now and say would I have rather had it than not I’d say absolutely I’d rather have done it.

**Victoria**

Was there anything… just coming back to redaction again, was there anything taken out that wasn’t to do with third parties? Because they can redact things they think is potentially damaging to you.

**G015**

Some full pages were taken out, yeah yeah, some full pages, mass amounts were taken out so I…the answer is I don’t know what’s behind that, you know what I mean? So it doesn’t read like a…it should read like a narrative, like a story, and you have to…cos what your mind automatically does is try to fill them gaps in, that is what you’ll do. If you’re reading a book and all of a sudden you get to page 79 and it’s missing a page, you will start to think right jesus I need to continue with the book I’m just gonna try and guess what was in page 79, and that’s exactly what my brain was doing. So as I’m reading through it…yeah some of them were full pages and in my mind I’m just thinking that that’s because it’s my siblings or you know…but maybe you’re right, maybe they’ve made a decision that I’m not entitled to that information, I’ve got no idea.

**Victoria**

And they didn’t…there was no like…you said you got a letter with it, but there was no kind of explanation? It didn’t say…I know that some software can put like a little note next to the redacted bit that says ‘third party information’.

**G015**

No no no, it was just grey lines, just grey lines.

**Victoria**

Was there anything in there that you’d contributed?

**G015**

What I’d written? Yeah. When I was seven, yeah. Incredible that. [both laugh] Yeah, yeah, yeah, incredible. And it…you know it took me back to a very confusing time because you know when I was in care I…so I have a couple of care placements, one of them was awful, really bad, but then the one where actually we were separated, the one where we were separated…cos there were three of us in care and I was the oldest and the other two were separated and went to a different part of [Place name] and I went off my own way, and although that felt horrible that I was separated from my siblings that carer was really good, and they used to asked me questions about if I wanted to go home, and I used to say yeah but I didn’t want to, you know, and I can remember that being a…you know, I couldn’t bring myself to say to social services ‘I feel safe where I am and I don’t feel safe at home’, because everybody says…everybody has a mum and dad, that’s what people do – although I didn’t have a dad anyway – but I had my mum and my mum loves me. So it was something…I can remember that being incredibly confusing, so to get the paper back when they were asking me where do I want to live and I was writing ‘at home’ at seven and stuff, it was incredible, really powerful stuff, really powerful stuff.

**Victoria**

Were there any photographs or anything like that?

**G015**

No no no. No photographs no.

**Victoria**

You said that you kind of found out that you could access the records and then you did, but was there like a particular motivation that you had? Were there particular questions you wanted answered or was it just curiosity?

**G015**

For me, I…what I wanted to know, so there were a couple of questions that I wanted to know specifically. The first one was why did I go home. What was… knowing what I know now and knowing what happened as a result of us coming home… when I went into care, I went into care as far as I’m concerned because of the risk factors of my parent not being able to keep me safe right, so they managed to get…cos the perpetrator of the sexual abuse was removed, so if that was the reason you took me into care you succeeded and you allowed me to go back, but that’s not how it reads. It reads that my mum didn’t have the capacity to take care of me. Now if that is the case what I can categorically now state is that that didn’t change. So I was interested to see…and it didn’t give me the answer. It didn’t give me the answer. But it didn’t give me any…there was no actual thorough assessment that explained to me the significant improvements that my mum had made in terms of capacity and why I’d gone home. So it didn’t answer me that question. It did go round about it. She went into a mother and parent unit with my two younger siblings and at first they said there was real concerns about how she parents these two so how can she have five? So what was it? That’s what I don’t understand. And I’m not saying by any stretch of the imagination that I should have stayed in care, I’ve worked with lots of kids in care and they’ve not necessarily had positive outcomes either but just some conclusion or some thorough assessment where they said this was the difference, this was why we made the decision that all the children could go back home, cos she didn’t have the capacity to take care of us. And what happened as a result of that is that we were surrounded by drugs and crime and poverty and constant moving and being out of school and all the rest of it that were environmental factors that I didn’t control, that didn’t cause but was a significant correlating factor to my offending. And I wanted to understand all of that myself, but that is not necessarily about…that’s more about my professional head, do you know what I mean? That’s my…I wanted to self-analyse and create a narrative and get some explanation as well. I’ve never beat myself up over my offending anyway, you at the end of the day I’ve got sentenced, I’ve gone to custody, whatever, so I don’t beat myself up about my offending, I didn’t seriously harm anybody, I think that might have been different had I done that, but I didn’t. So I wanted to understand why, because I never felt like a prisoner, I never felt like a criminal, I’d sit in a cell and think I don’t… you know every time I got out of custody I would work…but all my offending was substance related, so why was I a druggie? I was on heroin by the time I was 16. What went on there? So I wanted to analyse my childhood and kind of make some sense of how it led into me sitting in a prison cell. So it was more of a professional assessment that I wanted to do on myself really, rather than it was about asking any personal questions, because I was seven, I did remember a lot of it. It’s not like if you go into care at two and you’ve experienced sexual abuse, *that* is different, but I could remember a lot of it, so I knew there was sexual abuse, I knew my mum was struggling with capacity, I knew that social care were involved. So I wanted them questions answered really.

**Victoria**

Yeah, that’s interesting that you have that wanting to know why you left care and went home when the most common question that other people have is why did they go *in* to care, but you obviously already knew the answer to that. In terms of the records themselves and the kind of content and the quality of them, was it what you’d expected? I suppose you’re in kind of the privileged position of knowing now what records look like, so was it what you’d expected it to be?

**G015**

Yeah, I guess so [laughs] yeah I work in the field don’t I so I kind of knew what…the way it was gonna be worded and, you know, I’ve got no…I think I’d love to sit the social worker down and say you know…but again our job, my job, is incredibly difficult, we’re making judgement calls every single day about children and whether it’s the right or wrong decision, so I wouldn’t say that that decision was even wrong. You know, that social worker at that time would have made the decision that they felt was right, you know, they don’t make choices that are going to be wrong for children. So I think yes, it was what I expected it to be. What it made me question…it made me question my professional job now actually because what it made me do is to try to clarify, if I’m recording something try to clarify exactly what I’m saying. Don’t say something that…don’t say something without…that might be perceived as damning by the kid without quantifying what I’m saying. The reason I say that is because at seven I was going to a primary school in [[Place name]] and the staff reported that I was displaying sexually inappropriate behaviour to females in the playground and that’s all it says. It doesn’t say there was a meeting called about that, it doesn’t say that there was a discussion had with me, it doesn’t say what behaviour that was, and as a…I mean I was 30 at the time, as a 30 year old man to read that and think bloody hell what were I *doing*? You know? What was I doing? Was it that they…? So I think what people can do, what professionals can do – and they do it all the time by the way, I listen to it all the time, people use words like ‘oh well they’ve got attachment issues’ – if you’re going to put that in a document you need to quantify what you mean by that. Because, I mean, they might not like you, they might not like social care, they might not like, you know…that doesn’t mean they’ve got attachment issues and we’re not doctors, you know so… ‘trauma’ is the new word, buzzword, research in America, so you know ‘he’s traumatised’, well you need to be careful cos we’re not doctors. We’ve got to use language, that’s fair, but you’ve got to be careful when you are making statements and so having read my files if I make a statement while I’m recording I will quantify exactly what I meant, if I think that could be perceived as damning by that young person, cos there were a couple of things that were said like that about me, and I found that just a bit annoying, cos like well I don’t think that, what gives you the right to record that about me? Fair enough if you perceived that to be the case but just tell me why, don’t just put it there because that’s frustrating.

**Victoria**

I mean they are…everyone that I’ve spoken to has said they’re full of jargon, and abbreviations and acronyms and yeah these kind of phrases that sound straight out of a piece of guidance or a textbook or whatever.

**G015**

A textbook yeah. And I don’t know…that is one of my…I can’t stand it and so I got my Youth Justice degree and I wanted to…before I’d even challenge any of that I wanted to…you can’t challenge it if you don’t qualify, because if you’re not qualified you don’t know what you’re talking about, so I qualified, if anyone wanted to get me into a conversation about that… you know there is a massive gap between the way we operate and what we think we do and how it’s received by people, so we can keep…it’s almost – it’s really horrible to say this – but it’s almost like in my opinion it’s like when we used to…we would go to countries and we would say these people are savages, because their cultures different we would justify lots of things, I think there’s a little bit – I’m not saying it’s like that – but I think there’s a little bit of that, it’s almost like a superiority complex, that if you know things, if you can talk a certain way, if you’re educated and these people can’t follow you it doesn’t make you right and them wrong, it’s *language*. People we work with they think…I can remember thinking when people were talking to me ‘You’re off your head, you don’t know what you’re talking about.’ When I come into the field, it’s not wrong but it’s a language disparity and I think you need to close that and I’m guessing the majority of people that access their care files well they’re not professionals. I’m in a very privileged position so I knew exactly what they were talking about, because language ironically hasn’t changed a right lot, but I would imagine that would be incredibly frustrating if you haven’t had the experience of working in the field or you’re uneducated, I can imagine that being really difficult actually.

**Victoria**

Yeah, yeah, it was something that [Person’s name] brought up in the workshop in [Place name], saying about it needs to be in a language that people can understand, that’s not…that we need to think about audience when things are being written because at the moment it’s not anticipated, still not being anticipated, that down the line the individual is going to come back and read it.

**G015**

You’ll never change that. You’ll never change that because what…primarily we’re service led, you know, it’s just the way it will always be because we’ve got to justify our own existence, we make things complicated for *our* needs, it’s got nothing to do with… whether it’s youth offending or drugs, it doesn’t matter what agency, we call them specialist agencies but fundamentally we’re dealing with people in poverty, we’re all doing the same thing, yeah, we just put special spins on it because we’ve got to, because we’ve got to justify our own existence, because when the belt straps are tightened you know we’re all in the business of saying ‘no, actually we’re really important’ and the only way we can make ourselves really important is by saying look it’s really complicated and we can solve it, but it’s all about relationships, it’s all about…you know it doesn’t matter what agency you work with it’s about…if you stripped it all away and…I believe personally that it doesn’t matter whether you’re social care or youth offending or a drug agency or the young service or whatever agency you are I just think you’re working with people to try and inspire them, but if you stripped it back and made it about that then a whole heap of line managers would have to go, services would be stripped back and people don’t want that, people want to be important. They do. The whole system’s set up that way so if you…you know, how do you get a line manager’s job? You get a line managers job because you know more of the jargon. I mean how many managers have I come across in 11 years of working in children’s services who’ve got there because they’re great at working with kids? Very very few. In fact, more often than not they’re the ones that are stuck in the front line work. The ones that climb the ladder are the ones that know jargon, theory, research. I’m not saying that those things aren’t important but what I’m saying is you need a balance, but the balance isn’t there. So all the people that hold the power want it to be complicated, because they want to justify their own existence, so I’m not…I mean you’re doing this research, it’s great, it doesn’t mean you don’t do it, but do you understand what I’m saying?

**Victoria**

I do, yeah.

**G015**

I think that that would be…I don’t know how you would strip that back, because it’s not what the systems are here to do, the systems are here to justify their own existence and to do that, like I say, they make it complicated and it sets a meritocratic system then doesn’t it? It sets a pyramid where people are able to…that’s how you separate front line staff from chief executive of Children’s Services or, you know, target service leaders. How would you ever have that system if it didn’t operate the way it operates? Just my personal view though.

**Victoria**

No, I think you’re absolutely right. [laughs] You know, you get through the system by knowing the system, working the system, and excelling at the system.

**G015**

Excelling at the system!

**Victoria**

If you break out of the system then yeah, it’s very unusual for you to then be able to change everything around you. Given that then, if you’re approached in your work by a young person who has been in care, or is in care, who wants to access their records, how do you think is the best way of going about supporting them through that? What kind of mechanisms need to be in place for that to happen?

**G015**

You need…I’ll give you an example. So, Friday, last Friday, I’m working with this boy, fifteen years old, says to me ‘G015, I wanna know why I was in care.’ Ok, I’m quite blessed, done life story work, contacts the social worker and she says ‘oh, I’ve got his life story booklet here, you can do his life story booklet’, ok, she drops it off at the office. I’m in quite a privileged position me really because we sit down and we do the life story work and he…his mum was in a place where my mum was, so we look at the booklet, we’re going through, he finds out – he’s going through this information for the first time – he finds out that when he was five and he went into care because his mum had mental health issues and substance misuse problems, she goes into [Place name], I said ‘my mum’ – I’m talking to him – ‘my mum was there, that’s a bit ironic isn’t it?’ So ‘Yeah, yeah.’ So we’re having a bit of a conversation, then he went to an adoptive parent where they actually abused him, his adoptive parent, so he was only there five months, and soon as we turned the page to them he goes ‘oh bad memories’ yeah, so we talked that through, then we flicked the page, then it was saying – I don’t know if you’ve ever seen a life story booklet but it’s very child friendly language and it was saying you know ‘the social workers made a mistake and it wasn’t the best place for him so we had to take him back to the previous carer’, and then it had a picture of him and his sister and then a blurb underneath it that said ‘My name’s so-and-so and I’m very polite and I like dogs’ or whatever, I can’t remember what it said, but I said ‘It’s like Tinder’ and me and him just cracked up laughing right, it was just absolutely one of the funniest thing that’s happened to me in the last couple of years. We were both in hysterics right? The reason I’ve raised that is because…it’s not about me being in care but that did give me an extra angle…but it wasn’t…people always talk about ‘oh you know you’re opening this can of worms’. And professionals are scared stiff of doing what I did with that boy in that room, now I picked him up yesterday, picked him up, he’s fine! He hasn’t fallen apart, he’s absolutely fine. He just wanted a few questions answered and I answered him. Now that’s not accessing care files but it’s the same ethos. What we need is… to access care files it would mean they’ve left, more often than not they’re older level to be able to do that… so if we’ve missed the opportunity to do the life story work and then they turn around and say I don’t need me files, I know everything because I’ve worked with Children’s Services throughout my time in care… it means there’s been missed opportunities. But we need to stop with this idea that these kids are going to fall apart, these kids are more resilient than most of us because they’ve been through really horrific and serious trauma. Now there is a level of sensitivity, there is, and that… I knew that he wasn’t, that we wasn’t talking about sexual abuse, but I think we need to get practitioners to be at a level where they’re not scared of it, you know what I mean? They’re not scared of doing it, because I think it’s more about practitioners being scared than it is about the kids. Another example. A couple of years ago I had a 12 year old kid who were absolutely screaming ‘I want to know why I came into care’ and people – it wasn’t [Place name], so I couldn’t push for it, he was living in [Place name] from a different authority – and I was saying to them he’s come on my group with [p100] and he’s asking us, he’s saying, but ‘oh he’s not ready’. I mean, he’s 12. You have to help him. One, you have to deliver it in a way that he can understand, that’s your job really, yeah? And two, you’re doing more damage by not telling him, but there’s a stigma almost, once you start talking about some of this stuff, particularly in the youth justice field, because the kids might be emotionally unstable, might be offending you know, but this idea that you’re opening a can of worms, well the can of worms is already open if they’re in our service, what I’d say is you need to help them juggle them can of worms. So I would always, now I’m life story trained, I would always say what do you wanna know and I’ll help you find out. I’m not a social worker so it’s not my job to take on their role but what do you wanna know and I’ll try and help you find out, and if I find out that it’s very very sensitive information then it’s my job to pass over to the therapeutic social work team or the social work service and say ‘you guys need to help him through this’ because if he gets to 18 he’ll end up like me at 30, and they’ll just drop it on him you know and he’ll have no support around him. The kid’s actually blessed at the moment, he’s in children’s social work service, he’s with YOS [Youth Offending Service], let him choose which practitioner he wanted to go through that work with. We have CAMHS [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services] nurses here so I said to that boy ‘really most practitioners here would refer you straight to the nurse’, do it with the nurse. I gave him an option, do you wanna do it with the nurse or do you wanna do it with me? I’ve never done it before. But, you know, people are scared. And I understand why. Like I say, I’m in quite a privileged…but we had a laugh, you can break it down and you can make it so that it’s not this ‘oh my god, you know you’re gonna open all these doors and you’re gonna break down and…’ Actually what you can do is you can make it like light-hearted, you can do it in a child friendly way and you can help him make sense of his journey because I think there was a missed opportunity from the criminal justice system earlier on to liaise with children’s social work service to get my files and to just sit me down and do exactly that piece of work. ‘G015, right, you’re 16 years old, you’ve been addicted to heroin, that’s unusual, so what we’re gonna do is we’re gonna look at why that might be, because most 16 year old kids don’t get addicted to heroin, so let’s have a look, right let’s have a look at your care files, what were happening? Yeah, there were drug addicts in your house, and everyone was drinking - I was intoxicated with vodka at 7 years old - so, G015 do you think that might have played a part into why you’re taking… I’m not saying that that wouldn’t have meant I wouldn’t have spent years in the criminal justice system but the option didn’t seem there. So, you wouldn’t have opened a can of worms you would have helped me make sense of that can of worms is what I would say.

**Victoria**

In terms of accessing your files when you were 30, looking back on it, do you wish that there had been more support around it?

**G015**

Yeah. Yeah, even as a professional, without questions. You know, I think - support is an interesting word – I think at the very least they had the responsibility to say to me ‘what is your situation like? Who’ve you got around you? Have you got a partner? Have you got your siblings? What’s your situation?’ What are you going to do with this, you know? Are you an alcoholic? If you’re an alcoholic and living on your own and I’m gonna land this stuff on you what’s going to happen then? So I don’t necessarily think that meant…support didn’t necessarily mean a social worker coming round and knocking on my door, I wouldn’t have took that, but if they have said to me look there’s a number here, yeah, if you have any issues at all with any of that information this is the person to contact. Because what – I think I mentioned this when we were in the group – what they didn’t consider is what were the implications for my siblings, you know what…my siblings then say to me ‘G015, can I have your care files?’ You know, what responsibility, how do I deal with that? I didn’t know what to do. Do I go give them my files? I didn’t by the way. I made the conscious decision to say do you know what there’s a number, if you want it go through that process, and again they didn’t do it. They didn’t do it because they weren’t ready, so why should I do that for them? That’s the justification in my own mind. And it’s the same with people when the kids are young, if they don’t want to know they’ll tell you, but from data protection we need to be telling them they’ve got a right, you’ve got a right to this information, do you wanna know? I believe most people if they don’t wanna know, they’ll just say no, and if they’re ready for it they’ll say yeah, because you know even children…they kind of…you know, like [person’s name] and you know some of the others, I’ve worked with lots of young people that say ‘I don’t want to read that’, because deep down inside they know that what they’re gonna read is going to be traumatic, but we shouldn’t be taking that right away from children in my view, and we should be giving them the service that they deserve and we should be doing it…if we’re really good at what we do we should be doing it in a child friendly way that they can understand. And I would advocate for doing it at 5 in a way that they would understand, doing it at 7 in a way that they would understand, repeating it again at 12, and just continuing to do it until they get to a point where they can have just a level conversation about what happened to them when they were children and that makes sense of it. By not dealing with it that’s just about the professional, not about the child, in my opinion.

**Victoria**

It seems like what you were saying about life story work…that seems like quite a critical way of being able to communicate at those different stages, because it provides you with that narrative that the file itself might not have.

**G015**

Absolutely.

**Victoria**

Because the file is fragmented, it’s full of administrative documents, it doesn’t have like the photographs and the personal memories and the kind of, you know, like you were saying about being able to see what you yourself wrote down is a powerful thing and it connects you then back to your sense of self and your memories and your past and stuff in a way that reading an assessment probably isn’t going to do.

**G015**

Yeah. But even that good piece of work that happened with that kid right, that was probably…it was his journey from not being in care to being in care and it was closed, it was a book, it was a fantastic piece of work, but the issue was what I should have got is five books. I should have got five. It was a laminated booklet, it was great, it was a great piece of work, but it was only over a period of about two, three years. That should be a process and not an end, so that should’ve been something that gets to the end point, to where he is now, and he has them. By the way, he’s saying I’ve never seen this book. So great as it was…he probably did see it, surely it wouldn’t have been made for him not to see, but as far as he was aware he couldn’t remember reading that book, which is incredibly interesting because actually he’s only 15, so it were only 9 years ago. But then there was 9 years missing.

**Victoria**

Yeah, which is a shame. I suppose when you’re young and you’re a child, you remember things by them being reinforced don’t you? You go back to your photographs of your holidays or your birthdays or whatever and you have those things with you all the time. If his life story book was in the custody of the social worker or whatever it’s not there.

**G015**

Yeah I’ve dropped it back off to social services, yeah yeah yeah.

**Victoria**

It’s not there for him to keep rehearsing and going over.

**G015**

And I’m telling you how excited he got you know when he’s looking through it and he’s seen his brother and his sister, and he’s sat there next to me and he’s like ‘oh wow’ you know. Yeah, absolutely that he should have that booklet, there’s no justification for not, or the foster carer. You know what I mean? He’s in a long term foster care. It did break down for a while so…but you know I’ve come across very few kids in youth justice that have got that. Me and [p100] have been doing work together since 2013, I think I can remember one girl and she had it similar, she had it done and then it stopped at a certain stage, so there’s not many, not our kids anyway, because our kids are the ones that are most likely to have them kind of fragmented placements. I’m working with kids that have had 8, 9, 10 placements, they’ve been around the country in different local authorities, so it’s crisis management really, so it’s hard for whoever’s managing that case – again language, it’s a case – to ensure that there’s some continuity in terms of a life story book when actually what they’re doing is running around trying to find placements for these children.

**Victoria**

And those are the situations I suppose where it would be most valuable to have something like that, because there’s so much change…

**G015**

I worked with a kid, he was 18 years of age - I think he’s in custody at the moment – he was 18 years old and I sat down to do a timeline with him. I mean…I just basically said to him kind of run me through your life narrative, your life story. He had no idea! He couldn’t…there were foster care placements he couldn’t remember, he couldn’t remember whether that one was before that one or…and when you’re talking about a can of worms, you know, that kid had…he had no photos, he had no sense of identity, zilch, nada, none, and then his behaviour is completely and utterly off the cuff, and later on we’re scratching our heads and saying like why is he committing all of these offences? He didn’t know who he was! And it was quite easy to do, to sit down… I’m not a doctor or anything but I sat down with him to just to do a simple piece of work, he had no idea when or how he was in certain placements. Now that’s…I understand why that happens, I work in services, it’s not because people are trying intentionally to cause harm or stuff, foster placements take children in and then you know have to deal with these behavioural problems, but if we do not make sure that they have some kind of continuity in terms of narrative and story about themselves we’re massively massively compounding the trauma that these kids have faced before they come into care and once they’re in no idea. He was one of the most horrific case I’ve ever come across, he had no idea. Could remember one or two people, but some people he spent six weeks with and then moved on you know? I didn’t have an experience like that so some people sometimes say to me ‘G015 have you got a certain view of the care system because you were in care?’ Well actually no, because I actually value…my care experience was pretty good, if I had to scale it from 0-10 10 being great I would say it was about an 8. I was nurtured and I was cared for when mum couldn’t do it. I’m talking off the back of these kids you know that I’m meeting it, it’s got nought to do with *my* experience. Yeah I’ve got certain questions but wow I mean, in the time that they took me they identified that there was problems in the first instance, they took me into care for two years while my youngest youngest sibling was growing up so that would give my mum a bit of respite for her to grow up. So there were lots of fantastic things that the care system did for me, I’m not…it’s not about me it’s about some of these kids I’m working with, I’m taking a step back and think not unintentionally we’ve caused a lot of damage to children. The children that I see succeed in the care system are those that have one long term foster placement, and that foster placement or foster carer will bat services off, once they come in to that kind of corporate parenting thing it’s difficult then for the kid, it’s not easy. It’s not easy. Then they become crisis management, we can’t find a placement for them, then they end up…I was working with a boy the other day, 16 years old, tells me he’s been in [five place names], and I’m just saying you know how does that happen? You know? I’m scratching my head thinking how did that happen? And he’s sixteen and he blames himself, ‘oh yeah it’s my behaviour’. He’s been secured on welfare grounds twice, and he’s not…he doesn’t shy away from responsibility, I’d argue he takes too much responsibility for it because what’s proportionate? I don’t know what’s proportionate in terms of his behaviours this way so he deserves 20 placements, his behaviours a certain way so he deserves 10? I don’t know. But surely instability creates offending, and we’re creating the instability.

**Victoria**

Yeah and it’s very, it must be very destabilising as you get older, if you don’t have that knowledge about your own past to kind of anchor you down. One of the things that got said at the group with [Person’s name] and [Person’s name] and stuff was…we were talking about photographs and when do you have photographs from, and nobody at the table had seen photographs of themselves – apart from [Person’s name] – had seen photographs of themselves as a baby.

**G015**

No, I haven’t.

**Victoria**

That for me was a real consciousness raising moment, to understand that something that I take completely for granted about myself…you wouldn’t think it’s a big thing knowing what you looked like when you were a child but because [Person’s name] was pregnant at the time as well I think, she was saying…

**G015**

She’s had the baby now do you know.

**Victoria**

Yeah, I’ve seen on Twitter. [laughs] To think that you know don’t…not to have that foundation, to have that grounding not there, is quite…to not have anything until you’re like 13 or 14 and you start taking pictures of yourself and using Facebook or whatever.

**G015**

You know what I would say in defence of the system is that – and it can always get better, it can always improve – I don’t have that and that’s because of my mum. I didn’t go into care until I was seven so them documents they don’t exist. My mum was in care when she was 16, she had me, she fell pregnant with me in care at 16, so some might say well you know the care system…but it’s incredibly difficult, it’s incredibly difficult because again I go back to the same thing, there’s a disparity between I would say the local authority and the entity that it is and people living in poverty, whether that’s families or whether that’s children that come into care, children feel…some children feel disconnected from what the local authority stands for and I think that’s where we could improve the care system. Once a child’s taken into care they’re always going to be angry, right? Having said that they’ve got loads of people around them that care for them but they don’t feel that they do care for them so that’s…I don’t know how we resolve that issue, but it’s incredibly difficult and the system tries very very hard to…but again my personal view is I would go back to that earlier conversation we was having about language and about justification for themselves and all that stuff, it’s about love. You know? These kids, so you know kids are let down, come into care, I don’t have none of that stuff but it was my mum that didn’t provide that stability, so I probably had just as much stability… I had three placements in three years but I had less stability with my mum. So it’s not easy, because most of the people that operate in the system…when kids come in they expect a kid to behave in a way that they would see their own kid behave, and this is the biggest issue for me. Because if a kid’s ten they’ve had ten years of living with a parent that’s had a different level of expectation on them. I’m not saying that you shouldn’t have expectations for them to go to school, stop smoking, stop taking drugs, of course you should, but you should love the kid unconditionally but that’s not how Ofsted works for example. They will say ‘is he going to school? Is he offending?’, so they’ll apply pressure on the people that are there to care for him to stop all of that behaviour and the kid I don’t think can cope, from what I can see happening, the kids they can’t cope because you know they *do* smoke, they *have* got bad behaviours, they do…and if we understand people at all Ofsted and other people shouldn’t place these targets on children because what you should be saying is you love the child unconditionally, if you want that long term gain then hopefully by the time you get to 16, 17, 18 – because they are going to be delayed, look at where they’re coming from, look at where they’re coming from. And that for me is the biggest thing is that there’s so many conditions applied to them when they come into care that they can’t cope with it.

**Victoria**

Yeah, it’s very difficult, when you’re doing research like this and you’re wanting to put forward recommendations on how you can improve things it’s very hard cos you know that everything’s stretched as tight as it can go, so where is there opportunities for change? I don’t think we know the answers to that yet. I suppose you’ve made me think about what’s the connection between love and that stable emotional support and keeping records, and maybe those two things sound like they’re a million miles apart but quite often you…you kind of do record your love with your family don’t you, through like taking photographs and telling each other stories about what you did and what it was like when and all those kind of things, and that’s one way that families reinforce the bonds that they have with one another, and that seems to be one thing that’s really often missing.

**G015**

But that’s…it goes back to what I’m saying, the thing is you’ve got staff who are doing a job, you’ve got Ofsted who have got expectations on staff doing jobs etc, and the kid will come in and the kid, the kid’s not going to love you for taking the child into care, so that’s where it becomes a little bit of an issue because staff, particularly let’s say residential homes, if they’re getting abuse by a child they become the victims so for them to be a victim the child’s got to be a perpetrator and so there’s…there’s a dynamic that’s going on there that means when they’re recording…I mean we had an incident where we had a child, 15 year old boy who was on an order with us, breached his order, went on the run, he was in a residential home right? Residential staff found him in a house, pulled up outside – I read this on a surveillance note that they did, so he would get this in a care file – ‘so-and-so in a house with unknown female, seen in top left bedroom’. Right? What kind of language is that? So, you know it was almost like…then they said to us if he comes down to the Youth Offending Service ring the police, well this is the difference right, so you have the criminal justice system we said if he comes down here we’ll feed him, we’ll ask him to hand himself off and we’ll send him away. You’ve got the care system telling the criminal justice system to ring the police. There’s summat going on there. Now I got into an interesting conversation with the manager of the children’s home, because they had protocol that they liaise with the police, I get it, you were doing a good job, they were dealing with protocol, the point I’m trying to make to you is there’s no more vulnerable time than when a child is on the run from the police, I’ve been there, it’s not nice when you don’t feel like you’ve got anywhere to go. Now one thing I can always guarantee, rightly or wrongly, is that I could go back to my mum’s real quick, get showered, get fed and get off. Where did this 15 year old…because this 15 year old boy’s in care, where did this 15 year old boy have to go for some sense of safety? Nowhere. Because he was in residential home where he knew if he went the police were going to turn up five minutes after and I’m not saying that children’s home staff shouldn’t liaise with police and follow protocols and keep children safe cos that’s what they put forward to me ‘well we’re keeping him safe’. I’d argue you weren’t, and that’s what I’m talking about, it’s not love. It’s something else, it’s surveillance, it’s multi-agency, it’s effectively business, and that’s what I’m saying, if you land in a foster care placement, one long term, you’ll get love and that’s the difference, so like you say, where do we get to a place where we’re comfortable – social care should be able to do this, YOS aren’t going to do it, if I go out and start talking to YOS staff about writing about love when you’re talking about looked after children they’ll think I’m absolutely…should be outside hugging trees or summat so that won’t happen. But the care system maybe it should, I don’t know, it is care after all. I haven’t seen a lot of that. I haven’t seen daily logs that say do you know like he kicked off this morning but all I did was give him a big bloody cuddle cos that’s what he wanted, no I haven’t seen a lot of that. It’s language, it’s abbreviations, it’s everything that [Person’s name] was talking about, so that maybe is something that you know in terms of recommendations I don’t know you know, maybe that would change… Language would change culture, so if you change the way people talked about it…would they be comfortable with that? I don’t know. Would professionals be comfortable saying ‘I absolutely love that child and no matter what that child does to me, I’m going to continue to love that child and make sure that child knows that he’s loved by me.’ Would they be comfortable? Would they want to? I don’t know. Most of them are academics, that’s what they are. They come in, they come through a certain training route, they like to use language, it makes them…it validates them, it validates their professionalism. I think you’d have a real job on your hands getting people to just strip all that back and talk about love and affection, because then what would the system do? Would the system say that’s more like a…we’ll pay them like nursery. It’s about merit and where merits applied, and if you’ve got a social work degree and you know abbreviations and you know you are due to be paid more than who looks after [Isabel] in the nursery, but if you start using language that they use in the nursery well maybe you can be paid a little bit less. I don’t know.

**Victoria**

No, but it is an interesting thought though, it’s an interesting thought though. Because I’ve been thinking about ways…how do you talk to social workers about these kinds of things, how do you disrupt their assumptions about what should and shouldn’t be written down and how it should be written down, and thinking about saying well let’s write this, let’s look at this scenario, now write it down as though you were writing it down about your own child or about your brother or a sister or whatever. If you were writing it for them what would you say and how would you say it and what would you express? Thinking about it more in terms of something they have an emotional connection with rather than thinking with a professional head on all the time.

**G015**

I do an interesting…thinking about that, when I do training I do an activity where I separate two groups of people, or three or whatever depending on how many people are there. I give them three scenarios: 15 year old boy found with a butterfly knife in his bedroom, which is illegal; [Person’s name], it’s [Person’s name], 15 year old girl kicks off in a house, runs in the kitchen tells you she’s going to kill you, grabs an object, you don’t know what it is – it was actually a spoon, people didn’t know that at the time; and 12 year old girl goes out and comes back, you know she’s been at a friend’s house and she’s been smoking cannabis. Separate them up, one group you’re the corporate parent, one group it’s your own kid, right, and at the end we talk a little bit about what corporate parenting is and they feed back, and only once have we ever had an issue with it. Every single time the staff that are talking about their own kid have said no social services wouldn’t find out, no the police wouldn’t find out, no the school wouldn’t find out, nobody would find out we’d deal with it in house and that would be it. Only once someone tried to argue they’d take the kid down to the police with the knife but I just…you know I rolled with that but I found that very difficult to believe. In the cases where the child was looked after, it’s a residential home setting, most of them are residential home staff, if the YOS are involved they need to be notified it increases risk, if they’re at school they would have to have a meeting at school, particularly the knife, to see if they’re taking it into school, social workers would have to find out, there’d be a risk of vulnerability meeting. The idea is it’s about criminalising children looked after, but most of them say ‘we wouldn’t ring the police though’. It’s not about that, there’s something wider going on than that, that kids would say the meetings that you’re all having are bullshit is what they’d say, and actually if you looked at that the children that are not looked after aren’t having to sit and take responsibility for every action that they take in their house. It’s not about ringing the police, it’s about just burdening them with everything that happens when their comparative groups that are not looked after are not having to take on that responsibility, they’re only accountable to their parent, and the parent as you lot have all just mentioned wouldn’t bring in other people.

**Victoria**

No. There was a really interesting conversation about this with [Person’s name] and [Person’s name], cos [Person’s name] said ‘They never let you forget’, cos we were talking about remembering and forgetting and she was like ‘They’ll never let you forget’, meaning they’ll never let you forget things that you’ve done, mistakes you’ve made anything like that, and then [Person’s name] said ‘yeah, why is it that just cos I was in care at the time, why is there a record of the fact that you know sometimes I went off and met up with this girl in a different part of town. Would my mum have been writing that down about me for the future, so that it was forever recorded that that was a behaviour that I was having?’

**G015**

But think about it in a criminal justice context, it bumps up risk. If it bumps up risk…if we’ve got all of that information in comparative to other groups, we get that information, we do our risk assessment, it increases risk of harm, it increases risk of reoffending, it increases risk of safety and wellbeing, so what happens is then we put that report to the judge, the judge then looks at that – I’ve was just talking to my manager about looking at BAME groups, so we know that BAME groups are significantly over-represented in the criminal justice, is it that there is a subconscious bias from judges and the court process which is what we’re assuming, or is it that we as a criminal justice services are presenting reports to court that are higher risk for certain groups? So for example looked after children the risk would go up because we’d be privy to a whole heap more information than we would if children weren’t looked after, because very rarely do parents ring up, occasionally they do, but very rarely do parents ring up and say ‘yeah do you know what he started swearing at me last night, become very abusive and kicked the door off’, we don’t get that information. Looked after children we always get it, so then you’re looking at ‘sequence of aggressive behaviour’ – language that we use – and it just bumps up risk and if we’re putting that in reports and giving it to the courts make no wonder that we’ve got 25% of the adult custodial estate that are made up of care leavers. It’s systemic, yeah, and that’s the point of the training that I’m trying to get across is that I’m not saying you can stop it, I’m not saying to the care home that you can’t liaise with the police, but just operate in the margins you know. Yes there are protocols and the policies that you have to stick to but you can still do that and still keep your organisation safe but make sure that there’s a bit a humanity, do you know what I mean, that you’re not all following protocols and processes because you can’t raise children like that. The disproportionate over representation of children in care in custody, of children that have experienced card, it proves that. Yes, they’ve experienced things that contribute towards offending before they come into care which is also a massive contributing factor, but I believe that there are still some systemic things that are going on in care that contribute towards it too and all these things that we’re talking about play a part in my opinion.

**Victoria**

Yes. Thank you very much, I think we should probably come to a close because we’ve been, yeah, exactly an hour. Is there anything else that you wanna add about your own experiences of accessing your care files before we finish?

**G015**

If you let me go again I’ll go again for another hour [both laugh].

**Victoria**

Alright then we’ll stop and I’ll stop recording.

**END OF INTERVIEW**

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

Interview held 10th October 2018 between G112 and Victoria Hoyle by telephone.

**BEGINNING OF INTERVIEW**

**Victoria**

So, if you could start by telling me how you came to access your [Place name] records?

**G112**

I mean I’d known my history, that we were in [Place name] etc, and I really don’t remember how I knew I could access my records, but I did contact [Place name] Headquarters], yes I contacted [Place name]. It was many years ago, I can’t remember how many years ago…actually I should have sorted out my records, never thought about that but anyway… I just said basically ‘I’d like to access my records’. I can’t remember how long it took, but the process seemed quite straightforward.

**Victoria**

So did you speak to someone originally on the phone?

**G112**

I believe so yes, I’m sure I would have been on the phone, yes.

**Victoria**

And so when they arrived, your records, did they come in the post or did you go and get them in person?

**G112**

No, I was contacted by a gentleman from [Place name], who I now know has passed, and he said he was coming down to Plymouth and he would be bringing my records with him, and he would come to see me at home and spend some time going through them and answering any questions etc. And I was a little apprehensive, because I didn’t quite know, you know, what it was all about etc, but he was lovely, a lovely man, and he went through it with me and he said ‘now, if you’ve got any problems whatsoever please ring me.’ You know, he’d come down purposely to Plymouth to go through my records with me. I understand I don’t think that happens so much now.

**Victoria**

No, no.

**G112**

But I thought it was a nice touch, and you know it was great. There was things in it that I was slightly surprised about, but there was things that also I knew about, you know? So there was no real major things, I felt quite happy with the whole situation. But shortly afterwards, I don’t know why, but I think it sort of hit me, and I had to take some time off work. That was the only thing that I could think that it was. It was a bit of a shock you know? I don’t know. It was almost like an emotional thing.

**Victoria**

Yes, well, I have spoken to other people who have had a very similar experience. That at the time they’ve felt fine and then it was afterwards that it brought up memories or made them think about things in new ways, and they just really struggled to get back to their everyday lives as before. And certainly some other people I’ve spoken to took time away from work, or sort of had periods of depression afterwards. So I think that’s pretty common.

**G112**

I suppose it’s perhaps like a delayed reaction. But at the time you see I was working for social services, and I was working in children’s homes. I was a residential social worker, and you know I thought I can’t let this impact, you know, on my career sort of thing. Because of being in [Place name] and my history and that, that was the way that my career path went, and for that I’ll always thank [Place name]. But at the time I was working with some very difficult young people and I thought ‘oh’ and I spoke to my boss and he said ‘no, I think you better see the doctor and take a short spell off’ you know? Which was fine, and everything’s been alright since really.

**Victoria**

So, the records themselves. Do you have them? Did he bring you copies of them?

**G112**

Oh yes, yeah, I’ve still got them.

**Victoria**

And have you ever looked at them since, since he came and talked through them with you?

**G112**

I have on occasions yes, because I have spoken to people along the way over the years. They’ve not realised that they could still access their records, and I’ve explained, you know, what happened with me and all the rest of it, and you know I’ve sort of got them out and gone through it with them. Normally they’ve been strangers. I do a lot of talks for [Place name] and stuff, fundraising events you know, so you get to talk to different people that are attending these events. I had a lady, oh a little while ago now, in Plymouth and she said to me ‘I didn’t know I could do that!’ and I said ‘oh yeah’ and I gave her all the details and she contacted [Place name] and she rang me and said that they’d made contact with her, and she said ‘do you mind if I ring you again?’, and I said ‘no by all means’ and I said ‘if you need any support I’ll be around for you’. But I’ve not heard from her recently, so whether she’s actually got her records I don’t know, I know there was a delay at the time, I think there was quite a backlog, but yeah she was thrilled that this was a process that she could go through. Because, you know, she’d shared the information with her family and her grandchildren and she said ‘oh they’re so excited’. [laughs] It was nice really for her you know.

**Victoria**

Yeah, well it can be quite…I suppose when you’re coming back to it later on in your life, when you have a lot more experience and self-awareness, it is quite exciting that there’s this body of information about you that you’ve never seen, and you become curious I suppose about what might be in there.

**G112**

Yeah, that’s right.

**Victoria**

I know you said it’s a while ago and you’re not sure of the exact process but do you remember what was your motivation for asking for you records at that time?

**G112**

Erm, I really can’t remember, I don’t know. I think being in the job that I was in we used to have to write reports etc on the young people in our care, and you know I was probably inquisitive to find out what somebody would write about me and my family. Because I think I was very much aware that things had changed, from [Place name] days, and in fact when I… I’ve got a brother up in [Derbyshire], in fact two brothers up in [Place name], and my eldest brother... my whole family was split up at one time, after being in [Place name], and they’ve all got varying ideas about [Place name] care and what happened and all the rest of it, and I went up to visit one of my brothers, and in turn I visited the other one as well. His wife spoke to me privately and she said ‘do you know I’d love [Person’s name] to get his records’, so I said ‘that’s easy enough, you know, you just need to contact [Place name], I can give you all the details’, because she knew I was then a volunteer for [Place name]. And she said ‘he’s ever so funny about it’, and I said ‘well I don’t know why’ but he’s always had that sort of character about him. Anyway, I said ‘if you want I’ll have a chat to him’. Anyway, I had a chat to him and he said…now let me think what he said… I said ‘the only thing I remember about when I got my records is when you go through it, you need to be aware that back in the day people that wrote records are entirely different to the people of today,’ I said, ‘for example, they more or less back in the day used to write in their own words, and their own opinions, I found.’ And my brother said ‘what do you mean by that?’ and I said ‘well, look, like in my records I remember it specifically that they did say about my mother that she used to turn up to visit when it wasn’t convenient.’ And I related it to a young person that was in our care at the time, and his mother always used to turn up at meal times, because they were local children you know, and I mean we used to say to her ‘would you like to stay for tea then?’ and I think she cottoned on to this you see. When I was telling my brother about it I said ‘the thing is we as residential social workers write the records, we’ve had training on writing, on records writing etc, and we can’t put our own opinions down,’ I said, ‘but there was certain things in my records that were said specifically about my mother.’ And he took real offence to it, and he said ‘oh oh’ and this that and the other, and I said ‘hang on [Person’s name] I’m just trying to prepare you to realise that today’s idea of recordkeeping and back then is entirely different, so it may come over different if and when you apply for your records,’ and he said ‘oh oh’ and this that and the other and he actually fell out with me over it. He did. He has spoken to me a couple of times but for the main part he won’t entertain me. He said ‘you were saying things about my mother’ and I said ‘no, you’ve got it wrong, I wasn’t saying anything derogatory, I was saying that you need to be aware that the records kept back then would be entirely different in the way that somebody wrote it.’

**Victoria**

And that shows I think how the context of the records, as you say, the culture of social work and recordkeeping at the time, is really important to understand because otherwise you can be shocked and offended and really upset by some of the things that are said.

**G112**

Yes yes, absolutely right.

**Victoria**

The [Place name] chap who came and talked through your records with you, did he chat to you about these things when you looked at them together?

**G112**

Well, he…I can’t remember, I mean he did chat all the way through it, he was very thorough, but I think the influence of me working in the job I was in, in child care, and having proper training etc… I’m not decrying any carers that were around for us, you know, I think as far as that goes there were so many children in care at the time and they were doing a sterling job, but a lot of them were just ordinary people, you know, whereas the work that we did, we had to answer for anything we put down and we had to be very careful about how we worded stuff. I suppose it’s easy sometimes to put your own slant on it but we were definitely trained in the respect that you don’t do that, you know? I mean this lady that used to come around at teatime, she was a bit of a pain to say the least because she disrupted all the kids you know, and I mean it was a problem enough at mealtimes trying to get them to sit down for a meal, because most of them had just been sat in front of the television or whatever you know, and didn’t know what it was like to sit at the table, and so we always encouraged them to sit at the table. But of course when she was there they were performing to her more or less, it was food fights and all sorts you know. [laughs] But, yeah, I tried a couple of times to ring my brother and speak to him but he’s always been very stubborn, and I think to myself well it wasn’t meant in any way, I was trying to prepare him. I don’t know whether he has actually got his records now, but certainly his wife was very keen that he should. There we are, that was that. But to me I can’t fault [Place name] in their practice at all, I wouldn’t be volunteering for them now if I thought they had any failings whatsoever, about their caring etc and recordkeeping. As I say, I suppose had I not been in the job I would have never realised that there was a difference in recording!

**Victoria**

Yeah, because if you’ve had no previous contact with child social care records, if you’ve never seen them before and see them for the first time when you see your own, then I think that can be quite disorienting. I’ve spoken to a couple of people who, similar to you, were working within children’s services of some kind when they saw their records and they’ve all talked about how that helped them, not only to understand what was in the records but also to find their way through them, know where to look for the most important and key bits of information. Whereas people who are coming to them completely blind without having had any previous experience can get a bit lost amongst them, because they can be very detailed and long and complicated and there isn’t always an obvious order or chronology to things.

**G112**

No, no.

**Victoria**

Yeah, that can be quite challenging. The other thing that lots of people have talked to me about is redaction, where things were taken out of their records or blacked out of their records, because they related to another person. Did you have any experience of that? Were there sections that were removed from yours?

**G112**

No, there wasn’t. I mean I was only three when I went into [Place name], and my two eldest sisters…I forget how old they were but they were a lot older than me… I was more or less in the baby’s section and my two eldest sisters, although we were all actually in [Place name] village, there was my brother…there was five of us altogether…but my youngest brother wasn’t born whilst we were in [Place name]. No, sorry, let me get this right, he was born. [Place name] tried several times to reunite the family, and that was when my young brother was conceived presumably, and we were back living at home then for a spell, but it never worked out. We continued to be in [Place name] care all around the country, because my father used to work away, and I think my mother was working in service as well. To me it appeared that if we were taken back into care they tried to locate us in a home nearby where mum and dad were sort of thing.

**Victoria**

So everything about your parents and things, that was all left in your records? You could read all about them?

**G112**

Oh yes, yeah. And there was nothing, no real surprises in it, not at all as far as I can recall. Well it did say that when my mother visited, because my mother and father visited separately for the main part, when my mother used to go to go home I used to throw myself on the floor and kick the doors and all the rest of it, you know temper and all that, and I thought flipping heck you know. [laughs] But I’ve seen kids perform like that, and you know you’ve got to have an understanding of why they’re doing that, and if I was a little girl and if I knew my mother…I mean I can’t remember. For the main part my two eldest sisters have told me most about being in care, you know?

**Victoria**

So the records in a way fill in your memory, because they’re recording things from before the time that you were really conscious of what was happening.

**G112**

That’s right, yeah.

**Victoria**

I wondered, when you got the file was there anything in there that was written or created by you yourself? Or any photographs or personal items?

**G112**

No, not at all. No. I remember one time when I went up to…I think it was for a reunion up at [Place name], and my husband and I went up from Plymouth on a coach, in fact there was four coachloads went from Plymouth, and it was a massive reunion, all on the village green, you know it was very well organised, and I was able to see some photos then, when we went up. My two sisters were in the church choir and I was fascinated to see them in these three corner hats and what have you, you know, and I saw a couple of photos of me, when I was little, but for the main part… I mean, I have always taken photos of my children and grandchildren because of the lack of photos of me as a child. You know because the grandchildren will say to me ‘nanna, was you so-and-so’ and as they get older they do know about my history, and they certainly know about the talks I do, and they’re really keen to know about it all, and I keep all the photos and talks, recorded, that I’ve done. And my son said to me ‘mum, please keep a record of all of it, because the kids as they get older will be even more interested.’

**Victoria**

Yes, yeah.

**G112**

So that’s what I’ve done, you know.

**Victoria**

I think photographs are a really important way that we remember aren’t they? They bring memories back more than perhaps just written records do.

**G112**

That’s right, yes. I mean my husband and I…this is my second marriage and it’s his third marriage, but he’s got three girls and they’re all part of our extended family. Two of them live locally, so we see them and we see the grandchildren and all the rest of it. And only just recently the youngest one came with her two children and we were sat in the conservatory having a coffee and what have you, and she said to me ‘G112, have you got any photos of my dad when he was in the Navy?’ So I said ‘yes, I’ve got lots love, why?’ And she said ‘I’ve never seen any’, and I said ‘What about your mum, did she not have no photos?’ I’m always very careful with how I deal with things with them you know, and I said ‘When your mum and dad were together and your dad was in the Navy, was there no photos then?’ and she said ‘no, I don’t know anything about my dad’s Navy career’ and I said ‘right, ok, out in the hall there’s a great big bookcase, there is loads and loads and loads of photograph albums and in there you can come and you can go through them and if there’s any you want to take you can take.’ I said ‘[Person’s name] and [Person’s name]’ – that’s my son and daughter – ‘whenever they come down they always ask to look at the photo albums’ and sometimes I look through and I notice ‘oh there’s a gap there, somebody has snaffled one of my photos.’ But if they want them, you know they’ll get them eventually anyway. But I did speak to [Person’s name] about it. I said ‘[Person’s name ] told me that her mum never told them anything about the Navy and there’s no photos’ and he said ‘G112, that doesn’t surprise me’ and I said ‘well I’ve told [Person’s name] that if she wants any photos she can.’ And actually on that same day I left the two of them talking in the conservatory together about his Navy days, and I think that opened up a lot for her you know.

**Victoria**

It helps to stimulate those kind of conversations between family members and things doesn’t it? So when those things are absent it does leave a bit of a gap. Did you find that when you read your records that you remember things differently, or that the records help you to remember things?

**G112**

Let me think now. I think I’m now aware of how much [Place name] staff tried to get us back as a family unit. However, there was an awful lot happened when we came out of care eventually, as the years went on, and there was a lot of bad stuff happened then with my father and then later with my stepfather. There was a lot of abuse etc and court cases, and you know it was not good. We were taken into local authority care at one time and we had to go to court and state what had been done to us by my stepfather, and there was a lot of horrible, horrible stuff, so that is more prominent in my mind, because when I was actually in [Place name] and moving around I was only little you see. I did go with my mother once to visit my two sisters that were both in a [Place name] home elsewhere, this was as they got older, and they used to do like an entertainment evening and the family was invited. They were doing a play of some description. But even then I didn’t understand who these girls were, if you see what I mean. Because I was so young I suppose, and nobody told me why they weren’t living with us. It wasn’t until later that I found out the true things that were happening, and as time went on I was always a bit of…let me see… When my young brother was born I always did a lot of his caring. Our mother didn’t seem to do much and I had to look after him and you know wash him and dress him and all the rest of it, and I always – in fact I mention it in one of my talks, about my brother – I always say that I protected him, being a little boy, more or less all his life. We were very very close. He eventually went through a very bad time with my stepfather too and it was me that brought it to the fore, whether my mother actually knew what was going on I don’t know, but it was me that brought it out in the end because I knew. I was aware in my own head that my stepfather had been trying to groom me over a long period, and I wasn’t having none of it, and I used to just go and sit outside and even the neighbours had noticed, but it wasn’t until it all blew up with my brother and I told my mother what my brother had said to me that… you know, she was not keen to call the police, for whatever reason, but anyway, I spoke to the police, they came out and they interviewed me and they interviewed my brother and of course we had to go to court and everything. My actual father, my own father, previously had been involved in a big court case whereby he had abused my two sisters. So, you know, it was all this stuff going on and it was just…our life was full of it, you know. But always my two sisters, being older, they always remember the care in [Place name]. They had…I don’t think they’d be called foster parents back then…they lived with people, both of them went to live with different people at different times, and these people became part of my two sisters’ lives, they used to call them auntie and all the rest of it, and these people’s own children were sort of brought up for a while with my sisters you know. And I remember we used to go…I must have been with my mother then, I think I was with my mother and my young brother, and we were taken to visit my sisters whilst they were still in care. So it was all a very disjointed family you know.

**Victoria**

Yes, so it sounds as though in addition to the [Place name] records there would also be records from the local authority too?

**G112**

There was, yes, because after I had [Place name] records I thought now there’s gaps here and I’d like to be able to fill the gaps and in [Place name] records they did say that there was some local authority care, and I managed to contact these other local authorities, in Leicestershire and other places, but there was one specific place that I couldn’t contact. In fact I contacted somebody, but I can’t remember who it was, and they said that there’d been a fire at this place and all the records had been destroyed.

**Victoria**

Right.

**G112**

So I really quite upset that I couldn’t fill that little gap, you know?

**Victoria**

Yes, that’s really unfortunate. I think some local authorities they just don’t have records, particularly before the 1990s, either things were lost or destroyed or, as you say, damaged in flooding or fires or whatever. It’s really hard when you know that they will have existed but they’re not there anymore.

**G112**

I mean I know that as far as the young people that I looked after, we used to be asked as members of staff if we would take the children on holiday. Two members of staff would take two children you know, and we’d involve the children in the planning of this holiday, and the excitement used to build up over the weeks previous you know, and it was all very exciting because these kids had never had holidays and stuff, and we as members of staff used to plan things. We used to say to the kids ‘what would you like to do for activities while we’re away?’ and some would say ‘could we go horse riding?’ and I used to say ‘yes we can look in to that’ and we used to plan the holiday along with the children we were taking. I did it for several years, and I used to take photos of them while we were away on holiday, and we always – certainly me and whoever else I was with – we always prepared a photo album for each child that we took away and gave it to them, so at least they’d have some sort of record. And when I left one of the homes a member of staff contacted me and said ‘G112, this particular home is closing, and I know you were here longer than me, but there’s loads of photos and we’ve been told we’ve got to shred them,’ and she said ‘I think that’s dreadful’ and I said ‘so do I’ and she said ‘well I’m leaving, and I’m going to live in [Place name] I think it was, and I’ve got a big envelope full of photos and I knew that if anyone would look after them you would’ and I said ‘yeah, let me have them.’ And she didn’t destroy them as she was told to, and I’ve still got a lot of these photos, and a lot of them I’ve put in albums, and I always say, in fact yesterday I went out for a meal with some of my ex-colleagues, we all worked together in children’s homes, and we were talking about different things and somebody mentioned a particular child that they’d seen in Plymouth, and this person, this young lady, had got her children with her and they were chatting and all the rest of it, and quite often when [Person’s name] and I have been in Plymouth somebody will shout across the road ‘[Person’s name]!’ and that’s what the kids always used to call me, and [Person’s name] will say ‘that’s one of yours.’ [laughs] We’ll cross over and they’ll have kids in pushchairs or whatever and they’ve openly admitted that their time in care was the most happiest. And I’ve always said to any members of staff, like the ones I was out with yesterday, I’ve said if ever you see anybody that you know jolly well was in that particular unit, I’ve said do tell them – don’t tell them who or why or where – but do tell them that if they want any photos back in those times, somebody has kept them, and then contact me and we’ll make sure we get them to them, because I think it’s vitally important. There’s no reason why I should keep them, but I was entrusted with them and I’d certainly pass them on to the kids you know.

**Victoria**

Yeah, it’s one of those things I think there a lot of people talk about taking lots of photographs of children on trips and, as you were saying, on holidays but then when people go to request their records or to find out more about their childhoods, they don’t find any of those photos have been kept. I think perhaps it’s a bit of a common story that they have been destroyed because they were not seen as being part of the record itself, which is shame. That kind of comes down to I suppose what people think the records are for.

**G112**

That’s right, yeah.

**Victoria**

And perhaps not thinking about the meaning that they might have for somebody later on in their lives, and they want to look back but they don’t have anything to bring those memories back to them.

**G112**

I know when I was taking about [Person’s name’s] daughter and the Naval photos, I said to her ‘what made you mention it [Person’s name]?’ and she said well it’s [Person’s name] – her little girl is 10 now - and [Person’s name] had to her ‘mummy, when you was 10 do I look like you did, when you was 10.’ And she said ‘I don’t know love’, and I said ‘was no photos taken of you when you was a child?’ and she said ‘well I certainly don’t remember any.’ I said once again, ‘go to the book case and from when your dad and I got together there was always photos taken and there’s lots of you in there, you can drag them out any time you come around and go through them with the kids, they’ll probably have a good laugh at what you looked like then.’ I just find it dreadful that people would not share things like that! And my husband, you know, he said ‘it doesn’t surprise me G112’ and I said ‘well I’ll make sure that [Person’s name] gets photos.’

**Victoria**

You talked about how initially accessing your records had a bit of a negative impact, I guess, having to take some time away from work to reflect on things, but what would you say were the consequences of seeing your records?

**G112**

I was quite pleased actually when I reviewed them again. As I say I do big events for [Place name], fundraising events, with gifts and wills and all that sort of stuff, but what I also do locally is I go to WI meetings, I’m invited as a speaker sort of thing, and I do one particular talk, it’s called ‘The Life and Times of Dr John Barnardo’, and I talk specifically on how the homes were formulated from day one basically by the doctor, and then there’s another half to that talk and it’s my [Place name] experience and I talk about things like some of the stuff that I’ve shared with you now, you know about my young brother. I don’t give them gory details, but it’s pretty evident when I talk about what happened within our family that they know, because I can end one particular bit with ‘And my father was sent to prison, and then my stepfather was sent to prison.’ So they know what the score is. But they’re really interested in how my young brother came out of all this and there is always somebody in the group that asks about my young brother, and you know I think that’s great. And that’s why I think it’s good to be able to share all that. I mean it’s all gone now, and it’s been gone many years, thank goodness, but at the time living through it was very traumatic, for us as kids you know.

**Victoria**

Of course, of course.

**G112**

But the records also stated that my mother and father always visited, separately. You know because I suppose of what was going on in their relationship, because as I say my father used to work away and my mother did also you know. But I think they both led separate lives, and I don’t suppose that helped when [Place name] tried to get us back together again and social services as well. Because clearly there was just too much going on, it was just not a good situation for us as kids really. So far as I’m concerned I can’t thank [Place name] enough for their involvement, and I always end my talk with that bit, and I also end it with that I thank social services for allowing me to be involved in so many young people’s lives. It’s just, these people that I speak to, they can’t believe it you know.

**Victoria**

I think it’s very difficult for people to imagine or understand the things that happen to children and the experiences that can be going on within families if you’ve had no contact with it or exposure to it.

**G112**

Yes, sure.

**Victoria**

Speaking for myself, coming and doing this project has completely changed my perspective on care and Children’s Services, and you know the experiences of adults who have been in care as children, I’ve found it to be very humbling and it’s moved me greatly, to speak to people and hear about their experiences that are so completely different to mine. When I talk to people particularly about photographs and things and I come from a family where photographs have always been really important as you describe, having them all in albums and being able to revisit them, and then to speak to people and some of them are as young as 18, and they’re telling me similar stories. That they don’t have any photographs of themselves when they were children, that they don’t know what they looked like when they were babies, and I do find it really quite upsetting to think about. It brings home to you what a big impact it has, not just at the time but onwards always.

**G112**

But on the other side of it I suppose, like the stuff that I’ve described that was going on in our family over many many years, I suppose if you look at it logically who is going to take photos while all that is going on?

**Victoria**

That’s very true, that’s very true.

**G112**

There was so much you know of people trying to protect us within the environment, but there was so much negativity and stuff.

**Victoria**

Absolutely and you’ve got to put the safety and the wellbeing of the children first.

**G112**

Most definitely.

**Victoria**

You can’t take out time from protecting them to take a couple of pictures and ask people to write down their memories. It’s finding balance.

**G112**

No, no, and I mean [Person’s name] and [Person’s name], my husband’s two children, when we first got together, they used to think it was great. I think they thought I was somebody like David Bailey, you know, I always had a camera out, taking photos of them all you know. [laughs] Doing whatever they were doing, even if we were only baking in the kitchen you know and things like that. As I’ve said to all of them, it’s all there in these photo albums and one day you’ll inherit them, and my son says ‘no thanks mum I don’t want all that.’

**Victoria**

Oh I’m sure he will one day.

**G112**

I’m sure he will, because he’s got two children. They actually know what I do when I do my talks and stuff, because I’ve talked to them about it, and I think it’s also helped me in the respect that he’s only recently divorced from their mother and he’s finding it very difficult as are the two children. My granddaughter rang me and asked me for advice because she’d been offered a place at a university in London, and she said ‘nanna can I talk to you about it?’ and I said ‘of course you can my love, why because you should be really proud of that’ and she said ‘oh I am, but I don’t know what to think because there’s dad and mum and they’re still in [place name] but they’re split up’ and I says ‘there’s nothing to stop you keeping in touch with both of them’ and we went through all that and she only rang me the other day and you know obviously she’d been up and started at university and she’d had Fresher’s Week and all that and I said ‘how did it go?’ and she said ‘oh nanna, it’s the best thing I ever did’ and I said ‘I am so pleased, but in the future you must consider yourself. You know you can consider other people but don’t build your life on other people,’ I said, ‘take the opportunities as they’re offered to you and if it doesn’t work out you can soon go back’ and I think she really appreciated the chat that we had, and that’s what she was saying, she was thrilled that she’d taken it up. Kids today are still getting things that…especially if their parents have split up, cos the parents are so busy trying to sort their lives out that things get missed along the way, I don’t know. If I can help them along the way I will do and they know that.

**Victoria**

I’m glad for her, it’s a big decision going to university anyway but when you have all those other things to think about too, it’s quite stressful to have to make a big decision like that. Just one last question before we wrap up. I wondered if reflecting on your own experience of seeing your records, and also of creating records yourself when you were working in the children’s homes, if there were any things that you would change about recordkeeping? For people who are in care now, or coming into care in the future, so that those records better reflected their lives?

**G112**

Oh gosh, that’s a biggie. [laughs] I really don’t know. Gosh. I think, I mean you know after working in the children’s homes etc I’m very much aware that there are legal things always to be aware of, and you know I think that will always be the case and that’s only right and proper, but how they could change anything? I really don’t know. I suppose back in the day when I initially was in [Place name] and stuff, as I say I was only three years old, and I don’t know what my siblings have got in their records, the two sisters, we’ve never discussed it and never found the need to really, so whether they’ve ever accessed their records I don’t know, but I just think for me the records I’ve got are sufficient for the time. I don’t know what they could have done any different, because we were moved around to different homes, and when I accessed my records they were only the ones from [Place name], they weren’t a complete sort of dossier of all the other homes we were in, so I don’t know, I don’t know what the answer to that would be.

**Victoria**

It’s a difficult question and I don’t suppose there is any one single answer.

**G112**

No, I’m sure.

**Victoria**

I think everyone has had such diverse experiences, both while they were in care and then also in getting their records, it’s hard to come up with one or two or three recommendations as to how recordkeeping could respond to people’s needs better. One thing that has come up often is thinking about the record…is it possible for the record to do those things that you were saying, fulfilling the legal requirements, at the same time as also fulfilling what one person spoke to called ‘care of duty for my soul’, you know this idea that in the future you’re going to be an adult that has questions and who wants to look back, and can the record also serve those needs? Thinking about you know projecting forwards 40 years, in 40 years’ time is this record that was written up for a legal purpose of any use for helping people to remember things or to answer questions about their families? And that’s a difficult balance to strike and particularly when people are strapped for resources and time and I think lots of people, as you’ve said, recognise that everyone is doing the best they can…

**G112**

At that time.

**Victoria**

Except in some instances, where people have had very bad experiences in care. But generally speaking people recognise that everything was being…that people were trying their very best. So I guess the purpose of this project is to think about are there ways that we could help social workers and residential care workers and foster carers do things ever so slightly differently that would support care leavers later on in their lives, when they are accessing their records and thinking about their past.

**G112**

Yes yes.

**Victoria**

Thank you so much, that’s been wonderful, we’ve actually been talking for 57 minutes would you believe.

**G112**

Oh my word! [laughs]

**Victoria**

So I’m going to stop recording now.

**END OF INTERVIEW**

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

Interview held 6th December 2018 between G114 and Victoria Hoyle, via telephone.

**BEGINNING OF INTERVIEW**

**Victoria**

There we go, we’re now recording. So, if first G114 you could tell me about your experience of trying to access your social care records?

**G114**

Ok. I’ve actually accessed my care records, or tried to, on three separate occasions. My first time was probably about fifteen years ago, when Birmingham Social Services were at Snow Hill, and I rang up said I wanted to access my care records, and I got told that because I’d left care before 1983, which was when they were going computerised or something, that there were no handwritten files that had been left. There was no record of me. That was the end of the conversation.

**Victoria**

Right.

**G114**

Then four years ago I applied for my care records again due to a family argument, getting in touch with biological family and stuff like that, and I just thought ‘do you know what?’ To solve all these people telling me I was being a nutcase and had a screw loose and I needed to get my head sorted, I went and accessed my care files, to get the documents to prove why I’d been taken into care. The process of getting those care files? Again, I rang up. I was told to fill in a form, which I did fill in. Sent the form off. After the forty day deadline I rang up because I hadn’t heard anything, and I got told that I hadn’t been put onto the schedule or allocated a social worker, but they would sort that out for me and let me know what was happening. I think a couple of weeks later a social worker rang me and said that she’d been allocated to look for my files, but obviously with other stuff that she had to do it could take a little while. I said ok, that was fine, actually she seemed a pleasant lady, she was ok. She then rang me up again to say that she’d located my files but she was in the process of going through them and taking out anything that was third party related, which was fine, and she said as soon as she’d finished all of that she would get back in touch with me again. At which point it was a case of they could either send them recorded delivery to me, she could come out and hand them to me or I could go and collect them. I chose on this occasion for the lady, the social worker, to come out to my house and hand me my files. Because I thought she’s gone through and found my files and read about my life, I can have a bit of a chat with her and see how things go. And obviously she came into the house and I had bought her a card, I’d bought her a box of chocolates, and I said thank you for sorting out my files and accessing them because obviously I’d been told that there was no files existing for me, so the fact that anything was found was a bit of a surprise. I think I remember her saying that she’d gone through the files, that there wasn’t really anything in there to worry about, it was fine. And I just sort of like looked at her and I said ‘What do you mean, there’s nothing in there?’ Obviously she said because I’d been a bit of a quiet kid in care, or whatever, there was nothing too interesting, obviously nothing really happened to me. That was my first shocker. My second shocker was that it came in a brown box, and it was just paper, just sitting on top of each other, they weren’t in a folder. It wasn’t nice. There was photocopies of photos of me and my sister, and I asked ‘why have I got photocopies?’ and she said that they were their property. And it was a bit like ‘So you’re telling me that there’s photos of my sister in there, the sister that you separated me from’… I’m one of nine, but only the two of us went into care, and even the two of us that went into care got separated within that system as well. So that was another bit of a downer, but that was fine. And she did offer ‘if you need any help or support, please phone me.’ I did say ‘thank you very much’, because obviously at that point I’m now like 48, so I’m a little bit more grown up and a little bit more mature. I said ‘thank you very much and yes I’ll phone you if I need you’ and obviously shut the door but in the back of my head it’s a bit like ‘you have never done anything for me anyway, why would I phone you up now to ask for any help. For support? You’ve got to be joking.’ And that was the end of my involvement with social services, I’d got my files and I’ve got them sitting in the house. How did I feel? I wanted to start reading them there and then. I wanted to make a cup of tea and start reading but unfortunately I had kids to collect from school so I had to leave it. But after I’d finished work I made myself a cup of tea and I went upstairs to my bedroom and I shut the bedroom door and I just… I just read and I read and I read and I couldn’t stop. I couldn’t stop, and it was a mixture of ‘oh my god, look! That’s how much I weighed when I was born. That’s the time I was born!’ and I’d never known that. But there was bits of blank pieces of paper and I’m thinking ‘what the...’ am I allowed to swear?

**Victoria**

Of course you are yes.

**G114**

‘What the fuck did they photocopy that for and it’s just a blank piece of paper?’ And then there’s other pieces of paper that are just blacked out, and there’s absolutely nothing on them and you just look and think ‘why have you given me that piece of paper?’ What’s it actually telling me? And then there’s other pieces of paper where there’s just like a sentence in there. You know ‘Files returned due to the breakdown of this placement.’ And I’m looking at it and thinking they’ve blacked everything else out, they’ve left this one sentence in and all it’s showing me is I’ve been rejected again. Why did you black everything out and leave the one piece, the one sentence that shows you weren’t wanted again? You know?

**Victoria**

That’s really awful. So they didn’t tell you why things had been blacked out, they were just taken out were they?

**G114**

Yes, yes.

**Victoria**

So it didn’t explain ‘this has been taken out because it relates to someone else or…’

**G114**

No. I mean all I’m aware of is that all the stuff that’s blacked out is third party related, for Data Protection. Ironically I’ve asked a firm of solicitors to find out for me where do I stand on the redactions, because if Data Protection didn’t come in until… 1988 was it?

**Victoria**

1998.

**G114**

1998. Well I was in care prior to that, and left care prior to that, why do I then fall under Data Protection if it only came in afterwards? But nobody will answer me that question and I am waiting for them to come back to me.

**Victoria**

I mean you certainly do have the right to challenge the redactions, because even with the application of the Data Protection Act they do have the ability to make decisions about what information they give you. The law is not straightforward. Different people will redact different things. I know lots of people I’ve spoken to have requested their files multiple times and had different versions, with different bits blacked out, so yeah, you can definitely challenge it and see if you can get a different response the second time, third time.

**G114**

Well I did, because I’ve applied for them a third time!

**Victoria**

Oh yes, you said you’d done it three times.

**G114**

Which I did about six months ago. Now the reason I did it the third time believe it or not, is that in getting my care records I wrote a letter to Birmingham Children’s Trust Corporate Parent Board, and I explained to them that as my youngest [child] has just turned 18 I now felt I could tell them exactly how they had made me feel as a parent. And that’s for 23 years - well my son’s 22, 23 in January - I’ve been absolutely petrified that if I went to the doctors too often, if my kids were off school sick too often, that because I’d been in care they would come and take my kids off me, because statistically, you know, we’re ‘incapable of being parents’, because we’ve been abused, stuff like that. So I wrote them this letter and I put it in the post and I thought that’s the last I’m going to hear of this but hey ho I’ve explained to them how they’ve made me feel. And I’d explained that my lowest ebb was when I’d decided to take my life but I was also going to take my children with me so I wasn’t leaving them to the care system.

**Victoria**

Oh, gosh.

**G114**

But even though I was so low, I never asked anyone for help because of being so scared that they would take my children off me. So I explained that all to them. Believe it or not I posted it on the Wednesday and on the Monday morning the Assistant Director from Birmingham Children’s Trust rang me and by that Wednesday he’d actually come out to the house with the Head Social Worker, to come and talk to me about the letter and what I’d said in it, and asked me if I’d go to the Council and do a talk and presentation to other social workers in different departments at Birmingham Children’s Trust.

**Victoria**

I mean that at least sounds like quite a positive response.

**G114**

Yes, yes.

**Victoria**

And so did you then get copies of your records again?

**G114**

Well what happened the third time is I got talking to Andy Pepper [Assistant Director, Children in Care] about care records and everything else - I think he’s only been at Birmingham Children’s Trust two years – and he’d actually never seen a set of care records!

**Victoria**

Wow.

**G114**

He didn’t know what they looked like, he didn’t know how they were sent out, he didn’t know how they were redacted. And I went ok, well the only way I can show this then is I’m going to apply for mine again. He knew I was going to apply for them again. So we went through the process and I accessed them for the third time. And yes, I did actually get some extra bits of information, and I actually got – and I think it was because of Andy Pepper – I was actually given the original copies of my photos.

**Victoria**

That’s good.

**G114**

All eight of them, I hasten to add, for thirteen years but, you know, I got them. So I accessed them again. Now this time they were sent out recorded delivery in an envelope sort of thing and I just took them straight in to Andy Pepper, I put them on his desk and said ‘there you go, there’s my care records’ and I have to say he was visibly shocked. He went ‘is that how they was sent?’ ‘No files, no date order, you’ve got them as I received them.’ And again, believe it or not, tomorrow morning I’m going into Birmingham Children’s Trust to the records department to do a presentation to them, about how they made me feel and their lack of compassion, their lack of understanding. If they received that themselves how would they feel? How have I felt over the last few years? My kids would probably say I’ve been angry, I’ve probably gone off the rails a little bit, I’ve gone through ‘why was I not good enough?’ When I look at my own two children… I wanted them so badly, I’ve loved them from the very beginning. And 24/7, 365 days of the year, for 22 years solid I have given my life to those two children, and for the life of me I can’t understand a woman being pregnant and having children and then signing them away. I think there’s always that air of you’re going to find your family, you’re going to be loved and you’re going to wanted, and you go through your care records and you find that one piece of paper that’s signed by your own mum that says ‘parental rejection’. And it’s just…to be a grown adult at 48, and even when I got them a third time you know I still sat and read them again, I still read them again because I was looking for if there was anything different this time. Is there anything extra from the last time and stuff like that. And it just hurt to think that as a human being you were just so unwanted. But to be taken, you know, from your parents and stuff and to be put into a system that abused you just as much, if not more, once you went into it, and then you try your hardest to lead a normal life. You get married, you have your kids and all the rest of it. And then you apply for your records because at some point in your life you want answers and your children are asking you questions. You know kids I’ll got get my files, we’ll have a look because of this family argument – I have nothing to do with my biological family now – and then when your care records come it’s like…the lack of thought, the lack of compassion, the lack of love, in how they put those records together. I can only talk for Birmingham, but it’s disgusting. It’s absolutely downright disgusting, because that’s my life! Somebody has read those files about my life and know more about me than I know about myself. And to treat it so disrespectfully is unreal.

**Victoria**

Yes, I absolutely agree with you, it’s disgraceful and it’s one of the reasons we have been so motivated to do the research on this, because I think it’s an issue that…it’s been very under the radar, people just have not been aware of how poor the system is for people accessing their records, and also not aware of how important and critical it is for people to be able to do that in, like you say, a humane and compassionate way.

**G114**

Yes, yes, more compassion! Absolutely more compassion is need. And again every person’s an individual with individual needs. I can sit here and say you know what, I’m doing ok, I’m not rich and I’m never going to be, I work hard for a living, you know, as does my husband, as does the kids and everything else and I just think when those files came I’d worked so hard to get up every day and keep going and give my kids a better life than me. I was struggling with the fact that I’m important and I’m valuable, because I’ve always been told I’m not. When those files came it was a bit like they reinforced my…what’s the right word? They reinforced that I wasn’t valuable. That I wasn’t worthy enough. Oh there you go, we photocopied them, there it is in a box or, you know, a plastic recorded delivery envelope and feeling just as worthless, that I still didn’t matter. They couldn’t even take the time to get me a nice box, or even put them in date order. There was just no thought about it.

**Victoria**

No, and that…I think it’s because they treat it like an administrative process, when it’s not it’s a human process and it’s part of the caring that they should be doing.

**G114**

Yes, which is why going into the Trust tomorrow morning is what I want to do. I’m a person. It’s the records department I’m going into, I think there’s 13 of them I’m going to be seeing, to actually put a face, a human body, to a file.

**Victoria**

Yeah, and I think that’s one of the most important things for people who do this work to do, is to speak to the recipients, speak to the people who are accessing their records and their services, because they’ve not made the connection, a lot of people have not made the connection between the work that they’re doing and the person at the other end who’s receiving that box or that envelope full of stuff.

**G114**

Yes, there’s a real human being who wants answers to their life. Not that when you get your records you get those answers because they’ve blacked out so much of it it’s still very hard to even get to understand your circumstances. But then I think I class myself as lucky, I was only in two residential homes. Obviously we know people who’ve been in 20, 30 homes or whatever. But the first set of homes I was in, there’s no records of that. It’s only the second residential home. The first home that I was in there’s nothing there whatsoever, and then the other thing that’s missing is there’s no medical records. And again six months ago I applied for my medical records, and found out that anything prior to 2001 is gone.

**Victoria**

Really?

**G114**

Non-existent. Gone. I do not exist prior to 2001.

**Victoria**

That’s terrible.

**G114**

Yes, I don’t exist. It was all destroyed. Who made that decision? Who decided? Because I know it wasn’t me. Where did they go?

**Victoria**

I don’t know enough about the rules about medical records to say why that might have happened but I have actually requested my own medical records, back to when I was born, which was in the 1980s, so I am shocked that there was nothing before 2001. I thought they had to keep those.

**G114**

No.

**Victoria**

Could we talk a little but more about the content of the records? You mentioned that there was a big gap with that first residential home, but when you got the records what kinds of documents were there?

**G114**

There was… let me try and think. There was a few school records, school report cards. There was the piece of paper I explained to you about which my mother had signed about parental rejection and signing me over to social services. There was a letter, sorry a typed document, from the NSPCC. It was two pages. So I’m 52, so I would have been taken into care under the Children Act of 1948, would it have been? I think. And it was a two page document explaining that this inspector had been out to visit my dad and step-mum, about a conversation that me and him had had - at that point I would have been five going on six – and what my family life was like. That’s what’s really hard, they blacked lots of this stuff out [elsewhere in the file], but actually this document was completely left to read. It explained about how I’d been running away from home. I’m quite proud of that, that I was brave enough to run away from home, and that’s me with my bit of a black sense of humour trying to make light of it. How awful my life must have been to be that age and running away from home.

**Victoria**

Absolutely.

**G114**

So it explains that that’s why he come to visit and that’s why I was going into the care system, and the following day I was taken into the care system. To be quite honest there’s not really a lot there. Like I say there was nothing there for the first home that I was in, and then in second home I was in it was more a case of diary entries. Like date and time, G114 went to school, G114 went to see a friend, G114 was at the athletics club, G114 went to St. John’s Ambulance. It was all that kind of stuff.

**Victoria**

Yeah, like daily log books.

**G114**

Yes, daily log books. There was that bit and then there was a great big section on immigration. Emigration? Immigration? You know, when you go abroad to live. Is that emigration or immigration?

**Victoria**

Emigration I think?

**G114**

Yes. There was all these forms about this, and I was like what’s that? I was trying to understand it all. But then I realised. Me and my younger sister were in care together for a while, and then what happened was my mum’s half-sister decided to move to America. Now I never knew until I got my care records that she had tried to get me and my sister to go and live over there, that she wanted to take us. And there was all these things about English social workers having to get in touch with lawyers in London to talk to people in America, because we were still technically looked after children and America didn’t want to know at first. Then what happened is we went over there for a holiday, me and my sister.

**Victoria**

Ok, do you remember that?

**G114**

I do remember it. I knew I’d gone to America but I didn’t realise how hard my mum’s sister had fought to get us. We went over there for five weeks, we went to look at the American schools and stuff like that, met my aunt. I’d got two cousins, John and Rachel. My mum’s sister was Margaret, her husband was John. But as I say there were all these things about how much a flight would cost going from Birmingham to, I think it was Heathrow, from Heathrow to Chicago, and then they’d meet us in Chicago and they would drive us to Omaha, Nebraska, which is where they lived. We were over there for that time and then we came back to the UK. We were asked did we like it, did we enjoy it. I think I was 13, 14 at that point so my sister would have been about 10, and I said I didn’t want to go, I didn’t actually really enjoy it out there, I didn’t like my aunt. But my younger sister said that she wanted to go and live. So what was done - I think it was about Christmas time, maybe six months later - they organised for her to go on another holiday but without me, to see whether she’d like it or not. And she never came back again.

**Victoria**

Really? Wow. Ok. So did you know? You didn’t know?

**G114**

I’d got up to go to school that morning, I can remember in the kitchen at the children’s home saying to her have a lovely Christmas, see you in the New Year and then I went to school. And a couple of weeks later I thought she’d come home and somebody sat me down and told me that she wasn’t coming back.

**Victoria**

I’m so sorry.

**G114**

It’s alright.

**Victoria**

It must have been very difficult to revisit that, when you were reading the records.

**G114**

It was hard. But what I found out was that, for all these years ironically enough I’d blamed social services but actually what had happened – and I can understand, being grown up and an adult… My aunt had fought so hard to get us, every single block was being put in her way, so when my sister went for a second time she refused to send her back. [G114 pauses to take a moment.] And I could understand that in one way, but what I can’t understand is that at the end of the day, we were kids that were in the system, it was the only family I had and if she’d have been their [Birmingham Social Services] true daughter they’d have fought to get her back. But they didn’t.

**Victoria**

I’m so sorry. Are you ok to continue?

**G114**

It’s ok, it’s fine. I’m fine.

**Victoria**

I know these things are really difficult to talk about. It kind of ambushes you again doesn’t it, the emotion. It’s always there.

**G114**

I’ve spent so long burying my life, because again I’m one of the older generation where you didn’t talk about being in care because you were made to feel ashamed of it, that you’d done something wrong. So to access my care records, writing that letter to Birmingham… the last four years I’ve not been scared they would take the kids because they can’t now, they’re 18 and 22 so they can’t touch my children, I can say what I like because they can’t sack me or shut me up. So for me talking about it is what I really want to do, but yes, things like that really hit home because I’ve never understood a lot of the stuff. I still don’t understand a lot of the stuff, I’m still working through it. And as I say I can understand why my aunt did it if she’d gone through so much to try and get us, but the sad part of it is that she [G114’s sister] actually ended up in care in America.

**Victoria**

Oh no.

**G114**

Yes, yes. So it didn’t work out anyway, so she was over there, ended up in care over there. [G114 takes a moment.]

**Victoria**

Are you ok?

**G114**

I’m ok, I’m ok, I’m fine. So finding all those pieces of paper about that, the realisation that actually I realised somebody did want us, somebody did fight to have us, but obviously we were already kids of the state and another country didn’t want two other kids of the state added to the list and all the rest of it. I suppose I felt a bit of warmth to think that somebody did want us, but then I was angry that Birmingham didn’t go and bring my sister back, because she was the only family I had, but they allowed her to go and didn’t fight to bring her back, didn’t send anyone to say actually she belongs here and she needs to come home. They didn’t go and get her.

**Victoria**

You mentioned that when the social worker had originally brought the records to your home, she had said there was nothing really difficult…

**G114**

Of any interest.

**Victoria**

Yes, of any interest. That’s a terrible way of putting it isn’t it?

**G114**

Yes.

**Victoria**

But that she had offered some support but at the time that wasn’t something that you would have felt comfortable accessing.

**G114**

No.

**Victoria**

Thinking about it now, what kind of support or help do you think would be useful to people who are going through this experience of accessing their records and finding these things out or revisiting these memories?

**G114**

It’s…they’ve got to learn to take care of themselves. I just kept reading and reading and reading like a big sponge, wanting to absorb everything that I possibly could from those notes, but as much as I was reading and absorbing I was angry, frustrated, do I dare say happy? On a couple of occasions, when I found out my birth weight and stuff, but I wish I’d have known how to take care of myself while doing it. I was getting up and functioning, but I just wanted my work day to finish so I could start reading a little bit more. And I suppose lack of sleep because I was so busy reading. My mind was all over the place, so you’ve got to know about how to relax. It would be helpful to have somebody around you that you trust with you, to listen to you, they can’t fix it, but it’s somebody you can talk to. There’s no way on this earth that I would have asked Birmingham social services for help, for any support over accessing my records if I’d have had issues afterwards. It wouldn’t have happened. I chose to talk to two very close friends, and my one close friend she read the NSPCC report, and she only read two pages she didn’t look at anything else, and she said…she just looked at me and she went ‘have you been for help and support over what’s written in this G114?’ And I went ‘yes’, and she went ‘that’s all I’m going to ask you now, and I’m not even going to hug you. I want to but I know you’re going to cry, you’re going to break,’ she says, ‘and I know you don’t want to do that but when you’re ready we’ll hold hands and hug, when you’re ready.’ It’s having somebody that you trust with your life, because obviously people are going to see things and hear things that you’ve bottled up for so long. I know two care leavers over the last twelve months that have accessed their care records that have tried to take their own lives, and that makes me so mad, because they didn’t give them the answers they wanted. They expected more. They are younger care leavers, so I don’t know whether the difference is that because I’m older and wiser I was able to be a bit more rational, or think things through a little bit more. I think people have to be in the right frame of mind and in the right place in their life to do something like this. If you’re feeling down, depressed, not having a good time, I wouldn’t access your care records, because it’s just going to get worse. You’ve got to be in a happy place, or contented with your life, with people around you that you feel safe with.

**Victoria**

Yeah, and I think it’s difficult to know what to expect isn’t it when you do it, you don’t know… if you’ve got specific questions or you’re hoping for specific answers, then the records themselves…

**G114**

You’re looking for the truth aren’t you, you’re looking for why you went [into care], you’re looking for the truth, you want to know why.

**Victoria**

Yeah, and then it can be quite shocking I think to find the records have not been written with you in mind. They’ve been written by social workers and organisations who had quite different priorities maybe and there’s so much…people have told me how there’s so much jargon in them, and they can be quite offensive as well in what they say about people and their families.

**G114**

Yes.

**Victoria**

When you reflect back on it now, what do you think the impact has been for you?

**G114**

For me personally it’s given me a voice. It’s given me a voice to go ‘this isn’t good enough’. How dare you send something out to somebody that’s so important about their life, how dare you treat it like a piece of rubbish, and for me again personally it’s made me go to Andy Pepper ‘I want to come in and talk to them.’ I want to tell them face to face ‘this is what you’ve done, you made me feel like a piece of rubbish, you made me feel worthless, you made me feel like I didn’t matter, which are all the things you made me feel while I was growing up in the system. And you did it to me again, because you didn’t take care over it.’ Do I wish I’d got them? I’m glad I got them, because as I’ve said to you, the second time I got them – which was about four years ago – it was a family argument. This isn’t to go on paper please. [The reason I went and got them was that my kids had been asking about my family and stuff and I went to a wedding and I’d been told all these things, oh I’ve got a screw loose, there’s something wrong with me, none of this stuff had never happened, so actually I went and got my care records to settle this dispute within the family. And I got the documents that I needed to get which was why I’d gone into care, that we were battered children, that we’d been removed, parental rejection and all this kind of stuff, and I photocopied it all and I put it in an envelope and I sent it to them. So it was to settle a score.] I don’t know whether if that hadn’t have happened, would I ever have gone for my care records? I think my life was ok, I was fine, I didn’t really care because I’d always gone ‘you know what it’s their loss not mine. They’ve missed out on a great wonderful person.’ But I have to say I am glad I’ve got them, because it actually for me it answers…actually both my parents didn’t want me, both my parents actually failed me. Before I’d even gone into the system I’d been failed anyway, going into the system just made it even worse because it was like a double whammy. But I was lucky enough to get the answers, which were basically you weren’t wanted. And unlike most mothers who have a child every time their kid has a birthday, whether they’re 1 or in my case coming up to 23, they remember going into labour, every single ache, pain, you know epidural needle, whether you threw up and you know. I can remember all of that with my kids and I don’t regret one bit of it but as I sit here as a grown adult I wasn’t wanted. And I got that answer and that was a hard one to handle, to actually see written your parents signing you away, that they didn’t want you. It’s really really hard, that the reason you were treated so badly is because you weren’t wanted. That was a hard one to take.

**Victoria**

It must have been, it must have been very difficult. If you could… I mean I know that you’re going to go and you’re going to talk to the Children’s Trust records people…what do you think you’d like them to change? How do you think they could do it better?

**G114**

Put a bit more thought into it. Don’t just photocopy a blank piece of paper. If you’re going to black stuff out and then leave just one sentence, which was ‘Forms returned due to placement breakdown but Mr and Mrs so-and-so is now pregnant’, do you know what? I’d rather have had a page that was completely blacked out. That one sentence just said rejection. Put it in chronological order. Put it in a folder. Don’t just send it as a pile of paper in a box. What I kept thinking when that lady came with the box, have you ever watched CSI where they go into the storage room and there’s all them brown boxes with the numbers on?

**Victoria**

Yes.

**G114**

That’s just what it reminded me of, when she came in with the brown box. You can go to bloody Ikea and buy a nice box for a couple of quid. Chronological order. If you’re going to black stuff out fine, but if you’re going to leave something explain why you’re leaving that one sentence. You know, if you were the person reading that would you want to read it? And if you’re reading it does it give anybody any answers? Because I’m probably left with just as many blanks, if not more, than I had before. Don’t walk into somebody’s home and tell them that you’ve read their files and there’s nothing really in there of any interest. You’ve read about my life before I have! You know more about my life and you’ve blacked half of my life out, before I even had chance to look at it. You decided what I was fit enough to read or see without even talking to me. They should bother to meet somebody first before they start redacting information. Because we’re all individual and some of us are stronger than others, and the thing is for me I’d found out a lot of my history before I even got my files. So I could probably… Which is why that piece of paper about America and the overseas stuff, I know what that means. But if I didn’t remember going to American and stuff that piece of paper would have meant absolutely nothing. Offer counselling. I don’t know. Each of us that contact the records department or whatever, should have a counsellor. Ok, maybe they can’t afford to pay for one to be there permanently but have somebody that’s recommended.

**Victoria**

Yeah, that understands these things and can…

**G114**

Yeah, and I’d have said bugger off, but there could be somebody that needs that.

**Victoria**

Yeah and at least shows a recognition that this is an emotional process.

**G114**

Yes, yes, I think that’s what they don’t realise. It’s an emotional journey, it’s a real…it’s a rollercoaster. You know what getting your care records is? It’s a rollercoaster ride. It’s the only way I can describe it for me. It had its ups it had its downs it levelled off, I was ok with it, then I wasn’t ok with it. I was a bit like ok I’ve got to make the best of it. One nice thing is that I’ve got a door in my house where as my kids had their birthdays I’ve always put the line there of their height and their birthday, and when I got my care records I was able to put the time I was born and the weight I was. 48 and knowing that bit of information! Maybe they could have given me that before, in, I don’t know, some sort of package when you’re leaving care, of basic information.

**Victoria**

Yeah, and of photographs and those kind of personal things.

**G114**

Yes! Yes.

**Victoria**

That you carry with you through your whole life and that lots of people take for granted but that for people who’ve not had them are so so important.

**G114**

Yes, it’s like the photographs, I go back to those photographs. How dare they give me a photocopy of my own sister that they took off me? You know! They don’t get photocopies of their family! Neither should I. Why should it be good enough? If it’s not good enough for them why should it be good enough for anybody else?

**Victoria**

Exactly, exactly. Well those are all my questions G114. Believe it or not we’ve been talking for nearly 45 minutes,

**G114**

Have we?

**Victoria**

We have yeah.

**G114**

Oh my goodness me. I must have been having fun.

**Victoria**

I looked down at my recorder and I saw that it’s on 46 minutes now and I couldn’t believe it. Before we finish up is there anything else that you’d like to add that you haven’t had a chance to say?

**G114**

Do you know what? When we’re saying about helping each other… again I suppose it would depend upon each local authority, but you know what there’s got to be a certain amount of people each month or each week or whatever that apply for their records. Have they thought of even bringing those people together?

**Victoria**

Like peer support?

**G114**

They could support each other. You know, ‘you’re going to get your care records, so am I’. You know, ‘if you need me, I’m there, I understand, I can go through the entire process with you.’ Yeah, sometimes the peer support of somebody that’s already done it.

**Victoria**

Yeah, you’re definitely not the first person to say that. Quite a few people have suggested to me that that’s the kind of support that they would find really useful.

**G114**

It’s like most things isn’t it in your life? You can try and understand something, and try and give sympathy, but unless you’re the person who has been through that experience, you don’t understand it. You can try, but you can’t. Only somebody that’s done it can. You know they talk about people that have had cancer, or somebody that’s lost somebody to death. Ok, I know it’s a bit of a tangent, but I’m never going to understand somebody losing somebody to death. I don’t have a mum and dad that ever wanted me, I’m never going to experience that loss, and unless something happens to my kids – and please, don’t - maybe husband, depending on whether I’m annoyed with him for the day or not [both laugh]. Glad you got my sense of humour with that one. I’m never going to experience the loss of a loved one, I could be someone who goes to my grave and never experiences loss. And it’s really hard for my friends, I just say remember the happy times that you have and your memories blah blah blah, but actually understanding how hurt they are or how upset they are? And? I don’t know. I’ve never gone through it, and that’s a bit like the care records. Until you’ve gone to get them and that pile of paper is sitting in front of you and all you want to do is read and read and digest and, you know, get pissed off at this sentence and get angry at that sentence and then have a bit of a smile over ‘wow that’s when I was born, and that’s how much I weighed. Wow I never knew that before.’ So yeah, a peer support would be lovely, in the right way. Not lovely roses and chocolates but for somebody who has been through the same thing to be there for you.

**Victoria**

Definitely. Thank you so much, I’m going to stop recording now.

END OF INTERVIEW

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

Interview held 2nd October 2018 between G115 and Victoria Hoyle, at UCL.

**BEGINNING OF INTERVIEW**

**Victoria**

If we could start by you talking about how you came to access your social care record?

**G115**

Ok, so I was working at Natwest Mortgage Services at the time, and I was I think about 21, no 22 I think I was, so it was about around 2000, 2001, and I was going for some training and it was on the Data Protection Act, because I was handling data at Natwest. And as I was sitting there having the training something came up on the screen about ‘you have the right to any personal data held on you’ and it had never really crossed my mind but suddenly I thought, growing up in care, there must be information about me. So I phoned up [Wandsworth] Social Services and I just spoke to some administrator of some sort and asked her if there was any information. So they took my details, and then I never heard anything, and I forgot about it myself to be honest, and then… it’s funny talking about it now because I’ve written about it and sometimes you get caught in your memory about what was real and you know the way memories work…but I remember I’d been out the night before, was a bit worse for wear and it was raining outside and as I ran out I literally ran into the postman and he gave me this big kind of brown package, and because I was late I just put it in my bag and I ran for the bus. I remember it really clearly because it was the 126 bus from Dudley to Birmingham, because I was living in Dudley at the time, cos I went to university in Wolverhampton so I was still up in the Midlands. And I put the packet in my bag and I ran for the bus, I got on the bus, again it’s really clear in my memory, it was steamy, everyone was piling on because it was the first bus-stop at Dudley station and I sat at the front, in the front two seats, and I remembered that I had this package in my bag, so I opened the package and inside was like a red plastic folder, like a small lever arch folder, like a flimsy plastic and it was red. It always makes me laugh now thinking that it was red, even the packet that they put it in, like the association of danger. And in it was just this collection of papers, of pages. I’ve since counted them, there’s 126 sides, but they were all separate documents and reports and what have you, but on the first page it was a chronology of events, of my moves, so it was just saying something like ‘G115 looked after by the Borough of [Wandsworth]’, even that impersonal nature of ‘looked after by [Wandsworth] Borough’, and then there was just a list of all my moves. So I first went into care… I think I was maybe five or something, so you’re seeing every single move, and off the bus goes and it’s dark because it was winter time, and I was wearing a hood at the time, and I just remember like reading through the chronology and at first just being numb and then suddenly these memories cascading in. Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang. And all these memories that I totally didn’t think I had access to, they just suddenly came, so many different memories. So I started just reading, reading, reading, and I just remember starting to cry you know, crying on the bus, and I had my hood up and I remember thinking you know hopefully no-one can see, but I couldn’t stop reading, and that was the first time I had access, and I just read and read and read, and it was just one of the most intense experiences I’ve ever had in my whole life. Because you’re just not programmed to take in that amount of information, and the type of information that you’re taking in as well. And then I got to work, and I just didn’t tell anyone, carried on my day, and then I came home. But that was my introduction, so no warning, no phone call, no notes to say you know…really you would have thought you’d sit down with someone perhaps, but that was how I first met my file.

**Victoria**

What kind of documents were in there?

**G115**

So there were a variety of documents, so they ranged from social worker reports, there were foster carer reports, there were…at one point we, my brother and I, we were sent to an assessment centre, so four days of the school week and then I’d go to my normal primary school for one day, so you had the assessment centre reports. There were some psychologist’s reports. I got in trouble with the police when I was young so there were police reports, so they were the main…yeah…and then there were things like sign offs, so from senior members, where certain things had to be signed off at a very senior level. And they came in all different styles, so some were in like a narrative style, and then you might have profiles, that was the other thing you might have, they had your profile and what you physically looked like, what type of person you were, and so yeah all these kind of profile documents as well.

**Victoria**

Were there any photographs or…?

**G115**

No photographs.

**Victoria**

Was there anything from you in there?

**G115**

So that was...that’s one of the most profound things for me about the file, and it screams the loudest, is my lack of voice. And I just appear, my scrawled out writing, on like page 52, so my voice is totally stolen and words are put in your mouth, saying this is how you feel about certain occasions and certain people, and at times there’s conflict with what I believe. But just on that page 52 here is this… and I say little boy because sometimes the way I look at it is it’s like looking at another person, you just hear this little boy’s voice come through and it’s like a really raw raw feeling, and then he’s gone again, so that’s just it. One page.

**Victoria**

Looking back to that moment where you were in the data protection training and you realised that you could access the records, what do you think your motivation was at the time?

**G115**

I just…it’s hard because like I say I’m 40 now, so I’m going back some time, but my memory is just of curiosity, the sense that they were there. It’s like…I can’t remember his name, when they talk about climbing Everest. Why? Cos it was there. Is it Mallory? It was the sense that they existed. So I didn’t have at that point this kind of deeper urge to find out the detail, it was just curiosity mainly.

**Victoria**

Did you talk to anyone else about it?

**G115**

I don’t remember talking to anyone about getting the file, I don’t even remember talking to anyone afterwards. You know at that time I was living with the people that I went to university with. I was working but they were at university still, so I was in that kind of environment, and yeah my girlfriend at the time was living in Malaysia and she did come back but even then I don’t remember talking to anyone about it. Maybe I did but I just don’t have any recollection of that. It was a very private thing.

**Victoria**

So after you’d read it that first time, what happened then? Did you put it away? Revisit it?

**G115**

Yeah, that was…you know I’ve had moments where I have revisited it. So it was rough when I first had it, cos at first it seemed…it’s kind of difficult to explain. It’s almost kaleidoscopic because some of it is great because you’re pulling in memories, it’s reminding you of things and you’re building up this picture of yourself and who you were as a child, and you, just like I say, you have all these new memories and it fills some big gaps that for whatever reason you’ve kind of created, but then it had a profoundly negative effect as well. So I started drinking a lot, it kind of messed up my relationship, just because it was like I say, it was so much to bear. It came in ripples, because of all that was in there. So you’re trying to manage what you’ve read and it’s just too much to navigate at first. And I wasn’t, you know, I didn’t have the emotional architecture, if that makes sense? To process that. I was too…I’m not saying I was too young but I didn’t have the experience, I didn’t have… So knowing that we were going to talk I’ve started to look at it again and I’m more robust, I’m stronger, I know what’s in there, I have kids myself, so the file… This is important, the file is organic, the words stay the same but I don’t, I change, so every time I go back to that file it’s different to me. And now going back as a father it’s very different to me, and in some ways it’s easier and in some ways it’s harder. But after that first stage I then put it away, I initially went through it, I read it a couple of times and then I didn’t read it. And I said to you, when we spoke in the email, that I went travelling for two years to South East Asia, Australia and Africa, and I hardly took anything but I took the file with me, and I hardly ever read it but I took it with me and I never really thought about it in any great depth but there was something about needing to have it close to me, and even now I still have it next to my bed, which feels quite…it feels quite profound now but I’ve never really thought about it until we started talking. And the fact that I’ve started to write about it again, you reflect on it in a slightly different way. And so the next time I went back to it in a big way was…I was walking through [Croydon], I’d moved to [Croydon], I was now…I would have been in my early 30s, definitely my early 30s, and I bumped into someone that used to look after me in one of the children’s homes, a guy called [Leonard] and he had a real effect on me when I was at the children’s home, he was a really positive person, so seeing him and meeting him took me back to the file again. I went back to the file and again it had a real detrimental effect, and again I went through this cycle of drinking, it put a lot of pressure on my relationship at the time, and it was just this volley of the memories, because I’d had this big gap so you suppress, suppress, suppress, and then you’re engaging with the file and all that is coming back again, and then it kind of starts to attack who you are, who you are at that stage, any insecurities that you have, to read some of the things that you read in there… You’re in care, so on some level you know it’s not that you’re not wanted and as you get older you understand the context of why you’re in care, but one of the things that the file doesn’t really do very well is it doesn’t do context, so what it gives you is…it almost feels like lists of events, people’s interpretations, and there’s no sense of normality. And I think if you picked up anyone’s life, even someone not in care, and you wrote it out like they write that file out it would have such a skewed portrayal of their life, but if you add the fact that you’re in care… You know, you’re hearing the voices of social workers talking about your mum, you know, ‘she can’t cope with you, she doesn’t want you, she can’t bear seeing you,’ you know, ‘she used to hit you’ and you’re hearing all this, and in mine it’s talking about the abuse of my own mum, and so that’s a lot to kind of process. And it really literally is only in the last few years, and again going back to me having kids, there’s something about me seeing that file in a different way. I’ve never not seen it as something important and I’ve always wanted it, but it’s been really corrupting at times, but now it’s almost like a blessing now, because I’ve reached a point where I can understand it and engage with it, and kind of engage with it in a new way, kind of at a distance at times. But you know it’s a lot, it’s a lot to take in.

**Victoria**

Like you say, the recording process is not something that happens in the regular course of childhood, that you be observed that way, and it’s kind of a form of surveillance I guess.

**G115**

Yeah, and you know that. It’s like the Stasi, that’s what it feels like, and the thing is - and I’m sure I’m not the only person that’s said this - young people are aware. When you’re in care you know that they’re writing these reports, so actually it’s not just about it being a reflective exercise, it’s affecting you in the moment. So you know before you’re coming up to a social worker visit, you know that these reports are coming, so it’s affecting your behaviour and it’s affecting what you give out. So a lot of the times there’s bits in my file where it talks about, you know, my closed nature, ‘I hold a lot back’ and all this other stuff but some of that I’m sure is that you know that you are…you know at times you’re just like an animal in a zoo type thing. And it’s amazing, I think as adults we forget quite quickly what it was like to be children, and I do it with my own kids sometimes, but children…they don’t have the experience but what they lack in experience they have this really raw understanding of people and so they really really get people. But you don’t always get that sense, those more…everything is very black and white in the file. There is a lack of…everything feels quite surface level, again this thing about this lack of context.

**Victoria**

Thinking about the file itself, when you received it were there any redactions or bits taken out?

**G115**

There were redactions yeah. So there were redactions around…I think around my brother, there was some…maybe some names but I think I could work those out. There’s chunks missing, so there’s chunks of time missing. Also there’s like repetition, it’s clear that some documents have been written off the back of other documents, so you get language that has almost been kind of cut and pasted, so you get this kind of echo of things. So if something’s not right, it just keeps appearing, and then it’s almost like it becomes right. But not a great deal of redaction, from my memory, just little bits.

**Victoria**

You mentioned, for example, there was stuff in there about your mum but that wasn’t redacted that was kept in?

**G115**

No, so I don’t mind saying, there’s bits where they talk about race - I’m mixed race, my dad was born in Jamaica – so there’s a lot of talk about ethnicity, which is really quite uncomfortable to read at times and I would say it’s bordering racist, but you know some of this stuff is written in the 80s so some of it’s 80s language. But it talks about my mum’s relationships, past relationships being violent, especially with black men. And then it’s saying about me, that I, or we as in my brother, need to be put with a mixed race foster family with a strong black male role model, but then it’s got peppered through it the abuse about my mum and stuff like that, which is… I knew about that because, you know, some of it I was there, but I…I’m uhming and ahhing about whether I should have seen that or not. A part of me thinks now yeah I kind of want to know, but is that mine? It’s a grey area. A part of me feels it is my right to know because this is part of the story and part of that context.

**Victoria**

This is exactly the sort of conversation that we’re having all the time, particularly with the information governance and data protection officers who have to make those kind of decisions, and it’s not straightforward, and people would disagree, so for example you could find if you requested your file again that different parts of it would be redacted.

**G115**

That’s a shame in the sense that one of the big things that I think…I keep saying it, is this thing about context. Now if you take that stuff out, then the motivations and drivers around what’s happened to me get lost, and so there isn’t any of that kind of stuff hardly with my dad, and so you lose that sense of what were the reasons? What is *their* story? Cos that file is not just about my story, my story is linked to other people, all of our stories, all of our personal narrative is. If you start cutting off that it’s like you’re cutting off people’s arms and legs, and I know that’s a difficult choice because you’re trying to protect other people but that is helpful for me to know, as hard as it is, it’s helpful for me to know that, to understand. And it’s a lot about her drink problems, or drug problems, to know that here is a really fragile woman and one of the…the core reason why she couldn’t look after me. If that’s all taken out then you get the stage of ‘oh she didn’t want me’, so you’re trying to capture it. But that is tough no doubt, I can totally understand.

**Victoria**

And I know some people take it very seriously trying to work through the nuance of those decisions, and to think about you know what is it that someone needs in order to be able to understand the complete situation that was around them, while still trying to balance out other people’s right to privacy, it’s very difficult. Did it change your perspective on things that had happened when you were a child?

**G115**

Yeah, I mean, that keeps changing though, that doesn’t stop from the first time looking at it. The obvious change is that you suddenly start filling up space, so you’ve got lots of black space, and then suddenly it starts filling up with this cacophony of images, of noise, of memories, and you know there’s a whole bunch of them that start triggering off other memories that are not in the file. There’s other parts where you start questioning the validity of some of the things, because there’s parts of it where they will say I’ve got a relationship, in the foster family, with some of the kids and it’s really good and I think wait a minute, that was not a good relationship, we didn’t you know get on, we weren’t best friends, and we fought, and so then that story is getting rippled through other reports, and it’s not correct. And just while I remember – I’m sorry if I’m going off-piste – another thing about some of the information that’s in there…there’s stuff in there like, I always remember that stuck with me, this was one of the biggest effects actually about my looking at how things were. It says that one of my foster parents, their payments were increased because my behaviour was deteriorating, and I just remember reading that and thinking Christ I’m like a commodity. And then I started to think. You reassess. So those people were looking after me cos there’s financial gain and that kind of destabilised suddenly everything about the people that you were with. That’s dehumanising. That was a big change, and then that reminded me of once finding a booklet in one of the foster carer’s houses that had the pricing in it, so I think you would be a certain type of child and you would have a pricing scale, and I’d forgotten that but that was triggered. And then yeah some people that you…there’s a whole bunch of people missing as well, there’s people in there that are just forgotten, lots of people who worked in the children’s home. Whoever fills the report out for the children’s home might be your key worker, or they might be the person that runs the children’s home, and it kind of is really sad in fact that in some of those memories that you start to trigger there are other characters that were in your life but they’re missing. And it would have been nice to have some more normality. There’s a lack of…I know it’s because of the purpose of the records…but there’s this real lack of everydayness, and it’s the small things that can make up a life you know? Very small moments, and it doesn’t have that. It has the drama, it has the difficulty, it has the abuse, it has the drinking, it has profoundly negative things and how to manage the situation, it has a lot of legal stuff in there. So they’re talking about us being made wards of courts and all this kind of stuff, so like I say you get this really skewed life.

**Victoria**

You mentioned about having lived in children’s homes. Were there any records from the home, like log books, entries from log books, that you remember?

**G115**

I can’t remember, no.

**Victoria**

Cos that’s one of the places that other people have told me they’ve found that kind of every day stuff, but unfortunately log books you don’t legally have to keep them so they don’t survive for everywhere.

**G115**

I remember signing off for my clothing allowance in a log book but no I don’t have any, nothing like that.

**Victoria**

You’re not the first person to tell me about seeing records of payment in your file. Another person told me about how for her the most kind of profoundly upsetting part was that when she was 8 her birth father died and her foster carers allowance was increased because of her bereavement, and she returned to that frequently as being I suppose a symbol.

**G115**

It’s a massive symbol, it’s devastating. The flipside of that is when I went to my last placement, that was with my best friend’s mum initially, and it was an unusual situation because I’d gone back to my mum very briefly and stopped going to school and so social services were keen to get me back into school. And she initially didn’t want payment and I was saying ‘you’ve got to take payment’, and so they she had the minimum, and I remember she was offered more money but she wouldn’t take it because she said you know ‘that’s not what I want, I don’t want to have him here for extra money, that’s not why I’m motivated’, but you know that’s not captured in the file. I remember that fortunately but you know… On one side it’s negative, you know they are symbolic moments, they’re really profound, and I think the things in these files that are often really profound, most people…you know what, it’s not the abuse stuff because that stuff you know, that becomes very common and you’re used to that, it’s part of your life, if you’re on the outside it looks and sounds…but you’ve embedded that, it’s some of these smaller aspects. You know in the thing that I wrote it talks about you know going to a fair or something like that and making a birthday cake and that…it’s like an explosion of light when you read that but that’s few and far between.

**Victoria**

If you could give feedback to the people who wrote in your file now, do you have a sense of what you would suggest to them about things that they could do differently?

**G115**

One of the things that I would say - before them thinking about how to write or something - is that they should know that this file is going to be read again and again and again, and that the person that gets this is not going to be that little kid for their whole life, and that they’re going to read this in their 20s, in their 30s, in their 40s, in their 50s. So you know one of the things that I do with my own kids is that I just started writing stuff that they do, stuff that they say, little strange things, questions they ask me, funny things they’ve done, it’s not so much about events, but these small things and almost like in a list form but when I read back on them they feel really profound now. Something like that that just builds a picture that is not driven in to filling out a form for some bureaucratic purpose, or covering themselves, or some law. I know there’s all the stuff around care, but there’s almost like there’s a duty of care for our soul as well, do you know what I mean? It’s not just the duty of care for our wellbeing as in keep them in school, keep them healthy. This is a long game, life, so there’s *that* duty of care. I feel like the file is built around the immediate, you know, keep them safe unfortunately. It should be more. It’s not ambitious enough, and you must get the voice of the child in there, you’ve got to. And now we’ve got so much available to us that is not just about what you write down, so I think in the world we live in now…I’m thinking wider, not just photographs, you’ve got video, you know my son makes little YouTube videos and stuff like that, you’ve got so many ways of building data that we didn’t have. But trying to keep that, you know like the sense of a scrapbook, but beyond what we would think of or what I would have thought of as a scrapbook at the time. I’m sure I might have done something like that when I was in care…my life story?

**Victoria**

You might have done life story work?

**G115**

Yeah, I did, yeah.

**Victoria**

I was going to ask you about that. So life story work was quite popular in the 80s and early 90s.

**G115**

I did that, I just…wow, that’s amazing.

**Victoria**

Do you have that now?

**G115**

No, no.

**Victoria**

It wasn’t in your file?

**G115**

No, no but I can remember sitting at the table in [Streatham] now, with my social worker, cutting things out. Yeah, wow.

**Victoria**

It’s one of the things that has come up again and again, this experience of life story work and quite often what happens is that it’s done separately from the core record and as a result often it gets lost, or disposed of, but quite rarely is given to the person themselves to have, which you would imagine is the purpose of doing it.

**G115**

Yeah, yeah, something like that should be documented, photographed, even if you’re going to give it up. The other thing is, I’ve always been a collector of stuff, so when I was a kid, whether it was cards or magazines or keyrings, a big comic collector. So I’ve collected and kept a lot of stuff from my childhood, and it talks about it in my file, and I didn’t know why at the time, but things like school books I kept them, birthday cards, Christmas cards, I’ve got kind of like scrapbooks of those kinds of things, so I have kept those but they were all by me, and some way of linking…especially school because you generate stuff, I’ve got like the diaries that we kept at school you know and I find little gems and stuff in there. But some way of linking that more personal with that more formal would be key.

**Victoria**

Yeah, and like you say bringing more of that everyday life experience into it.

**G115**

Yeah, just to have that texture of life. Cos for a long time I just felt like I *was* that file and it took me a long time to untangle myself from that file, and I felt for years that I had this real residue of just that file, and went through kind of like a process of I am not…I am *some* of what they file is but I’m not *just*that file and I had such a richer life, but it’s been hard to reclaim that over the years. But an incredible document, incredible document, for multiple reasons as you know better than I do in some ways.

**Victoria**

Again someone said something really striking to me which was that you know having had that record kept about you is in a way one of the only privileges of having been in care.

**G115**

Yeah, yeah, I can understand that. You know there are things in there where…that’s why I say now it’s like a blessing. And you know I said to you I did my Masters in Creative Writing and I wrote a paper, one of them, and I used the file, and so there is…there’s a little guilt that comes with it now, kind of cannibalising the file but for creative terms now and that’s something that I’ve been wrestling with in a completely different way: how do you use that file? But there’s something very positive that has come out of the file now.

**Victoria**

I suppose it’s a way of taking ownership over what is said.

**G115**

I mean that’s a good…yeah, just reclaiming and giving that boy a new voice, and you know there’s something in it about saying, you know, ‘you’re going to be alright’ and to have that document…it gives me a dialogue with him, with myself, do you know what I mean? It’s hard… That is something that I’m sure, even if you weren’t in care, you’d love to have something like that in some way. So it *is* a real gift in some ways, as broken as it is, as incomplete as it is, as disjointed, at times fictitious, it’s an incredible, incredible document, it really is incredible.

**Victoria**

Coming back to the process of access, you’ve described an experience which I think is quite common, which is that you make a request, a subject access request under the Data Protection Act, and then something arrives, and you are left with that.

**G115**

Yeah, on the 126 bus from Dudley to Birmingham.

**Victoria**

I don’t know if you know but there is separate provision for adopted adults. So if you were adopted there a provision separate to the Data Protection Act called the Adoption Information Regulation, which came in in 2005, which requires that access to records, your adoption records, must include support and intermediary services. So in addition to gaining access to the material, which you have a more privileged access to as well in that they can at their discretion chose not to redact, you will have or you have to have a social worker, and they also have to support you to make contact with anyone in the records that you wish to make contact with, family members, foster carers and so on. And one of the questions that we’re sort of thinking about as part of this project is to what extent care leavers should have access to similar services, and there is a lot of differing opinion as to what people would want as part of the access process, and I wondered what you would want?

**G115**

That’s tough, because at the point and the age of me accessing that, I’m not long out of care, and a part of me wonders whether I’d…the last thing I’d want to see is a social worker probably, because they’re people that you didn’t even want to see when you were in care, and they represent…you know it’s funny now because at my age and experience you can reflect and see people were trying, they were under pressure, lack of resource, etc etc, but at the time you don’t have any other representation of the state than them. So the idea of me coming and getting my file and having to do it with a social worker that could be crippling. I, just speaking for myself, I wouldn’t have wanted that. Now if you’d said you could have access to someone else, I don’t know say someone like a psychologist or someone that was not in social services but understood and it was a choice, then I think I would be more likely…and just to have had a conversation of what to expect, to have been prepped, and then to say ‘these are the paths available to you’ and some of the pros and cons and then make that decision. Whereas I just know a social worker would have been…I would have said no.

**Victoria**

Yeah, I think that idea of getting a bit of context about the process and about…I mean you’d found out about accessing records as part of some Data Protection training so you had more of information than most people who go looking for their records in terms of what your rights were and how you could make the request. But other people have suggested things like…

**G115**

Other people that have had their file, that’s what I’d want. So there’s a guy that I bumped into that I was in a children’s home with last year, and I told him about the file and he didn’t know, so I sent him all the details and I told him all about getting my file and I said to him ‘look just be ready because this is what happened to me, I’m not saying it’s going to happen to you, but these are the things’, and you know gave him my number and we’re kind of still in touch, see each other, but that would have been good for me. Because there’s a kinship between people in care. If I was at a party and I met someone and found out that they were in care we’re suddenly…there’s something that’s a bond, that I don’t have with just anyone, and there’s something about that which even…not that it goes beyond my own family, but there’s something about the care experience that is obviously so unique, that in that process of getting and accessing your file, if I knew that I could have spoken to someone that had done it then I would feel that they’re like me, I would have more trust.

**Victoria**

Yeah, Ian, who I mentioned before, he said that to me, something very similar, that he feels like everyone who has been in care has a shared heritage.

**G115**

Yeah, definitely, and you know I very rarely meet people who’ve been in care but if I do then it’s an immediate thing.

**Victoria**

Yeah, so being able to talk to people who’ve had a similar experience and have had their records and can kind of prep you, give you a sense of the ups, the downs. One of the things that has really struck me, you were saying about sometimes it’s the most unexpected bits of the record that have the most profound effect on you. Whereas maybe a social worker assessing a file might say well this is the distressing thing in this, it might be completely wrong. I’ve been really struck again and again by how people have said ‘this is the thing about getting my file that I would have liked to have known in advance.’ So another person who has taken part in the project, she was in care in the 60s, and was mixed race in a care home in Wales, the only non-white child in the home, and for her it was…she remembered the way that people had talked about her as a child, but to actually see it on the page.

**G115**

Yeah, that’s…yeah.

**Victoria**

Traumatic, and particularly now, in her 60s, like to think that that was…that she herself thought at the time that it was absolutely normal, and she said if she’d been able to speak to someone about it beforehand and someone could have said to her ‘right, you’re probably going to see things kind of language in there and I saw it in my file and this is how it made me feel.’

**G115**

Yeah, if you’re going to do that there’s something about linking someone to others who’ve had a similar experience. But it’s brutal, there is something about seeing something in words and being able to read that sentence again and again and again. It’s not like someone is saying something, or you’re imagining something, because you can question that. When you see it written down it’s really powerful, and it sticks. That’s the thing about the file, that stuff is stuck now, it’s stuck in time, everything written down there, whether it’s true or not true, it’s an opinion isn’t it but it’s there. Just to quickly say, you were saying about how did it effect things? So my relationship with my brother is discussed a lot and it’s a really rough relationship, and I don’t have any relationship with my brother now, don’t have any relationship with my mum now, and reading the breakdown of the relationship between me and my brother, that’s the thing probably that has been most profound. Because you can see in the file that I was devastated by being put into care and he reminded me of why were in care, he was a familiar face, and it kept reminding me about my family, and I destroyed that relationship on purpose. And that was one of the hardest thing to read, that’s the kind of thing I would have liked to have had prepped about in some way, and that was tough, that *is* tough, and I think that’s been the hardest thing for me to purge. And I suppose you have to keep…I have to tell myself, you know, that I was a kid, you know and we were… I look back on it and I wish… I’m not the kind of person that looks back and says ‘I wish I could change things’ but I do look back on that and just think I should have been there for him and the file…one of the good things is it does capture the fact of the love, so that’s something that really is positive about the file. So it doesn’t always go into a lot of depth in the file in that context but the relationship between me and my brother, there’s a certain care that has gone into writing that up and explaining the break down. So thinking about how you describe things, when something traumatic is happening, having that understanding. I’m sorry, I’ve gone slightly off-piste.

**Victoria**

No, no. It reminded me of something else that I wanted to ask before we finish. Again, the focus group I did in Leeds, one of the comments that stayed me was somebody said it’s good to remember, but there are lots of things that I want to forget and the record doesn’t let me forget.

**G115**

Well you can remember to forget. [both laugh] That’s something that I’ve thought a lot about.

**Victoria**

So, one of the new rights, although it is a limited right, under the General Data Protection Regulation, is the right to be forgotten and the right to amendment as well, and as you probably know your record is held by the authority that cared for you for 75 years, and some of the other people I’ve spoken to have expressed a wish to keep the record for themselves but to have it erased from the local authority. And I wondered if you had any thoughts about that?

**G115**

You see my natural instinct is to say, you know, yes, but there’s something in me…if that information could be put in the right hands for the rights reasons, that there is a lot to be learnt from these files and so there’s something about it not being the state, you know, something about it not being the state. I would feel more comfortable with it being in the hands of you know academics. I’m biased, I work at UCL I should say, but there is something about the fact of what you guys are doing here, that that information when you put it together with other files is so valuable, that I fear that a 20 year old might say give me the file and burn it and if you want back to that 20 year old at 40 they might have changed their minds and say actually I want you to use that, so I would be really cautious. Although naturally my instinct is to say ‘that’s mine’ and it *is* mine, but there’s something in there that’s important beyond me, and I’m thinking about other people in care now and what that file could…put together with all the other files what that could change you know? I still have hope.

**Victoria**

That’s all my questions. Before we finish do you have anything else you want to add on?

**G115**

No, no.

**Victoria**

Ok, I’ll stop recording.

**END OF INTERVIEW**

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

Interview held 18th January 2019 between G117 and Victoria Hoyle, by telephone.

*Throughout this interview G117 mentions an email she sent to the local authority responsible for her records following her access to records experience. She has shared this with MIRRA and it is appended to the end of this transcript with her permission.*

BEGINNING OF INTERVIEW

**Victoria**

So, I think you were just about to start telling me about the experience you had in accessing your social care records. Can you kind of talk me through the process that you experienced?

**G117**

Ok, so, in 2015 I started to try and access them, and what I did is I sort of looked online for advice on how to do that, and things like that, and I knew the local authority that I’d been in care with as a child, where I’d been adopted in, so that was really helpful. And I found information on the Care Leavers’ Association website and other places as well, and I also went to the library to find out specific things about what I was entitled to, because I wanted to be informed before I asked for them. So I sent my request to them via where they said on the website, their contact, and initially I didn’t get a reply for several weeks. And then I got a reply saying you know ‘yes, you can do this but we need some ID’ which, you know, is fair enough. So I sent them ID and also I had to pay £10 as well.

**Victoria**

Oh right, they actually charged you the £10 did they?

**G117**

They charged me £10 yes, for…they said because it’s a data access request, subject request or whatever it was called. They said I needed to pay £10. I thought they were mistaken in that but I paid it anyway, and eventually - this was several months later because there didn’t seem to be any sort of timescale to it at all – I was contacted by a social worker, who sort of specialises in files. Now this was really strange because…the first contact I had with her she emailed me and said, you know, ‘do you want to have a conversation about what you want to do’ and things like that and, you know, about the files and I said ‘yeah, that’s fine’. So we had a conversation on the phone and on the phone she said several things, amongst them were, you know, that she’d tried to locate my files but ‘couldn’t make head or tail of it’. ‘It would be really useful’ – this is what she said – ‘it would be really useful if you could send me a list of all the foster homes and everywhere that you lived, with all the dates, so that I can make sense of your files.’ Now I thought this was ridiculous because…luckily I was old enough to remember most of where I’d lived and when but some places I was in for like a week, and I don’t know who they were. She was supposed to give *me* that information. It was the wrong way around. It’s completely ridiculous! But I thought, you know, I’ll just do this. So I made a really long list of things. I also, because I was scared about things being redacted and all of that, I did a summary of what I knew and things that I thought might potentially be redacted for whatever reason, that I already knew about. Because I thought if they know that I know it then they’re not going to take it out. Oh I should say, before this I’d actually made contact again several years earlier with one of my main foster families. Now my foster mum had actually kept a lot of my files that related to me, and gave them to me, and she also had her foster carer diaries. So I had a lot of my files from that period of my life, which was a few years, and her diaries, which were unredacted. So I’d already had access to some files through unofficial means. I don’t know if she was supposed to keep them and give them to me, but she did. So that gave me some additional knowledge as well and it was interesting because I could see what they had redacted. Where was I?

**Victoria**

You were sending a list of all your placements back to the social worker.

**G117**

Oh yes, so I sent a list of all these things back to the social worker, which really just annoyed and upset me because I was like if I was, you know… And she asked me as well on the phone… Are you still there?

**Victoria**

Yes, I’m still here.

**G117**

Yes. She asked me on the phone, she said ‘oh I’m not sure, what was your birth surname as well?’ So I told her but I thought I might not know that! Like, you know? But she asked me really casually, it wasn’t sort of apologetic or anything and then she was like ‘oh ok, and what were your foster parents called, and when did you live there?’ and all through the phone call she’s taking these notes down and I’m thinking, you know… I think it’s not her fault but she could have worded it differently. She could have said ‘I’m really sorry, do you have any information that would be helpful?’ but obviously she couldn’t make head nor tail of the file because it was all disordered or something, you know? But anyway, so I sent that [list] to her and then she said ‘oh you’ve been charged money, you shouldn’t have been charged money for this, so when you come down you can get your £10 back’. So I said ‘ok’ and she also said ‘you know normally we would send it to [Place name] and you can access them in [Place name]’ and I didn’t want that, because I thought that’s an extra person who sees them and I’m like why should all these people see them and I don’t get to see them? It sounds really stupid but it’s an extra person, you know? At some point during the middle of all this process I joked to one of my friends that I was going to try and get a job in the social work department so that I could actually access my own files, because there are all these admin people and all these social workers who can see them but the one person that they would mean anything to couldn’t. So I didn’t want that and it was specifically because of that, because I just didn’t want that extra person reading this information, and you know, because also it adds an extra layer. She’s compiling stuff, so she says ‘ok I’ll make a summary for you’ and I said ‘I don’t want a summary’. She said ‘I’ll make a summary of the records’ and I said ‘I don’t want a summary, I want to see what’s in the records.’ But ‘oh no, what we do is we make a summary.’ I didn’t want that. She then said she could send some of the things that I could see to Place name and they could speak to me about it, and I thought no that adds an extra layer of editing and interpretation to it. It goes via her and then someone in Place name and then I get a really garbled version at the end. So I said ‘I’ll come down’, and it was in London so no small distance to me, so I went down and I got given this really small file. So she starts off saying you know ‘I can’t really show you a lot of it but I’ll sort of tell you about, you know, your family.’ And I actually after – I had another appointment with her afterwards – but after this first appointment I went to a coffee shop and wrote down what she’d said, because I knew I’d sort of forget it, and it was…erm…I mean…a lot of the information was just factually incorrect. Like she said ‘oh your mum was an only child’ and I was like ‘no she wasn’t, she had a sister and I’ve got my aunt and I’m in contact with her now’, and she said ‘no, no, she was an only child’ and I was like ‘no, I’ve got my Auntie [Person’s name] she exists, I know her. And my other sister who I was separated from, who aged out of care, she went to live with her!’ but ‘oh no no no’. There were just things like this that were wrong. I didn’t see the actual files until after I’d sort of left the meeting, so I’ll just talk about the meeting first because a lot of the way it worked is that she would give me a lot of the information through discussion, rather than by giving me files. But what I thought was really sort of odd is that she sort of made kind of judgements on it as well, because she’d say like she’d read my file and there wasn’t anything shocking. That wasn’t the exact word she used but that was the sentiment. And she asked how I felt about it and she suggest that she’d seen worse.

**Victoria**

Gosh.

**G117**

And she… These notes are the thing that I’m looking at now, because I wrote down the conversation in the coffee shop afterwards because I knew… So I’ve got here, because I’ve written it down, ‘it wasn’t always clear who she was talking about’, because she started off with ‘your mum was an only child’ I was like I can only take anything with a pinch of salt.

**Victoria**

Yeah, what can you trust when you know that something is so completely wrong?

**G117**

Yeah. And some of the stuff she’d obviously sort of read, you know I sort of recognised things. But then like she was talking about after my adoption, a social worker would go see my mum and they would talk about me but she said ‘oh you can’t see any of those notes because it’s third party information’, because it was like my mum and a social worker. I’ve got here [referring to notes] that she said ‘I wish you could see them’, that’s an exact quote of what she said and she said it a few times, so she sort of sympathised with that. Oh yeah, and this is the funniest bit, she said ‘also in your file there’s a photo, but the thing is I don’t know who is in the photo and there will be third party…’ - I can’t even say this with a straight face – ‘there will be third party information in it because there’s two people in it, but I didn’t know if one of them is you, so I’m going to have to show you the photo so I know who is in it’ and I’m thinking if it’s a photo in an adoption file then maybe the adoptee should see it? The idea that it’s third party because it’s not of me… So it was a picture of me and one of my sisters, but it was like this idea that she wasn’t sure if she could show me the photo or not, because she didn’t know who was in it. And I’m like well surely the point of it being in that file… But that’s reminded me of the conversation we had, the first conversation, because I’d been worried that she would edit out all of the stuff about my birth mum on the grounds that it’s about my birth mum, but she sadly died when I was 15, so she’d been dead for quite a long time. And so when I wrote my information I wrote down a lot of stuff that I already knew about her, because I thought if they know that I know this then they’re not going to edit that out, you know, but when I was talking to her on the phone we had this bizarre conversation - and when I was talking to her in person too – she said she can’t release that information about my birth mum because it’s third party information and I need her permission. And I’m like ‘but she’s dead’. ‘Yes but we need her permission because it’s third party information.’ And I was like well how? I actually wrote to her – I can forward you the email, I don’t know if it’s helpful or not – but I wrote to her asking how am I supposed to make sense of my life if nobody other than me is mentioned in anything? Because like the whole ‘why was I in care?’ ‘Well we can’t tell you about your mum.’ That means you can’t get any explanation. The whole thing is just ridiculous! So anyway, we had this first meeting and she was basically telling me all about what’s in the files, and I knew - because I’d seen some of these files already from my foster mum - I knew where she was getting some of the information from, but I didn’t tell her that because I didn’t want to get my foster mum into trouble, and I just thought you know what… So when she was saying some things I was thinking I know where you’ve got that from. But interestingly I didn’t then get those documents. I got given this file which, I mean it was…yeah.

**Victoria**

Did she give that to you or did you receive it in the post afterwards?

**G117**

No, no, she gave it to me then. I’ll just finish off the conversation with her, I know it’s not what you’re doing but…

**Victoria**

No, no, please go ahead.

**G117**

She asked me if I thought my removal was justified, which I thought was quite a shocking question. I sat on the fence and I think I was a bit sarcastic and said ‘well if I could see the files I might have an idea’ but anyway. I don’t know, I just thought it was an odd question. And yeah I asked… there was supposed to be letterbox contact, and by letterbox contact I mean, I don’t know if you know that when you’re adopted letters are written between…?

**Victoria**

Yes, yes.

**G117**

So I’d found out that that there had been letterbox contact when I was 18, or just before my 18th birthday. I didn’t know it had existed before then, even though my parents had been writing back and forth. So they had shown me some of the letters, although it emerges that they didn’t show me all of them, but that’s a different thing. I knew that they definitely existed, and when I was sort of 17, 18, just before my 18th birthday I’d written to my sister who aged out of care via the letterbox, so I knew that they definitely existed. I’d seen a letter saying ‘we’re keeping a copy on file’. So I said ‘what about the letterbox?’ And she said ‘oh no, there is no letterbox’, she looked at me and said ‘I’m really sorry, there is no letterbox’. And I said ‘there is’. And she said, you know really as though she was feeling sorry for me, ‘I’m really really sorry there wasn’t any.’ And I said ‘there is!’ and she said ‘no there isn’t’. So I just sort of left it at that point, because I wanted to read what was in the file. Then, the timeline that I’ve got – she’d created this timetable, that she’d written up herself – was completely wrong, I can demonstrate that it’s wrong, it didn’t match mine at all and it contradicted itself. It started off with the wrong place of birth, because she started off with my sister’s birth details. That was the main part of it [the file]. Part of it was also a redacted version of my life story book. So when I was ten, when I moved in with my adopted parents, I got a life story book which was written as though I was six, so I wasn’t very impressed, but anyway, and in my file they’d put a redacted version, where they redacted everyone’s names out and they even redacted the family tree. So they’d redacted out my sister! And I thought what is the point of a family tree with only me in it? There is no point in that. I was like… wow. And they’d also – because what I did is I got out my stuff that I had from when I was 10 – they’d also redacted…so I’d written stuff like what do I want to take with me to my new home and I’d written I wanted my toys, I wanted my books, and I’d said I want to take my sister Julie, and they’d redacted out about my sister, because you know it’s third party, so they’d redacted out stuff that I’d written! Whenever I’d mentioned a third party and stuff when I was like 10. It didn’t make any sense. I had this thing and it was all blank and I was really upset, because when I was adopted it was basically…I lost contact with everyone I’d ever known in my entire life, and it was really quite a traumatic experience from that perspective because I was quite old. My younger sister went with me but apart from her I’d have had no contact and it was sort of I can’t explain…I lost every single person I’d ever known. So then it’s like you destroyed those relationships and now they’ve redacted out the names. Even the first names! So I’m not even allowed to know the first name of the foster carers that I lived with for three and a half years? It happens that I knew them, but I had other foster carers and things as well. They’d missed out homes as well, which might be because the files were so bad. I mean I’m not sure that’s the only reason but you know. One of the things is they completely missed out me having lived in a children’s home, but then in a file I later got sent it was there. It was all just a complete mess. I’d get like, as an example, there’d be a paragraph of three sentences, you know like saying ‘G117 is very happy at the moment but sometimes gets upset that she can’t see her mum’, something like that. And it would just be like that on a sheet of paper and there would be nothing else, I wouldn’t know who had written it, I wouldn’t know when… So I’d be like is this when I was five? Is it when I’m ten? Is it when I’m twelve? I don’t know when this is. There is actually no order of any sort to the files. And just things like that, where I don’t even know what it refers to. And then as I’ve said the chronology she’d drawn up was just wrong. It had things that were just, yeah, completely wrong. There was a copy of my original birth certificate so you know that’s good, so I would have found out my birth name if I didn’t already know it, but I wouldn’t have found out anything else. I’d have had a redacted family tree and all this. For example I had a document from my foster carers which sort of summarised everything, which had been drawn up when I was about 11, and when I was an adult my parents gave me this two page document, now looking at the two the document I got was a shortened version of the one I got from my foster parents, but I later realised that that itself was again a shorter version of this redacted version that I eventually got [in my file]. So it’s kind of gone through several stages. So anyway I had these files and they were completely useless. They really wouldn’t have helped anyone, like you know if I had been younger and I didn’t remember, if I didn’t have all this other information from my foster family, from my own diaries – I had my own diaries where I wrote things – I would know nothing. I wouldn’t know where I’d lived, I wouldn’t know my family tree, I wouldn’t know anything. So I wrote a massive long letter, an email… Sorry am I going on a bit long?

**Victoria**

No, no, keep going. I mean, just to pause you temporarily I have to say that yours is one of the most shockingly inept access to records processes that I’ve heard about.

**G117**

Really?

**Victoria**

I am really shocked about the level of redaction. But we can come back to that, go on, don’t let me interrupt you, keep going.

**G117**

If you need to go just sort of interrupt me. Once I get talking…

**Victoria**

No, it’s fine I’m not doing anything else, I’m home alone, so.

**G117**

Ok, sure. Yeah, so I knew I was entitled to more, I just knew it, and I knew there was a letterbox, and so I was so angry because like I felt that they were trying to deny me access to these things that I knew existed, let alone anything else, you know? So I sent a massive long email which I can even forward on to you, and I asked about had my letterbox been located at all, and what can I find out about your relevant policies on the archiving and disposal of it, and I mentioned that I had letters saying that they were on file. And then I said about those inaccuracies in the summary. Oh yeah, I’ve got here that I wrote to her ‘Within the files I’ve been given there are four different timelines’ and I’ve acknowledged that it might be ‘caused by inconsistences in the original records’ but that I would rather that that was acknowledged rather than them claiming that this was what happened. And then ‘a lot of the file consists of random decontextualized paragraphs. There’s no order throughout the file and even pieces of paper from the same document are not in order. I often have no idea what I’m looking at, for example I might have a photocopy of a paragraph in the middle of a page with the rest blanked out. There is no indication of when this paragraph is written, by whom, why or what larger document it is from’ and so I’ve said ‘I would like to know what document everything comes from’. I’ve said ‘some of the redacted documents and part redacted documents are themselves summaries’ and I knew this from some of the other documents that I had got because I could see – it’s quite interesting, because I then got further ones – I could see, like, how they’d kind of changed the content. I’d asked if, as a priority, I could have the original write-ups if they exist of my last ever meeting with my birth mum, at my goodbye contact, because I thought, you know, I want to know what happened. And I wanted a list of everything that I’d not been given access to, and why, and reasons for the redactions, and yeah also I’d queried whether information that was written by social workers is third party information. Why are they not relevant persons, who are performing their relevant duties and that kind of stuff? Surely it’s reasonable for people to know the people that they lived with, like even just first names. I’ve asked about how I might go about permission to see court records, and then…I just had a rant basically. So I sent that and then she got in contact with me again and she said – I mean she herself was lovely but I was just like what are you doing? – and she said ‘oh I’ve been on a course, and you can actually see more than I thought you could!’ And I thought that’s brilliant that you’ve been on a course, so obviously now you know, but I also thought if I hadn’t followed this up would you have told me that? You know? So I went back and I got some files, and I’m trying to remember here, because I also took…did I go down twice or three times?...at one point when I went down I took the covering letters I’d got from the letterbox when I turned 18, which said we’re keeping these on file, to show her ‘look!’ because she just completely denied it all the time, saying ‘there’s no letterbox, there’s no letterbox’. So I took that down the second time to show her ‘look, you do have this’, or the third time, I can’t remember, but anyway, so I went down and this time I got a really really big file but again I didn’t get to look through it until afterwards, and it’s only after wards that I realised part of the reason it’s so big is that some things would have been copied like 10 times. So it’s like oh look there’s a really big file but actually I’ve just got 10 copies of the same thing, and a lot of the things that I had copies of – I showed it to my friend – it was just completely pointless. It was just like a standardised form saying my height and weight and stuff like that, you know what I mean? They’re important for many people, but when you’ve got basically… the whole form is just the standard form and then you’ve got two words that relate to you on it and then that’s copied like 13 times or something, it’s just a bit pointless. But these were much better than the previous ones and there were also some of the documents that I had through my foster parents. Now interesting, I was able to….so the redactions were done in several ways, some of them it was blacked out and others a piece of paper had been put over it and it had been photocopied so that you couldn’t see. With the blacked out ones eventually I managed to work some things out, with some of the others I had copies already through my foster mum, and sometimes things that they’d – I’ve got a list somewhere but I can’t find it - of things that they’d redacted out. It was quite revealing. Things like about where it said ‘there should be contact’ and stuff like that they’d taken out, but it often seemed quite random. And then the second lot where I’d got like 10 copies of things the redactions were irregular, so in one copy I might get – and it was quite useful to be actually – in one copy somebody might be redacted but in the other copy other bits might be. And she said like ‘oh yeah I’ve got my admin support photocopying it for you at the moment’, so I knew that there were these admin people like photocopying and doing things to my file and they’d obviously redacted things in different ways. One thing I said in my first meeting – and I think this was deliberate – is what I really wanted to know is why I’d been separated from my older sister. Now I think it was just because she was older, but I wanted to know why we’d been separated originally, and particularly because in the files I’d got from my foster mum, in the original notes, it said when we were separated it was because they didn’t have enough foster homes in London to take all three children and so my older sister was sent away into like Suffolk, but then in a later document, that was part of the minutes of another meeting, the rest of the document is the same but that bit has been changed to, you know, there were no places but then she was sent to ‘a nearby home’. And so they’d obviously thought oh no we can’t put that it was far away so we’ll put it was nearby, and then in a later version they’d put, you know, it was decided that they would be taken into ‘separate appropriate placements’ as though it had all been decided. And so you know with the later version it’s all like ‘oh yes, we’ve all thought about this’ but I only knew this because of my foster mum’s records. So anyway, I’d said I want to know why and when I went the second time there was a bit that had been redacted but the page, that page, instead of giving me the photocopied page where they’d put a bit of paper over it and photocopied it, I got the bit with the white paper stuck on it still, so one of the bits that was redacted on that page – and this was the only one where I got the wrong page – I lifted it up and what they’d redacted was that, you know, we’d been split up in foster care because there weren’t enough foster carers. So that had been redacted.

**Victoria**

So that wasn’t really third party information, was it?

**G117**

No!

**Victoria**

So, you could see that they were redacting things other than third party?

**G117**

Yes, I could see that they were redacting things other than third party and often it was to protect themselves I think. Also when I’d spoken to her [the social worker] initially I’d said about how I didn’t have contact and then I said that really affected me and I’d wanted contact, and then she’d redacted out all of the stuff that said I should have had contact, do you know what I mean? They’d redacted things out to protect themselves, it was nothing to do with third party. And so what I got was completely… I didn’t really learn that much from it to be honest. But then the best thing, at the second one [meeting] was she had this document and she said ‘oh unfortunately you’re not allowed to read this document’. It was a document I sort of recognised because when I was 18 my parents had some documents that they’d shown me but only just like one document, they hadn’t really [shown me], and I recognised it, it’s about 10 pages, you know like a summary. So I knew what it was and I was like ok, but my parents have been allowed a copy of this. I didn’t say I recognised it. She said ‘you can’t have a copy of this but I’m going to let you read pages 3 and 8’, so I read pages 3 and 8 and I didn’t sort of like really learn anything new, because it was stuff I already knew, but I asked ‘why can’t I read the other pages?’ And she said ‘oh because, well, up until page 3 it’s about your birth mum and the period before you came into care.’ And I’m like ‘is that not relevant to me understanding why I’m in care?’ And she’s like ‘yeah, it is but you know we can’t let you have it.’ So she let me read pages 3 and 8 and she was just holding the other pages and I was like can’t you just say ‘oh I need a cup of tea’ or something like that and let me see? So I read a tiny bit about one of my foster homes and then page 8 I don’t even know what was in it, because I wasn’t allowed to have a copy of it you see. So I didn’t quite know what the point of them keeping the records was really. And we had several arguments as well. We had an argument as I’ve said before about the letterbox and I pulled my trump card and said ‘look, I’ve actually got proof of it’, and eventually she found that, and you know, she gave me copies of it. I don’t know whether it’s all of it. She said ‘oh I did look and actually I found it in this other box.’ I’d said ‘could it be in my sister’s box? Could it be in a file that you have on my birth mum?’ but ‘no, it wouldn’t be there, you don’t have any.’ ‘Oh, could it be in a kind of special letterbox storage?’ but ‘no, you don’t have any.’ We had this whole argument, and I was like ‘there was a letterbox!’ Any other adoptees or foster children, if they’d given them a letter to read when they were older they wouldn’t have got it, so like letters that my mum wrote to me. If I didn’t know they’d already existed… you know, I knew just before I was 18 but my parents didn’t have to tell me. I would never have known! What is the point of it? She didn’t seem curious, it was like I was attacking her and like she was going to be right about it. And she talked about this thing that happened in my foster family like ‘oh this is how it happened’ and I was like ‘no, that’s not what happened’ and you know whatever and she was like ‘oh no no because of…’ and I was like ‘no, because I was there’. And eventually when I got the records she was talking about I was right! And there were comments in there about things that I had said which nobody on the planet, except maybe my foster parents, nobody who would know what those comments would mean apart from me. So, like, you know what I mean, the whole thing is stupid because…it just is. But eventually I did actually get them. What was really interesting was that my foster care records, particularly anything relating to decisions and all of that and my time in foster care remained very redacted, and there was also a document that I really wanted to see, which they put in heavily redacted, but I wanted to see the full version. I’d been given a very heavily redacted version of it the first time, but I didn’t get any of it the second time, but because she had decided that I could see more of it the second time, I was going to write to see more, but I’ll just talk about that in a minute. But I did get a predominantly unredacted version of notes written after I was adopted, so that was good, because that was like pages and pages. I mean it was all in handwriting so it was difficult to decipher but that good. The rest of it unfortunately, and the stuff that I know least about because I was sort of younger and moving and stuff, I don’t have much information on. So eventually I got this letterbox and the foster care files and the adoption files and then I was looking through it again and I sort of realised how much of it was copied stuff, just kind of the same document, and that I still didn’t have this other document that they’d given me part of. I did contact her again by email to try and you know get them, you know to sort of say can you hand over these documents. But it was quite difficult. First she was on maternity leave, which was obviously fine, but then they randomly introduced encrypted emails so then she was emailing me these encrypted emails and then because… The whole thing was really stressful and I found getting my files more stressful than actually being in care – and I’m not lying, there was nothing in my files that was as distressing as trying to get through all the gatekeepers - and you know, the whole thing like people are trying to shape your memories, control what you think, they’re trying to like reorientate your mind so that you’re looking towards your, you know, adoptive family. They want to shape your story, they’re always telling your story for you, and so I’ve got this life story book and then this woman who doesn’t know me from Adam is telling me my life story and I’m like I have made contact with my birth family and my foster families and I’ve got diaries and all sorts of information, and you know you’re gatekeeping this information and what you’re hiding is partly because you don’t basically want me to sue you, I think, among other things. You know? And particularly with one of the placements where I didn’t have one of the best experiences just didn’t exist in the files at all, and so anyone would think that I’d never actually lived there, and that was the place I actually wanted to know most about because I wanted to know did they know what was going on? And interestingly in the massive file that I received afterwards I found one mention which… I mean I had proof anyway that I’d lived there because it was in my life story book, but anyway, and I spoke to my foster sister who I’d lived with after there, I used to talk to her about it, so I had all of these things to corroborate these memories that I never used to have. I never used to have that when I was just adopted, I had nothing to corroborate those memories with at all but I have a lot now. But anyway so I found one mention and it says ‘oh’ – when they were looking for a new home – and it suggests, you know, we don’t return there because our experiences hadn’t been that positive and that was the only mention of it, which I thought was interesting. You know you clearly did know something because you’ve redacted it out of files but I’ve found this one mention of ‘oh maybe that wasn’t a good idea’. I don’t think the redaction is always about third party information. And then so I was going to send this email and it was just really stressful, I can’t explain how stressful it is, it's just because as well when you’re a child as well in care you go to these visits with your family and there’s someone there writing about you. You know. It’s like the last time I ever saw my birth mum there were people there and it’s all being like recorded and then you don’t even get access to it. It’s like if I was a normal person, let’s say my mum was on her deathbed, you wouldn’t then have someone writing up what they see, and then you try and get the write up of that and they won’t give it to you because it’s third party. It doesn’t make any sense in a normal context at all. And a lot of what I was interested in was just the kind of normal memories, not necessarily you know the why’s or court decisions but just corroboration of ‘yes I did live there’. Otherwise I’m the only witness to what happened and I’ve managed to gather other witnesses by making contact with people but for those earlier years you know before I was in my main foster family, which was just before my adoptive family I don’t, you know, it’s just me and my older sister you know… But anyway, so I emailed again and they started this whole thing with having encrypted emails, and I couldn’t remember my password to the encrypted email and the clue was which school did you attend but of course I’ve attended loads because of being in care so I didn’t know what that was, so I had to call this encrypted email helpline and eventually convinced them that I’m me, and eventually I got to email…but now I can’t remember how it ended and I’ve looked in my emails. I know I gave up in the end because I couldn’t get into the emails, so the last thing that I’ve got is an email from them saying ‘additional files’ and I couldn’t get into the email that they sent me because it’s been encrypted. Now I can’t get into it at all and it’s two years ago and I just think I give up. It was just like really hard work.

**Victoria**

And it’s putting so much of the labour onto you.

**G117**

Yeah, yeah, so. I mean the whole thing… that’s the story of my files. But I’m currently…because my sister’s having difficulties I’m currently being assessed as a kinship fosterer for my niece who is actually going to be moving in with me from the 9th February…I’ve currently been going through the foster carer assessment process and two days ago they said I have to send – I mean this isn’t about my files but it’s just carrying on – I’ve had to tell them my life story, which I’ve had to construct from all these different things and they’ve written it down, and then they’ve sent me a version and I’ve sort of had to correct them again, which I did, and they’ve said ‘well oh we can’t actually correct anything’ and I said ‘well it’s not right what you’ve written’, so they’re going to attach amendments, but then two days ago they sent me the latest version, their newest version, which is a completely different context of my life, and they’d redacted half of it out! And I’m like I fucking told you those things! How can you? They’ve redacted out…I can’t even explain it…they’ve redacted out the name of my birth mum, my foster mum and everyone and I’m like you only know those names because I told you. You sat there on my sofa as you were assessing me. It’s presumably because it’s being sent to other people as well, I don’t know why, but they’ve redacted out my birthdate, which I know obviously, and they’ve just redacted loads of my life story. They sent me this version and I found it hugely…I cried actually. It’s not even… I think they probably just thought ‘oh we’ve got to take out names or something’ you know, but they hadn’t taken out all the names, they’d just taken out my birth mum, my foster family and one of my exes. It’s like I gave them that information, and it’s got really personal information that they haven’t redacted. Again it’s like with my birth mum and my main foster family, those links were severed and you wouldn’t even let me have their names, you wouldn’t let me have the letters, that you denied existed and now you’re still taking out their names, and I know that’s not what they were doing, it was just an admin decision obviously but.

**Victoria**

It’s a lack of recognition that those kind of admin decisions actually have enormous personal impact on people.

**G117**

Yes. I’ve got this thing and they’ve just redacted out the names of my birth mum and foster parents and because their names have been redacted out before…it’s just like what we don’t speak of them then? I know they probably thought ‘oh they haven’t given their permission’ but they mention my sister and haven’t redacted her. So that’s a separate thing but it is the latest version of my life and at the moment they’re winning because they sent me the redacted version even though it was my version that I told to them.

**Victoria**

I think its…that’s just indicative of how the data protection legislation is being misunderstood and misapplied in this situation. I mean as I say I think your first experience is probably one of the most extreme that I’ve heard about. The level of the redaction sounds clearly offensive, shockingly so. To think that your life story work was being redacted, I think that is…it’s not only misunderstanding the data protection legislation it’s totally misunderstanding the social work and adoption process and I think, yeah, it makes no sense.

**G117**

It makes no sense. This book is apparently my life story, and I get given that but then I get a redacted version. It’s like they…maybe they had no idea what they were looking at and it was just somebody going through very quickly. But what is interesting though is that there are files I know that I haven’t been given in any form, and I have no way of knowing if there are any more, in terms of other files that I haven’t been given. The first time I have this really small file, most of it was the summary that the social worker had written herself and then the second time I got more files, the case review notes and stuff, but there are still documents that I have seen that my foster mum had that she gave me that I haven’t got. You know maybe they’re not in the file, or maybe they just didn’t give them to me. And then there’s that document that I saw pages 3 and 8 of. I asked my parents if I could see what files they had and they said ‘oh, we threw them out’ and I was like ‘what?’ But then they changed their tactic and they said ‘oh we gave them to social services’ – these ones now- ‘to help them understand your sister’, but I’m like they’re mine, they’re about me, but I don’t think we’ll get them back again. Because I thought that, you know, I could look at what my parents had. Or maybe they don’t want me to see them, I don’t know. I don’t know what the answer is.

**Victoria**

It’s so difficult because you are navigating in the dark, because you don’t know what they’re working from, and because they give you no reason to trust in their transparency it’s very difficult not to feel suspicious isn’t it about what’s motivating the process and whether its ineptitude, whether or not things can’t be found, the records management is bad so they don’t know where the boxes are, their filing system is poor…or is it motivated by self-preservation, not wanting to share information that, as you say, you could potentially use to take legal action. Or is it just misunderstanding of the Data Protection law.

**G117**

I don’t know, I think maybe part of it is just time and staffing. The social worker did mention that you know she didn’t have a lot of time and she was part time and everything but I would rather it would be a longer process than that it sort of…and I would also rather than sort of presenting me with this is sort of your life that you get the definitive version…because it felt very much like I was having to beg her to tell me my life story and I was like no, this might not be true for everyone but for me I do know, for lots of it I know more than she does and I found it quite insulting. But it is just like I’d much rather that she just said ‘I’m really sorry, the files are really haphazard and we seem to have several different timelines, or we’ve got two timelines that don’t add up, so I’m going to give you them both and we can try and work out why they might be different’ or whatever, rather than just giving me a huge mess and sort of trying to impose order on it herself. That’s what she did, she tried to impose some order on herself without having the knowledge that I do or whatever, and then presented it as a finished product. And I’d much rather say ‘We’ve got all of this,’ you know, ‘let’s work together to put the pieces together’, because it’s not kind of her fault if the files are in a mess. But yeah, you know I just think the lack of understanding, that to understand your own life you have to have information about other people. You can’t just not have information about your birth mother, or you can’t redact siblings from the family tree. You can’t just…I mean that is ridiculous. What is the point? I couldn’t understand what she thought the point of me doing this was if she’s going to redact everyone who is not me out of it, and she even redacted me, what I had written in my child’s handwriting, about other people. So that was my experience anyway, I’ve given up.

**Victoria**

I can’t blame you because it sounds like it’s been a really traumatic process, with no end in sight really. One of the questions that I have to ask you is if they offered you any other support in addition to the social worker, did they suggest any other places that you could go for assistance?

**G117**

Yeah, she did offer sort of counselling with it as well, but I didn’t want that because of…I just didn’t want counselling that was from them, because it would have been from them. And for me that wouldn’t be disconnected enough, you know? It’s so hard to explain, but you sort of…I don’t know. I was offered sort of counselling, but I had to meet her in order to get them.

**Victoria**

Well thank you so much for talking me through it all, it sounds like it was completely exhausting to go through it, and I know that recounting it can sometimes be difficult. I mean, just finally, because I stop recording, do you feel that accessing the records was, in retrospect, in hindsight, do you think it was the right thing to do? Would you do it again?

**G117**

Yes, I would, I would. You know there was a time when I had all these different documents of places and times and was figuring out how they all fitted together and stuff, but then I came to the realisation that what social services wrote in my case was the least important source of information about my life and everything. Because I’m lucky compared to some in that I do have people that I can talk to from when I was younger. Not for the whole of my childhood but for a substantial portion of it, I have people who I can now talk to, to test my memories, and I have my own diaries for three and a half years of my childhood. I can see day to day and I can actually see, yeah, you know things that we did and say ‘oh, do you remember when?’ and ‘oh yeah, I remember that’. And that is what I wanted, to be able to speak to somebody about ‘do you remember when?’ because you don’t get that when you’re sort of moving around and then when you’re adopted at an older age and it’s all closed, like you’re a blank slate. You don’t get that. So I just came to the conclusion that social services files are the least important source of information anyway. I mean maybe I just had to come to that conclusion for my sanity, but it worked anyway.

**Victoria**

Ok, I’m going to stop recording, we’ve got an hour of recording so I will stop it there.

END OF INTERVIEW

Appendix: Text of Email

---------- Forwarded message ---------  
From: **G117**  
Date: Tue, May 10, 2016 at 3:42 PM  
Subject: Records

Dear

It was great to see you again when I came down and sorry for not emailing sooner. I had meant to email you before you returned from annual leave but it never happened! [sentence personal to SW removed]

I said when we met that I was going to email you about some things I was unhappy with regarding my files. Anyway, I have finally got round to doing so! Just to start though, none of this is to do with you! Rather, it's to do with what I'm allowed to see and Wandsworth's interpretation of this. Whilst I did warn that I would write a long email, apologies for the length!

I completely understand that you have other cases to see to, but I hope you can look into the points below at some point. I've numbered the points for ease (although they aren't in a particular order).

1. Has my letterbox been located at all? If not, what can you find out about your relevant policies regarding the storage, archiving, and disposal of letterbox? I have a covering letter which says that copies were being taken and put on file, so this should have happened. Thank you.

2. Could I have another summary please - thanks. There are quite a lot of inaccuracies and inconsistencies in the one I was given (the one written up recently) and I would appreciate it if I could have another one. I'd rather have the original documents, but, failing that, if you could look at the summary again that would be appreciated.

3. This is mainly just a comment and something to consider. Within the files I've been given there are four different timelines. This is partly, I think, because of inconsistencies or inaccuracies within the original records. Indeed, the 'original' documents I’ve been given parts of appear to be summaries written from earlier files, so it seems likely that my homes (or ‘placements’) were written up wrongly in the first place. Some miss out homes or have my homes in the wrong order. Only one - the summary that was written for me at 10 ('life story book') - is accurate. However, redaction doesn't help the situation as it could be that in some cases they are redacted to the point that the timeline is inaccurate or misleading. It so happens, luckily, that I know all the homes I lived in and the order I lived in them because I was older and remember it. However, if I didn't, I would have four versions of where I'd lived. Therefore if I had no prior knowledge - or a confused knowledge - of where I'd lived, my files would have made me more, rather than less, confused. I don't think anything can be done about any inaccuracies in the old files: in any case I am rather of the opinion that 'what's done is done'. But this is something to consider when redacting and when writing summaries. Thus, if the summary written up recently (point number 2) could be corrected that would be good (although I'd rather the actual files). But more generally, when writing up summaries for other people, please bear in mind that they might not remember as much (or anything) about their childhoods and that therefore any discrepancies in timelines should be addressed and explained. I do think it's better to just address the fact that the original files may be confused and help the person understand them - this is better than leaving the person confused (even if it doesn't reflect well on the record-keeping of 20+ years ago! But then, what's done is done).   
  
4. I mentioned this one when I saw you. A lot of the file I was given consists of random, de-contextualised paragraphs. There is no order to parts of the file and even pieces of paper from the same document are not in order. I often have no idea what I’m looking at. For example, I might have a photocopied paragraph in the middle of the page, with the rest blanked out. There will be no indication of when this paragraph was written, by whom, why, or what larger document it’s from. I would like to know what documents everything comes from please – thank you.

5. The redacted documents and part-documents I have been given are themselves summaries. These ‘original’ documents appear to have been written up after the plan had been formed that I was to be adopted (indeed, after I was placed with my adoptive parents I think). However, there must be case files from before this on which they are based. Please can I have the original documents that these were written from and if not please explain why. For example, please can I have access to my case files prior to the adoption decision such as the periodic case reviews and the minutes of meetings which explain why and how decisions were made.

6. Specifically - and as a priority - please can I have the original write-up(s), if they exist, of my last ever meeting with my birth mum and the few before that (such as my 10th birthday, which was the second-to-last time I saw her). Please consider the emotional impact of me knowing what happened during my last ever meetings with my now-deceased birth mum when weighing up my right to see this with any data protection/third party issues.

7. Please can I have a list of what I’m not being given access to and the reason for each decision.

8. A comment for general consideration - there was some overlap with the files I was given with some documents I had been given previously. However, this time they were redacted. This is somewhat bizarre at it means I was entitled to more information when younger than now when I am in my 30s. This is something to think about when providing people with their files.

9. Please could you reconsider whether or not what social workers and foster carers wrote about me and my case really is 'third party information' that I cannot see. Why are they not treated as 'relevant persons'? And why, even if they are treated as third parties, can their names not be redacted out and the information they give be given to me? They are professionals performing their professional duties and is it really reasonable that the information they wrote down about me and my case is kept from me?

10. Sometimes the names, including first names, of people I lived with have been redacted. This is quite upsetting as these people were my brothers and sisters and parents. It is as though I don't have a right to know about my family life prior to my adoption. Surely it is reasonable for people who grew up in care to know the names of those they lived with? I know the names of people I want to know the names of, so this is not really about me wanting this information. However, please can this be re-considered with regards other people accessing their files. Surely a person who was in the care of the state has the right to know the names (even if just first names) of their foster family members?

11. Please could you direct me towards how I might go about applying for permission to see court records.

12. This is perhaps a slightly bizarre comment and question. Please consider how much information everyone around the adopted person is given, compared with how much information the actual adopted person is given. By 'everyone else' I mean social workers, adoptive parents, foster parents, everyone. For example, what information were my adoptive parents given or likely to have been given (if possible  I would like to know this - or to know what kinds of information and/or documents adoptive parents are routinely given) - was this more than what I was given? Is the information given to adoptive parents also in snippets? Or do they get a fuller family and care history? Did they get the complete documents whereas I've only received the redacted versions? It's absurd that social workers and various people involved in my case and my parents get to see more information about my life than I do.

As a corporate parent Wandsworth has responsibility for safekeeping information about the lives, families, childhoods and relationships of the children that were once in its care. That's why it administers letterbox and must retain records for 75 years. Many adoptees and former children in care have no choice but to approach their corporate parent to find out how and why decisions were made and for information about their childhood experiences and relationships. I realise that there are laws governing access to records, but the law also allows local authorities a degree of discretion when it comes to weighing up the rights of different parties and making disclosure decisions. I think that in some cases Wandsworth has wrongly prioritised the rights of other people over my own rights when exercising this discretion. It’s not reasonable to expect someone to make sense of their life without reference to other people, or without reference to things other people wrote (particularly professionals involved in their case). Indeed, I think at some point something I said/wrote has been redacted out, which is bizarre. Presumably I mentioned a third party! It is as though my needs are given less priority than those of everyone else, and that the privacy of professionals is protected more than my right to know about my own life. This is odd given that I am the adopted person around whose welfare the entire system is supposed to circle. I'm not wanting to be difficult or to cause trouble for you or anyone else - I just want information about my childhood, the sort of things that non-adopted people take for granted!

Anyway, I already have access to quite a lot of information so several of the numbered points are general things that I'm concerned about on behalf of other adoptees.

Anyway, sorry for this long email and I do appreciate all your efforts so far. I also really enjoyed talking to you the two times I met you! I also understand that you have other cases and a busy workload, but if you can look at these things it would be appreciated. Thank you!

Best wishes,

G117

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

Interview held 13th November 2018 between G107 and Victoria Hoyle, via telephone.

**BEGINNING OF INTERVIEW**

**Victoria**

Ok, so we’re now recording. If we could start G107 with you telling me how you came to access your [Place name] records?

**G107**

Well. I had a letter, from the police because I was in [Place name] at the time when Jimmy Saville was visiting and they wanted to talk to me about it, whether I knew anything and what had happened to me, anything like that. So a lady rang me from [Place name] and I told her everything about the time I was there, and also about why I was there, and I don’t know how we got around to talking about records but… No I know why it was. I couldn’t understand how they’d found me in the first place, that was why. Because I’d been trying to get access to my records from when I was in care for more than 20 years and everywhere I went I was up against a wall. There was nothing. Nothing. I didn’t exist. I had a solicitor. I went to see a solicitor who was supposed to specialise in that area, and she came back to me and said ‘I’m sorry I can’t help you any further.’ And I thought ‘ok’. I went to the police. I wrote to the Head of the police in [Place name]. Again, another brick wall, they had nothing. I thought ‘well that’s strange’ because a lot of my records had been through the system, police, you know, statements and such. There was nothing. As far as anyone was concerned I just didn’t exist. I felt really really…I felt really lost. And then I had a breakdown, I was in the hospital in [Place name] and I met there a lady who was a social worker, who had been a social worker to my mum’s family. And she said ‘G107 don’t give up, don’t give up, they’re there, keep pushing.’ And you know people have said to me, at the time, do you feel like there’s a conspiracy? I thought I was a bit crazy, you know? I said ‘Actually I do.’ And then of course I got this letter and that was quite a shock, because I thought ‘somebody knows me! They do know me! How did they find me?’ So I said to this woman from [Place name] who called me to talk about it ‘How did you find me?’ She said ‘G107 we’ve got everything here about you.’ I said ‘No way.’ She said ‘yeah.’ And I thought it’s everything I’ve wanted, that I’ve been looking for for years and years and years. And because I needed it as well for a prosecution case. You know they helped me in building a picture of myself when I was young and how…because everything was in there. Why I was there, and some things that I’d forgotten, and as well it showed me – or reminded me – of the person I was then. So that when she brought it… she brought it all the way up here, she came up on the train with all these records, and sat with me all day, and I went through them and I read them and I… I wasn’t upset as such. I was crying to myself, I was crying. I thought, you know, I’ve waited for so long. And then talking to her about something that started the police investigation. And all those records that they finally found, that I had, helped me with that prosecution, to get an end to it. So after five years – it took five years – I got a court case, I got a verdict, and it’s over. For the first time in my life, I was free. It was all gone. And it was all because of those records. Had they not called me because of that I would never have been free. I don’t know if you can understand that but…it was such a… It was very emotional. I’m sorry, I’m getting a bit emotional because I’m remembering.

**Victoria**

That’s ok, please take your time.

**G107**

It was…it was so important to me. I can’t possibly explain or say how important those records were. And I think for anybody who’s in care, at the time and now, I think it’s equally important - or more important – to have them there. It can finish things for them, it can end things for them, you know, it can put things away so that you can carry on with the rest of your life.

**Victoria**

It’s like closure.

**G107**

Yes, that’s it, yes.

**Victoria**

That’s an incredibly powerful story. So you said that you’d tried for many years…

**G107**

Yes, yes, I did.

**Victoria**

I wonder if you could talk a bit more about that. Who did you contact trying to find your records?

**G107**

Well, initially…and the thing was these records didn’t go back that far, if you know what I mean? I had… It’s a bit long winded but… In 1991 my third daughter was abused by a family member that had abused me. It happened just the once. I immediately called the police and she had a video and everything done. I had the police to the house and they took statements and it all come out then about myself and everything. And an old social worker that I had at the time that I was in care…so I would have been like…we’re not talking long before, we’re talking like maybe 15 years, and the social worker came to the house. She was quite high up in, you know whatever it is, social services, and she come to my house, and you know when somebody is lying, you just know when somebody is lying. You look at somebody and you know that they’ve recognised you, because you can’t hide what’s in your eyes. I’m very good at looking at people’s eyes and I know, I can see. And she sat there on my sofa and said that she did not remember me or anything about me, and I knew she did. So again that reinforced the conspiracy sort of thing. A little while after that I had a breakdown, when I was [33 or 34?] and I had to go through it all again. And every time I went through it and I was trying to tell these people about it, and they didn’t find anything. I wasn’t in the system. I was nowhere, they said ‘we can’t find you.’ I was there! I was in [Place name], I was in [Place name], I had a social worker, I had all these… There were statements. Where had all these things gone? They can’t just vanish. So that was initially through social services. Then through the police, they couldn’t find anything. And through the psychiatrist and that in the hospital. Then it went on a bit later and I sort of…you know when somebody turns around and says to you, especially someone in authority, ‘you just don’t exist, we can’t find you’… I accepted that in the end, I thought ‘oh well, that’s it’ you know, that’s it, finished, I’m not there. But then something else happened and I had another breakdown and I was in hospital, it was the last time, and it all come out again, and I had a really really bad time. It took me three months but I had some treatment and it really really helped me, and when I came out I thought right, I feel really strong, much stronger and determined. And I thought I’m going to find out something. So I initially, the first time, I wrote to [Place name] police, the head of the police, the commissioner or something. They had a…he put me in touch with an organisation, a central organisation for them, to access my records. So I did that. I even paid for it. And what came back was nothing, they couldn’t find anything. So I thought ok, alright, so I went to a solicitor then who, like I said, specialised in that area supposedly. And she said ‘I’ll find something, if it’s there I’ll find it.’ I said ok, I trusted her and I paid her. And she came back after I think it was about four weeks, I had to keep on at her but after four weeks she said ‘I’m sorry I can’t find anything’ and that was it, cut dead. It was just like a sudden change, a sudden chill, but it wasn’t a chill it was metaphorically speaking, it’s like they’re all there ‘yeah yeah yeah we can do that’ and then suddenly ‘I’m sorry, that’s it now, gone’. Dead. Oh, ok then. So when the solicitor couldn’t find anything I thought ‘well that’s it’. It must have all…I wasn’t there, you know. It was a feeling of…I mean I’ve never felt much of anything in my life anyway, never anything, I didn’t… I’m sorry. It just made me think that it was all not real. You know? So… So that was it, I gave up again, I thought I’ll never find it, you know. I know that social worker said to me ‘G107 don’t give up it’s there.’ But I had given up, and I hadn’t even thought about it for 10 years. And suddenly, out of the blue, just out of the blue, my half-brother and his mother came to my door. What can I say? It was about 8 years ago. They knocked on my door, I’d never spoken to the boy, I’d spoken to his mum years ago. They knocked on door and they said ‘hi, I’m such and such. I’m your dad’s son’ and that he’d like to get to know me. I knew they only lived around the corner, and my dad he lived behind me, and my dad is…I should say, my dad abused me most of my life, until I was 16. That was my real dad. And they came in and got talking and chatting and I was good with him, I was thinking yeah come in, have coffee. And I don’t know, that was like a start, that was like a catalyst for everything since. I bet they wished they’d never come to my door that day, because that started it all up again for me if you know what I mean? And we’d been talking for about just over a year before I got that letter. And at the same time, or around about the same time, my daughter who’d been abused, who I hadn’t spoken to for a few years because we just don’t get on, she told them…they wanted to find the rest of the family sort of thing, so they went to talk to her. I did say to them ‘don’t, I wouldn’t advise talking to [daughter’s name]’, but they did. She said ‘I suppose you know about my mum and your dad’ and all this. She told them everything. I didn’t want them to know. I didn’t want them to know because I didn’t want…there was so much in my life that had been tarnished with what had happened that I didn’t want…this was a new relationship, this was something fresh and I didn’t want them to think bad of their dad. If he went on in that new life with a new family and he hadn’t done anything then great, if they loved their dad, great, I didn’t want to spoil that. I didn’t want to ruin that for them, I wanted them to have that. So that’s why I didn’t want to say anything. I didn’t have any control over [daughter’s name] because I didn’t speak to her, and I knew, I knew she was going to tell them and I don’t know why she did. And that ended it, that ended everything. They come and they questioned me and they asked me ‘is it true?’ and I said yes and they didn’t believe me, and that’s fair enough, I accepted that. ‘I’m so sorry’ I said. And again at the same time I got this letter, and it just started everything off. It was so weird how it all came about. I don’t know how to explain it.

**Victoria**

And you said that someone from [Place name] came up with your records, to go through them with you?

**G107**

She did, yes she did.

**Victoria**

So were the records what you expected they were going to be?

**G107**

Erm. Well, yes…they were. I suppose there wasn’t as much in there as I thought there would be, or could have been. I don’t know where the rest of it went. But most of it, most of everything was there, but I do think there was a lot missing. But there was also a lot there. I don’t think that was up to them, I think that was down to the people that sent them on from the previous place. Which actually was [Place name], and according to [Place name] they’ve got nothing. Nothing at all. When the police officer…it was eventually how I got the prosecution and it took her such a long time, it took her two years, she was like a dog with a bone and thank god for her, because she didn’t give up. She searched and searched, she said ‘I know you’re here G107, I know you’re here’. She went into the archives up here, and in London, they’ve got a…I think somewhere down that way they’ve got a big archive. She kept searching and she found everything. So those records from [Place name] was the biggest thing that could have ever happened in my life, it started everything and ended everything. So yes, sorry about that, I got a bit…

**Victoria**

No, no, it’s obviously been an incredibly key moment in your life.

**G107**

It was.

**Victoria**

To find them and to be able to, as you say, bring everything to a close. So I wonder if we could talk a bit more about the records. Not necessarily what was in them, but perhaps some of the ways that they were structured and the kind of language that was used and so on. Something that people quite often say is that when they read their file, they find that it has things in it that they don’t remember, or it has things in it that conflicts with what they remember. Did you have any experiences like that?

**G107**

Yes I did, because before I went to [Place name]… It came because of the [Place name] home in [Place name], but to get to [Place name] I came from [Place name] children’s home which was here, so all the records that were there supposedly followed on to them, but half of them were missing. The ones that they created while I was at [Place name]… you know there was a lot of conflicting things. I mean I know certain things, I knew certain things, I knew certain members of staff did what they did and what they said but it did not match what they had written. So I thought had they lied or had I forgotten? But I’ve always had an excellent memory and so…I don’t know, I think maybe in them situations in places like that I think they only write what they think they should write, not the truth. But it didn’t matter to me because everything that was there was everything that I needed. Does that answer the question?

**Victoria**

Yes, definitely, yes. Was there anything that had been taken out, that had been redacted or removed? You know, they sometimes sort of black in out of the records. Did you have any sections that had been taken out like that?

**G107**

Yes, yes.

**Victoria**

Do you have any sense of what kinds of things those were?

**G107**

I think it would have been something that would have been able to come back and bite the bottom of the person who wrote it, if that makes sense? And I don’t know how or when that happened. I trusted the woman who came with the records, I don’t know why, I don’t trust easy, I never have but from the first moment of speaking to her, I don’t know why, she’s just such a lovely woman. And I trusted that when she brought them she brought them all, and that she believed that everything there was what was available. So that when I read it, and I did say to her at the time ‘this is missing, that’s not right’ or ‘that’s contradictory to what I remember, and that’s and out and out lie’ because there was some of that there. So I didn’t…I think if anything was missing or wrong in it or not right it would have been from the people that wrote it to begin with I’m thinking. I don’t know.

**Victoria**

Was there anything in there that you had contributed or anything personal like photographs or…

**G107**

No, no.

**Victoria**

No, no like letters or diaries or anything like that?

**G107**

No, no. Which was a shame, because there was a couple of things that… I can… [sighs] you see, being in care wasn’t… [sighs] the staff that were caring for you were so deceitful. I don’t know whether they were meant to be but they’d say things… You see I never spoke, I did not talk and they would often try to get me to talk, and they said to me, you know, how are you feeling? If you write it down on a piece of paper, if you write it down that could help. And I can remember one night sitting by the light of the lamp from outside my window, I don’t know why I did it but I wrote a sheet of paper back and front, both sides. It was probably the kind of drivel that you write in the middle of the night, who knows what happens in a 14 year old mind, but I was so… I don’t know, not happy, but I was quite proud of myself for doing this, and I gave it to the person who asked me to write it and he took it and used it against me. And I never wrote another thing, and I never spoke to anyone again, for a very long time. And everything they took into the case conference, there was always this paperwork, things like that they weren’t there. But it’s what condemned me. But none of that was there.

**Victoria**

You said that you trusted the person from [Place name] that brought your records and [Place name] do have a really quite consistent approach to supporting people while they access their records. Unfortunately for a lot of people in a similar position they would just receive their records through the post.

**G107**

Oh. Right.

**Victoria**

It’s far far more common than having a person sit down with you and look through them. I wondered if you could talk a bit about that support and if there was anything that was particularly good about it or anything that you would change or anything additional that you would like to have seen.

**G107**

You see, me myself the person that I am I’m a very open person, you know, and I take people straight away as they are until they do something to me that…yeah…that I don’t trust or whatever. I’m not quite as bad as I used to be now that I’ve got a bit older. But when I was talking to the lady on the phone, I don’t know, it must have been her voice but it was just so…maybe it was just something that I needed, I needed to hear it, but she was just so good, she was so understanding. She didn’t talk much, she didn’t talk over me or anything like that, she was very good at drawing things out of me. Or maybe I just needed to say it. She listened anyway. She came up on the train and it make it so much less…[sighs] not formal but cold, it made it feel a bit less cold. It was like there was somebody there who cared, somebody there that understood how much this meant to me. And you know she came up on the train, she came all that way on the train! I mean I know someone else was paying for it but she came up anyway, and she was happy to spend the whole day with me, in my home, and sit with me for as long as it took and for as many times as I wanted to go over it and read it. She sat with me happily, there was no hint of any…she was never uncomfortable or wanting to hurry off or anything like that, she was just so relaxed like she belonged there, and she just sat with me and answered my questions and talked to me. I read it, you know, and yes it made the experience so much more…I don’t know, tangible, like a feeling… I think had they sent it to me through the post probably I wouldn’t have read all through it. You know I would probably have skipped things, you know, I wouldn’t have had the patience or I wouldn’t have sat down. But that day she sat there and it was like warm, I don’t know, it was warm and… I don’t know it just meant a lot. That someone other than myself showed that bit of caring.

**Victoria**

Yes, absolutely, and it’s one of the things that we hope we can push more for with this project is to demonstrate how valuable it is for people to have that additional care and respect around the process, rather than it being seen as an administrative task, which unfortunately it is seen in a lot of places, as being a paperwork exercise rather than something that has such an enormous impact on people’s lives.

**G107**

It does, because it’s not just paper. You see to them it’s just paper, words on paper, but to the person who’s reading it, who it’s about, it’s everything. It’s their life. You’re reading about yourself, remembering and going through it all again, feeling all the feelings you felt then, bringing up all that stuff, that I don’t think…I’m not sure that anybody could do that on their own. I think that’s why I would have skipped over it, had that person not come and given me…It’s like she put a warm blanket around me, and helped me to read it and feel it without fear of showing the emotion that was coming or that I remembered. You know?

**Victoria**

Yes. My last question is about the future really. Not necessarily for yourself and your records but for young people who are in care now, and their records. Something that’s been said a few times is that there could be improvements made to the way the records are kept, how they’re written, what kinds of information is in them. So I’ve been asking people, if you could advise a social worker today how they should write, what they should write, what would you say?

**G107**

Yes, yes. I know it’s quite laborious and I know that social workers don’t have much time but I think when you go into that – it’s more like a vocation these jobs are – so when you go in to it it means you care. And each person that you care for, that you have in your hands, you have to know you have the life of that person in your hands, and that everything you write about them is going to have an impact, now and in the future. And I think that maybe every social worker, for every person they care for, should have like a journal, like a journal that’s specifically for that person, and they should write down not just how… I know it’s hard, and they probably don’t have time to do it… but write down not just what they’re seeing or hearing but how they’re feeling about it and why they are feeling that way. You know, rather than just putting a few words down saying ‘This person…or this child seems to be so obnoxious and not cooperating or not doing this or not doing that’ adding with that ‘I think it’s because’ or ‘I get a sense of’ or ‘Maybe it’s’ or you know ‘I’ve asked them and their own response is’ and ‘I feel that with a bit more’. You know just something like that. Does that answer that question? I don’t know.

**Victoria**

Yes, yes, absolutely it does, certainly. I think that you’re right, that social workers are under a lot of time pressure and so it’s difficult to suggest things that they could do better that doesn’t create more work for them, which is one of the challenges that we’re sort of trying to face.

**G107**

I suppose that with today’s technology they could do audio, record it, which would be quicker and at least then in the future, you know, when the person is looking for their records and gets them back, they’ll have a better picture of themselves and the time that it was happening.

**Victoria**

Thank you so much, that’s been really generous of you to share that with me. Is there anything else that you’d like to add before I stop recording?

**G107**

No, I just hope I’ve answered your questions and I don’t know whether I have or not.

**Victoria**

You have, definitely. I will press stop on the recording. We’ve just done exactly 30 [minutes].

**END OF INTERVIEW**

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

Interview held 22nd March 2018 between G016, who wishes to be anonymous, and Victoria Hoyle, at Victoria’s office at UCL.

BEGINNING OF INTERVIEW

**Victoria**

So, we will start by talking a little about your personal experience. Would you mind giving me a bit of background into your care experience, and how you came to access your records?

**G016**

I came into care when I was seven. Mum was not coping, dad had various issues. So I was seven, I went to the first foster family, which was supposed to a very short term placement but it turned out to be more like a year and a half, maybe two years. It was in [place name]. I remained in my school where I was at when I was at home. And then I was sent to a second foster family, and was moved school again in [place name]. That was not a good experience, not a nice family. I don’t want to go into specifics but it wasn’t a good time. That was a year and a half about, and then my social worker and the manager and the whole team went and a new lot came in and saw that I was very unhappy and I needed to be out of that place, and within a week I was in a children’s home. That was my third placement and I was moved school again, but that is the only good thing the care system did for me. That was the best placement for me. And when I say that to people, people look at me like I’ve grown two heads because when you mention children’s homes I think people conjure up images of Oliver Twist and cold porridge in the morning and you know, but there’s good and bad in all of this. Good foster parents, bad foster parents, good children’s homes, bad children’s homes. That worked for me. And then I returned back home to my natural mother when I was eleven. My father sadly died when I was nine, so he passed away. That’s my journey so to speak.

**Victoria**

And you’ve accessed your care records?

**G016**

Yeah

**Victoria**

How did that come about?

**G016**

Well, the way it came about for me was, in the second foster family I was abused. I took that to the police and the CPS and they threw it out, not enough evidence and all the rest of it. So I then proceeded to take a civil action and obviously my solicitor had to access my care files to try and proceed with that civil action. I mean it didn’t get anywhere, but she had to access my files. And I wanted to see them. She also wanted me to read them because she needed me to comment on them, she wouldn’t force me to read them but I… So I didn’t apply for them through the local authority, it was the solicitor getting them, that was how I got to read them.

**Victoria**

What was the process like? Did you get copies of your records? Or did you have to go and look at them?

**G016**

No, she [the solicitor] got copies. She got the whole file in copies, and she said I could have copies of whatever I wanted. At the time I only asked her for copies of the children’s home records, because that was the ok bit so to speak. In retrospect I wish I had asked her for copies of the whole lot, but I didn’t and this is now some years ago and obviously solicitors keep records for a certain amount of time and then I assume they shred them or put them in the archives or whatever. So if I wanted to go back and get them again I’d have to go through the local authority and I don’t think I can be bothered trying that process. [laughs] As I say she was happy, she would have given me copies of the whole lot if I had wanted to, but I think the place I was in at the time I could only deal with the good stuff. As I say in retrospect I sometimes wish I had asked for everything but I didn’t, that’s that. That was how that came about.

**Victoria**

So you didn’t have any contact with the local authority?

**G016**

No, no, she [the solicitor] did it all. I didn’t go through the local authority because she just did it all. I didn’t have to do that. So I didn’t have that experience of the 40 days and all the rest of it.

**Victoria**

And you mentioned that the reason, your motivation, for seeing your files was as part of this civil action. Was there anything else you particularly wanted to know or find out?

**G016**

I don't think I was wanting to find out. I know why I went in to care, I know the social workers I had, I knew the placements I’d had, there wasn’t… I know a lot of people talk about wanting to fill in the missing gaps. It wasn’t really about that for me. I think I was just more curious as to how people were describing me, which was not particularly favourable. And I think this has come up a lot, that the way social workers wrote about children in the 70s was pretty awful, and the language was pretty… you know… and at the time I took that very personal, but now I’m learning that unfortunately that was quite normal for that time. But no one actually told me that at the time that I was reading them, which would have been quite helpful, because I may not have taken a lot of it so personally.

**Victoria**

When you received the files, the way that they were written, that language, you said that nobody talked to you about that? There was no introduction?

**G016**

No, no one warned me that in the 70s social workers talked about children using very derogatory language. You know, it’s not really you, it’s someone’s opinion, try not to take it personally. No one had that conversation with me, so I was very shocked at some of the language that was used.

**Victoria**

You mentioned in the workshop in January that some of your records were redacted. What kinds of things were redacted from the records?

**G016**

It was ridiculous to my mind. Mum wrote a letter…what it was, the solicitor obviously she didn’t have my brother’s permission, but mum was alive, so she asked mum would you be happy for your stuff to remain in the records because that would be of great assistance to me. So mum wrote a letter saying fine, I don’t mind [G016] reading anything about myself. So they had to redact my dad’s name in anything, and my brother’s name, but I could work it all out for myself, because it would be something like Mrs [surname] and blank, well that’s obvious that it was referring to my dad. Or [G016] and blank. So someone somewhere was sitting in a room doing all these redactions and I knew who they were referring to anyway. So why do that? I know they have their reasons, but all of that redaction and I knew who they were referring to.

**Victoria**

Was it just names that was taken out or was there other information about those people?

**G016**

Well I don’t know if pages were taken out but my solicitor was quite surprised. She said she had had cases where she’s had literally pages and pages of just complete redactions, whole pages being redacted but the pages stayed in. And they actually gave us quite a lot, she said your file is actually quite good. No it was names that were redacted and I could work it all out for myself. I think from what I can remember there was only one page where it was completely redacted and there was another page… I mean even letters from my grandparents, there was certain things redacted, but I knew it was a letter from my grandparents, so most of what was redacted I could figure out for myself.

**Victoria**

Those letters from your grandparents, were they to you?

**G016**

No, a lot of them were to the social workers. There was one letter… I think I mentioned this in the workshop. The children’s home I was in, we sadly lost a child, she had epilepsy and she went to run herself a bath, ran the hot water, had a fit and of course the water kept running and someone felt a flood and there she was. She was certainly pronounced dead on arrival to hospital if not beforehand. I was seeing a child psychologist at the time, very infrequently, not very often, and this death, the day she died, happened on the day I was supposed to see this psychologist. Well the last thing I wanted to do was go and do that, I wanted to stay at the children’s home and be with the children and all the rest of it. The psychologist understood that and she had written a sympathy letter to *me* saying Dear [G016], I’m sorry to hear that blank died today. Again, I knew who it was. Children don’t die in children’s homes every day. You know, ‘I fully understand you didn’t want to come to your appointment…’ So that was a letter to *me* but her name was blanked out. I suppose it’s to protect her, but I knew who that child was. So a lot of my redactions just felt so ridiculous, because someone was doing that and I could work it all out for myself.

**Victoria**

Prior to going through the civil action, did you have any knowledge or understanding of things like data protection or redaction or anything like that?

**G016**

No, no. I didn’t even really know you could access your files, but I certainly didn’t know anything about data protection and redaction. Not a clue. As I say wasn’t even aware you could access them but I certainly didn’t know anything about data protection or anything like that.

**Victoria**

You’d never been told that you could access your files? For example when the previous action was happening, the criminal action?

**G016**

You mean the police never told me? No, no.

**Victoria**

So when you saw your file, was it what you expected in terms of content and the way it was presented?

**G016**

What had I expected? [hesitates] It was what I had expected in terms of the information that was in there. As I say I wasn’t looking for any surprises. What I wasn’t prepared for was the language. The absolute terrible language, the way that I was written about. I just can't imagine myself writing like that about a distressed, traumatised child. I mean, to give you an example, when my father died… foster carers get an allowance to look after the kids, fair enough, they have to be clothed, fed, watered. I accept that. But what seemed to be the response to my increasing distress was rather than let’s see what’s going on, let’s give her some help, it was let’s give the foster carers more money because they’re having to deal with her increasing distress. And when my father died there was a letter saying ‘well I think the allowance needs to be increased more because they’re having to deal with [G016]’s bereavement.’ And it was like, well, number one they weren’t and number two, excuse me, sorry, why would you give them more money because I’m bereaved? That’s the sort of things that were shocking to me, it wasn’t what was in there in terms of my parents or anything, it was the language, and as I say, giving them more money. It was that that was just like, what?! How can you respond to a child like that? If a child’s bereaved they need help, not the foster carers getting more money. I could understand it they were given more money to pay for therapy for me or something, but to just give more money to…

**Victoria**

Just to keep doing what they had been doing.

**G016**

Yeah.

**Victoria**

Were there things that you thought were missing from the file?

**G016**

Well… well between the ages of me from seven until I went to the children’s home, so I went to the children’s home when I was about nine and a half, I have no photographs from that period. So between seven and nine and a half no photos seem to exist. When I think about it I don’t think any were taken. I would have expected a few photographs maybe. School reports seem to be lacking, I mean there were a few but there weren’t many. I would expect more of those to be in there. Yeah, that mainly.

**Victoria**

Was there anything that you remembered happening that hadn’t been recorded? Events or incidents that were just missed out, the information just wasn’t there?

**G016**

You mean specific incidents or…?

**Victoria**

A difference between what you remembered and what the file said.

**G016**

Oh yeah, there were lots of differences. A lot of it didn’t match my perception of things at all. Is that what you’re meaning?

**Victoria**

Yeah.

**G016**

No a lot of it did not match my perception at all and that fits really from my time going in to care up to the children’s home.

**Victoria**

You talked about being in foster care initially and then moving to the children’s home and that being a positive thing. Was there a difference in the records between the foster care placements and the children’s home?

**G016**

Oh god yeah. You mean in the way they were written? Oh yeah. I mean my solicitor was very thoughtful actually in the way that she did it because I read them over three sessions and what she did was she gave me the children’s homes ones first because those were the better ones. I mean being in care is not good at any stage, but those were the better ones for want of a better word. So she gave me those ones first and then she sort of left the worst ones till the end, because she said I knew that if I’d have given you the first lot first of all, you wouldn’t have wanted to go on and read the rest. But yeah, the minute I went to that children’s home the terminology was just so different. They actually started talking about me like a child, like a human being. I don’t know what they thought they were getting but one comment was quite telling, a few days after I’d been… because in a children’s home they have to write a diary about what you’ve done each day, they just have to write something, even if you’re not there. So say I’ve gone to nan’s, ‘at nan’s’, they just have to think of something to write. And there was a comment: ‘Such a pleasant child, a far more pleasant child than we were led to believe.’ They must have been told they were getting a monster! But the tone was just completely flipped, it was positive, it was like reading about a… I couldn’t believe actually that was my file, it was almost like have they got the right file here? It’s just totally different. And I suppose that’s because the people looking after me were having a more positive attitude to me, I don’t know, but the contrast was just… That’s why she gave me that one first.

**Victoria**

And did you have the same social worker throughout?

**G016**

No, the first social worker I had till I went to the children’s home and then the whole team changed, because it was when I got the new social worker that she came in and could see that there was something desperately wrong. I never disclosed the abuse, I never actually disclosed that that was what happened but she could see that I was a very unhappy child, this placement wasn’t working and she needs out. So I had two. The first one that I had from when I went in until the children’s home and then the second one. And the way she wrote was completely different.

**Victoria**

So it depends very much on the individual and the placement, the quality of what you’re going to get in the end?

**G016**

Yeah, oh yeah. Because it’s how they’re judging you, and if they’re judging you as a problem then they’re going to write in that way. But when I went to the children’s home, as I say, I had to pinch myself and think are these the right files? I mean I knew they were, but it was just such a difference.

**Victoria**

At any point do you remember having contributed anything yourself to the file?

**G016**

No, the only thing that I contributed myself was the…and I think I brought this up in the workshop…was a so-called life story work exercise, which was useless because what they consisted of was my social worker, the first one, sitting me down, telling me what to write, telling me what pens I was going to use, telling me what I was going to draw, telling me what colours, telling me what photographs. Useless exercise because it wasn’t my story, it was hers. Now that was actually kept in the file rather than given to me. Any life story work is supposed to be the child’s property and I didn’t actually get that back, until I went through the civil thing because she [the solicitor] said well this is yours, before I even read anything, so that shouldn’t even be kept in there.

**Victoria**

That had stayed in the file and you’d not been given that to take away?

**G016**

No, and that is supposed to be the child’s property. That’s not even to do with data protection, that is the child’s thing.

**Victoria**

When you looked at that, and remembered this experience of having done it, did it surprise you? Anything that you had written?

**G016**

No I just remembered it being a useless piece of work because I was sat down and she might as well have done it for me, she might as well have just done it and given it to me.

**Victoria**

Was that the only time you did it, just that one occasion?

**G016**

No, that was with the first social worker, that was the first time. I did start it when I went to the children’s home and it was completely different, it was me led, I wrote it but I think I didn’t do much with it because I’d had such a bad experience with it the first time. I think it sort of put me off a bit, which is a shame because the second time would have been completely different. I did do a bit. There is a few pictures of me with some of the kids from the home but I think I was just a bit demoralised with life story work and I think they just decided not to push it really.

**Victoria**

So when you accessed your file it was through your solicitor, did you have any support before, after or during?

**G016**

No, well, my solicitor had to write to my doctor to get his ok, that it would be ok for me to read my file because she was concerned that there would be things in it that would be upsetting and she had to cover her own back by, you know, saying do you think [G016]’s in a frame of mind that she can cope with this and all the rest of it. I was seeing a counsellor, so he was satisfied that I was seeing a counsellor. But there was a great pressure, even from my doctor, and he’s a lovely doctor I get on with him really well, but he said do you think it would be helpful to have a social worker in the room with you so she can explain why things were done? And I said no, that’s the last person I wanted in the room, so there was a lot of pressure to have a social worker in the room to say well this was done because of this and this was done because of that, and I appreciate for some people that might be helpful, but for me I didn’t want a social worker trying to justify, as I see it, a load of mistakes in my life. I just wanted to sit on my own in a room and read those files and have my own interpretation, and go for support when I felt I needed it. But there was very much this push, you really need to have a social worker and they tell you… see what I mean? To put it in a different light. And you don’t want… well I didn’t want that. And I’m very conscious when I’m talking about this that everybody’s experience will be different and for some people that will be a good thing.

**Victoria**

Yeah, I’ve spoken to people who’ve said that they wish that they had had a social worker or somebody there but it does depend very much on the individual and the experiences that they had as to how they feel about it now.

**G016**

You mean with their social workers initially?

**Victoria**

Yeah. So, looking back on the access process, afterwards what impact, what affect, did it have on you having seen the file?

**G016**

While I was doing it, it was alright. I found it was three or four months down the line that it started to affect me. At the time I just sort of had to deal with it like reading a book, I had to almost somehow on one level detach and just read this stuff like it was a book, but I think it was a few months down the line that it started to hit and I don’t know if that’s common but that was my experience.

**Victoria**

And when you read it, did you read it all or did you go to specific sections?

**G016**

No I read it all, in three sessions but I did read it all.

**Victoria**

And do you ever go back to it? The residential home stuff that you have?

**G016**

I do sometimes, yeah sometimes. Funnily enough if I’m feeling down I do go back to it because that’s the only positive, you know, there’s one document in it that is the first document that I read. This was even before I officially could read all of it, from my link worker, and it was just such a touching document that it… it meant the world to me. That was the first thing that I read, it was just the care, you know, so yeah I will go back to certain bits often.

**Victoria**

There are positive effects and positive emotions that come up when you’re looking at it?

**G016**

Yeah.

**Victoria**

So if you could have had the best possible access to your records, how would you have wanted it to be? If you could do anything differently, how would you want to the access process to be?

**G016**

If I could wave a magic wand?

**Victoria**

If you could wave a magic wand and create the ideal access process.

**G016**

I think number one, if you were brought up in the 70s, 80s, 60s, I really do think you need to be warned about the language because I’ve spoken to other people of a similar… Because back then they didn’t think anyone was going to read this stuff, they could write about you any way they wanted, and I think it really needs to be explained that you will see language that’s derogative. It’s not really personal, that’s just the way they wrote. I think if I could have known that as the time it…well I might still have taken it personally but maybe not as much. That would have helped. I think freedom of choice of support, rather than you’ve got to have a social worker, a more open choice about support and also that that support… I think people think you just need the support at the time but that support needs to be, you know, on offer down the line. And also I think this whole business of… like I’m saying, on reflection I would have perhaps liked [copies of] everything, I would have liked that process to be easier. As it stands, my understanding is that if I want to go and get everything again I’d have to go through the application process again I assume and I think there should be an opportunity to be able to go back, once you’ve been accepted once I think you should be able to go back in a year’s time and say actually I want that now. But as I understand it I would have to go through that whole process again and again, and I think there should be an opportunity to be able to go back once you’ve been through the process once. Once it’s been redacted that file should be somewhere and you should be able to go back, to keep going through to get more copies. That’s what I assume I would have to do?

**Victoria**

Yeah, I think you would have to make a subject access request to the council, the local authority.

**G016**

Well I feel once you’ve made the first access request and you’ve got your file or whatever, I feel that should be kept somewhere and you should be able to go back and ask for more copies. Because you feel you can want things at different times.

**Victoria**

Yeah, definitely. Thinking about the file still being there, in the local authority…

**G016**

Well I assume so.

**Victoria**

It should be, that is what the guidance says. Have you ever thought about asking for it to be amended or changed, or would you want it to be disposed of, if it could be?

**G016**

How do you mean?

**Victoria**

So, under new legislation, the GDPR [General Data Protection Regulation] which is coming in, which is replacing the Data Protection Act, there are two new rights. There is the right to amendment, which means that you can go back and alter a record or comment on it and put that in the record.

**G016**

But you can’t… I mean my social worker wrote, I don’t know, ‘[G016] had a major tantrum on Tuesday’ for arguments sake. I couldn’t cross that out?

**Victoria**

Probably not but this is the thing, it’s not really clear yet what will and won’t happen, and it will probably take some court cases to iron it out but at the moment you could request, probably not to cross it out, but to go back and add something in.

**G016**

Like ‘that is not my memory’?

**Victoria**

That’s not my memory, that’s false, you know, as far as I’m concerned this is what actually happened.

**G016**

But the original statement would have to remain?

Victoria

Probably. But then there is also this new right to be erased or to be forgotten, where it may be possible for people to go back and say: look this information is no longer relevant to you, I don’t want you holding this about me anymore and I want it to be destroyed or given to me.

**G016**

And they have to do that?

**Victoria**

Well that’s the question. How will that effect care leavers, is that something that people will ask for, and I think if they did ask for it there would be a debate about whether or not it should happen, because there’s other legislation that says you have to keep it for 75 years, so which takes precedence, which one wins.

**G016**

My feeling on that is that if that came in force I’d have a right to say I don’t want you to hold this because it’s not… I don’t think I’d want them destroying it, I think I’d want it back to do what I saw fit with it, but is that what you’re saying? Or is it they would destroy it, you wouldn’t be able to?

**Victoria**

I’m not sure, it’s hypothetical really. I’m interested in what you would want. Whether or not you would want to take control of it like that?

**G016**

Yeah, what I would like is to be able to go back and say you hold this file on me, a lot of it in my opinion is not correct or it’s not putting me in the light that I remember, I don’t want you to have it. But I wouldn’t want them to go and bin it, I would want it back to do what I wanted to do with it. Because if they just destroyed it…I would want to have to control over being able to go through it and keep stuff and not keep stuff but I don’t know if that’s the same law you’re talking about.

**Victoria**

Well I think it will be interesting to see if the law will be used in that way, because it’s only just coming in in May, it will be a while I think before we know whether or not it can be interpreted in that way. The reason I ask the question is because I’ve spoken to other people who say they think it should be their right to decide what happens with that information, and that it doesn't belong to the local authority but it belongs to them because it’s about them.

**G016**

Yeah, and that’s the view I hold. If that law did come in I would like to go to them say you hold this file, a lot of it as far as I’m concerned is wrong, and not accurate, and doesn’t… and I want it back to do whatever I see fit with it. That would be my ideal.

**Victoria**

If you were speaking to another care leaver, who hadn’t yet access their files, would you recommend it to them as something to do?

**G016**

That’s so hard. [sighs] It’s so individual. I don’t know if I’d see it as my place to recommend it or not recommend it, I don’t know. I mean belonging to the Care Leaver’s Association you’re almost part of a gang or a club that none of us ever wanted to be a part of, so there’s some common threads that don’t have to be spoken about and we all get it, but at the end of the day we’ve all got individual stories and I don’t know if it’s my place to tell someone to do it or not do it.

**Victoria**

You talked about people being provided with more information, like about the historic use of language, if someone was going through the process, is there any other advice that you would give them?

**G016**

I would say take it slowly, don’t try and read the whole thing all at once in one day, but there again some people might want to do that. The difficulty I think is what you ask for copies of, because as I say, in retrospect I wish I had asked for copies of all of it, at least more than I did, but if I were to do that I’d have to through the whole process again and from what I’ve heard, I don’t know if I could. It’s so daunting. So I think my advice would be to take it slowly and don’t try and read it all at once. And do what you think is best, don’t feel that you have to sit in a room with a social worker because that’s what you’re being pressured to do, but by all means if you want that fine. I think because I had such a negative experience with social workers the last thing I wanted was a social worker sitting in the room and justifying it because… If you had good positive relationships with social workers then I can see how that would be helpful.

**Victoria**

Do you feel as though accessing your records had any impact on other people in your life?

**G016**

My dad’s not alive so he couldn’t be impacted. I suppose it has mum, because I suppose I’ve read things that perhaps I didn’t know about the specifics before. Perhaps she’s had to hear things that haven’t been particularly nice and so I suppose it has had impacts on her you know. It hasn’t been easy for her at times.

**Victoria**

Have there been any other knock on effects, or consequences to doing it?

**G016**

I think the good thing is that I have learned somebody cared along the way, albeit at the end of the road. Bad things is that the stuff you read, and the way they write about your parents as well, that can be pretty harsh. Reading about your parents and the way they write about them, because again it’s very derogative, that is quite difficult. Because they’re your parents and they’re talking about them as if they were scum of the earth a lot of the time.

**Victoria**

Obviously records are still being created today for young people and children who are currently in care, if you could give advice to a social worker about how and what they should be writing about, what would you say to them?

**G016**

I would say any time you’re writing about a child always think that child could go back and read that, and really think about how you're writing stuff, because the power of words is so powerful. The way you write about kids, that follows them. The labels you get follow you into doctors you see, psychologists you see, even job interviews maybe and just the terminology and labelling, you’ve really got to think that’s going to follow a child for the rest of their life. I think when social workers write records they forget that it could be a long-lasting thing, they’re just thinking about that seven year old kid they’re writing about, but they need to remember what they write could effect the rest of that person’s life. I’ve had experience of that where a label that was put on me when I was two has followed me to this day sometimes. So they really need to think about the labels that they’re giving kids, how that can affect the rest of their lives in so many different ways.

**Victoria**

In terms of life story work, which you had a negative experience of…

**G016**

I’m sorry, it’s one of my hobby horses. [laughs] I think what one girl said in the workshop, with any records, with any life story, it’s as good as the person who’s doing it and that is just so true.

**Victoria**

What would be the best way of doing life story work?

**G016**

I don’t know, as I say the way it was done with me she just told me what to write. And I understand it’s helpful sometimes for social workers to fill in the gaps, but I don’t think it always needs to be in a book. Some children might want to go and visit places, or they might… I think there’s this thing that it has to be a written down document, it has to be a book. And I think again each child is different so maybe they want to visit somewhere where they were or they might want to go and, I don’t know, watch a home movie of somewhere they were. I don’t think it has to be a book. Ask the child what they want it to look like, you know, what do you think would be a good idea to do life story work and how would you like that to look. Or do you want to do it at all, because it might be that child’s not ready.

**Victoria**

More choice, and more creativity.

**G016**

Yeah.

**Victoria**

I suppose it’s quite artificial isn’t it? To put your life into a book, that’s not how it happens.

**G016**

I mean people do write about their lives don’t they and what not but yeah.

**Victoria**

Yeah people have memory boxes and scrap books and all that kind of stuff, but it’s a bigger picture.

**G016**

I’ve got a memory box for stuff to do with my dad, that’s something I’ve created and I’ve put stuff in it. I’ve made stuff. I think life story work has to be thought of…it doesn’t have to be a book, it could be a box, it could be…but they like to stick to this book, text style.

**Victoria**

You said about going to places where you have made memories and things. Have you ever been back to the places you were when you were in care?

**G016**

You mean me off my own back? Or the social worker making me do it?

**Victoria**

I mean on your own.

**G016**

Yeah, I went back to the children’s home and met some of the staff that were still there. It was very different you know. When I was there it was very cosy and like a big family and there was a lot of young kids. When I went back they had kids who were very disturbed and had keys to their room and they couldn’t have kids under 11 and so it was a very different set up. But there were some staff still there, a couple, and the school I went to was right next door, it was called [name of school]. The school was nothing to do with the children’s home but the children’s home was called [name] and so was the school and some people think it had something to do… but it just happened to be called that. So I went back to the school and a couple of teachers were still there, so I’ve gone back there. In terms of my father, he collapsed on the Caledonian Road in London, I don’t know if you know it? It’s a very long road and I actually went and walked down this long road, I don’t know if I walked down all of it, but I did walk down that long road. I actually… this isn’t to do with my care files, but I actually accessed his medical records. Because no one explained what he died of, no one told me anything, so I actually went back and got his medical records. I think I had to have a copy of my birth certificate and his marriage certificate to prove that I was his daughter, so I did that to try and find out how he died. Not the nicest way to have to do it, but no one told me so I thought well… So I read those and then I wrote to the hospital to ask if I could see a doctor, because obviously there was a lot of medical terminology and jargon in it and so I saw someone who was a doctor but also a psychologist in ITU. So he would see people who had survived ITU and were having problems as a result or their relatives, so he was able to go through the medical stuff but also some of the effects of ITU and what people experience and what have you. So that wasn’t to do with care but it was a by-product, it was linked in with it.

**Victoria**

It’s related isn’t it? It’s following the same route, looking at records to find out about yourself and about your family, but because you weren’t told, because that information wasn’t shared with you when you were nine or afterwards when you were older and had questions about it. Are there questions that you still have that are unanswered by the records?

**G016**

My care records? The big question is why on earth did that social worker leave me in a placement that was clearly not working. I mean, I was abused but even if I wasn’t abused that placement was not working. They did abuse me but say they hadn’t it was quite clear that placement wasn’t working. Mum was telling them. My grandparents wrote numerous letters. Other people. Why did they leave me in that place for a year and a half? And then a new lot of social workers come along and within a week I’m out of there. What did that social worker see that the other one didn’t? Well I think she did see, but she didn’t care. That would be…if I could go back I would ask her why, why did you…and a new social worker comes along and within a week… And the whole tone of the records change, it’s not just the children’s home, it’s the social worker, it's just completely different.

**Victoria**

It does definitely show on how dependent it all is on the individual people who are involved in your life and who have the responsibility for writing it up afterwards. Other than going back to the children’s home and seeing some of the staff, did you keep in touch with anyone that you knew at the children’s home? Any of the other children?

**G016**

No I didn’t sadly because… I mean I had a few kids that I got very friendly with, there was obviously Lisa who sadly died and there were two little ones who were much younger than me. Another girl [name] she was in a boarding school but came back for holidays. No I didn’t, no unfortunately, and I do often wonder how their lives have panned out and what they’re doing now and how has it all worked out for them.

**Victoria**

But you’ve never tried to find them?

**G016**

I’ve thought about it but it’s a difficult one because does someone else want you knocking on their door after thirty odd years you know. Hello, do you remember when? They may not want that, it’s difficult.

**Victoria**

That’s the end of my questions really, you answered a lot of the other ones as you were talking. We’ve been talking 45 minutes believe it or not, so just to finish off is there anything else about your experience of accessing your records that you want to capture and share for the research?

**G016**

As I say, I think I’ve already said, there does need to be a system where once you’ve gone through redaction once you should be able to go back and ask for copies without having to go through that process again and again and again. Because I’m sure there must be other people who think I wish I’d got a copy of that or I wish I’d got a copy of that.

**Victoria**

So when we put together the pack for care leavers, with advice about accessing their records, is there anything that you’d want us to put in there? Anything that you think, documents or instructions or contact details or support information or anything that you would want other people to have access to?

**G016**

I’d want them to know about the CLA, which is tricky, because of the same problem you have with this research. The CLA can’t deal with youngsters under 18 I think it is, so they can’t access that, because you get in to child protection and all the rest of it. They’re all people who have been through the care system and we all know what we’re on about. I don’t know what support there could be. I mean there’s Voice for Children and different things. It’s tricky where you can point them really.

**Victoria**

It’s one of the difficulties. How you provide information both for young people who are still in care or fit that definition of a care leaver, up to 25, and people who are a bit older who are coming back to access. I think it’s probably going to be a little bit different depending on, you know, what age you are as to the best way. But the CLA definitely provide lots of great advice. That’s the thing, there’s lots of good advice already out there, it’s just making sure that people have access to it and know where to go. If you don’t find the CLA and you do go do it by yourself, it’s more difficult. Your route was quite different to a lot of peoples.

**G016**

And also I think I mentioned to you on the phone, there is this sort of perception that if you go back home to your natural parent or parents you’re not considered a proper care leaver, which is… People like to define it by if you’ve been in care for one year, two years, but you’re a care leaver whether you were in care for a week, two weeks, three months but I don’t think that’s how a lot of people see it.

**Victoria**

I think a lot of people have the perception that care leavers are people who’ve been in care all of their childhood, or from a certain age up to 18, rather than the experience of lots of people like yourself which is that you’re in care for a period of time and then you go back to your birth family. Or you come in and out.

**G016**

Yeah, that happens a lot yeah. You go back to your parents, it doesn’t work, you go back to care, that’s another situation. Or you’ll end up being adopted or something. And I think it’s most unfair that it seems like the rules for adopted people accessing their records…they don’t have to do the same barraging, there seems to be double standards for people that are adopted and people who’re foster or whatever. From what I can understand, kids that are adopted it's a given right that they see their records, so that seems to be a double standard,

**Victoria**

Yeah, there is specific legislation that provides adopted people with access to their records that doesn’t apply for children who were in care in foster care or residential placements. There is a difference at the moment, which is difficult to understand why that might be.

**G016**

Maybe some of this research, I know it’s difficult, may be to look at the policy for adoption and why isn’t that the same for care leavers, or why can we not make those parallels?

**Victoria**

I know Darren has talked about that and tried to make that argument in the past, but for whatever reason, there is a bit of resistance [from the government].

**G016**

I think there’s a perception that when you were in care you will have a relative or someone who can tell you stuff. But in my experience with mum for example, because so much happened and because she wasn’t very well at the time, her memories of it can all be quite muddled. Often she will think something happened when I was still in care but it didn’t, actually it happened when I was at home. So I think there is this perception that if you go back to your parent or parents you can ask them and they will remember it all, but mum’s memories are quite muddled because, as I say at the time she wasn’t very well. Often she will think something that happened when I was in care happened when I got home and vice-a-versa, so while you’ve got that parent their memories might be quite jagged, they may not want to talk about it – there’s another thing – so this perception that you have a parent to go to because you’ve gone back to that parent isn’t always... Because their memories can be jagged or they may not wish to discuss certain things, and both have been the case with mum. So that’s a false perception and that’s another big thing I’d like to get across to whoever is creating these files.

**Victoria**

Yeah, because it’s really a difficult experience, it’s not something that you are prepared for, that experience, as a family.

**G016**

No, and it’s not just about you, it’s about your family and your parents and, as I say, there may be things they have jagged memories about or not wish to discuss. When you say about the knock-on effect, it isn’t just you it’s the whole family.

**Victoria**

Well I think that’s where we can end it, unless you want to add anything else? If you think of anything else that you want to put in once you’ve seen the transcription then just let me know and we can insert it in, and we can always come back and revisit it in the future if you would like.

**G016**

I think the only thing I’d end on is that it’s so unfair that we have to go through so much, knocking and knocking, just to get information that at the end of the day is rightfully ours and I know that that is where the tension comes isn’t it, because the authority argues about whose information it is.

**Victoria**

Who owns it? I think a lot of local authorities and charities, their position is that they own the records, but who really has rights to them?

**G016**

And in a way isn’t that what we need to sort out, because while that contention exists we will always have this hurdle. In a way that’s… you know… who *does* own these records? And I think that’s a barrier to a lot of this, or some of it.

**Victoria**

When it’s seen from the organisational perspective as being information that belongs to the organisation then that is where a lot of the problems arise, because that’s why they get to make decisions about what can and can’t be seen and what should and shouldn’t be redacted. Whereas if there was a situation where the care leaver was recognised as being the owner or partly the owner of the information, then it might be easier to get access to it in better circumstances and more freely than at the moment.

**G016**

Yeah.

**Victoria**

That’s definitely something that we need to think about.

**G016**

Ownership.

**Victoria**

Yeah.

**G016**

It sounds strange doesn’t it when you talk about records and ownership, but who owns them, it is a big issue isn’t it?

**Victoria**

Yeah because if you own them you have more rights over what you do with it, who you share it with, how you share it, whereas if you’re only requesting it and someone else owns it then it's a much more difficult position.

**G016**

Yeah.

**Victoria**

Thank you very much [G016], so I’ll stop recording now. We actually did 55 minutes in the end.

END OF INTERVIEW