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

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| Title | *MIRRA (Memory – Identity – Rights in Records – Access) research project data deposit interview transcripts: group three* |
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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 11th April 2018 between G301 and Victoria Hoyle, at [Place name] Customer Service Centre.

BEGINNING OF INTERVIEW

**Victoria**

First question is an easy opener. If you could just start by briefly describing your job role and the range of responsibilities that you have.

**G301**

Sure. So I’ve relatively recently been working as an Information Management Officer – Governance having worked for the best part of 18 20 months as an Information Governance Assistant. So as an assistant I had day to day responsibilities for FOIs, which is where most of my background lies, as well as some involvement in subject access requests. I’ll focus on the subject access requests. So in that context [I was] receiving requests for information from data subjects, some of whom may be ex-employees of the Council, current employees, some residents looking for housing files and so forth, which are relatively easy to deal with, and the rest tend to be social care files, which can be somewhat more complex and voluminous. So responsibilities there would be to clarify requests, to find out precisely what it is that a data subject is after; making sure they are who they say they are, so asking for ID and proof of address; then collecting all of the information, where appropriate liaising with children’s and family services to see if there are any particular concerns about a specific case; then going through and redacting the file, which could be anything from a few pages if, for example, there wasn’t a great deal of social work that had taken place or if the data subject was after just a small amount of information, all the way through to 10,000 pages worth of notes from the ‘60s, handwritten, terribly photocopied, quite difficult and time consuming to go through. It’s probably also worth noting that at times we would also have a conversation with the data subject, just to see what they know – I dare say we might go into more detail on this later – then a little bit of admin, saving down an original copy of their file, an audited copy of their file, and printing out a fully redacted copy of their file, and sending it to them by special delivery, all within 40 calendar days currently, which I’m afraid to say we’ve had a poor track record of keeping of late. So as I mentioned I’m currently an officer, so I got a promotion, and my role hasn’t changed a huge amount, on the FOI front looking more at internal reviews and more complicated cases, and in terms of data protection I’ve been helping look after a team of temporary staff to manage a backlog of subject access requests which have built up. I’ve still been doing a little bit of redaction work and asking for ID and so forth as I mentioned but also looking at some sort of reviews where data subjects have come back and said that there appears to be information missing for example.

**Victoria**

On average, if you can estimate, how many requests do you receive monthly, annually, from people for social care files?

**G301**

I think it’s a really peaks and troughs sort of thing but what feels right is between…in a month maybe sort of 7 or 8 would be a low month but there could be sort of 15 for a relatively busy month for social care files. As I mentioned we get easier SARs on top of that for housing information and tax, council tax, as well.

**Victoria**

So if you receive a request for a social care file is that subject access request dealt with in exactly the same way as any other SAR or do you have any different processes or procedures?

**G301**

The information comes from a different place, so for a housing file for example we’ve got FOI champions within the housing department that we use to collate information for a housing file whereas for a social care file we have direct access to the current and historic….what’s the word I’m looking for? Legacy! …legacy repositories. We have access so we’re then able to scrape out all the information, so we can actually do it without liaising with the social care team, as I say though we tend to do that, particularly for post-1989 requests, which is when the Children Act came into force.

**Victoria**

Ok. Is there a particular policy, any documentation around providing access to care leaver subjects?

**G301**

So there is certainly information on our website that explains the right of subject access and how to go about making a SAR…yes…so…

**Victoria**

What about internally, for guidance for you and colleagues, are there as far as you’re aware any specific policy documents or procedure documents?

**G301**

We have procedures that the team are familiar with in place, there are a few different documents that have been produced over the years. Sort of a basic guide to redaction. But with redaction it’s…it’s such a nuanced thing, it’s very dangerous to put down fixed rules, ‘you must redact this’ because you have to take each case on an individual basis. I guess for that reason perhaps there isn’t as much as you might expect.

**Victoria**

In terms of any external guidance or legislation that relates specifically to care leavers and social care files, are you aware of any legislation over and above the Data Protection Act that’s relevant? It’s not a test, I’m just interested to know.

**G301**

Yeah yeah sure. The Information Commissioner’s guide…code of conduct…it’s either the guide or code of conduct for subject access requests. The Commissioner has a useful 60-70 page document that sets out the tests to apply when redacting and just generally dealing with subject access requests. There’s also the social work modification order I think it’s called, which I’d be interested to hear your opinion on actually particularly the wording around ongoing social care. So yeah those two, and obviously the GDPR.

**Victoria**

Have you ever come across some guidance in the Children Act 1989 transitions guidance for care leavers?

**G301**

No, no! I’d be fascinated to know.

**Victoria**

There is a section, updated in 2014 following the Children and Families Act, which specifically relates to access to records for care leavers as defined by the government, which is people up to the age of 25, and it makes statutory certain access procedures. And one of the things that has emerged from this research is that that piece of legislation is very buried for a start, within some guidance that’s only really used by social care practitioners, and is not very well known about by people working in information management and governance…

**G301**

Demonstrably.

**Victoria**

Yeah, and as a result it’s not being used. So it’s just a tick box question to get a sense of it, because one of the things that we’re concerned about is how fragmented the picture is and that different types of expertise are held in different places.

**G301**

I apologise, can I ask you to repeat it? It’s the transitions…?

**Victoria**

The Children Act 1989 transitions guidance for care leavers, and it’s available online and it’s being updated regularly, so although it’s founded in the 1989 Act it’s updated with each iteration of the Children Act.

**G301**

Cool, many thanks.

**Victoria**

I can’t remember the exact section, I can send you the reference if it’s useful to you.

**G301**

Thank you.

**Victoria**

So you said that generally speaking these requests are managed through the information governance team but there might be some conversation with social care practitioners?

**G301**

Yes.

Victoria

Can you just elaborate on the different circumstances in which you might go to social care and ask for clarification or further information?

**G301**

Yeah, so perhaps the most useful example is if there’s clearly a risk of upsetting a care leaver or…would you like me to limit my answer to care leavers or people who are still in care?

**Victoria**

We can talk about both and then I might follow up with a question about how they’re different. Go ahead.

**G301**

So if there’s ongoing social care and there’s anything to indicate there might be a risk, any kind of risk really, risk of harm, risk of upsetting, whether we’re unsure that a particular person may know of an event, whether it would be safe to divulge certain information, then yeah we’d get in touch with somebody who worked or is currently working with the data subject.

**Victoria**

So is that more likely to happen in an open case scenario?

**G301**

Yeah yes.

**Victoria**

Do the social care practitioners get involved in any of the practicalities, like in redaction, or have an overview of the file before it’s released?

**G301**

Yeah yeah it has certainly happened yes and sometimes it will be the case…we liaise with a sort of central team within children and family services, so we email a mailbox, [email address] I think and they will then more often than not liaise with the social worker, see if there is any particular risks or concerns around a SAR that we’ve highlighted to them and it may be the case that then it’ll be decided that the social worker themselves will sit down with the data subject and go through it with them in the first instance. Yeah, sorry I forgot the question…

**Victoria**

Do they get involved in redaction or have sight of the file before it goes out, sort of to check it?

**G301**

Ah yes yes. It will often be the case that they will review the file before sitting down with that person yes.

**Victoria**

You also mentioned that during the course of the request process you may have contact with the subject. What kind of contact do you have and what conversations would you have prior to releasing information?

**G301**

So it perhaps doesn't happen as often as it should but it’s certainly happened in the case where a file is particularly large and it’s going to take us as weeks to just read through it line and by line and ultimately it will take longer for the data subject to receive their information. We’ve done it in the past where we’ve sought to find out if they’d prefer to have less information quicker, if it was just a particular document or time period that they were particularly interested in, because it may be a surprise to them that there is 1000s of pages on them. There can be an expectation gap that it’s worth kind of exploring. Also – we have to be careful in the way that we do it – but to find out what they already know, because that can influence what we redact, but as I say we have to be careful not to tip them off to something that we wouldn’t want them knowing and equally we’d have to be convinced that they’re not just saying yes I know about that on the off chance that we’ll then be tricked into providing something that maybe we shouldn’t, if that makes sense? It can be a delicate conversation but those are kind of the motivations behind it, if that’s helpful?

**Victoria**

Yeah definitely. When the requestor receives their information, receives their file, is there any support or provision of service to them as part of the process?

**G301**

That’s a really good question and unfortunately not by default outside of the process I’ve already outlined where its deemed particularly necessary, a perhaps very vulnerable data subject or a file which is perhaps going to contain a number of surprises to a data subject is asked to be shared in person by our children’s and family services.

**Victoria**

Have you had any training that’s specific to working with people who may have had traumatic experiences or experienced abuse or anything like that?

**G301**

Not at [Place name] but…I’m not entirely sure it was the reason I was given the job but it was certainly something I was asked about at interview… I have had previous experience of working with vulnerable people, and training. I used to work at [Place name] hospital.

**Victoria**

Do you ever provide access to care files for any different types…

**G301**

I’m sorry, I should probably leave this until the transcript but I used to work at a psychiatric hospital, for the record…but I’m sure you wouldn’t include that [the name of the hospital] anyway.

**Victoria**

No no, what I do in the transcript is I put any named places or people in square brackets and then omit them if we publish from that section.

**G301**

Thanks Victoria.

**Victoria**

So do you ever provide access to files for people or organisations other than the subject?

**G301**

Yes, so we get information sharing requests from the police. There’s a protocol which you may be familiar with for historic sex abuse. That particular protocol we allow a police officer to come in and look at files un-redacted and then if they’d like any particular documents to take away, perhaps that the CPS have requested, then we would look at redacting those files and providing them to them. Similarly we might get a request for information under Section 29 of the Data Protection Act, and if we’re convinced that…if they’ve filled out the relevant paperwork and we’re convinced that there’s a real need for them to see it to progress a particular case, there’s sufficient grounds and it’s not a fishing expedition then we would appropriately redact and release that as well.

**Victoria**

Have you ever had any requests from researchers, people like me who have a kind of academic use for the material?

**G301**

No, not under the Data Protection Act. I daresay we have under the FOI Act and anything we would have released under the FOI Act would be very high level, anonymised, heavily redacted, zero personal information.

**Victoria**

So let’s come back to redaction because that is a tricky subject and we know from the research thus far that it’s a source of tension and conflict, both for the people redacting files and also for the people who receive their files redacted. So I wondered if you could give me an overview of how you manage the disclosure of third party information from files?

**G301**

Sure. If I do not have the permission of third parties I weigh up whether in all the circumstances it is reasonable for the data subject to have it.

[both laugh]

**Victoria**

Well now that I know that you know the wording of the Act [both laugh again]…

**G301**

Ok so the age of the information will play a big part, whether it’s reasonable in all the circumstances to assume the data subject would know it and if they didn’t know it the balance between the harm to breaching potentially somebody’s privacy and the benefit to the data subject of kind of allowing them to have a kind of a family life, as in the right to privacy and a family life. Yeah. Any risks that I can see, risks for harm, risks to revealing perhaps police methodology, that’s obviously something… any opinions from non-professionals that may have been given in confidence I’m very very careful to take out, and I think it’s really important to…I was having this conversation yesterday during a training course… I think it’s really important to black out rather than white out so that the data subject can see that there is information removed. I think whiting out can just yeah lead you into the position where you’ve tricked them into not knowing that there was something that has been taken out, so there would be no…they wouldn’t know there was something taken out so they wouldn’t be able to appeal it. I think you know sometimes we are a little risk averse, we really try not to over-redact but we do err on the side of caution perhaps more than we do on the side of disclosing everything, so I think it’s really important to black out, to be upfront that you have taken something out, just to allow that right of appeal.

**Victoria**

Can you give me an example of where you would redact information? So, a scenario of third party information that you would feel should be redacted.

**G301**

Sure. One that I always like to use is if there’s a child that was taken into care and their mother had mental health issues and the data subject really wanted to know why he or she was taken into care. I’d allow things like ‘mother couldn’t cope’ or information that would suggest that the mother wasn’t coping with bringing up the child or general things perhaps about the mother’s mental health, but as soon as… you know ‘Mum was finding it difficult to cope with Jane’… but as soon as it started going into specific details about the mother’s condition or things that the mother had done… Yeah perhaps the mother was involved in prostitution, which often comes up, I’ll usually tend to take that out. ‘The mother was low in mood’ or ‘the mother was schizophrenic’ I’d leave in, generic things, but as soon as it went into detail you know the mother was hearing voices from god telling her to do specific things…that I think is too much. So generic things where the information is both the mother’s and the daughter’s, I’d do my best to give as much as to the data subject as possible but where, yeah, it went into specifics. I think I’ve said the same thing five times in slightly different ways. [both laugh] Sorry, you need to rein me in when I start waffling, I’ve had too much coffee I think.

**Victoria**

Do you ever redact information from files for other reasons than third party information?

**G301**

Yes, as I slightly touched on, if it will reveal police methodology, you know the way that they’re targeting particular criminals might give something away to help somebody reoffend without getting caught. If there was a risk to somebody, even the data subject. [pause] If it wasn’t clear to me that the data subject knew something that wasn’t necessarily third party information but would be damaging to them to find out, then I’d take it out. I’d try to do some research to find out whether they did [know it], but if I didn’t know and I saw the risk of them finding out something you know life changing out about themselves… I don’t know, that their father wasn’t really their father…I think I’d be really careful about releasing that, just here you go find out for yourself on page 35 without any… that might be something.

**Victoria**

And when you do redact do you provide an explanation about why the decision has been made?

**G301**

Yeah so we’ve got a template letter which more or less sort of replicates the Act, you know ‘where appropriate we’ve taken out third party information…’ It’s fairly vanilla. We have written bespoke ones in the past which might go into slightly more detail. We have used the social work modification in the past, whether or not we included any language in the disclosure letter I’m afraid I don’t recall because perhaps to have done so would have tipped them off anyway.

**Victoria**

Do you ever take any legal advice for disclosing information?

**G301**

I’ve not since being here, but my tenure is fairly short. As I say we have worked with Children’s and Family services for advice but in my tenure here I’ve certainly not. I’m not a lawyer but I have some legal background.

**Victoria**

In the conversations that you have with people who make requests what’s your sense of their motives and expectations?

**G301**

It’s quite… So in reverse order, expectations can really vary. Some are super sympathetic to the fact that we’ve got quite a challenging workload and the 40 day deadline is likely to be missed and their fairly philosophical about that, and [some are] people who know what their rights are and aren’t afraid to tell you ‘you need to get back to me by a particular date and that's a long stop’. Motives was the first wasn’t it? Often particularly with historic requests they may have blocked out a lot of their…particularly distressing upbringings and just to kind of get closure on a difficult period of their life often comes out. Find out why I went into care is usually a common request. There are all kind of motives when it comes to non-social care SARs.

**Victoria**

Do people who’ve had their social care files ever come back to you with additional questions or additional requests?

**G301**

In our standard disclosure letter which explains why there may be certain redactions in there, third party information and so forth, it goes on to say if you need us to review either the redactions made or the completeness of what has been provided to you to get back in touch. It also sets out the right of complaint to the Information Commissioner. So off the back of that I think some people come back where they were expecting to see more or were unhappy with the redactions which were made, but for other reasons? No no. I think… and just to skip back to the previous question I think sometimes the motive is they’re unhappy with a decision that was made so they want to see all the nitty-gritty workings behind perhaps a report, so they may then come back to the Council but more likely to the social care side of it.

**Victoria**

Thinking about the content of the files, I want to move on to think about the recordkeeping itself. We’ve got about 15 minutes left.

**G301**

Sorry for waffling.

**Victoria**

Not at all, not at all. The content of the files. Have you found in your experience that there is a lot of personal ephemeral content, things like photographs, letters, birthday cards, or is it predominantly formulaic official documentation?

**G301**

I certainly see things like yeah photographs…perhaps it’s more true of older files. There’s often things like cards, birthday cards, paintings particularly for younger children, Christmas cards or whatever, general drawings may be included as part of a therapy session, you see those in files. So yeah it certainly wouldn’t be without the more official reports but yeah there’s letters to and from mum and dad perhaps, photos, pictures, family trees.

**Victoria**

You mentioned that you have access to the content management system or file management system that’s currently used by social care and that there is a legacy system and a current system. So could you just describe the records management of the case files a little bit further, if it’s something that you know about.

**G301**

Yeah, you’ve flagged to me that I’ve failed to mention the fact that we do also have some hard copy information which is a bit of a problem at the moment. We have microfilm and microfiche for some particularly old records. The microfilm we have a relatively reliable index of, the microfiche is less well organised. There is currently a project going on to index it all up, because it's a known risk that we’re missing stuff. So yes we’re working to improve the recordkeeping for some of our microfiche and I suppose you’re never going to get 100% perfect recordkeeping I don’t think ever but the current state of recordkeeping is certainly a lot better than it was.

**Victoria**

So are all records now born digital, are they all managed within this electronic system?

**G301**

Yes. Clearly people print things out and make notes, I don't think we’ll ever get rid of pen and paper, but all records would then be put into Mosaic which is our system.

**Victoria**

So you’ve just received a SAR, how would you go about finding the records that have been requested?

**G301**

99 times out of 100 it’s a full file that's been requested, and it’s perhaps worth saying that where we’re asked for ‘why I went into care?’ we typically pull a full file for that as well because 9 times out of 10… we’ll try to pull together relevant documents that answer that question for them but two things: it’s kind of difficult for us to make that call, and secondly they’ll often just come back and say I want more. So typically we’ll go and pull everything out of our systems, and the way we do it is by searching for their name, and where it’s a common name we’ll perhaps need to use another identifier such as date of birth.

**Victoria**

That would be true of the current system, the legacy system and the microfilm?

**G301**

Yes.

**Victoria**

You have an index of some kind?

**G301**

For microfilm we do have a reliable index, for microfiche it’s currently being held by a third party and they run searches of the microfiche for us. We have concerns about the reliability of that search, yes, hence us bringing it in house and reindexing the whole batch.

**Victoria**

So are the paper records somewhere? Or have they been destroyed and the surrogates retained, the digital copies and the microfilm?

**G301**

I believe so yes.

**Victoria**

So there are no paper files?

**G301**

I believe that’s the case… but I’m not entirely sure and I totally should be. Yeah. We do have archives but I know that’s not a place that we look, so I can only assume that they have all been put onto microfilm and I’m sure…I would have thought the original has been deleted…but I do know there are hard copy records for some individuals so I’m afraid that’s a bit of an unknown on my part. I have seen hard copy files so I do know they exist but my instructions when joining were if you don’t find it in the current system and you don’t find it in the legacy system then you make searches of the microfilm or microfiche and if it’s not there we don’t have it.

**Victoria**

You talked about the digital systems. Mosaic is the one you’re using for current records. In terms of that legacy material, which I assume has been scanned at some point, how is that managed? What’s the system that you’re using?

**G301**

That system is called Camino (sp?) but that was an electronic database as well, so while it may have contained some scans from hardcopy records equally I think it had the capability of managing emails and so forth.

**Victoria**

How far back do the records held in there go?

**G301**

Potentially decades and decades I suppose, if there was ongoing social work at the time at which that system was put in place the records that were on microfiche or archived would have been put into that system.

**Victoria**

Next is the hot topic question, which is how you think the implementation of GDPR is going to effect subject access requests?

**G301**

Yeah cool.

[both laugh]

**G301**

I think the £10 fee whilst it’s only £10 might put certain people just over the edge, people who you know may be semi-interested but you know a tenner there’s no point, those people that £10 is a lot of money to, they’ve been perhaps held back from making requests, as I say those people who could take it or leave it but on balance would make a request. I think there’s certainly a real risk that our numbers are going to seriously increase, coupled with the fact that you know it’s in the papers, people are becoming more and more aware of their rights.

**Victoria**

The reduction of the response window I guess is also going to…

**G301**

I have a different view on that, I think almost all of the types of requests we’ve been talking about would fall into the complex category so I think we’re going to see an increase in our window and we’re going to be able to play a little more cleverly with our timescales, and I can see us following the appropriate methods of identifying complicated cases and extending the deadline to three months. You know those huge 5000 pages poorly photocopied handwritten notes, cases, would clearly I would suggest fall into that category and we’ll have three months to deal with them rather than 40 days.

**Victoria**

Have you ever had anyone seeking to amend their records as a result of a subject access request?

**G301**

Yeah yeah we have yeah. The one that I dealt with…it’s obviously a current right… the one that I’ve dealt with though we couldn’t amend the record because it was simply someone’s stated opinion about somebody else. So we offered them to have a file note put in their records to state that they disagreed with it.

**Victoria**

Of course the new right…or not so new really…but the headline that a lot of people have focused on is the right to erasure or the right to be forgotten, and a number of former care-experienced people have asked me whether or not it will now become possible to have their care file destroyed. Do you have any thoughts or opinions on that?

**G301**

[pause] Yes so…looking at the case of the guy who was suing Google trying to rewrite history, clearly I disagree with that… I’d want to know why. I suppose if you wanted to start afresh… [pause] I don’t know, my gut… I don’t have an intelligent sentence to put together on it I don’t think… but my gut is telling me basically that no it’s a record of what’s happened. I think it should certainly be kept private. Yeah… but I’d be open to be convinced the other way, I’d be interested in the motives, I’d want to know why, I wonder what the motives would be? I think it’s really dangerous to erase criminal records from my experience of working with psychopaths, they’ve all sort of changed their names by way of trying to sort of rewrite history and make a fresh start, perhaps not always for the right reasons, but clearly it wouldn’t necessarily be a negative reason that somebody would want to have their information erased. So yeah, I’d be open to being convinced but it’s not something I’ve given a great deal of thought to or have a particularly strong feeling about, but as I say my gut feeling is no.

**Victoria**

Do you have any thoughts or ideas about how the systems that you currently use could be improved or made better?

**G301**

Yeah, I guess this is fairly frivolous but just being able to have a button that would just extract all of the information into a PDF file would be a huge win because scraping all of the information out and converting them from various file types into PDF is seriously admin heavy. Perhaps more interesting though would be subject privacy by design basically, to have things stored in to social care forms that would almost be accessible at the touch of a button by a data subject. So all third party or inappropriate information was held back. But the practicalities of that, particularly where we're talking about really balancing information of third parties, you know the privacy of third parties with the rights of disclosure, would be unworkable. I don’t know, I’m sure Google DeepMind are working on something that could someday in the future, some AI tool that could figure that out for us but I think we’re a few months off that yet.

**Victoria**

My last question is a bit of an open one, and it’s about how you yourself have thought about social care files, and whether or not you’ve ever considered them as a form of memory?

**G301**

Memory for the data subject which they wouldn’t have had otherwise? Yeah certainly. I guess I kind of alluded to it earlier, where people may have blocked out…it goes to that case doesn’t it that spent ages…it got to Europe didn’t it? And it was decided in favour of the data subject overruling the UK authorities that a file had been heavily over-redacted on the basis that the data subject was entitled to privacy but more importantly family life, and his lack of a family network I think particularly convinced the European court that his file, the names being included, amounted to his family life, which I think for me answers the question of memory.

**Victoria**

The Gaskin case.

**G301**

Thanks. I was going to say Gillick but that’s Gillick competence. Thank you. Paul McGann, the film.

**Victoria**

So, that’s the end of my questions. Is there anything else you want to add?

**G301**

I guess not. Just that sometimes I find it… I always approach a SAR from the Gaskin side of things where I’d like to give them as much information to help them as possible but I feel somewhat constrained by the lack of guidance and the fear of breaching somebody’s privacy. So I’ll be looking forward to finding the results of this really important project that you’re running and hopefully you know it’ll make things easier, it’ll give people like myself more confidence to disclose information, because there’s a real sense… so the backlog project we’ve got currently, we’ve got people of different experience levels and I do a bit of QA work on different files and I try to keep it as consistent as possible, but the approach that some people take and hearing about the approaches that different local authorities take as you alluded to earlier, it’s remarkable. There’s no… it’s by design I get, the lack of guidance but I think there could be more yeah. Even if it’s just highlighting the Gaskin case more and flying that flag a little higher to give that confidence to people like myself.

**Victoria**

Thank you very much. I will stop recording you there.

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

Interview held 11th April 2018 between G302 and Victoria Hoyle, at [Place name] Customer Service Centre.

BEGINNING OF INTERVIEW

**Victoria**

The first question is an easy opener. If you could just briefly describe your role within this organisations and the responsibilities it entails.

**G312**

Ok. So I’m the Corporate Information and Knowledge Manager at [Place name] and the team that I manage is called Information Management and we cover information governance and records management and we recently in a restructure kind of lost the web internet strategy part but that’s unrelated to this topic really. So the records management part of the team look after paper and electronic storage, document and records storage, so that includes being custodians for electronic records management systems and kind of being the main point of ownership for the corporate offsite paper storage, but we also would be advising on anything like retention schedules, and we will be working more closely with the archives as we start to embed those retention schedules in our systems. And in information governance, part of the team there is the request for information services, so that’s FOIs, EIRs and SARs, and they’re the central point for those. For FOIs we have a network of champions that they then allocate them out to and kind of follow them through the life cycle and in most cases they then send them out. SARs…depending on the type of request they have a different role, but I’d say the majority of them they’re preparing the file and doing the majority of redaction and sharing it with the data subject and managing the relationship with the data subject. So my role in managing all of that – and I’m also the DPO, the Data Protection Officer under GDPR – so…sorry the governance part of the team aside from requests for information are also involved in any incidents, so security incidents and providing general information governance advice on things like privacy impact assessments and any sort of data sharing projects, so really I oversee all of that and am hands on in various parts depending on the priorities at the time. So recently I’ve been quite hands on with subject access requests, not in doing the requests but in scheduling the work because we have had a backlog that we wanted to clear, and managing relationships with other services that have responsibilities for these things which has involved some work with social care on how we can make sure that we’re dealing with it from the information side and the social care side for SARs. Yes, so, sorry, that’s a bit long.

**Victoria**

No, not at all, you obviously have a lot of responsibilities. As you know this research is specifically looking at access to records for care leavers, or indeed people who are in care at present, so the first section of the interview is around access to records requests. You’ve just said that you’ve been working more closely with the subject access request process at present and that there’s been a backlog. I wonder if you could just describe the current state of subject access requests, and what happens when you receive one?

**G312**

So currently we have been doing a big piece of work to look at the processes around subject access requests because I think we’ve been finding them problematic to answer on time and we’re aware that the timescales are about to become shorter. And there’s no particular… there’s kind of no uniform reason across every request as to why each one can’t be answered on time and there’s no easy answer i.e. it’s not always that we need more people in the information management team. So we had a backlog and in November we began working with the ICO to make them aware of how many were in that backlog, we wrote to all our requestors with an estimate of when they’d be done and it required quite a lot of analysis to work out the different types that we get, and to estimate the due dates we did a ready reckoner on how long a file of that nature normally takes, because currently social care cases will be much more complex than a housing repairs subject access request for example. So that’s taught us quite a lot about the types of requests we get and where the service areas could help us in getting them answered on time. We’ve been using some of our FOI champions where we do need input from other parts of the organisation and we’ve been reviewing the way that we work with social care on the social care ones. So before that social care were reviewing every request relating to social care and that was to make sure that in addition to any redactions that we’d done from a purely kind of data protection perspective they were also assessing whether there was any risk of serious harm particularly around jeopardising ongoing social care. But ultimately that’s double handling and we have a deadline and it makes it very difficult to do when you’re talking about 5000 pages that two teams have got to go through word by word so we’ve identified a way of doing kind of triage beforehand to work out which ones they do need to look at. And sometimes they decide they don’t need to actually look at them and review them but they just want to share them in person because they know that the case has some sensitive elements to it. I think so far that triage has been working to avoid everybody reading it twice but also to make sure that the data subjects needs have been addressed and that we are considering the social care side alongside the data protection side. But we’re looking to replace our systems as well as introducing some different type of staff members so that we’re applying lean principles, so it takes sometimes a number of days to prepare the file because the information is spread across different systems, and for social care files there is often thousands of pages, so instead of the people who are trained in redacting the information spending their time downloading documents we’ve taken on an administrator so that the preparation of the files can be separated from the redaction of the files, to help streamline things. And we’ve also been working to replace the back office systems that will help us to track requests and performance, as well as looking at what we could do to improve the way that people can make requests. So we’ve been working on both of these things for FOIs and SARs because the team deal with both.

**Victoria**

So given these changes you’re putting in place, just to clarify for me, I wonder if you could describe what the optimal SAR process will look like.

**G312**

Yeah so we’d like to try and make it as easy as possible for people to make the request, so avoid…I guess try and minimise the back and forward. So at the moment sometimes people might make a request but then they’ll get asked to provide ID, and then they might get asked to provide us some more information about what they’re after, so we’ve been looking at, in the short term, kind of making it easier for them to provide that documentation that they need to to us upfront when they make the request. But also we’ve been involved in a pilot to do with making use of federated identity, so this is about Verify, the gov.uk verify service, and how that could be extended to local authorities using micro sources of data, ultimately so that if our service users had a Verify account that we’d helped them to get and could use it to log in to our services, they wouldn’t need to give us their ID because we’d already know that they are who they say they are. So we’ve been exploring something like that, around making the request and being confident that the person’s entitled to the information. And then I think we would be able to prepare the file separately to the redaction which is what we’re already looking at, but also we’re doing work to improve where the information is held, so where we’ve got some legacy sources of information say for example in microfiche, we’re digitising that so that it is in the social care system because that will help us to just know where it is a bit easier. And then the redaction, I think having advice from the social worker upfront is really useful. We’ve also had feedback from other local authorities that that works well for them, so I think that triage and a contact in social care is really useful for social care files particularly. And keeping a requestor up to date with any complexities, particularly under GDPR if we’re going to extend up to the three months rather than the one month. And we’d like to look at how we actually share the information, so if it is going to go out to them either in the post or electronically and electronically isn’t something that we’re doing at the moment but we’d like to start doing, either way whether there could be some sort of template covering letter depending on the type of file - particularly for the social care ones there’s different categories that we’re starting to identify - even a template letter might just help the person a bit more. And sometimes they’re [the files] still shared in person because of the content, so I think there’s kind of no one path but end to end I think they’re the sorts of things I’d like to see us improve on and address.

**Victoria**

You talked about this new triage method between information teams and social care teams and I wondered if you’d encountered different information cultures or ways of thinking about social care information between those two contexts?

**G312**

Probably more in…so say my team there may be an element of sort of making assumptions about families because they haven’t been as exposed to some of the things that social care teams are. So we’ve talked before about the risk slider on the scale being moved slightly more towards risk averse in the sense of things like…maybe my team might be more inclined to just assume that because two people are siblings they would know information about each other but actually in lots of these social care circumstances that just isn’t a fair assumption to make. So we’ve spent some time with social care trying to help us understand some of the things we should be bearing in mind when we’re doing the redaction, to say that you couldn’t reasonably assume that they already know that just because they’re a family member, so I think that’s one key thing we’ve come across. The other thing I suppose is that in the past – and it is very dependent on individual team members and their backgrounds – but we’ve had some people that want to provide more support to each data subject when the file is shared, so giving everyone the option of having it shared in person by a social worker, but obviously from social care’s perspective that might just not be possible, and they feel like they’ve got a good understanding of when somebody should have that shared in person and when its fine to kind of signpost them to other support if they need it. I’m not sure there’s anything else really, no.

**Victoria**

Do any other parts of the organisation get involved in subject access to social care files? Legal teams or anything like that?

**G312**

Not that I’m aware of, no. I mean maybe we’d ask for…but even in the case where we were going to use the social work modification exemption because that just needs to be signed off by the professional… actually I don’t think in my experience we’ve ever really needed to consult legal, because actually we have a good understanding of the law and so do social care.

**Victoria**

How do you manage those social work modification exemptions where you’re taking a decision based on that order?

**G312**

Social care would be heavily involved in that case, and actually it’s been rarely used. We were talking about this yesterday, I think we may have used it once perhaps twice and I mean I think we take that quite seriously because ultimately the person has a right to the information unless we have every reason to use that modification, so we definitely don’t use it lightly. Yeah and we’re lucky that we do have quite defined contacts in social care, so we have a data protection lead and a person that we typically liaise with who is the person that also manages complaints and has a very good handle on… - I think managing complaints helps because sometimes the two are linked - and they have a lot of contacts across social care, so both of those contacts have been quite key. Does that answer the question?

**Victoria**

Yes, yeah. Have you ever provided access to social care records for any other kind of user? Any other kind of individuals or organisations that might make requests for that kind of information?

**G312**

Yes, so…say that again sorry, not SARs but just other….?

**Victoria**

Not SARs, other ways of accessing those files.

**G312**

Yeah, and actually I mean there’s a number of different things, so there’s CAIS – Child Abuse Investigations – our protocol with the police so that they can come in and have a look at case files and take copies of particular pages to support their investigation, and we have been doing a bit of work around that to try and help it to work in the best way it can, because again it’s about that balance of rights. We don’t want to be a blocker to the police but sometimes their request doesn’t feel justified, so we do have to push back or we do have to ask them to be more specific but we actually have a team in social care, the FAST team, so that’s First Access and Screening Team, and actually they deal with a high volume of requests from other authorities and people like the police, so we want to do some more work with them to understand exactly… we’re doing some data flows anyway for GDPR, some information asset register data flow work, because I want to make sure that our team is supporting them enough in doing that, because they do it rather than us. Because I guess if anything the risk is that they’re not as aware of the information rights part of it, they’ll be considering that it seems reasonable but maybe sometimes they could benefit from knowing that we could give them advice if they’re ever unsure.

**Victoria**

Coming back to subject access requests, in terms of managing those requests do you have any internal procedural guidance or do you use any pre-existing published guidance from elsewhere in managing requests and doing redactions and things?

**G312**

So in terms of the actual redactions? What to redact?

**Victoria**

More broadly for the process, although I guess redaction is a key thing people want guidance on.

**G312**

Yeah and interestingly we had a redaction training session yesterday with an external provider and we opened it up to people, so there were some people from social care there including the two roles that I mentioned, the data protection person and the person who is our key contact for SARs, but interestingly the general conclusion is that it is on a case by case basis and it really is about balancing the rights of the individuals and it really depends on the actual case and the relationships involved, and so there is just no black and white answer, which does make it very difficult for us to put…obviously we could have guidance in place but I think it makes it difficult to make it a science rather than an art. Which I think can be challenging for people who need to understand…some people ask us if we can just get technology to run through and do the redactions, but actually it’s not about looking for bank account numbers it’s about trying to understand whether that person should know that about their mother. I mean we use the standard things like the ICO code of practice and generally we’re making sure that we’re learning from other people, so we’ve been talking more to other boroughs to understand how they’re doing it as well, because we can learn from what they’ve done and they can learn from what we’ve done as well.

**Victoria**

Focusing in on redaction a little bit, you talked about not having specific guidance but there being training around redaction and I just wondered if you could explain a bit further about how you manage the disclosure of third party information from files?

**G312**

I’d say that our guide to redaction is much more about ensuring that it is taken out adequately and we actually use Adobe Pro, so the team will go through and my understanding is that they are kind of drawing boxes over it but at the end they can do the full metadata redact so that the information isn’t recoverable, so that we don’t end up with any sort of security incident. I would say though that some teams that provide us with the information, if it comes to us in hard copy they will have gone through with a marker and done it in that way. Sometimes if we’re concerned we might chose to scan it in and redo that on Adobe, again on a case by case basis. Is that what you mean?

**Victoria**

Yes. Do you ever have any appeal cases about what has been redacted, or people coming back to the service to ask questions about the reasons or the decision-making?

**G312**

It’s difficult because I wouldn’t typically…I wouldn’t necessarily know about them because beneath me there’s the governance lead and then there’s the officers and assistants. You know we do have a review process and sometimes somebody will just let us know that they’re already aware of some things that means that we can share more than we did originally. But in terms of where they ask us what’s in the blanked out sections I’m not aware that we have, but I don’t think I would know because the team are the ones dealing directly with the data subjects. But interestingly yesterday we talked about the fact that sometimes you might be using an exemption that means that you wouldn’t even want someone to know that you have got a file that you haven’t given them. Say there’s domestic violence, the fact there’s even a file could indicate that they’re being investigated for example, so we were just talking about how we’d have to be careful how we worded it to them because we couldn’t say that we hold no information because we do but we’d just need to say that there is no disclosable information and we’re not even giving them a redacted file, and I think that’s more challenging. But I don’t think I’d really know what we’re asked or what we say, just because the team would be dealing with that, and it’s never been escalated to me which I’d say is a good sign. I think that means something.

**Victoria**

I suppose that was what I was thinking, you know in terms of escalation of these issues does it ever get to a service manager level?

**G312**

I haven’t had anybody coming to me with those particular concerns no.

**Victoria**

In terms of access to social care files particularly would you say that it was something there was a good level of awareness of within the local authority and within social care?

**G312**

As in that staff are aware that people can access it? The people that we deal with in social care have a good awareness of it but I don’t know if I’d be able to say if the rest of social care do. I mean I know that social care want to more actively promote to care leavers that they have this right and encourage them to get them sort of quickly rather than waiting until the social worker that was involved in their case is gone, because I think that can be challenging when we’re doing historic files. But actually at the moment it’s not something that we would be prepared to respond to so I think that’s something we’d like to start doing say when our backlog is cleared for example. We’d like to then make sure that we can more actively promote…not giving them their file before they ask but just making it You’re leaving care, if you'd like your file etc.

**Victoria**

I want to ask a few questions now about recordkeeping systems, particularly focusing on child social care. I know you mentioned a responsibility for records management as well. Could you describe how social care files are managed, and what kind of systems and processes are in use?

**G312**

So we use Mosaic for both adults and children’s social care records and it has an integration with our document management system, which is called E-docs (sp?). So social workers, I guess like units, have a folder that they put everything in to in the document management system and then they’re indexing it on the social care system and that automatically files it on the document management side of things, so if a case file doesn’t already exist it creates it with the right security, the right naming conventions, and puts the documents in the right sub-folders, and if it already exists it just files them in the right subfolders. So the documents are essentially held separately but there’s a link on the social care system that opens them immediately. I’d say it’s one of our better integrations actually between the document management system and a case management system. But we’ve also got legacy repositories, so Camino (sp?) is one that we’re currently working on a migration project and those things will then go in to Mosaic and E-docs, so those…I think those are typically scans of paper actually. I think the majority of content in Camino were paper that was scanned into electronic. So we’ll be migrating those over to Mosaic. So I don’t think there’s any paper storage, everything was digitised and put on to Camino, Mosaic then started as a new system and now we’re migrating everything from Camino, and there were definitely some other systems in place at other times, so Care First is one that I think was migrated into Camino…

**Victoria**

So there’s several generations of digital systems?

**G312**

Yeah yeah exactly, and we also do have some microfiche, so what was originally paper scanned on to microfiche that’s in storage but there isn’t a very good inventory which is why we’re digitising it. We have a scan on demand service for it, which would work well for us if we could trust what was in there, but actually we want to make it much more discoverable so we’re scanning that and I’m hoping we can also move that into the social care system as well, so that they’re linked up, which is challenging just because there’s not as much metadata on things on microfiche but I think we can at least put them in the system and then people can start linking the records up as they realise they’re linked.

**Victoria**

So Mosaic, after this migration from Camino, will contain both open case records and historic records?

**G312**

Yes and where we can we’re linking them but we do know that there’s some where there is no current case file in Mosaic so the other one will come over… but they’ll all be in one system, if that makes sense.

**Victoria**

And for a system like Mosaic, what would you say is the lifecycle…how long do those type of systems tend to be procured for?

**G312**

Oh, I don’t know if I’d know… I’m not sure. But the document management side of it, we’re kind of working to get rid of E-docs, so we will soon be making a decision about whether all the documents from E-docs go into the replacement which is GoogleDrive, or whether they could just go straight in to Mosaic. Historically here we had a policy decision to use a document management system for all documents, but sometimes I think it makes more sense to keep them with the case notes if it has the adequate controls in place and can do things like apply retention and disposal, so for all of our integrations soon we’ll be making that decision and I think it’s likely…I think Mosaic can, I think that other authorities do have documents stored directly in Mosaic so I think we’re likely to do that, but it is an example where one side of the integration’s life has come to an end and the other hasn’t, but I’m afraid I don’t know about Mosaic.

**Victoria**

These records, particularly the case files of looked after children, have a long retention on them – 75 years – and I wondered if you have a digital preservation policy?

**G312**

No, not at the moment, so we… I’d say that we are putting together a roadmap to apply retention in our systems because actually in lots of systems it’s a quite difficult thing to do and in lots of cases it hasn't been [done]. So we’re creating a roadmap to work out how to do that and I think until we’re at a point where - and I think actually that’s not the right way of dealing with it - but until we’re at a point where we’re disposing of material from the systems to the archives we haven’t been considering digital preservation yet because we just have got other projects to do at the earlier side of the lifecycle. It’s something that we have started to talk to the archives about, so now we’re migrating, will be migrating, things from our document management system to GoogleDrive, we'll be talking to the archivists about how we can start thinking about digital preservation but at the moment we don’t have a policy or a strategy for that.

**Victoria**

How do you think that GDPR, and the new Data Protection legislation when it arrives, is going to impact on subject access requests?

**G312**

I mean in some ways not very much because while you’ve got the shorter timeframes you’ve got the extensions so actually in social care cases it’s maybe just as likely that someone will have to wait longer than they currently legally need to than less time. Because I’d say that of all of our subject access requests the social care ones are most likely to fall into that category of complex, both in terms of being thousands of pages long but also the complex kind of needs that need to be considered. So there’s that. Obviously they become free of charge. I mean we waive the fee now but people wouldn't necessarily know that until they come to ask us, it’s not something that’s kind of publicised. So we did some work recently, we did a stand at a Your Homes event with posters for each of the individual rights and we asked people which ones they would ever actually exercise, and most people we spoke to didn’t know they could currently ask for their own information and said they’d be really interested to and that a £10 fee would have stopped them but if the fee disappeared they’d be much more likely to, so I guess we think we may get more of them. And there’s other things that we’re required to tell people when they make a subject access request to do with how long we keep the information for and why we have it but that’s actually all going to be in the privacy notices so I think it’s just more likely to be signposting them to those things. I mean I guess it’s more about whether GDPR raises awareness of information rights and I think information can…information is power, I think for somebody who has maybe been in care and some things have been out of their control I can imagine having access to the information is something that helps them to get closure and is really important to them, and I think it would be a good thing if awareness was raised about it, I think it’s a good thing.

**Victoria**

Under the new Children and Social Work Act 2017 there is a requirement for local authorities to comply with Corporate Parenting Responsibilities, and that’s just a Children’s Services responsibility but across an authority and I wondered if you’d had any discussions about that?

**G312**

No but I was on maternity leave last year so I don’t think that helps. I may have missed some key discussions when it was coming in, but no I’d say it’s not something that I’ve talked about explicitly. It may be that the conversations we’ve had with social care about things that we should be considering are as a consequence of that but that I’m not aware of that direct link. I’m sorry that’s probably not very helpful.

**Victoria**

That’s ok, they’re very new, they’ve only just been…the Act obviously is from last year but the corporate parenting responsibilities have only just been published, maybe three or four months ago.

**G312**

No sorry I would have been here and no it isn’t a conversation that I’ve had with social care, but our backlog has been our priority because ultimately having a backlog of overdue requests means that we’re not meeting the current DPA responsibilities, so to get ready for GDPR we had a big step to make, which is almost finished, but I think that may be a reason why it just hasn’t been discussed yet. I’ll make note. [both laugh]

**Victoria**

This is the final question really, you have covered it already but I wondered if you had anything to add to it. If you were able to implement improvements to either recordkeeping systems or information access systems, what would your wishlist look like?

**G312**

Yeah and we’re lucky that we have got lots of opportunities at the moment for us to do those things and for lots of our new projects I think that we’re taking quite innovative approaches to ways of doing things that makes information an asset, which is one of the six strands of our ICT actually, which I think we’re very lucky to have that kind of buy in…

**Victoria**

Sorry, can you just clarify?

**G312**

Yeah, sorry, [our] ICT has got six core themes and one of those themes is information as an asset. I think we’re moving kind of more towards really making sure that the organisation sees the value of data and information and how it can underpin their services, and it means that whenever a service kind of just like wants a new system or a new thing I think ICT are able to show them how we can add value and make sure we’re thinking about things like privacy by design and access by design but not because we have to but because actually everybody benefits from that. So I have less concerns about the new things that we’re doing, but in terms of some of the legacy systems having to manually download every document is far from ideal. I think making sure that systems support things like subject access requests for me is very important. It might not be top of the list when you are looking – particularly not previously – when you’re looking at system requirements. So I think yeah that’s one of them, and… what was the question sorry? How I’d change recordkeeping systems?

**Victoria**

Yeah.

**G312**

I think that’s the main thing really, that actually it’s difficult sometimes to just collate the information. I think if systems had easier ways… I guess a bit like the data portability although that’s more designed for data provided by a person, I think it would be nice if there was an easier way of collating information for a subject access request. Yeah, I’m not sure.

**Victoria**

The last question I’m going to ask is slightly different. You talked about information as an asset, as an organisational asset, and one of the emerging themes within this research is information – particularly child social care records – as an identity and memory asset. I wondered if that value was recognised at the moment in the way that you approach these kinds of subject access requests?

**G312**

Say that again, information as a…?

**Victoria**

Memory and identity asset, for the individuals that they relate to.

**G312**

And it’s whether we’re considering that when we’re doing SARs?

**Victoria**

Yes.

**G312**

That’s a tricky question because I think generally my team will be trying to give…we try to make sure we’re not over-redacting because of exactly that. We’re very conscious of the circumstances that surround a SAR - not necessarily an individual one, say at my level I don’t really know all of the SARs we’ve got at the moment - but knowing that normally the reason that somebody is asking for the information is for exactly that kind of identity and memory, we will always try and make sure we give them what we can give them but I don’t know that there’s more that we can do than that. I think that we just have to make sure that taking out information is necessary and I think that there’s different scales of that. You know, sometimes it’s about what the person already knows and we can’t tell them something new about another person, because it wouldn’t be fair on that person but…yeah…I think other than just having it in mind in generally and in the kind of attitude we take to it, which is we’ll give everything we can give, I’m not sure that there is much more that we can do, although I’d be interested to see from the findings if there is because I mean the team are dealing with the data subjects and often the data subjects will explain the contexts of why they need it and yeah I think we’re all very aware of how important it is to those people and so we do have lots of conversations about how important it is to keep the data subject informed about the progress, which can be really difficult and we’re still working that out, like how do we know how long it’s going to take until we are doing it and how can we manage their expectations fairly, and we’ve talked about the fact that people have no idea that behind the scenes we have multiple systems and that even in one system it can be a case of manually downloading each document and sometimes people come back…that’s actually linked to your earlier question… sometimes people come back and say the thing that I asked for wasn’t in there and it’s not because it’s been redacted it’s because it wasn’t in the form they expected it to be, so it’s not the exact piece of paper they expected it's the equivalent information that someone has written up.

Victoria

Thank you. That’s the end of my questions. I know you have your next meeting to get to. Is there anything else that you want to add?

**G312**

I mean only that I think we’re trying to continually improve this and we are at a point where we’ve actually invested quite a lot in this this year because we weren’t where we wanted to be and we are very aware of the impact that can have on the data subjects and it isn’t just a compliance exercise and I think sometimes that’s where things like the deadlines are a challenge because we want to make sure we’re actually supporting the data subject as a Council in the way that we should be from a social care perspective as well as information rights and actually it does make me wonder, when you explain about the project, if there was another mechanism other than SAR that didn’t have the rigid you know timescales around it, actually the data subject might be at an advantage because we all want to help them to get that information.

**Victoria**

Thank you. I will stop recording.

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

Interview held 15th May 2018 between G307 and Victoria Hoyle, at a Shire Hall. G307.

BEGINNING OF INTERVIEW

**Victoria**

So if you could just start by giving me a brief overview of your role and responsibilities.

**G307**

So I am the Information and Records team manager here, so my responsibility is managing the team who provide records management support for the business, so I currently manage one records manager who is responsible for going out to different teams and advising them on how they can manage their records appropriately, particularly with records storage and retention, and I also manage the corporate records centre, which is where we store semi-current files that the Council produces. And I manage several temporary members of staff who work on various records indexes projects, so that’s where we index semi-current records onto or in our database and then put them into storage in the records centre.

**Victoria**

And recently - I know from the conference that you had last year – you’ve been engaged in quite a significant project to index the social care records.

**G307**

Yes, yeah.

**Victoria**

Could you kind of talk me through that? What that is and how it evolved?

**G307**

Ok, so it began in 2016, it was…it came out of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sex Abuse and the requirement that records should be retained as evidence or potential evidence for that. So the Council did a piece of work whereby it looked at how accessible the records were across the County and how accessible the records currently in the records centre were, in terms of how they were catalogued and yes, whether anything that was in any of the localities should be brought to Shire Hall for better management, and it was decided that yes there was enough work to warrant a project. So it was initially two parts, the first part was to look at a specific number of files that were already in the records centre that were badly catalogued and to improve that indexing and the second part was to go out to the localities, identify records that were no longer needed on a daily basis and could be brought into Shire Hall, and to catalogue those from scratch. So we initially started with two people, one person doing the surveying and one person doing the indexing, and then it grew to the point where we had six people in total. At the end of the first year we stopped doing the records survey work and we focused solely on improving the indexing of stuff that was in Shire Hall, so it’s been running really for two three years, so we’ve just entered our third financial year to Phase 3 and we’re solely looking at particularly children’s records in the records centre, so it’s mainly yeah child in care records that we’re going through and yeah enhancing the metadata that’s on the database entries and checking the classification of them and the retention periods that are set against them. Yeah, that’s about it.

**Victoria**

So prior to starting the project what was the state of the index, how were the records organised before that?

**G307**

So everything that was in the records centre should have had a database entry against each physical record. What we found were the majority of those entries were quite basic, they ranged from a name and date of birth and ID, which is in the title, which is ok, to simply very short descriptions which could be ‘J Smith’, which of course doesn’t help anybody when they’re trying to search for a particular J Smith. We also found that several files, physical files, were bundled together into one file entry and those files actually related to several different people but were indexed under one particular person’s name. We also found that the files weren’t cross referenced in any way. So you might have a file on Jane Smith and a file on John Smith but the database had no way of telling you that actually those two people were related, or that there was potentially information about John in Jane’s file or Jane in John’s file. So what we’ve done is cross referenced the files as we go as well, so as well as going through and picking out the right pieces of information to add to the file entry in terms of the title and the subject, we’re also looking to see who else appears in the file and where there’s significant information about a third party in a file and making a note of that on the database entry, so that if I searched for John Smith Jane Smith’s file would come up in the list of results of files that had information on him.

**Victoria**

So you’ve built quite a powerful database really?

**G307**

We’re trying to, yes. [both laugh] We’re trying to, it’s a bit of a Pandora’s Box, which I think I said at the conference, because the files…they were certainly classified using two different classification schemes, one that was historic and one that we’ve put in place over the last few years, so we’re still continuing work to move files from one classification scheme to another, so there’s still a lot of work to be done but we’re hoping to get to the point, especially with the children’s records, where everything is cross referenced, everything has got the right metadata attached to it.

**Victoria**

You mentioned IICSA being a driving force, was it the demands for information from IICSA or requests for information from IICSA that led you to develop this particular metadata system? Because it strikes me as being quite a…quite a far reaching system, in that you’re gathering information about lots of parties in the records rather than really thinking of them as the records of one single subject with third parties in them, and I’m quite interested in that and how you came to that solution, rather than just consolidating the basic information that you already had.

**G307**

So I would say it wasn’t just IICSA, so we were obviously quite concerned about how we would respond to any requests from them – we haven’t actually had any requests as yet – but we also found that during the early stages of the project that we were coming across a lot of what we call family files, so yes again to use the Smiths as an example, the file would have been given the title of ‘John Smith’ but actually it related not just to him but to all his siblings. We became concerned I guess that we wouldn’t be able to answer subject access requests appropriately if we kept uncovering you know this situation with the files, and so we really felt it was worth our time to make sure we added that third party information to the entries, and I know it has certainly helped our requests team since we started doing that, because it just builds up a better picture of what’s going on, but also it gives us greater confidence that we are giving the requester everything that we hold on them as well.

**Victoria**

And this database that you use, is that bespoke or have you used an existing piece of software?

**G307**

So we’ve had our current database since 2010, it’s called RAFTS, it stands for the Records Asset and File Tracking System, it was actually built I think for the police initially but we bought it in 2010 and we’ve just continued using that particular database since. We’ve had to adapt things along the way, so basically make the most of what we’ve got and manipulate that to fit what we were trying to achieve.

**Victoria**

In terms of the files themselves, so you have… presumably there was a pre-existing retention scheme when you began, I know that there’s now a moratorium on destruction from IICSA, which is putting in abeyance the carrying out of any disposals, but in terms of how you are retention scheduling this material can you describe that for me and how you’ve made any decisions about that?

**G307**

Yeah, of course, so we have found that a number of the files have been given incorrect what we call destruction review dates essentially, so that day at the end of the retention period where somebody should make a decision, so we have been fixing those to bring them in line with what’s required. So any file that the teams working on where the correct review date falls in the future that specific future date is attached to the file. If they go to a file and they find that the review date should have been in the past at some point we actually give it a generic review date of the 31st of December 2021 because initially the Inquiry was supposed to end in 2021. So that demonstrates to us that we are keeping the file for IICSA’s purpose but on that date it could technically go because it has already reached the end of its proper retention period. We did that partly because of IICSA and partly because our database doesn’t allow us to set destruction review dates that are in the past, so it was decided that we would just have one generic date for every file that should have ordinarily been reviewed and potentially disposed of but we can’t because of IICSA, rather than give them each a sort of random one. It gives us an indication as well of the number of files that we’re dealing with that yeah should have gone but haven’t yet.

**Victoria**

Could you give me a sense of what proportion of the files would have otherwise been disposed of?

**G307**

I would say…I think the project team will probably be able to give you a better answer because obviously they’re dealing with them on a day to day basis but I would probably say about 40%.

**Victoria**

That’s quite a lot.

**G307**

Yeah, I mean I might be wrong but I can certainly pull off…I can certainly get someone to pull off the number with that review date and we can marry it up against the number that have been dealt with so far and work out what that is. Part of the issue with the wrong review dates having been set is the database itself because when you set the classification code against a file the database automatically adds on the number of years it should be kept for, so 75 years or whatever, but it does it from the date that you register the file on the database rather than from the actual trigger point, so we would have to manually change that date to make it in line with the child’s date of birth and so on and so forth, so the team here obviously do that. The issue is that in the past the creating team who deposit the files with us and actually do the indexing themselves haven’t done that, a lot of the time they’re rushed or they don’t have the resource to go back and do it or sometimes just don’t understand the importance of doing it, and unfortunately at some point down the line it’s been cleared to go into the records centre so now we are rectifying those mistakes.

**Victoria**

So in terms of when you as the records management team become responsible for a social care file, at what point does that happen?

**G307**

So when they’re deposited with us, so the team…so the owning team will create the file, use the file, close the file and then with our guidance they will index the file on the database, the physical file will be sent here and the teams check a proportion of the files against the database entries. It’s usually about a third of what comes in in each batch, so if 10 boxes come in the teams will check files in three of the boxes. If there are mistakes made they’ll get sent back to the owning team to make amendments, if those particular three boxes are ok then they’ll go in. Once it has been agreed that they can come in and be placed into storage that’s the point that we take custody of them, but the owning creating team always has responsibility for making decisions about them, so when the destruction review date of a particular file is hit that owning department will make the decision as to whether the file can stay or can be destroyed. They have to give their permission for any other team to view their file, so every file has an allocated file owner from that creating team, so if someone from I don’t know…I’m trying to think…the planning team wanted to look at a social care file they would have to get permission from that particular file owner, so they always retain that responsibility and that ownership of the file. We think of ourselves as the custodian, we make sure that everything is in place and we look after the file while it’s with us but we don’t have…we wouldn’t have the authority to make particular decisions.

**Victoria**

So let me see if I understand correctly, the file of a looked after child could be active and in the social care team from a child’s birth right through to them leaving care, and still be in receipt of services until maybe they’re 21, so that file could have been in active use for 21 years and it’s only at the 21 year mark the case gets closed and at that point it comes to you?

**G307**

Yes.

**Victoria**

So there’s a whole life of the file which is completely….

**G307**

Within the team, yes.

**Victoria**

Within the social care team.

**G307**

Yep.

**Victoria**

Do you have any contact with the recordkeeping processes within the social care team?

**G307**

We don’t have as much as I would like, that’s certainly something that I’m looking to increase. My issue is that up until very recently I only had the records centre team and it was only me that could go out and speak to people, so I didn’t have…I haven’t had the resource as such. We are also…in the records centre we only manage paper files…

**Victoria**

Ah, I was going to ask about that in second.

**G307**

Yes, we only manage paper files and the majority of the current social care records are now electronic and on a separate system that we use. I have access to that system but I only have reader access to certain records, so as a service area we’re very much linking up with children’s to try and make sure that that system has the right functionality, right retention rules on it, because those records that are created within that other system will stay in that system they won’t actually come to the records centre, as yet.

**Victoria**

As yet?

**G307**

As yet. We are doing a piece of work to look at electronic records management and how that could be enhanced here, so it’s not to say that as some point that won’t change but at the moment it will just stay in the system that they use over there.

**Victoria**

And presumably at the moment most of the records that you would be in receipt of from social care, some of them anyway will still be in paper form…

**G307**

Yes.

**Victoria**

Because they’ve not been using…I don’t know how long they’ve been using an electronic system, quite a lot of places they converted around 2005?

**G307**

Yes, I’m not sure to be honest.

**Victoria**

It’s certainly an area that has been flagged a couple of times with us, is that these social care recording systems and whether or not they have recordkeeping functionality as opposed to, you know, the management of casework. I mean they’re primary function is to record social work tasks rather than to preserve or to provide access to records.

**G307**

Well GDPR has certainly been a good tool [both laugh] to trigger to those conversations, so those conversations are happening now, it’s just been a case of us not having the capacity to really go out and invest time, certainly not from a records management point of view.

**Victoria**

Coming back then to the case files just briefly because I might ask a couple more questions about the digital stuff. So, the material itself, the hard copy paper files, are they stored here at Shire Hall?

**G307**

Yes, yes, so we have 17 strongrooms in Shire Hall and all children’s records are kept here. We do have an offsite store but we keep our low demand stuff - so files that aren’t requested particularly often – over there and we made the decision that we wouldn’t send any children related records out there as well even if there had been very few requests for a particular series of files, because we wanted to keep them here, keep them accessible and yes we just thought it would be more appropriate.

**Victoria**

At any point have any children’s files been reviewed and selected for permanent preservation?

**G307**

Not case files, not for individual children. [Our] Archives are very interested in looking at…I guess the mechanics of the process so we certainly transfer over a lot of minutes and business workings, but no child case files as yet. I know it’s something – and I’m sure [Person’s name] will talk about it tomorrow – where I think they would quite like to take like adoption files, or at least a sample, because of the social history value to them but that’s not something that we’ve ever done as yet. Partly because none of the files have hit their review dates.

**Victoria**

Yeah, they’ve all got long review dates on them so…

**G307**

Yeah, I think the earliest ones are probably 2040 2041, those are the earliest adoption records we have from the early 1940s.

**Victoria**

In terms of the survival of the care records, what are your earliest surviving files?

**G307**

Oooh, probably the 50s? Yeah.

**Victoria**

So they’re not far off their review dates?

**G307**

No, no, the issue is at one point they were classified the same as adoption so they were given a longer retention period and part of the work that the team are doing is actually reducing some of the retention periods as well attached to the files.

**Victoria**

Do you apply any retention within files? By which I mean do you identify any elements of files which have different retentions.

**G307**

No, we don’t. [both laugh]

**Victoria**

I ask that because somebody suggested to me yesterday that, for example, residential logbooks have a short retention, and that they were aware of a place that had actually removed those from files and destroyed them separately. But you don’t do that?

**G307**

No, I mean they are probably likely to come in separately anyway, so we would apply a shorter retention period to it but we wouldn’t take it out of one particular file you know.

**Victoria**

You don’t weed.

**G307**

We don’t weed, no, no.

**Victoria**

They’re just as received?

**G307**

I mean we might weed if we find a file of like 70 duplicates, in which case we would get rid of 69, but generally no.

**Victoria**

When you were doing the indexing and the cataloguing…I’m sure the team this afternoon will talk about a bit more about this, but presumably during the surveying process as well there was a need to build up quite a body of knowledge about the provision of social care services.

**G307**

Yes.

**Victoria**

Did you capture that in any way?

**G307**

I tried to…so over the last couple of years we’ve had a lot of change within Children’s Services, so I did try and sort of liaise with various people out there to give us an indication but unfortunately I wasn’t able to capture as much of their knowledge as I had hoped for, so a lot of it has been built up by just going by looking at the files. So I would say the team have a good understanding of what the social care system was like in the 50s and 60s and I know in a lot of our team meetings it’s very much been commented how much it changes, not only the system but the recording of it as well, so yeah it’s very much self-learnt rather than being able to talk to anyone actually within the teams themselves.

**Victoria**

You mentioned GDPR…

**G307**

Yes.

**Victoria**

And I wondered to what extent GDPR is going to affect, had already affected the ways in which you manage child social care records.

**G307**

Oof I think that’s a good question [both laugh]. At the moment it’s a little bit of an unknown because we are, we’re obviously still waiting for the final legislation, so we’re very much providing people with the things that, you know, we *know*, so what needs to be in the privacy notices things like that, but in terms of how people use their new rights or enhanced rights and how that actually plays out…I think I’m not… we’re kind of waiting to see in a way, we’re getting as prepared as we can be but we may have an onslaught you know in the couple of months after the 25th May and I think if that’s the case that will probably inform processes, because it’ll be a case of well ok what needs to change to meet this demand or x, y and z.

**Victoria**

Yeah, I mean in terms of the new rights are you thinking of the right to erasure and things?

**G307**

Yes, I mean because we’re obviously a public body that helps in the sense that we have to keep certain pieces of information in order to provide services to individuals, but I also think just the enhanced awareness because everyone knows about GDPR, I go out to dinner and people will corner me about GDPR, so I think people are much more aware of the rights they have already had that…yeah, a better understanding of how they can use that as well.

**Victoria**

So potentially looking at a spike in access to records requests and things like that?

**G307**

Yes, yeah.

**Victoria**

Unwittingly in working on the index for IICSA you will also hopefully have made the subject access request process more efficient.

**G307**

I hope so, that has certainly been an aim of ours, to help the guys deal with the SARs.

**Victoria**

In terms of the training that was given to the team that have been looking at the social care files, what kinds of skills and knowledge have they needed? I mean some things they will have brought with them already but some things maybe needed to be enhanced?

**G307**

So initially it was very much process based, so we obviously gave them guidance and sort of some training in records management principles cos none of them came in with a particular records management background, so we did that first off, so we…because some of the material can be quite emotional we did try…we have tried to make it as…we’ve tried to depersonalise it as much as possible, because obviously some of the stuff is upsetting. So we’ve always said you know think of it as a process, you know, you go in you’re looking for your key information and don’t necessarily read as much as you can. We’ve slightly revised that because we’ve realised that actually some of the complicated relationships between individuals and within families require some sort of…yeah…knowledge of what was going on in [our county] at the time, and also what was happening with the social care system, and as I said previous because we’ve learnt a lot of that through going through the files, that’s been built up organically and then sort of supplemented by mine and my colleagues various bits of legislation and what particular orders mean, so what’s a care order, what’s a special guardian that type of thing. I wouldn’t say we had any specific sit down training on all of those things it’s just been built up over time and through our team meetings which we have…well we’re meant to have at least once a week, sometimes it doesn’t quite work out, but that’s when people come and say well what does this mean and stuff, and yeah if one person has dealt with one particular thing in a file and someone else comes across something similar they will chat and advise each other, yeah.

**Victoria**

Have social care had any input or involvement in the project?

**G307**

Not from an implementation side of things, no. I mean Children’s Services pay for the project, so that’s been good, and certainly they’ve shown an interest in what’s been going on and I send them updates but not in terms of putting people on it or anything like that.

**Victoria**

I mean in terms of paying for it…you’re free not to answer this question…just out of interest, giving that this is a very ambitious project and a bit of a trailblazer, could you give me a sense of the cost?

**G307**

[laughs] So what we…what we do is we employ people through our temporary staff service where they get paid a certain amount, they get paid by the hour essentially, so what we do is we target a certain number of files that we think need attention and then we use a formula where we think we can get three files done in an hour, three files processed in an hour, so obviously we divide that number by three and then times it by the amount of money that these individuals earn an hour. If it was one person doing three files and they were on £10 an hour it would obviously cost £10, so I think so far we have…well in the third phase we are looking at doing 16,000 files, and I’ve got four members of staff now on it, so yeah, it’s sort of in the £10,000s.

**Victoria**

Yep. If you could go back to the beginning of the project is there anything that you would change or improve about the processes that you put in place?

**G307**

Ideally I would want a greater link with Children’s Services because a lot of the issues that the team have found with the historical files can be…can be put into like a Lessons Learnt paper and we have tried…we have captured them, it’s just it would have been nice, it would be great to work with Children’s to see whether those are still issues that they’re facing and obviously what we can do to rectify those or what have they put in place since that actually we can take away and think ok this is what they meant then and so on and so forth. That would have been really helpful, but I think that the context in which we were working, with change etc, it just wasn’t possible.

**Victoria**

Do you think that Children’s Services have a sense of using this information or this database for any other purpose than finding files?

**G307**

RAFTS? No I don’t think so, no.

**Victoria**

Because it just strikes me that you’re putting together what is quite a powerful system that could potentially be used to like track families, family relationships over time. It’s almost like a big data project.

**G307**

Yeah, it is.

**Victoria**

And I did just wonder whether anyone from social care had considered the possibility of being able to for example look at patterns in social care over time, given that it sounds as though you’re gathering information to make that possible?

**G307**

Yeah, I don’t think that they have, to be honest, no. I mean I don’t know how aware Children’s Services as an area are of this particular project, obviously the individuals who are providing the funds are, but if you sort of go down the various tiers it gets to a point where people aren’t aware of the work that we’re doing. So for the team clerks RAFTs is a tool to find the paper work that they need to give to their social workers to enable them to do their job and it doesn’t really go beyond that I don’t think. I might be wrong, but I wouldn’t have thought so.

**Victoria**

And just to touch briefly on the access to records question, do you have sort of a sense of how this new system supports the access to records team?

G307

So we’ve certainly had the feedback that it’s made their life easier in terms of being able to call up the right information – I don’t really have any stats as such I can give you, but it’s…yeah it makes life much easier, cos yeah if they’re looking for Jane Smith and they search for that on the system and it doesn’t come up or lots of Jane Smiths come up but all the different records are just indexed as Jane Smith, then to do their job they obviously have to look at all those records, but there might…out of 10 there might only be the one file that’s the right Jane Smith, whereas now because we’ve got the extra metadata they can identify just from looking at the database which is the one file that they need to look at so it’s saving some time.

**Victoria**

Do you know if there are any records that are missing? So, any children’s files for example that were disposed of prior to the 75 year retention coming into force? I know some local authorities have very few records surviving pre the 1989 Children Act.

**G307**

I think we do have a gap, I know certainly I’ve…so [the county] had a number of children’s homes and I know that there are gaps in the records from those homes, of those establishments. I don’t believe that they are because of disposal once they had been in the records centre, it was just the fact that at some point…they never got here. Yeah. In terms of things being disposed before 75 years, I imagine so, but I couldn’t tell you how many to be honest.

**Victoria**

I ask just because I was at a conference last week, just a couple of weeks ago, where people were talking about the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry and one of the questions that Scottish authorities were asked was to identify gaps and substantiate the reasons as to why there were gaps there and it made me wonder about being able to document gaps in similar ways to documenting the presence of records and how that might support access to records work. One of the things that is often said to me by subjects, care leavers trying to access their records, is the frustration of never being able to prove a negative, so they ask and they’re told there’s no file, but there’s been enough cases of people being told that and then 10 years later a file will be found, or vice a versa. There was one once and now there isn’t, that there would be a value in being able to say ‘If someone was in this home between these dates then that is a known gap in our records.’ Is there any way of managing that information in your system?

**G307**

There probably is. I think with ours there’s no way of being able to draw the data to say…I don’t know, x school or x whatever and drawing that information whereby you can arrange it chronologically and draw you the missing patterns. Again that would be very dependent upon the right metadata being put in the title or whatever, because we don’t have a field for covering dates, so we have reporting software where we can sort of draw things out of the system but we don’t…we wouldn’t be able to do that just based on covering dates of records for x establishment. We’d only be able to do that by pulling off a list of all files relating to x establishment and manually going through and arranging them, so it would be quite resource heavy, yeah.

**Victoria**

Do you have a controlled vocabulary?

**G307**

One that I have designed yes, yes.

**Victoria**

Because I assume a lot of children’s homes go through various iterations, with name changes…

**G307**

Yes, oh yes. So we apply the name that is given in the file. We have a number of schools that change their name over time, and yes to be honest it is dependent on someone’s knowledge that x college became x school that became x whatever…so we don’t cross…we don’t sort of add all the different names to a particular entry.

**Victoria**

So my last question I suppose is what’s next with children’s social care files?

**G307**

What’s next? [laughs] Well I mean the project as I say is into its third phase, we have a lot of children’s records, a lot of care records in the records centre that need attention, so we’ve been very fortunate that at the end of first phase we were able to produce a successful business case to get extra funding and then the second one at the end of this year, the previous year. So I would certainly like to try and do another business case to improve the indexing, because I think that’s such an important piece of work. I’m still not convinced that we’ve scooped everything from the localities, so I would like to return to that records survey work and get everything in and I think certainly link up with Gloucestershire Archives as well, to just sort of…create a little bit more a uniform way of managing the records because certainly we have our closed ones and they have the official documents I guess, from GCC and from the establishments, and just make sure that we are marrying up. We’ve done it as much as we can for the moment but just to continue that process.

**Victoria**

While you were talking I’ve thought of another last question. If you don’t mind?

**G307**

Ok, no, no.

**Victoria**

Which is whether or not this process has changed your perspective on children’s records?

**G307**

It has in that it certainly…there’s certainly a lot of social historical value in them but also they are a microcosm of someone’s own personal history, so…I in some ways can see the value in retaining some permanently but equally it’s like placing someone’s life you know in a…I say a glass box, I mean a hundred year rule and all that, but yes…I think that they have to be treated with a lot of respect, and with a lot of understanding as well. One of the things that I’m sure the team will talk about later is some of the language that’s used within files during certain periods of time, and it’s been very interesting to try and work out how to capture that. Some of it obviously isn’t appropriate to capture for what’s in a database entry but equally some of the…say for example the use of the word mongrel or something like that, that does inform sometimes how you place the file within several others. I can’t think of an example off the top of my head. I think as well that it also has to…sorry let me think about what I’m trying to say here.

**Victoria**

Take your time.

**G307**

I think the way, yeah, I think the way certain things are described…has an impact upon the way that you can view…or you could view the social care system now, you know for example I dealt with a file that was for a little girl who was an orphan and who was placed in a national sort of institution, and she was a redhead, blind and dumb, which are three of the worst things that you could be and it was basically…I can’t remember the exact wording but what was written in the file was basically no one will ever want this girl, so let’s just put her in one of the worst places possible and save a better place for a better child. That little girl went on to die a couple of years later, and I guess it’s hard not…you have to certainly use a filter to think right that’s how it was that’s not how it is necessarily today, but yes, it’s reminding people that the language that they use can have an effect on the way others view their job.

**Victoria**

So potentially a training tool for social workers today?

**G307**

Yes, for social workers now.

**Victoria**

Yeah, it would be interesting to bring today’s social workers into contact with those historic files.

**G307**

Yes, yes.

**Victoria**

As kind of a reflective exercise to think about…

**G307**

How they use that language, how they describe things, absolutely.

**Victoria**

Yeah, and to highlight the longevity of their work.

**G307**

Well yes, from an access to records point of view if they write something in a similar vein and then that individual was to get hold of their records, that’s…that obviously gives a negative perception of the care system, the Council and could have much wider implications as well.

**Victoria**

Yeah, the many ripples of the record through time.

**G307**

I like that. [both laugh]

**Victoria**

Which is a good note to end on. Is there anything else that you want to add before we finish?

**G307**

Not that I can think of but…

**Victoria**

Well you can always come back to it at the transcription stage, so thank you and this is where I will stop recording.

END OF INTERVIEW

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

Interview held 15th May 2018 between G313 and Victoria Hoyle, at a County Council, Shire Hall.

**BEGINNING OF INTERVIEW**

**Victoria**

So if we could start with you giving me a brief overview of your role here and particularly in relation to care records.

**G313**

Yeah, my role is I’m an Information Request Officer, mainly I do Freedom of Information requests but I also am involved in some Subject Access Requests. For the CLEARmark [Access to Records] Award I had to basically update all the links that we had on our website and change some of the wording around to make sure it was quite – as the title says – clear to requestors how to go about requesting their own information. And for the care leavers we’ve always tried to encourage them to do that.

**Victoria**

To request their information?

**G313**

Yeah cos as it says on our kind of like part of the website it’s a lot of their life in these files, especially if they’ve been in care since they were a baby or something, there’s a lot there. And we never ever charged under DPA, cos up until GDPR we were entitled to £10 but we never bothered charging that. So we were kind of like trying to encourage care leavers, to make it as easy as possible for them to access their records.

**Victoria**

So when did you do this work with CLEARmark?

**G313**

I did this work last year, last summer.

**Victoria**

And was this for the recertification?

**G313**

Yes, we’d had it previously. I think it comes up every two years, so yeah it’s just updating all the links, trying to change some of the wording here and there. Cos we had two…we had a totally new website, the old one none of the links worked so I was basically doing that side of it. But I did go to our youth services - cos you know we’ve outsourced to a company called Prospects - for their views on it and they didn’t really come back in time for us to be able to use it, cos there are quite strict deadlines on these things.

**Victoria**

So that was to talk to them about…

**G313**

Yeah, what their views would be.

**Victoria**

So, from their prospective how would young people find this kind of information, that kind of thing?

**G313**

Yeah, yeah, but sadly being the summer and everybody’s got other priorities I never had enough time to do, you know…the big remastering job I was trying to do.

**Victoria**

So with CLEARmark, what is it that you have to evidence?

**G313**

Basically it’s…yeah, I don’t know if you want me to run through what’s on our submission?

**Victoria**

Yeah, and how you, I suppose, met it or what you’ve changed in order to meet it?

**G313**

Yeah, ok. The first requirement is advertise the right for care leavers to access their records in at least one type of media. Well we’ve got it on the webpages, on our kind of ‘Accessing your Personal Information’ page, cos I think a lot of people now are quite web savvy and stuff, you know all the stuffs on there, you can request it other ways, you know by post, but the general information is on the website, and we’ve also got a separate subsection ‘What’s in my social care records?’ which explains a bit more about how they would go about accessing it and it’s all broken down into various steps about how they have to do it, and we always give a contact number so people can actually genuinely phone up and get somebody on the phone who actually knows what they’re talking about rather than ‘if it’s Option 8 press this, if it’s Option 7 press that.’ So we’ve got that part of it.

**Victoria**

So the ‘How do I access my records?’, does that sit in the information management part of the website?

**G313**

Yeah, it sits in [gestures to indicate a hierarchy] Council and Democracy, Data Protection, Requesting access to your personal information. So we obviously passed on that requirement. The second requirement by the Care Leaver’s Association was to [reading] ‘have a statement of recognition that care leavers have a right to this information’, a copy of a statement, a policy. We’ve got, as I said, we’ve got - in the ‘What’s in my social care records’ link - we’ve got a statement saying, you know, if social workers have had an involvement in your life, and by definition with a looked after child they must have done, there may be written information about you and your records. The information held within files can often hold many answers to a person’s past, that’s quite a good way of putting it because a lot of people wouldn’t know, like I say if they were put into care at a very young age they’re not necessarily going to know why. And anecdotally that is one of the big reasons people ask, ex-care leavers, we even get care leavers going back to the 1950s, they were in care in the 1950s, asking for stuff, because they didn’t know why they were put into care in the first place. So that was that requirement. We also include it in our Data Protection Subject Access policy as well.

**Victoria**

As a specific section?

**G313**

Yeah, which includes a statement of recognition of this right and its importance. Sorry I’m reading off this but I haven’t actually looked at this since last year. Again the requirement, to ‘recognise the positive importance of accessing files’ – that’s in our ‘What’s in my social care records?’ part of the website. You know so that obviously fulfilled the need for that. ‘Have an ATR policy’…I’m guessing that’s access to records, although it doesn’t actually say that. Like I said it’s on the website under the Data Protection part and also we have got supporting policies which you would expect anyway. ‘Have a monitoring system on requests received.’ That’s an interesting one, I don’t know quite why, but we do, we’ve got a centralised system called ‘Manage My Requests’, which is a data base so we can log requests in, we know when they’re due, we do try and get them out as soon as we can but some you know take up to 40 days which I understand is changing with GDPR, which is going to be fun for all concerned but…

**Victoria**

Just about that request system, does that allow you to record the type of request, so if it was for a social care file for example, if it was a subject access request for a social care file, would that be…could you extract that data from the system and say annually we receive this many SARs for care leavers?

**G313**

We can do now, I don’t think we could do before, we had to change something on the system. Yeah, because I had a quick look before and there were some that came up ‘subject access request – care leavers’, so we can, I don’t know how easy it is mind but we could. Yeah we could yeah. Yeah so we met that requirement, we can monitor them, it’s not like it goes into some black hole and gets totally forgotten about, which happens in some places I’ve no doubt to be honest. ‘Provide a brief and accessible response letter’… yeah, we’ve got a fairly good wording for that to be honest, telling them we’ve got your request – that’s after we’ve got all the necessary proofs of ID and stuff – we’d say ‘here’s your request, we’ll respond no later than 40 calendar days’… at the moment but it’s going to be a calendar month, assuming they don’t rewrite the [DPA 2018] Act before they put it in place… so they know exactly when they can expect it by, and in the response we go to great pains to point out that any personal information of other people will probably be redacted under the DPA. I think there’s some wording on one of the ‘Accessing your social care records’ bits that says you only get information on yourself, you won’t necessarily get it on family members, professionals, people like that, it’s just for you, cos a lot of people wouldn’t know, they wouldn’t appreciate that you know? You’d think you’re getting everything on your file but you don’t. So we go and explain that like I said we were awarded it [CLEARmark] back in October last year, so it’s valid for three years.

**Victoria**

Do you have a sense of why CLEARmark is important to [us] as an organisation, the motives for doing it?

**G313**

Yeah I think we’ve always been fairly…not the word advanced but fairly ahead of the pack really in trying to make stuff as clear as possible to people, about how to do things. Cos it’s easier for everybody, it’s easier for the requestor and it’s easier for us cos it reduces misunderstandings and stuff. [indicates he needs to take a drink] Do you mind if I…?

**Victoria**

No not at all, it’s quite warm in here isn’t it? These little glass boxes can get quite warm. You mentioned that your role is access to information, presumably FOI requests…

**G313**

Mainly FOI requests, yeah yeah.

**Victoria**

And some subject access requests?

**G313**

Yeah yeah.

**Victoria**

Have you personally dealt with any subject access requests for social care files?

**G313**

Yeah, I tend to do mainly elderly adult social care cos I do the FOIs in that area as well. And I have done quite a few historical care leavers SARs, you know the ones I mentioned to you earlier, people in care in the 1950s, 1960s. Not so many of the up-to-date ones, I don’t tend to do many of them.

**Victoria**

Do you mind chatting about that process? Is that alright?

**G313**

Yeah, that’s fine.

**Victoria**

So when you receive a SAR from a care leaver, what’s the process that’s triggered by that request? Could you talk me through the stages of providing that information?

**G313**

Yeah, first of all we would go back to them and say ‘can we have proof of identity?’ It’s usually like a copy of a utility bill or driving license, passport, or if they’re known to us anyway something from their social worker. When we’ve got the proof of ID we go back to them and say yeah, ‘here’s your acknowledgement, we’re going to process your request’. Sometimes we might ask them to be specific but if people want everything then that’s fine. So then we would go out to see who held the information, it varies, if it’s more up to date it’s going to be held on a system called…have you heard of LiquidLogic?

**Victoria**

Yeah.

**G313**

Which is our children’s system, it’ll be held on there, but it also might be held on files in our archives, records centre archives, so it can be a mixture of both. Basically we would go out to the teams that had dealt with them to get them to send the information back to us and then we would copy it and go through redacting it, any third party stuff, and there’s generally a fair bit.

**Victoria**

So that redaction process presumably takes quite a significant amount of the time?

**G313**

Yeah, absolutely. I’m trying to think of the example of the one I did the other month, where the guy was in care from 1956 to 1970 or something like that, I reckon at a rough guess it took me about 30 hours overall.

**Victoria**

Just to go through line by line?

**G313**

Yeah cos he had…in the olden days they used to have family files, so he was on there but it was with three siblings, so once you go through the hassle in a way of getting it copied you’ve then got to do line by line, context, and that is what takes a long time. Cos we don’t really want to be releasing too little but we don’t want to be releasing too much either.

**Victoria**

How do you do it? Do you use a redaction software?

**G313**

Some people use Adobe Pro, but I tend to be paper based so I tend to use redacting tape and then copy it again so you can’t read it, but the redaction process is a real…you know…that’s where the real thought process has to come into play.

**Victoria**

And in terms of what you do and don’t disclose, what kind of principles do you use in approaching the redaction?

**G313**

It’s quite difficult to summarise it to be honest.

**Victoria**

Yeah it’s an intuitive process I know.

**G313**

Yeah, if it’s clearly about them then they would obviously get it, if it involved another member of the family then it depends on how contentious or sensitive the information is. Let’s say they both went to the park and had a picnic you might well leave that in, but then if it says after the picnic the sister went home and had to go to hospital for x, y and z you would take that bit out. So a lot of it is context to be honest.

**Victoria**

Would you ever take anything out that wasn’t third party information, for any other reasons?

**G313**

I had a case whereby…*not* for third party, *not* involving other people did I understand that right? Probably not. I’m trying to think of exceptional circumstances where you’d have to redact something about the person. If it was something along the lines…hmmm…if it was something…tricky, probably not, unless you thought it was so damning or so…it might upset them so much, but then again that’s a judgement call. And the other thing is, the further back you go, people are very very judgemental and they weren’t afraid to put it on paper, so what I did with the one I did for the guy in care in the 50s was put ‘bear in mind these contain opinions, couched in the terms…you know the context of the times’ but I can’t think…very rarely you would take something out, not release it to them. If we knew the person had like mental health issues or something we would try and seek guidance from a doctor or something, try and see would that be…would that really cause them severe distress, but usually we would release it.

**Victoria**

Yeah, and how does the person normally receive the information?

**G313**

They can get it electronically, we send them a…but you see I don’t do the modern ones that much…but we send them a disc and we send them a separate email with an encryption, I think. I’ve never actually done one of those. Or we send it to them in the post, like recorded delivery. But we send a letter out and it says ‘here’s your stuff, bear in mind certain information has been redacted about other people, and if you’re not happy with what you’ve got you’ve got a right to complain to us, and if you’re not happy with that then you go to the Information Commissioner’, so that’s pretty much covered on that.

**Victoria**

And does anyone ever come back and complain or ask for more information?

**G313**

Sometimes, probably more with the more recent cases to be honest. Cos another assumption is if something happened we wrote it down, but if we didn’t write it down we haven’t got it. I know it sounds obvious to us but…and I don’t know what the level of recording is, but if nothing happened to the individual in a month they could come back and say ‘where’s the records of June 97?’ but if nothing happened in June 97 we’ve got nothing to send back.

**Victoria**

And does anyone ever dispute what’s in the file and say ‘that’s not true?’

**G313**

I haven’t dealt with any as such but I know colleagues have, yeah and it’s quite tricky that, because unless it’s a factual inaccuracy what we usually do is say ‘well we checked it out, what we can do is we can put your comments on file disputing it’, but like I say I haven’t really dealt with any like that.

**Victoria**

When you do an access to records request does the fact of that request then become part of the file? So would you keep a redacted version as part of the record?

**G313**

Yeah, we would keep a copy of the redacted version but on our own branch file, an IMS file, we keep those for six years.

**Victoria**

So it wouldn’t become part of the 75 year retention of the care file?

**G313**

That I’m not 100% sure to be honest, like I say, I don’t think we do but as I say I’m mainly FOI. I do do these but not as a main job.

**Victoria**

Do you get FOI requests for care information?

**G313**

Loads. We get loads for care leavers, a lot at the moment about care leaver’s educational qualifications, and NEETS [Not in Education, Employment or Training] and that sort of stuff. We get lots on…I don’t know whether they’re classed as care leavers, but unaccompanied asylum seeking children, loads about that. Yeah we get a lot about…a fair bit about care leavers, looked after children as they used to be, a lot.

**Victoria**

I don’t know if I can really ask you think but do you have a sense of the source of those requests, are they coming predominantly from individuals or media?

**G313**

Media, generally yeah. Yeah definitely media, some campaign groups, trying to think off hand to be honest with you who we’ve had them in from… Usually media. BBC, Guardian, not so much people like The Sun, although they seem to be obsessed with parking fines at the moment, parking fines of foreign registered cars, I just sent one out now.

**Victoria**

So you can probably get a sense of what the latest scandalous news stories are going to be based on what FOI requests you’ve had recently?

**G313**

Yeah, we had a hell of a lot last year about high rise tower block insulation. So yeah, they generally follow a pattern, but we do get a lot about children in care and care leavers, usually about how many went to employment, how many went to university, that sort of thing.

**Victoria**

And presumably that information is pretty easy to extract now?

**G313**

[sighs] Errrrr, ish. LiquidLogic isn’t…it’s better than the adult social care system, which is very difficult to extract from because it’s a very old system, but yes, most of it can be obtained without going over the 18 hour time limit thing.

**Victoria**

Have you ever been aware of receiving a request from an academic, someone who is doing research of any kind?

**G313**

Yeah, we get them, we get them, they’re usually pretty upfront about what they are, although to be honest somebody could describe themselves as a member of the public and it’s quite legitimate, you know, we’ve got an online form, we ask people but it’s really for our own records. But yeah, we do get ones from academics yeah.

**Victoria**

You mentioned GDPR and I know this is not your area really, but do you have a sense of how GDPR is going to impact on the work that you do?

**G313**

Well my personal view is, and I remember when they brought the Data Protection Act in, a lot of people are going to see this Right to be Forgotten thing and get on that, so a lot of people have got various issues with the council, they’re going to be writing in saying ‘I want this deleted, I want that deleted’, that is what I think. And the other impact is going to be to the timeframe, you’ve still got the same amount of copying and redaction to do but you’ve got virtually a quarter less time to do it, that’s going to be a big impact. But the increased subject rights under GDPR that’s going to have potentially a big impact, you know, and saying how long we’re going to keep stuff for as well, where did you get it from, you don’t really have to do that at the moment.

[G313 gets a phone call and temporarily leaves the interview.]

**G313**

Like I say some of the answers might be a bit vague but it’s not really my…but I do do it.

**Victoria**

No, it’s fine, I’m just digging really.

**G313**

Dig away.

**Victoria**

Yeah, it’s interesting what you say about right to be forgotten and that is sort of the headline news I suppose of GDPR and the impact that that will have. And it seems to me from chatting to people in various contexts is that the consensus at the moment is there’s not really yet any clear position on when that right will be applicable, because particularly with say for example a local authority that has so many statutory responsibilities that require the keeping of records, actually using that right will be subject to so many exemptions it’s going to be very complex, at the beginning, deciding how it’s going to apply.

**G313**

Yeah, cos in theory if somebody can test something we’ll have to go back to whoever put that on the record, get them to check and double check and they say we still think it’s right then we’re going to have to go back to the person and say well we think it’s right…and I don’t know where it goes from there to be honest, it’s going to be a pickle of a job in some cases to be honest. Especially if we’ve got paper files on people and electronic records, electronic records are quite easily auditable if that’s the word, paper records…have you seen any of our care leavers’ files? Well yeah, how would you ever check some of that stuff, how would you check the accuracy of that? And like I say that’s where the bits about opinions come into it as well, cos it’s not facts, especially the further back you go, I don’t care what they said, the expectation was they’d never be seen by the individual. That’s another point in the one I did the other month, it was the intention that these files were never shared with the subject, so probably don’t take it to heart as much. I think the guy himself he wasn’t that worried but he probably had an idea what was in there. So it’s a big issue to be honest, it’s a massive issue, but it’s the rectification of the information that’s going to be the thing. People saying well why have you got to keep it for 75 years for? Or why don’t you keep it longer than 75 years?

**Victoria**

I can imagine that there will be some sort of test cases.

**G313**

Oh this is the thing isn’t it? Until it gets to case law and the ICO start getting involved in it, you can’t tell, it’s like when DPA came in, you couldn’t tell what was going to happen with that to be honest. Cos that was a very steep learning curve to be honest. Cos one school of approach when DPA came in was that you only give people personal data so you spend all the time weeding out fairly mundane stuff from files, but the thing is if it’s going to harm them…if its not going to harm them why not leave it in? So that was one thing, that’s another thing about redaction, it might not be personal data but then again what’s the harm in releasing if it might give them context.

**Victoria**

Yeah, I have spoken to people who’ve had their files twice…

**G313**

Everybody will do it slightly differently.

**Victoria**

…and they’ve had very different outcomes, yeah.

**G313**

I’m hoping that in here [at …] it would be slightly different but at some places I don’t know…it’s very much judgement, context, experience of doing them before. Right or wrong, but you know.

**Victoria**

You mentioned about LiquidLogic and I just wondered if you had any thoughts about how a system like that could be improved to make information more accessible and extractable?

**G313**

I’m probably not the best person to ask, I’ve not actually got it. I can comment on the adult social care system but it’s very…it’s almost like it’s designed by IT people to help them out, you know what I mean, it’s a bit cynical maybe but… I suppose the ultimate thing would be for people to access their own records online but I know the NHS tried that and failed miserably with that.

**Victoria**

Well, yeah, access to health records has been a bit of a controversial subject over the last 10 years ago hasn’t it?

**G313**

I think that would be the ideal solution, but… you could keep that, you could have regular updates you know, as it happens but you could do under DPA I suppose, you could ask us stuff every year or whatever. But yeah, sorry I can’t help much with LiquidLogic, I haven’t got it so.

**Victoria**

That’s ok. I’ve never actually seen it myself, just heard many tales of it.

**G313**

It’s not that bad but it’s not that user friendly either to be honest, if you sat the person in front of it and said here’s your record, they’ve have a pretty job trying to find out the stuff on there.

**Victoria**

Yeah, it’s a system I suppose that’s designed to be used in quite specialist circumstances, people get trained on it and adapt to using it, but it’s not intuitive necessarily.

**G313**

Yeah, if you sat the person in front of it and said there you go, there’s your record, they’d say ‘what?!’ Some bits might be obvious, other bits wouldn’t be.

**Victoria**

Well, thank you very much, that’s been very useful.

**G313**

Sorry it’s a bit generalised but.

**Victoria**

No no no, I am interested, very interested, in the CLEARmark stuff.

**G313**

Yeah, I’m trying to think about the guy, the contact that I talked to up there, cos they’re based in Manchester aren’t they?

**Victoria**

It might have been […]that you spoke to?

**G313**

Yeah, is that him?

**Victoria**

Yeah, I know [him].

**G313**

Yeah, cos I kept badgering him saying ‘have we got it? Have we got it?’ cos my bosses are asking me, they were very keen for us to have this.

**Victoria**

That’s good, I mean he will be pleased with that I imagine, that they were so keen. So I will stop recording.

**END OF INTERVIEW**

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

Interview held 17th October 2018 between G317 and Victoria Hoyle, at [Place name] County Council.

**BEGINNING OF INTERVIEW**

**Victoria**

So this is an interview at [Place name] County Council between Victoria Hoyle and G317.

**Victoria**

So if you could just start by briefly describing your job role and responsibilities here?

**G317**

Broadly, I’m the records manager of the County Council, so I’m responsible for paper records and electronic records. We’ve got systems that deal with that, as in we’ve got a paper records system that deals with all our semi-current records, where we have indexes so we can actually find the records, and we have something similar for electronic records, but that’s only really been going for the last 10 years.

**Victoria**

And in your work what sort of contact do you have with records of child social care and Children’s Services?

**G317**

Quite a lot, as in the vast bulk of the paper records are from Children’s Services.

**Victoria**

Oh ok.

**G317**

And in terms of the electronic it represents a reasonable proportion, because Children’s Services records are generally for longer term retention and therefore we end up having more of those than other stuff.

**Victoria**

Ok, so within the Council’s infrastructure where does records management sit?

**G317**

Currently it sits under…ok above me is Information Governance, above that is now Legal. Previously it was sort of ICT type of thing, and then yeah…is that enough, or more?

**Victoria**

Yes, yeah. And how do you kind of communicate and interact with the rest of the Council? [pause, followed by clarification] Are there kind of policies and newsletters?

**G317**

Ah, yes, there is a records management policy as part of that. It’s being reviewed, we’ll probably review it again. We also have the retention schedule, and that’s the main thing, but most of it is… In terms of paper, as with all Council’s around the country, everyone is sort of reducing in size so of course at some stage they need to store stuff and generally we get it. So we’ve got stuff on the website about how to do archiving and for example yesterday I was doing something about electronic records, mainly about emails, so, showing people how to do it. I’ve also done floor-walking with social work teams, etc.

**Victoria**

So for this project there is a particular interest in children’s case files and I just wondered if we could walk through the kind of life of a children’s case file here. So who is responsible for the creation of children’s care files and then what happens to them subsequently?

**G317**

Depending on what… that’s a confusing sort of thing, because generally what will happen is that it’s probably going… I don’t know how much depth you actually want to go in to? A lot of stuff goes from the referral stage. Currently – I can give you the current sort of thing – there is a referral, that is usually coming in to our call centre. Generally when the referral is entered onto the system that automatically creates a… basically we’ve got two different systems, we’ve got what’s called a CRM, a Client Relationship Management system, and behind that we have our EDRMS, Electronic Document Records Management system, and basically from a referral, at a certain stage in the referral, it will automatically create the client record. Underneath that there will be a whole bunch of sub-folders and then from that it then goes to…I don’t know what they call it at the moment but the people who deal with the referral. Usually there is a whole bunch of different teams, and generally the names of the teams change every couple of years but it depends on what it is. It will usually go through the initial assessment type stuff. After that it will get branched off as in in to other areas, again whether it’s Child Protection or Safeguarding or if it’s something to do with Children Looked After, but that usually only comes after Safeguarding does Children Looked After. Or it could just be a Child in Need, as in…there is no sort of risk to the child that’s been perceived, that’s another one. So of course, after that, with the Children Looked After it could even go into the Adoption process – although there is a possibility that it could come into the adoption process in a different manner but I don’t know, I’m not sure how often that happens – or it could stay in the Children Looked After one which then links into usually the foster carer files or links into other Children’s Centres, although mostly Children’s Centres have been outsourced, or sometimes haven’t.

**Victoria**

So once a case is closed at what point does records management become responsible for the file?

**G317**

In the electronic world it goes directly on to the database. So to give you a good example there is three elements of integration with our LCS [LiquidLogic] system. When it’s [the case file] been created it [the system] automatically creates the file structure, along with all the metadata to do with the children, and then every time that system creates something it automatically files that document into the system. If post comes into the system it goes through the post room where it’s scanned and is placed onto that file. So in some ways it’s in an archiving system from the word go. We also render – not Guantanamo Bay render – but rendition, it’s basically to make sure the files, the documents, survive for a long period of time. It’s generally automatically rendered into PDF/A, so it’ll last for whatever period of time, but of course there’s more problems with non-document type files. Yeah?

**Victoria**

Ok, can you give me an example?

**G317**

Videos? So videos, audios, there’s no real long term file format for it. I’ve got a whole list of ones but I can’t remember them off the top of my head. But like one of the ones that is quite difficult is actually emails, because well the current software doesn’t actually render emails, and of course… Yeah actually with emails there is a slight problem with putting stuff in, because most of the emails have to be done via a separate email system so of course that hasn’t got generic integration with our EDRMS. So, say, the social workers need to download it to their desktop and then upload it, which isn’t the best way because of course it takes longer, and anything that takes longer means that there’s a chance that it won’t actually happen. So we are looking at that, to have some app that will enable it to automatically go but there’s technical issues.

**Victoria**

So that’s the case with the electronic records, I presume that the vast majority of the material being created right now is electronic?

**G317**

Yep.

**Victoria**

Or is being digitised. What about the paper records? When was the switch to the digital systems, do you know?

**G317**

I can’t give you the exact date – I should actually, but I can’t remember – but it’s probably… the integration with the ICS system, or the LCS - it’s actually changed its name multiple times – was probably about 10 years ago, maybe 8-10 years ago, and that is the vast bulk of it. The main gaps from that period, in that 8-10 years, was the special educational needs file and the educational psychology files, because those departments were a bit more…uninterested in using it. But of course now they’re mostly being electronic, but the big thing for me is that I’m trying to get all the information about one child in one place, so when we do need it it’s just in one spot. For the paper side of it, as in pre that period, it depends. Before I started there wasn’t any database, as in….before, ok…on the paper records side we have another system and it’s been working since about 2003, where we actually have built up the indexes for the paper files. Before 2003 there wasn’t any central index of paper files, and of course because they’re paper they can’t be searchable, so you can’t find them, and so the Council did do some big indexing projects where basically we had a building – that was actually a really big skyscraper type building in St. Albans that was kept just for this recordkeeping team, along with all the records – where they basically spent a year and half, two years, indexing all of the records. And then after that we imported them into our database, and after that we tracked them and put them in boxes etc etc. But of course, after that, in about 2006 to about 2008 we started to move buildings, as in we transferred from a number of buildings and then they sort of all came together. They reduced the property portfolio from about 50 shared site buildings to about 3. So what happened? Of course a lot of those buildings need to be cleared out and the majority of the records were archived at that point by the actual teams themselves. Yeah? But of course when an individual group does the archiving the metadata of it may not be perfect, and of course because of the volumes you can’t actually check everything.

**Victoria**

So are there any children’s social care records that are hybrid? So there is a paper file but there is also an electronic record as well?

**G317**

Yes.

**Victoria**

Would that still be true right now? Are they creating paper records now?

**G317**

Sometimes they will be printing out stuff to use, as in if they’re going to court or something like that. Also there’s certain things that, especially if they’re say CLA [Child Looked After], they might have passports and that and they’re kept in a different place, so yeah.

**Victoria**

And the Children’s Services teams, they hold on to that stuff?

**G317**

Yes, as in until there’s closure.

**Victoria**

And then it comes into your remit?

**G317**

Not the passports etc, they’re usually passed over to the children.

**Victoria**

Yes, yeah. Where does all this paper stuff live? Is it here in this building or is it in storage?

**G317**

No, no, generally we use offsite storage because it’s a lot cheaper. I won’t say where it is! So, yeah, in terms of volumetrics we’re got about 20 kilometres worth of paper.

**Victoria**

A significant amount. And of course in order to then access that material, if it’s offsite, you do need good indexes, good catalogues, to retrieve it. With the children’s case files, how are they indexed?

**G317**

Generally they’re indexed with the surname, first name, date of birth and possibly one or two ID numbers. But of course, especially with ID numbers, because we’ve had different systems in the past they can be confusing. The expectation of…basically my expectation with this is there’s a possibility that someone will get something wrong in one of those but they’re unlikely to get something wrong in all of them. But of course that’s the ideal and we’ve probably got a reasonable percentage that has that, but not all the records because of course there are some sort of dramas usually and they haven’t got enough money, so some of them are just down as names or dates of birth. But of course if you want the system to work right the dates of birth have to be in a specific format, as in dd/mm/yyyy otherwise the system doesn’t recognise it, yeah. Generally we seem to be able to find the majority of the stuff that we get requests for. I usually get more curious about where we can’t find something when we should have it, or we expect to have it.

**Victoria**

So say a request for access for records, for a subject access requests, comes into the Data Protection team, and they contact you and say this person has made a request. What happens then? What’s the process?

**G317**

Basically they’ve got access to the records management paper records system. They will actually do…they should be checking on our EDRMS system. They’ll also do searches on our paper records system. They’ll request the files, boxes, that they want back. At the moment what we do with them is rather than get the files back in paper we actually are getting them scanned with our offsite storage company and then getting them transferred back to us securely and then we actually put them into their folders so they can then process it. Because basically they process using some sort of redaction software. Yeah.

**Victoria**

So the paper records themselves are currently staying in their offsite storage?

**G317**

Yeah.

**Victoria**

Have you done any back scanning of these type of records, to create digital copies prior to a request? I know some authorities you see have chosen to scan significant amounts of material into their current records systems.

**G317**

We did try and do some CLA records in about 2005. The business units didn’t particularly like them at that stage, so it didn’t really work, so most of the time it was… we were encouraging them to use the systems so we left the paper records with them rather than taking the paper records off them. For our adult care clients we basically went completely electronic and then all the files disappeared and they’ve only ever gone forward. But also for adoption records we have scanned some microfilm records, but that’s mainly because the microfilms were past their use by date, so to make sure that we had a backup copy of them we had them scanned. They were in quite poor condition.

**Victoria**

Sure. So you talked about not being able to find things. Do you know of any specific losses or gaps in the Children’s Services records?

**G317**

Yep. There seems to be a gap around a children’s home.

**Victoria**

A particular home?

**G317**

Yes, I can’t remember it off the top of my head, it might be called [Briar’s Patch] but I’m not 100% sure. And also there is, in some ways…ok for the next bit it’s not really a gap because after I’ve researched it I’ve found that basically for children that were in some ways fostered, I can’t remember the exact dates, but sometime in the 80s I think, after a certain point we will have their records before that point it is a bit more chancy because there was a legislation change in the Boarding Out of Children’s Act, which changed the actual retention period from the age of 21 years to 75. Actually it wasn’t that much of a change at the time, but of course I think it’s children born around 1966, 1967…and before that for children who were fostered there is a possibility that we would not have their records. Which seems a bit strange because of course now everyone knows that it’s 75 years etc yet you’re looking back 75 years and we haven’t got 75 years’ worth of records, so yeah. For adoption, for some reason there is also gaps in the adoption records, I’ve never really got to the bottom of that. But yes it’s rare that we can’t find anything, it’s just that with most of the children records from ages ago most of them are actually quite small and short and they aren’t actually to do with the children themselves. They’re actually to do with the parents or the adoptive parents, so yeah.

**Victoria**

Ok. So, I don’t know, looked after children file 75 years retention period, Children in Need files shorter retention…

**G317**

There’s no specific retention for Children in Need.

**Victoria**

No, the general consensus that I’ve seen is to retain until the child would be 25. But my next question was going to be: with Looked After Children files you are obviously responsible until they’re 75 years old and very few places have reached that threshold so there’s no disposal happening as of yet, but there are a whole raft of other children’s services records that don’t fall into that category which could have been disposed of sooner. So I was going to ask you about your retention for those kinds of materials, and your disposal process?

**G317**

Things like Children in Need and Child Protection don’t actually have a defined retention period. We’re keeping, I’m pretty sure we’re keeping the Child in Need records for 10 years after closure of the case. Most of the Child Protection records or Safeguarding records I’m not sure exactly whether that’s 35 or 40 years but of course at the moment we are… the IICSA, the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, we have a letter saying we shouldn’t be destroying anything and a long list of stuff so at the moment we aren’t doing any destructions of records. We haven’t made massive destruction of any children’s records since I’ve been here really. You know there’s been destruction of duplicate records where we’ve known there have been duplicates but we have been going to get to destroying stuff and then we got the letter from the IICSA and then at the moment we can’t, so, not really.

**Victoria**

Once the Independent Inquiry has completed its work and the moratorium on destruction is lifted, then presumably there will be vast amounts of material that will be up for review?

**G317**

Well, it’s not for review it’s for destruction. If it’s passed its retention period it would be for destruction not for review, but most of the…we will be sort of increasing the retention period for child protection stuff in light of Saville, things around Saville, so rather than it being 35 years from closure it’s going to be more like 50 years from closure. Most of the stuff that we’re likely to destroy is probably the education records and possibly the Children in Need. Because we also, on the opposite side, we get complaints from people telling us to destroy records, so there is a balancing act on what we do destroy and what we don’t destroy.

**Victoria**

Do you ever get requests from people to destroy records that are under the 75 year retention, so any formerly looked after children?

**G317**

We have had something with regards adoption, where the adoptive parent has requested for certain information to be removed.

**Victoria**

Can you say any more about that? The kind of information they wanted to have removed?

**G317**

It was about the individual themselves, so under Data Protection there is reasonable grounds in following Data Protection principles and removing it, but based on adoption legislation where it’s more about the child there is also grounds for keeping it, regardless of what they want. You know there is competition between the different pieces of legislation, so.

**Victoria**

Yeah, they do conflict certainly in parts. I was wondering whether you transferred any records, Children’s Services records, to the archives?

**G317**

No. Sorry. We will transfer registers, as in higher level things about who may be in care and all the rest of it, but it’s highly unlikely we will transfer anything else.

**Victoria**

No case files?

**G317**

No. Why?

**Victoria**

Well, I mean, I’ve heard some people make an argument that they will have a long term historical value, for historians of childhood and historians of social care, in the same way that for example workhouse records do. So I do know of at least one local authority that is considering sampling their files.

**G317**

Yeah, ok. I won’t go in to archives.

**Victoria**

Ok, a controversial subject, I’m trespassing on a controversial subject.

**G317**

Well, if you want to. At the end of the day there is a combination of, ok, yes, Data Protection doesn’t count after someone is dead, as in it’s only for living identifiable human beings but I don’t think the archives should make that decision basically. Maybe care leavers, yeah. But the volume of the files is probably too much to actually think about, as in if it goes into archives that means it should be kept forever, which basically means you need to be…like some of the paperwork is unlikely – as in 1940s, 1950s paperwork – is unlikely to survive forever because it’s really poor. The ink wears away the paper, eats through the paper, so it would cost a lot of money and there would be ongoing storage requirements. I don’t know, I can’t see any massive reason to keep it, so.

**Victoria**

In terms of the files that are retained for the 75 years, what would you say you see as being the primary reason for retaining the records for that long?

**G317**

It’s the legislation.

**Victoria**

I know, I suppose I’m asking what you think of the legislation.

**G317**

It’s to provide access to the actual child, for the actual child, to the records, that’s what it says in the legislation too, so.

**Victoria**

Yeah, I was just wondering if [your CC] might see some other motive for retaining it for a longer period of time. But no, clearly, if you say it’s for access to the individuals.

**G317**

Well, that is the legislative reason and part of the legislative reason is it is to provide access to the child. You know, when they want to actually access it. Not all of them access it but if they do want to they need to have it. Well, it might help them.

**Victoria**

Definitely. How would you say the GDPR and the new Data Protection have impacted or will impact on the ways you manage these types of records?

**G317**

Pretty minimally, because GDPR is not that different from the old DPA or Data Protection Act. The only big difference at the moment is the one that I’ve talked about before: more people are actually wanting to alter or remove records, where you know we’re also keeping the records for a statutory reason, so yeah, there’s going to be more of that. But truthfully for us it doesn’t make much difference whatsoever, because before that there was the Data Protection Act and we’ve always had subject access. I’m not sure but before Data Protection there has been some other client access to records legislations, but I’m not sure exactly what they were, and of course there was also adoption stuff. So in some ways…one of the things about [our CC] is that they’ve been pretty good at, you know… the main thing is they were trying to make sure they kept it, they’ve been keeping stuff before they had to in some ways. But Data Protection or GDPR is probably…it’s going to make people think about it. The other sort of thing that it will actually do is it probably increases the number of people who do actually do the requests, as in the subject access requests, because generally yeah generally after any new legislation or something like this gets into the papers, TV, the actual subject access requests spike.

**Victoria**

Do you have any involvement in the procurement of new recordkeeping systems for social care?

**G317**

Depends on what you mean by recordkeeping system. Generally the CRM system they will…the Children’s Social Care teams will be keeping a close grasp on it, they will probably ask for comments but sometimes… Ok, for instance, sometimes we will be asked to provide sort of our requirements for it. It depends but mostly it’s a separate system, it counts as a separate system so it’s all about the politics of keeping things…yeah. Sometimes we will…every so often we do get requested to provide information on certain things. I believe the LCS system, or LiquidLogic, is putting in some sort of retention rules. I’m not sure if at the moment they’re very good. I’ll help them when they do get around to it, so yeah.

**Victoria**

In terms of the electronic records what would you say your level of confidence was that they will be available for former looked after children to access in 60, 70 years time?

**G317**

For the vast bulk of it which is going to be documentary, as in Word documents, PDF documents, I think there’s a…I think there’s a good chance that those type of documents will exist and will be accessible. Mainly because PDF/A is more of an international standard, where you’ll be able to recreate a reader because it’s an open source thing, to be able to read the actual document. But of course we also have to bear in mind servers break down, as in basically servers will go out and there will be some sort of loss based on that. So, you know, but of course the system is usually…it’s mirrored between two different systems and it’s backed up so the vast…I would say the vast bulk of it will survive, for normal generic documentation. That probably will include images so long as they have been PDF’d but I have much more doubt about videos or audio records surviving that long, because there is no standard format and it’s unlikely there will be a standard format, and it’s unlikely whatever formats we’ve got now will work in 75 years. So that’s highly unlikely to survive, so for my side I’m discouraging the use of it. Which it’s not great to do because of course it would be useful, but if someone can’t actually…if we can’t keep it for that long, there’s no point in creating it in the first place. But images, as in photos and all the rest of it. One of the things they do is story books, so they’re great because it’s still giving the children something, or the care leavers something, to look back on, so yeah.

**Victoria**

So those kind of life storybooks…

**G317**

Life story books that’s it.

**Victoria**

They would form part of the electronic record, or…

**G317**

I haven’t done searches for them. I generally don’t. I’m providing a framework for the records to go in and I’m only ever doing searches when we’re trying to find something in particular or something. We’ve got a vast…CLA records there’s currently 172,000 of them. As in that’s what I know, as in that’s just the folders, I’m unsure exactly what numbers there are. I know that there’s 76,000 paper ones. It could be more, it could be less, I’m just…it’s only when there’s a problem and we actually dig into it that we find that.

**Victoria**

It’s interesting isn’t it that you say that the Children’s Services records and particularly Children Looked After files constitute a large proportion of your records management system when we’re also hearing at the same time about how they’re increasingly constituting the majority of local authority funding.

**G317**

Mmmm, the majority is more for adult care services. Children’s Services….but of course for adult care it’s a different group of people, and it generally… they’re only getting care from the Council at the end of their life, and then the trip reason or the retention period usually starts from the end of their life and that’s quite short so it’s more of a quicker turnover of files. Whereas with the Children’s Services stuff it’s starting at the start of their life, and it’s going through, so we’re not getting rid of those ones and of course now with Children’s Services there is a lot more information created in terms of this one person, compared to an adult care client. So, yeah, it does actually…there is I’d say in terms of paper, I’d say it is about two-thirds of the actual files.

**Victoria**

So coming up on my last couple of questions. First I was wondering whether or not there is anything that you would change about the current records management of child social care records?

**G317**

Erm. It would be useful to have some sort of requirement…I mean there are requirements on social workers to actually do it, but at the end of the day there are lots of social workers and this is a big organisation, so of course trying to get everyone to do everything in the same way is hard. So it’s getting people to do it, in a way you know. In some ways one of the reasons why we actually do it where it’s automatically linked to another system is that means the information is automatically created, so we’re capturing it at creation… so, well yeah, more money to integrate with more systems. Because if we actually capture it from creation then it automates the filing so no one has to do anything, cos it works really well.

**Victoria**

And finally I was going to ask you about – and you sort of touched on this just then – about the records quality.

**G317**

Metadata quality or…

**Victoria**

Well both I suppose, that and the content itself. Whether or not you would change anything in that respect, or want to institute a standard?

**G317**

I think maybe they’ve gone too much into standards, because like a lot of the stuff… I’m not sure how much information about the child is now in the record because most of them are based on forms, where there’s an electronic form and it automatically fills in most of the stuff, and then it grabs information from the database to put it into the form, which then automatically gets saved. Possibly I think it’s losing some of the humanity of it, because it’s putting in one box of information. So in terms of metadata I don’t think there’s any problems with metadata because they - especially on one of those sorts of systems - they will check the metadata and they’re actually collecting the metadata from early, from school age, so they’ve got the metadata. We know what their dates of births are, we know what their names are, we know when they change their names, so we’ve got all that and it automates when they actually change their name. It automatically changes it on both systems. One of the good things is with having the records automatically transferred over and kept it captures their old name, so we’ve got their name throughout.

**Victoria**

So it’s more the kind of holistic, maybe narrative kind of content that is lacking a little bit.

**G317**

Yeah. They have got a sort of thing called…what’s it called…they have a timeline where they do it.

**Victoria**

Like a chronology?

**G317**

Chronology, that’s it yep. So they’ve got that timeline, so that does provide something, but I do think it’s sort of losing a bit of the humanity.

**Victoria**

Ok, so that’s the last of my questions. Is there anything else that you want to add that I haven’t, you know, given you an opportunity to say?

**G317**

Erm. Not really.

**Victoria**

That’s ok, there doesn’t have to be.

**G317**

I would actually like to…I’ll probably update you about the CLA ones ok, because the reason why we actually found, I found out about the issues with, not having… We had someone who needed the information, could have been from the Windrush thing, but they were boarded in [our county]. We knew they were boarded [here] because we could find the information from the foster carers, but we couldn’t find a file for that individuals and you know the only… so we didn’t have… in some ways yeah possibly one of the things that I think is… because if he was, I don’t know if he was to do with Windrush or not, but there is also the expectation that government should actually accept you know, if someone like [our] County Council has decided to say yeah, right sorry, this person was fostered with us at this stage and we can verify well then he should be able to get…that should be enough evidence.

**Victoria**

Even with an absence of a record?

**G317**

Yeah, because you know we can’t sort of…we’ve got a record, which isn’t about him, but it was about these foster carers and the only reason why we’ve got that one is that some of the children with those foster carers were either later on adopted or something else, or they were younger so their file was kept. We don’t know if he had a file, so we’re only finding bits and pieces about him, but… and that’s the thing that’s a bit disappointing, so yeah.

**Victoria**

Thank you, that’s great. I’ll stop recording.

END OF INTERVIEW

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

Interview held 17th October 2018 between G31) and Victoria Hoyle, at [Place name] County Council. G316 consented to be named in this research where appropriate.

**BEGINNING OF INTERVIEW**

**Victoria**

So if you could just start by giving me a brief overview of your job here and your responsibilities?

**G316**

Well, the stuff that we really concentrate on of course is the subject access requests and I myself do quite a lot of the leaving care subject access requests because a lot of the time they are quite voluminous and I don’t mind, they don’t intimidate me. Some people can get intimidated by the volume of them but I don’t mind so much. So that’s the most part of my job. I’m also responsible for data breaches as well which is become quite time consuming since GDPR and so it’s made things, I have to say, more difficult with the SARs now that we’ve got only 30 days rather than 40 days, particularly when they’re large.

**Victoria**

Sure, sure we’ll focus on the SARs requests and specifically for child social care records. Let’s start at the beginning. So let’s imagine that I’ve made a request, I send in my request by email or post, what happens? What’s the process that triggers?

**G316**

 What happens is that we then immediately put that on to our database and we search all the records, all the archives, all the current electronic databases, so we search everything. We call all the files in and then we also send out an email or a letter to the person to acknowledge that we got their request and that it will be processed within the time limits. And then we take it from there. It becomes allocated by our manager and it goes to whoever has got the least case load, so it goes along that way. And then what we would do is, once we start reading the files, we might look to see what that person’s situation is. Are they vulnerable? Or are they still in the process of leaving care? Do they still have a worker? And we’ll often give them a ring because there might be some questions that we want to ask them if they haven’t been particularly…I mean they might want to see a specific section or not so we will contact them and ask them a few questions, and particularly if they’re looking vulnerable we would contact their worker if they’re still in care, because obviously we don’t just want to send out records at the end of it and, you know, oh my god they’re self-harming or you know they’ve gone really downhill, so we like to make contact with the workers as well. Because quite a few of the access requests might come via their worker, whilst in the process of leaving care or it may come from an advocacy service like Voice, that’s for the younger ones, but obviously with the older care leavers they might not have someone that they can rely on, but they might have some mental health issues that make them vulnerable, so we always ask them, you know, ‘have you got someone that can support you’, you know? ‘How about the doctor?’ Or we suggest some agencies that they might go to.

**Victoria**

So you’re receiving requests from a broad age range then? Would you also process the requests for young people who are still in care?

**G316**

Yeah, well we’ve had – don’t quote me on this - but I think someone has had a request from an 11 year old. That was before my time. But I’ve recently had a request from a 13 year old and I’ve had a few 16 year olds, 17 year olds, but the majority of them tend to be like from 18 into their early 20s for the younger people.

**Victoria**

So you’ve spoken to them on the phone and perhaps got a little bit more information from them, and then I presume you start to work through the files. What do you do as part of that process? So, as you’re working through it what are the actions that you’re taking?

**G316**

As we go through? Well everybody works a little bit differently. I always start with - if it’s a young care leaver and they’ve been in care for a while – with the case notes, so I can see where they are, up to date, cos it usually starts from where they are now and then it works backwards from the particular place. So I can see where they are, what their relationships are like with their…maybe birth mother, foster parents, etc etc. Do we need to maybe see if they would like us to ask consent from certain third parties as to whether they’ll share information with them. Yeah, so it’s a good way of finding out as you go, for me personally, from now going backwards. And then I get to paper files, because there’s quite often paper files as well. Going backwards you can see, I think… have a clear idea from where they are now as to how that’s going to affect what’s going to be in those files. Other people prefer to do it the other way around but I think I get a clearer picture myself of what’s currently happening in their life. Are they in a good place? Are they in a very vulnerable place? Yeah.

**Victoria**

So you’re sort of getting to know them a little bit before you then start the redaction process?

**G316**

Yeah, yes to see: What are the relationships? I mean, are they not speaking to their parents at all? Have they had a really bad relationship with their parents? You know, we might release records and then the parents will ring us up…they might have gone to their parents and said ‘look, what’s happened here?’ And then the parent will be angry and call us up and say ‘what have you released to them? What have you told them? What have you done?’ but all we’re doing is letting that person, that young person, know how they came into care. But of course some of the parents think they shouldn’t know any of that stuff, but they have to….or we think they have to have the right to know why they’ve come into care. Otherwise you’re just left with big gaps, and they’re still none the wiser as to why they’ve come into care, so…but it’s treading that line isn’t it with third party information? It’s quite a difficult thing to do some times.

**Victoria**

Yeah, I was going to ask next about that decision-making about redaction and the approach that you take to it. You’ve talked a little bit already about the tension between giving a person the fullest story about their time in care at the same time as respecting the privacy of the other subjects of the records. Could you talk a little bit more about how you do that? What’s the standard position about how much you should disclose?

**G316**

That is really really difficult because each case is different. That’s why I personally like to start at, you know, now and go backwards because no two cases are the same and often I’ll discuss it with Isa, our manager, saying ‘what do you think?’ Because always with care leavers we want to give them as much as we can because we know - having done work with the Post Care Forum you know and along those lines - how difficult it is for someone who has been in care to have those blanks. What’s happened? What’s happened to me? Why did I come into care? And some of them, there are cases where people think yeah I’ve got a really good relationship with my mum now, I know she had a hard time. But you know in their records it might say that mum, yeah she’s had a hard time but she really really gave you a hard time and they might not have remembered that. I think they’re still entitled to know that…but there’s still that worry about, you know, if they’re a very vulnerable person, you know? They’re entitled to that information but my god what is it going to do to them? Hence discussing it with workers, but that is more difficult to do of course if it’s an older person, someone who has been out of care for a long time. Yeah.

**Victoria**

Can you give me some examples of things that you have redacted in the past? Without compromising the anonymity of any specific person.

**G316**

[hesitates]

**Victoria**

So, an example of something you would redact or you have redacted?

**G316**

Well, something…er…maybe that….[hesitates] that mum was raped perhaps? Something that’s really really personal to a parent, and if we can’t see somewhere else in the file that they know that then we would probably take that out because it’s such a personal thing to happen to somebody. So Something that’s really personal, that may have effect on the mother, her behaviour and whatever, might in some way of contributed to the child coming into care, but still it’s such a personal, personal thing to have happened. Yeah, so something like that, some really personal information. Maybe that mum has had a child previously and they don’t know anything about it. Again, that might be a really personal thing. So again it’s all taking into account how relationships are and…yeah…so it’s always quite a good thing to read quite a lot before you contact anybody really, so you get a good idea of how things are.

**Victoria**

So you don’t just start on the first page and start redacting as soon as you go?

**G316**

No, no, but luckily with our software you can just highlight it and think shall I redact that? Because you don’t have to redact it straightaway. You just put the lines around it so you can see that this is a query here and then you can go back to it as you go along through the file and think ‘oh, they know that, they know that, it might be a really sensitive bit of information but they do know that.’ So you can leave that in, you don’t have to redact that. The software is quite good at giving you those options, you can just highlight things as you go through.

**Victoria**

What is that software, do you know what it’s called?

**G316**

Adobe Pro, yeah.

**Victoria**

So you do this all digitally now then?

**G316**

Yes, thank goodness, we used to do it with tape! No, so Adobe Pro…we’ve only had it for a year or so. We used to use e-copy, which was similar, but I think Adobe…they both had their faults I suppose – but Adobe is better, yeah.

**Victoria**

Does that give you the ability to explain a redaction?

**G316**

What we do is we put stamps in. So if third party information has been removed we will put a stamp saying ‘Third party information removed’ and also when we write them a letter at the end of…you know, when we send it out, we’ll also say that any information removed is third party information. There may be not so much in older people’s files, but legally privileged information is removed as well and we’ve got a stamp for that. So yeah we stamp them up. Also, if we speak to them we’ll say to them ‘oh you might see quite a few gaps in there, and that’s because of third party information’ and they might say ‘What’s third party information?’ and then we explain that to them, yeah.

**Victoria**

So once the records are ready to be delivered to the requestor, how do you do that? Does that happen electronically?

**G316**

It can do, if they want it to be electronic then now we’ve got Adobe reader we can do that a bit easier. When we were using e-copy we weren’t sure that the redactions were safe, so we would have to print it out and scan it back in to make sure that the redactions couldn’t be undone. But with Adobe we’ve been reassured that that can’t be done so we can send it electronically. But most people still would like it to be sent paper, so the majority does still go out paper, but it would be a lot cheaper for us if we sent it all out electronically. But people do like to have paper.

**Victoria**

And some of these files are quite long?

**G316**

Gosh, yes, we can send a few boxfuls of paper out to people. And actually quite a lot of the… we do try to take out repeated stuff, because it’s just you’re looking at the same thing over and over. There is an awful lot of repetition in files. So we try to take duplicates out but we can’t always, you know, take everything out, so they might get like boxes full but it might be boxes full of repeated…quite a lot of repeated information in there. Young people are…they just want to get to the bits that are really important and then they’ve got these reams [laughs] of stuff that’s, you know, not particularly interesting or…you know.

**Victoria**

It must be quite difficult to navigate them. Because you’re seeing them on a regular basis you get to know the different forms and where to go for the right information, but if you’re completely free to them it must be quite disorienting.

**G316**

I think it must be very confusing for some people. For some people who maybe don’t understand things as well… it must be even more difficult for them, if they don’t have somebody that can help them through. So when we send them up, if we know it’s a vulnerable young person, we quite often let the worker know it’s on its way out, and sometimes the person will agree for the files to go to the worker and then they can sit down with the worker and go through the files. Yeah, but it’s surprising to me actually how quite often, particularly young males, will say ‘no, I don’t want anybody just send them to me’, and they don’t want any support even though they might be vulnerable. But funnily older care leavers want to talk more and discuss it more, whereas quite a few of the young people I’ve found, like I say particularly young males, quite often are like ‘just send them to me.’ [laughs]

**Victoria**

It sounds like it might be slightly easier for young people who are still receiving services to have that kind of support, to talk with a worker.

**G316**

Yes, yes.

**Victoria**

Is there any provision for older care leavers?

**G316**

We haven’t got any in [Place name], but we always say to them, you know…well recently one of my colleagues had somebody come in, I think she was in her 30s, and she really wanted to talk about it and so my colleague tried to answer all the questions that she could, because we’re not social workers of course, and I think she really really appreciated that, that help made her feel better because it was quite a nasty abuse case, so… But we don’t actually have anything at the minute. I know that Isa was speaking with Nancy and trying to get some provision made, because younger care leavers… I think once the younger people get a bit older they might want to discuss it more as well, so it seems a shame that Council’s don’t provide that. I know that there are organisations like the Care Leavers’ Association out there and we direct them to maybe speak to those organisations, but it’s a shame that there isn’t anyone that’s available you know within the Council to help them. It would be nice to be able to refer them to somebody.

**Victoria**

Do you ever get asked for any other additional information to help contextualise some of the records? So someone might ask, do you have any records about this children’s home or…?

**G316**

Yes, yes, the older care leavers we have that quite often with, because unfortunately recordkeeping wasn’t quite so…particularly if someone’s in their 60s or 70s, or even their 50s and 40s actually…you find that the recordkeeping wasn’t quite so good, and they say ‘well I was in care’ and sometimes we can’t find it, nothing at all, or just a few bits of paper. And they will say ‘oh but I was in this place’ or ‘I was in that place’ but we just don’t have them, and I’m saying ‘it’s not that we don’t believe you, it’s just that we don’t have them’, and you have to explain to them that the recordkeeping maybe wasn’t as good as now or the retention period…maybe they were possibly destroyed. But I think our recordkeeping has been pretty good here in [Place name], and normally if something has gone past it’s date and been destroyed, or if it’s been archived, then obviously there’s a record of that, that it’s been destroyed and we don’t have that any longer. But it is frustrating when you have someone who desperately wants to know about their past and they’re older and then we can only find a few bits of paper that doesn’t really say much. Because quite often the records didn’t actually say much. They sort of skipped over any bad stuff, you know? They can be…the recordings can be quite upsetting for people because often the social workers would often describe the person as, you know, never gonna amount to anything, or, you know, a waste of space and all those sorts of things. So, you know, that’s upsetting for them and then there is no real…they don’t really get the answers that they were looking for. We’ve had a chap, he’s made a couple of subject access requests and he still asks us, you know, ‘well what’s happened from like when I was a baby?’ He’s said ‘I was in care from a baby’ and we’ve only got from a certain…I think from when he was 6 or something along those lines. We’ve said ‘well, we’ve searched and we’ve searched and we couldn’t find any records going back that far’, you know? But he says ‘I don’t know what happened to me then, what happened to me then?’ It must be really upsetting for them not to know when they really want to know at a certain age, yeah.

**Victoria**

What proportion of the records would you say had personal things in them like photographs or certificates or school reports? Those kind of things which are perhaps a bit more ephemeral, that don’t form part of the main record.

**G316**

[sighs] Oh I don’t know. Maybe 2%. I haven’t come across many at all in the old files. Even with the new files…photographs? They have their life story books but they don’t seem to…they get given to the young person, we don’t ever…I don’t ever recall seeing those in the records or any family photographs in the records, very few, even in the modern ones so... We do get for younger care leavers like the certificates and school reports and those things but photographs they seem to be quite a rarity.

**Victoria**

I’ve found that that’s what quite a lot of care leavers are hoping for, something visual.

**G316**

If we do find them then we’ll send them the originals, if it’s an original photograph and keep photocopies. We always send them to them, if they’ve made the access request, because it seems nice. I had one recently, I think he was only 18 but he had quite a lot of siblings as well, and he was quite close to them and some of them got fostered and – I can’t remember – maybe a couple of them got adopted as well, but there were some [photographs] that I think he had originally, that were given to him originally, but he didn’t have them any longer. But luckily we still had the photocopies of them, and they’re quite good photocopies so we managed to give him those. It’s nice to be able to give them their family, yeah.

**Victoria**

Do you see much kind of direct contribution in the records from the child themselves? So, things they might have written or plans or reports that they have contributed to?

**G316**

In the younger people’s files, the younger ones, there are some, not huge amounts though. There’s always the visits from the social workers that are written up, where they’re asking the young people questions and…but yeah and sometimes there are letters that a child may have written to their mum or to a sister or brother, or even to their social worker. Yeah, so there are…some. Not huge amounts but some, yeah.

**Victoria**

I was going to ask you about…you touched about this already when you were talking about the language that was used in some of the records, but you must have seen quite a wide range of styles of social care record over the period. How would you say that the recordkeeping has changed over time?

**G316**

Immensely. Immensely. It’s very detailed now compared to the old records that we have. They’re detailed in a different way. I had one where the social worker said ‘I decided to go on my bike because it was such a lovely day, it was really nice out and…’ you know, and he would go and he would describe what the children were wearing and that dad was a feckless no good and so it was describing things that weren’t actually the crux of the matter, and things like any…you know…if someone’s being abused, it seems almost to have been skipped over rather in them. There’s not much detail. Whereas there’s far more detail now, it’s very…I think it’s far more robust and repeated constantly [laughs] in our modern records, yeah. So it has changed. And they do not describe the people, you know, in that way, they don’t describe what they looked like, you know, because it’s…irrelevant in most cases. It’s what’s happened to them, how are they feeling, you know, what’s going to be done. So it’s far more detailed and relevant, whereas quite a lot of the stuff in the old ones was totally irrelevant in some cases I think. So even though you might find a few files it’s not always giving them a great deal of what’s happening, or what has happened to them really. So…yeah, it’s changed a lot I think, a lot.

**Victoria**

Do you ever get people coming back to you and saying this is not what I remember, or I’d like to change something in here or add something in here?

**G316**

Yes, yes. Young people don’t tend to. So the older people might ring us up and say ‘oh I don’t remember that as being right’ or…but they’ve always got the option, if they feel that the records are wrong, that they can write to us and we always tell them that if you feel that something is not right and you want to add your piece into the files we can do that for you. I think young people do feel that but they tend not to come back so much to us, and it’s only because of when we did the Post Care Forum and Nancy brought two care leavers and one of the girls that did have her files said, you know, ‘that is totally different to how I remember things.’ You know, ‘I don’t sort of understand how they saw me in that way, I don’t see me in that way’, so yeah she was a bit…I don’t think it was a good experience for her having her files, cos she didn’t see things, you know, in that way and didn’t remember those incidents and were they recorded rightly? But she didn’t ever come back to say, she was just unhappy about it all but just accepted it, yeah. So no they don’t really. As I say the older people like to have a chat and say ‘I don’t remember that’ but the younger people don’t tend to ever really come back and I don’t know if that’s because they’ve had it explained to them maybe by…if they have got a worker. Or whether they just think ‘oof, social workers…’ and just keep it grinding away in the background. I don’t know.

**Victoria**

Do you ever have anyone who comes to you and asks for the files to be destroyed?

**G316**

I don’t think that I’ve had anyone, not that I’m aware of, I don’t know if my colleagues might have done but I’ve never had anyone come to ask for their file to be destroyed.

**Victoria**

I ask because you mentioned about the impact of GDPR and of course one of the most headline changes is the right to be forgotten, the right to erasure, and it’s been raised a couple of times with me by care leavers that their preference would be to take custody of their own record and for the local authority to no longer have a copy, particularly older people I think. So I’m just asking everyone I see whether or not they’ve come across that. You mentioned a couple of other impacts of GDPR, the reduction in the time limit and so on. Are there any other ways in which GDPR and the changes in the Data Protection Act have impacted on you?

**G316**

It’s increased, I think it’s increased the applications, not necessarily from care leavers but from other things. We always have warring parents as well, we get a lot of those, and some people have even applied and we say ‘well actually we can’t find anything’ and they say ‘oh I didn’t know whether you had anything on me or not, it’s just under GDPR, you know, I can, so I just thought I’d see if you had anything on me anyway.’ Oh [laughs] ok, that’s fine, but yeah, we’ve had a lot more different ones come in. Recently we’ve had trading standards ones from people that have complained about pot holes and have not got what they want and want to see what personal information we’ve got on them. So it’s increased a fair bit. And 30 days… I know that we can extend it if it’s going to be complex or so big that we can’t do it but that kind of has a knock on effect on our other cases, so it does make it more difficult. Because we never actually get 30 days, because of course its calendar days it’s not working days and so you do find yourself under more pressure to get things done. Because the thing about care leavers’ files is that you want to do a good job with them, you want them to get…but time limits and you’re thinking ‘oh my god, all this volume and I’ve got to redact this and I want to do a proper job.’ But sometimes you have to just press on, so it does make it quite difficult because there’s more work, less time. There’s not much we can do about that because that’s the law, so we’ve got to deal with it in some way.

**Victoria**

What proportion of subject access requests would you say came from care leavers?

**G316**

Erm, probably…I don’t know whether it’s 50% maybe? Might be a little bit less than that. It seems sometimes to come like here’s lots of care leavers at the moment and then you might not have any for a little while, but I think we have had a fair bit over the time.

**Victoria**

And do you ever get requests for children’s case files from people other than the child themselves? So from any other subjects of the record or from others, like social workers or the police?

**G316**

Police constantly because of…police that are investigating historical sexual offences and current sexual offences. We have lots of requests from the police to view files yeah, from young to older people depending on whether it’s a historic case or not. We used to get from…we don’t really deal with those so much anymore…but from other authorities when the family have moved in to a different area and there’s…they might have a child protection conference coming up and they would like to know, you know, their history. But from third parties within, like the mums or dads or brothers or sisters, they may…I think they do seem to be quite savvy knowing they can’t have third party data so we don’t get a lot of family members asking for other family members. Again I think that might be the older people but we’ve done cases with older care leavers and as a whole there might be four or five siblings in care where we’ve said to them ‘oh you could maybe sort of do kind of a joint one if you like, where you could all apply to have your records’ so they will get their records and then if they want to share with each other they can share. Because some siblings obviously don’t want some stuff shared, so yeah.

**Victoria**

Yeah, that’s quite difficult isn’t it? And you’ve mentioned about seeking consent sometimes with third parties whether or not their information can be shared. Do you do that often?

**G316**

Erm, yeah quite often, quite often. Cos sometimes… there’s quite a lot, you know, if we can see that there’s a good relationship, you know, and sometimes they’ll say, you know, ‘oh I would like my mum to know as well.’ So yeah sometimes we do, but there’s sometimes when it’s really really obvious that…sometimes they might say you know ‘don’t tell my mum anything, don’t let my mum know I’ve made an application.’ Not that we would, we would never do that, but yeah, so we do quite a bit.

**Victoria**

If you could change anything about the current system for access to records for care leavers, either at the highest level of the legislation itself or locally, is there anything that you would change? Anything that you would recommend changed?

**G316**

What would be nice as I said is if we had someone in the Council, maybe a counselling service, or some support service within the council to be able to give the care leavers some support would be great. Timescales, I always think we want more time to give more consideration to the records, because sometimes you do feel like you’re rushing through it and maybe sometimes you can’t give it the attention it deserves really, and you do feel for them because I know if I was in that position, because my mum was fostered, and it just feels really sad you know, because they’ve had a tough life anyway and not to get a decent service, you know, from the people that were supposed to be looking after you. That’s really quite sad, that there’s nothing there to help and support them at the other end of it, yeah. So that would be really nice. I don’t think there’s much we can do about the time. [laughs]

**Victoria**

No, probably not at a European level no.

**G316**

Maybe more resources, because sometimes you’re just stretched with staff sometimes, so maybe that but yeah.

**Victoria**

I think that’s all of my questions, is there anything else that you would like to add that I haven’t given you an opportunity to say?

**G316**

Not really. I think we do try our best in [Place name] to help them. It’s helped me personally being part of the Post-Care Forum and going and meeting like with the young people that have had their files and the older people that have had their files as well. You get a good idea…because I know that one of the young people that was at one of our meetings, the young lady had her records and the other guy just didn’t want to know, he didn’t feel ready. So you could see like two sides of experiences as well. And we also went to another meeting as well with young care leavers, and listening to their experiences as well of how they interacted with their social workers and they didn’t feel…didn’t feel cared about, which again was really sad because they had so many changes in social workers so it was a shame how many of them felt that there were so many changes and that must be so disruptive for them in their lives. It just makes you feel even more like you would like to do a good job really but I think we do try as best we can. Yeah.

**Victoria**

Well thank you very much. I will stop recording.

**END OF INTERVIEW**

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

Interview held 17th October 2018 between G319 and Victoria Hoyle, at a County Council office.

INTERVIEW BEGINS

**G319**

Hello, I’mG319, I’m the Head of Intelligence and I used to manage, until recently, the information governance, which covers this service area.

**Victoria**

Thank you very much. So we were just talking about your philosophy of subject access for child social care records. If you could encapsulate that philosophy into a statement how would you describe it?

**G319**

Oh that’s a challenging question. I think what’s driven me and my team in shaping and delivering the service is that the measure of success is that the service user gets everything that they’re entitled to in accordance with their rights, delivered in a way that is…that is provided and can be consumed in ways that are appropriate for them, in terms of how they specify it. That’s the measure of success. Obviously that we do it in a compliant way, but we do it – to perhaps playback a word that you used earlier, which I absolutely empathise with – in a humane way. I’m really strong on that personally. I feel it, I see it, I’ve been personally involved in it in some senses, often in a sort of a slightly data breach context but I get it, as a manager. This isn’t just counting numbers and saying we have one hundred percent compliance which we almost do, which is great, shouldn’t everyone? But it’s being, I think, sensitised, empathetic with the impact, the positive impact that a good service in this area can have on users. Still in the knowledge that at the end of the day we’re in a large authority, with a lot of service users, many hundreds of thousands, we’re still only talking about a few hundred [of service users] even over a number of years, but the impact it has on those, on many of those, people can be huge. And I think that’s quite a balance in an organisation, potentially a balance in an organisation under - as are all - financial stress, that’s having to make some quite difficult and unpalatable choices. This is an area that I’ve fought to build not diminish. Not at least because the demands on it are going up, because probably…perhaps the reasons are for another place, but certainly the public are becoming more aware thank goodness of their rights, and organisations, perhaps grindingly slowly, are becoming aware of what their obligations are. I like to think we understand our obligations; that we seek to deliver them better than just compliant. That we seek to deliver them in a way that delights the customer, if I can put it that way, and often at times when they’re not in a good place. That for me is a measure of the success and I’m proud of what we’ve done. I’ve used that word in a number of settings, which is an unusual word for a local government officer to use. Not because they’re not proud of it, but often we’re very slow to say we’ve done a good job here, I’m proud of it, I want you to know about it and that’s exactly how I feel about that. For what it’s worth losing that direct management connection with the service is not a positive for me, I do miss that, that link between what we do, the day job, and the impact that it has on individuals and which I’ve seen personally, and met some of these people as well, in some of the exercises that we’ve run. What I’m less concerned about is the balance between people getting what they want and the organisation being prepared to give it. In a sense I’m slightly bullish about that, not in an aggressive way, but I understand the information rights of the individuals, the care workers should understand them, the care workers’ managers should, it shouldn’t be a debate. Rarely do we have those debates, but where we have we challenge it. We’re not…we don’t roll over, we fight for the rights of the people out there, and there are occasions where that brings you into some organisational tension, and I think we’re gutsy enough and genuine enough about our desire to deliver a really good service to take on board some of those attitudes, behaviours, sometimes they’re justified, usually not, often under pressure, almost always under pressure. You know, we do it in the context of the real world but ultimately we’re there to deliver and see those rights delivered. Some of those discussions, in some senses, have gone - and challenges have gone - to the very highest level, to Chief Exec level. You know, not individual cases, but some of the principles about us going that extra mile. So we’re doing the right thing and I think what we do and the way that we do it and some of the tools - I’m sure there are some imperfections, I’d be a fool if I didn’t admit that there weren’t - but I think in the round what we do, how we do it, why we do it and how well we do it is worth looking at by other people. Not because I want us to have the brownie points but because I genuinely think there are some things that other public sector and indeed other sectors as well could usefully at least have a look at, and think and reflect on. You know, is there some way of working, some ways of using some of the tools that are widely available, that perhaps they could have just a rethink on if they’re minded to do so. I lament the lack of a legislative framework to help me drive this through, to maintain the good that we’ve got, because often it’s not just a matter of improving it’s a matter of staying where you are and not going in another direction. So I’m a bit sorry that there isn’t a slightly stronger legislative framework. But ultimately I’m sort of convinced through experience that if organisations don’t want to do things they may tick boxes but they might not actually deliver what they should be doing and I think it’s better to work on slowly, slowly, on the hearts and minds and the organisational DNA, so that it’s just a given that you provide this service. Perhaps an analogy to throw into focus: FOI doesn’t land as well in organisations, including this one, people feel ‘is this really adding value?’ and the truth is often it’s not, because it’s coming from not clients but organisations. Sometimes these get a bit muddled up, and it’s a matter of being clear about these information rights. Keeping it personal for me is quite an important aspect to the service, both in terms of how we deliver it and how it’s viewed by our services, and we’re not fighting them on that. This is a care issue for us. I wish the project [MIRRA] huge success and I will be keeping close to it, through Isa, through the resources that we’ve put in that we didn’t have to put in but that we wanted to put in for all the right reasons that I’ve touched on already. Just checking there’s things that we can learn, as we can always learn them, but also that others might benefit from us, from having a look at what we do.

**Victoria**

You mentioned your ambition to see an improvement in the provision of services, information services to care experienced people and care leavers. Could you reduce that to some key areas?

**G319**

That’s a tricky one. I’m probably not close enough to know but my gut feel would be that if you take the life cycle of the process, probably areas of improvement must be: how to access it, how to describe the service, the consistency of the service. A consistent experience, I think that’s a justified expectation even though an individual will experience what they experience individually. I think it’s our obligation to provide a consistent level of service, to provide it technically, increasingly, using electronic means rather than paper means, but again, I think tempered with our obligation to provide this information in a way that the service user wants to receive it, so that digital… we don’t have a digital divide but we do begin to move some of the methods to a slightly more electronic means. And the reason for that isn’t because it’s easier for us, that’s to some extent true, but we can probably do it a little bit quicker. There is I think an element of this that still takes too long, even though we’re compliant it’s still a long time, and often it’s more than the statutory time for justifiable reasons. Beyond that I think it’s more about some of the tools: retention, integration of policies and practice, technical systems having the retention built in, keeping the stuff as long as we need to keep it, keeping it in the right place, keeping it in good condition as well, because some of these I guess are original documents and it’s the originality that may be sparking some of those memories and experiences. So I think we have to, again, keep looking at how we deliver it. From a delivery point of view our job is to cost the tax payer as little as we can, so that’s a given and we have to look at that, that’s quite right, but that’s not at odds with improving the way that we deliver it and the experience of the service user when we deliver it, and how, you know, the journey we take in that process. We can both do it better, do it cheaper, do it quicker, and give a better outcome. Even though I think we start as a local authority from a high base on all those levels, we can still do better on all of those levels.

**Victoria**

What do you think is the key to communicating the importance of these issues to decision makers within social care?

**G319**

Well, normally I’d say bottom up but I’m not sure about this one. I think it might be top down, because there is a compliance element. I think compliance is top down, hearts and minds is bottom up, for me. And we shouldn’t…we should have…much of what we do should draw energy, resource, focus away from the service [Children’s Services]… you know we shouldn’t be relying on the service to do more than they need to on this, we should be helping the process and doing as much of it effectively, efficiently, as we can. But where we need information, where we’ve got to check it out, the service [Children’s Services] has got to come to the party on that. You know I think it’s approaching it from both ends, I don’t think there’s a magic bullet. There’s no point me saying to a care worker – even though I may be right to say it – this is a care issue, not a data protection issue. I’ll say it and I’m right but if they don’t receive and apply it then I’m wasting my breath, and I think it’s better staying positive about it, sharing the experience with the service, celebrating the experience with the service. And this process is indeed an attempt to do part of that, to make it a bit more visible even within the social care arena, where it’s still a bit…you know, you don’t touch on it that often. In a sense to mainstream it, to move it more into that we’re delivering an aspect of care on behalf of care services than we’re delivering a data protection service. ‘Please send us the problem and we’ll sort it out for you.’ It’s continually working on that balance. You don’t do that by sending out a piece of paper, you know, you do it because that’s how you behave, that’s how you communicate, that’s how you engage with senior managers who can have some influence over behaviours, and you do it from the bottom up by just being like that all the time with everyone in a consistent way. I wouldn’t say it’s generational but that’s just the way that you have to do it all the time. And the hope is that it just begins to move the organisation slightly in its trajectory to see the service not as a compliance but as a support, as a form of care. I think that’s the journey for me. We have kept the service [Children’s Services] well informed of this work, but I still felt – and I’ve shared this with Isa as well – that we’re not sort of being a bit more overt about this activity, we’re just doing it and we’re doing it well but they’re not really seeing some of the positive benefits from that, from the mouths of the people who matter often. And they’re a massive resource potentially and if you engage them in the right way probably more than happy to talk about their experience. Sometimes it’s not good as well. I’m perfectly open. We’ve run some sorts of open events I think, or Isa has, the team has, on site here and involving Children’s Services, so they’ve heard it, you know? They hear it, as a case sometimes but they hear it. But I think that’s the route, it’s slowly slowly, drip drip, there’s no silver bullets, you just have to keep at it, keep banging away. If there’s other strategies and that’s what we can learn from others great, we’ll use them, but I hope projects like this can at least put some resources and materials and get some of that message raised above the bar a little bit, then we’ll latch on to that and say ‘this is great, oh look we were involved’. So it’s both to participate and to use some of the outcomes.

**Victoria**

Do you think there are sort of particular sensitivities or resistance within an organisation like a local authority to the provision of these kinds of services?

**G319**

Yes, I think that’s inevitable on a number of levels. At the highest level, you know we have a KPI [key performance indicator] that says 100% compliance. Well what else can it say? It’s a legal compliance so of course it would say that, but we do promote that. That’s not something that’s buried in the service plan, that’s in the resources panels, at the highest level, it’s in the strategic plan, it is well publicised, so if we start failing then it’s out there in the public domain. So at the highest level we haven’t got to persuade the organisation, it’s when you come down to actually doing the day job you begin to hit areas of…not resistance but challenge. ‘Oh this will do won’t it’? Well no it won’t probably, help us a bit more. And that’s often at a personal level with individuals. We’re all individuals, we’re all different, we all bring different things to the job, we perceive different priorities. Quite rightly care workers will say I’ve got three child protection cases I’ve got to deal with by lunchtime. I’m not going to stand in front of them and say that’s not their priority. So it’s about managing the outcome with the organisation, not saying or telling the organisation that it’s got to do this job. It’s about helping them, doing as much of it as we can for them, and I think having a central team is a plus. You know that isn’t a model that’s…I don’t know if it’s common or not, it’s not universal that’s for sure. Often it would be a team within each care sector probably in many places. I think there’s huge mileage in the model that we’ve got. I’m convinced that it works, and that’s not just because I thought it up. I didn’t actually, somebody else did, but I was right behind them. And that has brought some challenges and tensions, you know ‘you’ve taken our resource away, now you’ve had the temerity to come and ask me to do a little bit of work...’ But that’s the day job. Organisations are funny sometimes, we react sometimes not necessarily very logically, so we’re quite…tigerish, if I can use that word, about pursuing this but not in an aggressive way. It’s always supported. ‘What can you give me?’ you know? ‘Can you help me with that?’ And we’re quite persistent but I think the organisation…I don’t know whether we’ve worn them down or not but I mean they’re sort of there. Within that of course you get individuals, for whatever reason, who aren’t up for some of this and say ‘oh well I’m sorry I can’t do that, I can’t help you’. That’s very rare, that’s really rare, I don’t know, I’ve got nothing to compare it with, but it’s a fact. But you manage that on a case by case basis, there’s no point shouting against the wind on that, people are like that sometimes. I wonder why they’re in that profession if they think like that but they are so we deal with what we can deal with. I think we’ve got a fairly pragmatic, proportionate response and at the end of the day, the test is what do we deliver and how do we deliver it, and on those counts it would suggest that our approach is valid. It can be maintained at that level, cos that’s the key thing, can you keep doing this all the time? And demand will creep up, it just will. Is it scalable? Can you keep it up? Well of course we can, it’s about making choices to do that. So yeah, I think for me I leave… it’s almost a like a retirement speech this…I leave the service missing it a little bit, I miss the service in the round but this particular aspect particularly. And I am proud, I restate that, I am proud of what we have put together. I think others should look at it, including locally as well and that’s why I mentioned in our earlier conversations, does this touch on health because there are some things that I see as really part of the same service delivery but I’m not quite sure that public services are as tuned in to their obligations and I’m damn sure that some of their customers – often they don’t want to be customers – don’t have that same hopefully positive experience at the end of the day, which is what we want to deliver.

**Victoria**

As part of this project we’ve discussed whether or not the ICO or indeed Ofsted could lead the way in terms of shaping a framework for child social care recordkeeping. I wondered if you had any thoughts on that idea?

**G319**

Yeah, I do. I think the lack of a focused statutory framework rather than something general and slightly non-specific under GDPR, data protection etc…it would be helpful. Less so the ICO, I think there’s enough there in the ICO toolbox, you know that is part of our compliance regime if you like, but it’s not going to touch hearts and minds. It just doesn’t. I think Ofsted is a really strong card, for me, to play. Ofsted are here this week. I would be very surprised if this area gets any mention at all, directly. It may in some tangential way, it may on the back of some of the audited cases but that would be serendipitous. As a strand I think it should be featuring, I really think that would be strong. I know, it doesn’t matter why, I just know. Organisations – I won’t say Hertfordshire because I don’t think it’s particularly true – would respond by mobilising themselves, if they weren’t there already, if they knew Ofsted were going to look at it. So why not? My analogy is as soon as, a couple of years ago I think, child sexual abuse really did begin to come up the agenda, in terms of public visibility, transparency, let alone just doing the flipping job, as soon as Ofsted started putting it in their guidance for schools, schools moved. We’ve got 534 of them [schools] I think within this authority, well there’s a lot of capacity beginning to mobilise by putting one paragraph into some Ofsted guidance, and it’s not a sledgehammer to crack a nut. I think it’s appropriate, I think it should be an area that’s assessed and I know in practical terms it would mobilise perhaps where there is non-compliance, quite frankly. And I think if there is non-compliance I think Ofsted should have the ability to do something about it. Not just on its own terms. If we’re not complying with that it’s a bit of a marker for me. It tends to suggest, and this is what inspectors are really good at, triangulating, that perhaps a few other things aren’t quite so good. It’s quite a good lead indicator, I think it’s a very good indicator let alone in its own right, so it would get my vote if it was ‘get Ofsted on it.’ I don’t think the ICO button…other than perhaps strengthening it or putting explicit words in there…that could all help but I don’t think that would change the centre of gravity particularly. Ofsted, CQC [Care Quality Commission], those other regimes, will. Even peer review. Even if LGA [Local Government Association] work to strengthen that up, through corporate peer review, because ultimately how we perform in my view as an authority in this specific area is not a …it’s not an attribute, it’s a condition of the authority, it’s a corporate issue. It’s not just a service issue, and even if it was just there in the corporate peer review, in the checklist somewhere, again may just help move some that perhaps do need to move and affirm some who I think, like ourselves, are already pretty well up the curve. I think there’s further to go but we’ve made a good start. So it’s about not just one but a number of complementary moves, but the big one, the one that I think really could make a difference is Ofsted. I’d like to see something in there. As I say the child sexual abuse one was a bit eye-opening for me when I saw it, because we do deliver services, we do provide those dashboards for CSE and all sorts of child sexual exploitation and it was amazing how quickly it moved as soon as Ofsted put something in. I thought well, I could be a bit cynical, I am a bit cynical about that, that’s a shame but if it makes a difference? I’m a pragmatist, I’m for it.

**Victoria**

The other route that we had considered is that IICSA, the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, may make some recommendations to government. I don’t know if you’ve had any contact with the IICSA process?

**G319**

No, not really, I mean I’m…well not me, but we’re providing information and performance management services, data services, to help people manage what’s actually happening out there. I’m not close enough to the organisational and political or governmental legislative framework around it. But I have seen what a few words by Ofsted can do.

**Victoria**

Well thank you, I think that’s all my questions. Before we stop recording is there anything else that you would like to put on the record?

**G319**

Good luck! I mean that, that’s not a…I don’t mean that ‘good luck’, I mean that I hope that you can produce something that others can use. That’s what I mean by good luck, and that is quite a challenge. I hope this goes further than do the report, finish it, publish it. I hope there is follow-on, and I think that has always been I think for me the challenge. The number of projects that we all see actually that don’t change the world when they could. I hope that there is some traction, and I do see the voluntary sector perhaps being some real allies in this and politically as well but you’ll be closer to that. Having a Baroness on board will definitely help. Good luck on that. I really hope it can make a difference, at scale.

**Victoria**

Yes. I will stop recording.

INTERVIEW ENDS.

**FOCUS GROUP TRANSCRIPT**

Group session held on 9th May 2018 with G303, G304 and G305 and Victoria Hoyle, at [organisation].

BEGINNING OF RECORDING

**Victoria**

We’re now recording. Brilliant. Ok, I suppose first of all if you give me a brief sense of what it is you do on a day to day basis, what are your roles and responsibilities?

**G304**

Very varied, and we are still at the moment getting to grips with them. So I think G303 will have mentioned in her email that [someone else] used to be the Archive Manager and she has just moved on, so we’re sort of splitting her role between the two of us [indicates G305]. At the moment we’re trying to sort of define what it is we do but I generally tend to work with the management of the archive and of the collection. At the moment that involves trying to get cataloguing software and sort of bringing the archives forward a bit because it was last catalogued in the 1970s in a paper catalogue. So we’re doing an application to the Wellcome Trust for funding at the moment, and I also do things like monitoring the environment. I deal with academic enquiries and manage those. At the moment I tend to be working more with the wider organisation on sort of information management strategy and sort of GDPR. And then we also do, I also do, sort of the daily tasks around the office still, I do postal enquiries, and our family history services, genealogical services, preparing the material for providing those services. That’s about it for me really.

**Victoria**

Just to define the archive, this includes both [organisation] organisational records and the case records of individuals?

**G304**

So we put it as, broadly speaking, four collections. So we have the organisational collection which runs from 1867 to [hestitates] current, but we’ve sort of got a cut-off point of the 1980s at the moment because with the introduction of digital technology we’ve sort of had a barrier to our recordkeeping processes for that organisational material and that’s something I’m trying to develop at the moment with that sort of information…setting out information management. And then we also have the children’s records collections, so we have the records of over 500,000 children. We say 500,000 at the moment, but I mean we take in records every year, and G305 deals with that more than I do. Then we also have over 500,000 images in a photographic collection, as well as negatives. We also have a film archive, which we’re not able to access at the moment, because we don’t have the technology to be able to access that material. Broadly that’s how I would describe them.

**G305**

For me my new role is interim research and administration manager so I’m looking after the team. My previous role was the senior archives and administration officer so I was the senior member of the archives and admin team, and have been here the longest out of the team. So currently I’m sort of supervising the team, their roles, and am line managed by G303. So… my role is still slightly being defined, but we’re looking after all of the enquiries that come into the service. So they’re initially dealt with by the archive and admin team, to be identified as to whether they came into [organisation]…if the person came into [organisation] care or not, or was adopted through the organisation and so we, downstairs, identify those people, we do all the administration needed to provide a service to people. Anybody who wasn’t in the care of [organisation] gets signposted to other organisations, anybody who did come into the organisation’s care or was adopted goes on to our waiting list. The team downstairs they do all the research needed, so pulling together all of the information from all of those different collections that G304’s previously mentioned. It’s a bit like putting a jigsaw puzzle together you know, looking for all the different areas there were, and then making those files up again to be allocated to a member of the Access to Records team. We also run a family history service, for people who’re inquiring about relatives that they assume are deceased. It obviously doesn’t really fall into what you’re looking at but it’s a big part of our work. We also take, as G304 was saying, we take up all the files from the current services. We used to get around 2000 files back per year. Obviously with GDPR there’s been a massive push to get all the files back that are languishing in all the different regions and still in paper form, because we’re really going through a push to be digital now and have only electronic files rather than hybrid paper and electronic. So far in the last year we’ve had about 9000 files back, so there’s been a big impact on the workload recently, but it will mean that we’re more up to date in knowing exactly where these files are. We also deal with all the historical abuse inquiries that we get in and that’s been a big part of my work, obviously managed by G303, but we do searches, and we’ve been involved in the national inquiries that are going on, first in Ireland and then Scotland and the UK, the IICSA inquiry. I’m trying to think what else we do… General enquiries, not just the access to records enquiries but the more unusual enquiries tend to come my way as well. As G304 was saying we get a lot of academics, we get lots of people who just want general information about the homes or tracing people. There’s quite a lot of signposting going on that’s actually not relevant…it’s not our department as such…we either provide people with a small amount of information or alternative areas where they can, you know, do their research and things like that. But there’s no two days the same [laughs] and that’s probably what makes it so interesting. I’m trying to think what else…

**G303**

I was going to add to that, to what you were saying G305, that one of the reasons we get so many sort of odd enquiries and why so many of our initial enquiries don’t turn into a larger piece of work is because of the name of [organisation]. A lot of people believe they were in [organisation] when actually they were in the care of another organisation. We reckon it’s about 50% that we…that turn out to be no traces, 50% of the enquiries that we get. You know, most people will tell you they’ve got a Hoover to clean their carpet with when actually they haven’t, it’s something quite different. But people…the term Dr [organisation] is synonymous with children’s homes for many people, particularly of the generation that we’re largely dealing with and so signposting is a really…we think it’s a really important part of our work. That if we can’t help somebody that we try and move them on to an organisation that can.

**G304**

It’s that building up a knowledge of those other organisations and a rapport with them, so that the Access to Records team have contacts in all of those other organisations and can give the details. And we refer people too.

**G305**

We have lots of lists of homes and things like that. Quite often people will tell you the name of a home that they were in and we clearly know right from the offset that it’s not [organisation], but we know that it’s maybe National Children’s Homes and so we can refer them on. There’s certain areas of the country as well, that different organisations were more prevalent in. We can try and suggest there, we give people the contact numbers for records offices and you know links to websites and things like that where they can find more information. You know, a lot of our enquiries - not all but a lot of them - are an older generation, who are potentially not as tech savvy. A lot of them you ask them for an email address and they say ‘What’s that?’ [everyone laughs] so doing a search on the internet is not something that they’re sort of familiar with so we quite often do a bit of that for them and signpost them in the right direction where possible.

**Victoria**

So what level of enquiries are you receiving, if you could break them down? You mentioned several different types of enquiry. On average how many do you get?

**G305**

On average it’s a round about 2000 enquiries a year. Of those probably only 500 will be for people who are enquiring about themselves, either in residential or foster care or who were adopted. The remaining 1500 will probably be made up of family history enquiries, so enquiries about deceased relatives who were in [organisation] care…

**G304**

And those can be from the UK, Canada or Australia, because we migrated children to Canada and to Australia. Canadians make up quite a large proportion of the family history enquiries.

**G305**

The [organisation] name is far reaching. It’s big business in Canada at the moment as well, ‘home children’ and tracing your ancestry. It’s obviously been made more easy now by lots of records being put on the internet and people being able to look at births, deaths and marriages and census returns at the tap of a button now rather than traipsing up to the London and trawling through great ledgers. So we do get a lot, and we also find that our waiting list fluctuates when…with television programmes, so every time *Who Do You Think You Are?* comes on the television our family history service waiting list goes up, and then when ITV has got on *Long Lost Families* our adoption list has a bit of a spike, and that will carry on for usually the duration of the series and then it tails off again, so we’re very much peaks and troughs really with the waiting list. And lots of other things…you know if there’s been a story on a soap opera for instance about an adoption and things like that, that quite often spikes people to make enquiries to us.

**G304**

We’ve also seen in some ways the impact of the ability to do DNA testing now, that brings enquiries that wouldn’t necessarily have known that they have links to [organisation] or they’ll come to us knowing that they want to approach a relative and asking us either for support with that or to provide family history service information that is their evidence to say ‘we’re related’. So DNA testing has been an interesting one…

**Victoria**

I never thought of that as having an impact.

**G304**

Yeah.

**Victoria**

So around 500, around a quarter are for adopted adults or care leavers. With those two categories do you manage those requests in different ways, for adoptees and for foster care, residential care?

**G305**

Yeah, we keep the two waiting lists completely separate. Our electronic file rooms are separate. The difference being obviously the legislation surrounding the adopted adults or their family members, we’re OFSTED inspected for those so we have strict guidelines that we follow. I’m sure G303 can go into more detail about that. The other enquiries we’ve obviously got the Data Protection Act and now GDPR - we’re currently just changing all our letters to make sure they’re all GDPR compliant, and changing our privacy notice etc. But generally what happens is we…people fill in an application form, whether they’re adopted or in care, they come back to us with identification, we’ll then search the archive to identify them and as soon as we do we write back to those people, again regardless of whether they’re adopted, to let them know. So post-care people go on to our waiting list immediately, which as I say fluctuates depending on how many enquiries we’re getting in, staffing levels at the time and how long it takes Access to Records team to get through pieces of work. Sometimes you get a lot of very elderly people who need priority, so we prioritise anybody over the age of 80, and so sometimes we’ll get a little flurry that holds up the rest of the waiting list because the older generation will need to take priority.

**G304**

And it’s the volume of material in a file. Somebody might get three files in a row that are 500 pages, somebody else might get three files in a row that are 10 pages, so that will impact as well.

**G305**

Yeah, you can never tell exactly how long it’s going to go. And then we’ll contact that person to provide them…you know, with their contact person, the Access to Records team member, who will get in touch with them via telephone first of all or letter etc. They have the option to come here and meet with somebody directly, we do do some home visits in some cases. Not many, but we can do that if needed. But generally people opt to have their records in the post, and then have ongoing telephone support which I’m sure the Access to Records team will go into more detail about later on. For the adoptees, obviously they have slightly different options. They can either come here and have their records, because they need a face to face interview to have their adoption records, or they can opt to go to an adoption support agency or their local authority adoption department. So once we actually identify people we write back to them to tell them their options, so a) do you want to come to us or b) if you want to go somewhere else here’s your nearest thing, here’s a letter that you can pass on to them which basically introduces them and the fact that we’ve got their records and we’re willing to share them. So there’s a bit of to-ing and fro-ing and they don’t actually go on the waiting list until we know where they’re going to seek a service, so sometimes it runs very smoothly, sometimes we get a few local authorities who are a bit slow off the mark etc, or they’re restructuring or they’re outsourcing their adoption work to an adoption support agency etc. Generally we have less adoption enquiries and the waiting list is obviously a bit shorter than it is for post-care enquiries. We also have birth relatives enquiries, so birth parents, birth siblings, it’s not just the adopted adult. Sometimes it’s a birth family member wanting to trace them. And then we now have descendants of adopted adults with a prescribed relationship, so it could be a daughter of an adopted person who has since died wants to find out information about birth family. So it’s quite varied the adoption enquiries. Obviously some people just want their records, other people primarily come to us wanting to trace birth family members. And it’s very similar with post-care enquiries as well, predominantly it’s access to records but a lot of them then chose to go on to try and trace their family members. Perhaps they knew about them before they came in, alternatively they may have found out about them from their records and have decided to do that. And that’s a piece of work that we can do with them. We charge for the tracing process but we offer a free intermediary service, and ongoing support for them as well, but again the Access to Records team will go into that with you.

**Victoria**

You mentioned at the start of the process that they fill in an application form and you have an ID process, and then you search the archive. So I just wanted to come to that searching process and what happens at that stage, what are you searching?

**G305**

We’ve got a…as I say we’ll take you downstairs later on and show you, you know, so you can have a look around…but we’ve got a card index system, which obviously might seem quite antiquated in line with some people’s but it works. So there’s probably round about 800,000 cards in the system, which is obviously more than the 500,000 approximately that G304 was saying before, because at the moment we’ve always kept cards for people in birth name and women used to have a card made up in their married name as well, so obviously when people decided to keep in touch with the organisation after they’d left care a lot of women went on to get married and change their name and became known as ‘Mrs John Smith’ and would write letters backwards and forwards and so a card was always made up in their married name as well, so that it’s easy to track them down. Some people chose to change their name by deed poll so again changes of names cards, adoption name and birth name, but we also used to keep records of all the enquiries that were made, what we call ‘no trace’ so nothing to do with [organisation]. It’s a policy that we’re in the process of changing at the moment, but a lot of people will come back to us more than once, keep thinking we’ll try again and see if they’ve found more records etc. So that card index will give you all the information…well, usually it will give you all the information you need to identify somebody. So there’ll be their name, their date of birth, their date of admission, usually the home that they were in care to or foster care etc. And then we have microfilm numbers or ledger numbers. Really it’s a finding aid, so it enables us to then go on and find the records in whatever area of the archive that is. Quite often just finding that index card will…you know there’ll be enough information on it for you to make a positive identification that that person was in [organisation] care, alternatively sometimes we need to go and do a bit more research to establish that that is the right person. Sometimes there might not be a date of birth on the index card, it could be a more popular name – Smith, Jones, Williams, of which we have many – sometimes there’s a little bit more teasing out of information. Or somebody perhaps hasn’t filled out the form very well. So it’s a little bit like playing detective sometimes you know.

**G304**

Our ability to do all of this is entirely dependent on the team’s knowledge, because we have no cataloguing system at the moment, and that finding aid…we don’t have… we’re created abbreviation lists of what the records mean…or what our abbreviations mean for microfilm references and things but without the knowledge of the team it would be a lot more complicated in accessing the material. So, it’s a real learning process.

**G303**

I think it’s true to say that without the main card index system we are completely up the creek. We just cannot do our job.

**Victoria**

So was this card index created over time incrementally as files were created?

**G305**

Yeah, it started in 1942. Prior to that everyone who came in was recorded in hand written ledgers and obviously Second World War threw a bit of a spanner in the works with children starting to be evacuated to different places and it was becoming more difficult to keep track of where everybody was, so they settled on the modern technology of the time, of a card index system, so every time a person came into [organisation] care an index card was made up, and every time they moved on to a different home or a different foster care placement the card was added to, and they were all held at Stepney Causeway the organisation’s previous headquarters, and so we’ve carried on, every time a child comes in an index card gets made. They didn’t retrospectively make index cards for people prior to 1942, that’s something that we did, probably about 15 years ago…?

**G303**

Between ’95 and 2000 it would have been I think,

**G305**

So, well…I started ’97 so…

**G303**

So we did it after you started?

**G305**

Yeah.

**G303**

Right ok.

**G305**

So we had a bit of money in the budget and we initially got two people to come in and write the names out that were in the ledgers, so very basic level detail just name, admission date and sometimes their age and sometimes what happened to them when they left care or something, but it enables us to be a bit quicker with the research. So for the older generation who came in prior to 1942 at least we don’t have to spend quite so long looking through the ledgers, we’ve got a starting point you know. It doesn’t give you all the information but it enables you to speed up the process.

**G303**

It also meant you weren’t mauling the ledgers on a regular basis - the ledgers have been protected and you’ll see that - we’re still using them on a daily basis but not as much as we were when we had to go through every single ledger to find somebody.

**G305**

When I first started here when you got an enquiry in that was pre-1942 you literally had to start in the ledgers at somebody’s date of birth and work through up to the age of about 21 and make a note of everybody with that name, which was great if you had an unusual name but if you were looking for a John Smith, it could be an extremely lengthy process because the ledgers only give you so much information and then you need to go and look up more information on the microfilm readers and potentially none of the people that you’ve identified are the right person, so it was a really complex and time consuming piece of work. So we’ve narrowed that down to a fraction of the time now, but it’s a case of…without the card index system we are really in the dark. There is ways around some of it but it would be extremely time consuming to do it.

**G303**

Until I think the late 80s it wasn’t a single main card index system it was a series of 12? Have I got that right?

**G305**

Yeah there were… girls and boys were separate, anybody who was purely in foster in care was separate, anybody who was on what they called the after-care list where they’d actually left care was separate. I think there were various different regions of [organisation], so Scotland I think was separate from London etc, so they had all these different places and I think it was around about 1988…

**G303**

It was after [Person’s name] started in ‘86…probably before 1990.

**G305**

Yeah…well when [Person’s name] started it was all separate card indexes.

**G303**

Was it? Ok.

**G305**

So they took the decision to merge them all into one, which obviously means you’ve only got one place to look, and again that meant that everybody was…not on a level playing field…but everyone was treated exactly the same rather than being in all these different departments, which was kind of a throwback to the way that [organisation] was set up, at a time where you had a girls after care department, a boys aftercare department, and…

**G303**

Girls and boys never mixed! [all laugh]

**G305**

Never the two shall meet. [all laugh] So there were lots of older practices that carried on traditionally through [organisation], through the archives system and things like that, it was just the same way for years and nobody had made the decision to change it, and that all kind of changed in the 80s. There are still some things now that we resist against changing because, you know, it’s quite difficult…there’s no sort of single guide at the moment to carry on research on somebody’s records, because quite often it changes depending on the era somebody was in care, where they were in care, how long for, whether it was foster care… it’s quite difficult to do an overall guide.

**G304**

I can happily say I’m in my third year here now, I’m now doing the role I’m doing and when it comes to searching for records I still ask other people all the time, because depending on each case you’re looking for the process is entirely different. It might be a microfilm number with a reference I’ve never heard of, after three years. It could sometimes be the team downstairs and twenty years they’ve worked here and they’ve still got no idea…that’s the difference and the range of types of records that we have, it’s big.

**Victoria**

So you’ve mentioned microfilm, is that the preservation medium for the case files? Are there paper files?

**G305**

So obviously we’ve still got the ledgers up until 1942, but some of those people’s records…so everyone who came in had an admission history, which was a typed document – we’ll show you some of those later – that has their name, date of birth, date of admission, their religion if they’ve been baptised or not, the names of their parents, their ages, their occupations, their addresses, names of other family members etc, height, weight, hair colour, and then a synopsis, a history of the reasons why that child is coming into care…and all of those are on microfilm, all of the ones we’ve got and they run up until 1966, and then after that we have what we call ‘divisional films’, so the way that [organisation] was set up we had the London region, the Scottish region, the north east, so then we have divisional microfilms for those children which are referenced on their index cards, and you would have a more of a social history on those microfilms. So some people have a mixture of microfilm and ledger and paper records.

**G304**

So up until…when did they stop microfilming?

**G305**

About 2005. We’ve gone on to disc, CD.

**G304**

But we do have a 10% sample of paper records in storage, but other than that everything… so when material comes back from a service to us here we work with a digitisation company, they collect the material from us, it goes off to be scanned and then the originals are destroyed. We get the CDs, although at the moment we’re just moving on to a new process where they send it to us electronically and we upload it to our content management system and so it doesn’t…we don’t have to put it on to disc which obviously is not a good medium for storing records because they deteriorate very quickly. So that is the new way we’re working now.

**G305**

The idea is that as stuffs going to be digitised it’s going to be put on a server now, so everything going forward will be digital, but obviously we will be expecting that going back to the 1860s it will only go on as we get enquiries about it or if we got funding.

**G304**

Yeah it goes…we have a well-defined case management system because that’s what the organisation uses and at the moment it will go into there, into cases that we create. We don’t have a way to centrally store it for recordkeeping processes at the moment.

**Victoria**

So the system you’re using isn’t an archival system it’s a case management system?

**G304**

Yeah.

**Victoria**

So this is what [organisation] would be using for people who are currently receiving services. Right, right, ok.

**G305**

So it’s…the system that we use is slightly different from children currently in a care placement or using [organisation] services now, they have a slightly different front sheet and their files are set up slightly differently from ours because obviously we’re not working with children, we’re providing a very different type of service. All the children and young people that [organisation] are working with have usually been placed there by the local authority and things like that so there’s lots of different types of information recorded about them whereas we’re working solely with adults, so we’ve…you know, who haven’t come to us via a local authority etc so our file rooms are different to young people receiving a [organisation] service now but they are changing shortly so I think broadly speaking we are all going to be using a one size fits all type of thing.

**G304**

But obviously we’re only at the point now where we’ve just obtained archival cataloguing software and so the priority is to catalogue the collections that are downstairs in the archive rather than concentrating on digital preservation at the moment because I think the scale of it is too wide for us to begin that right now and we need to sort of get an idea of what we’ve already got and catalogue the material that is already in other formats before we’re creating those digital surrogates and thinking about how we store them.

**G305**

Yeah yeah, and going back to your original question, in addition to the ledgers and the microfilms and CDs we’ve also got the photographs, which we’ve got the originals of but we have them digitised as well and you know we can provide a paper copy or an electronic copy to people. But we also have things like birth certificates, school reports, swimming certificates, baptismal certificates, all sorts of all manner of things that were original documents that were in somebody’s file and when they were microfilmed they actually…they microfilmed the document but they sent us back the original copy as well, so something like somebody’s original baptismal certificate is obviously very important to them, to have a physical copy, so we keep those documents still in paper form.

**G304**

Which I find really interesting because when you see the quality of the microfilms they’re not great and I think for them to have had the thought to actually save that material is interesting because a lot of what they did was not very skilled and not very precise.

**G305**

But it was done in the 1960s…

**G304**

And it was done in the 60s and 70s so.

**G305**

It was the technology of the day and we look at in comparison with today’s scanning technology and some of it is abysmal really, but it’s still readable and a lot more than some people get from other organisations who’ve thrown their records away or they’re virtually not legible.

**G304**

And that was sort of the [organisation] enduring policy, keep everything. Record everything, and that started with [the founder] himself and has carried on right through, which is why we have the volume of material that we have here in comparison to other organisations.

**Victoria**

I think it’s interesting that those kind of personal ephemeral and quite key life records were kept in the original. If somebody makes a request for their records, would you provide them with copies of those things or would you give them those things?

**G303**

We give them the originals.

**G305**

Yes, yes so we make sure we’ve got a good copy. If it’s on the microfilm and it’s really iffy we will take a current scan of it now, by definition in colour [laughs] so we will keep a copy on their electronic record, should they for instance lose it we’ve got an electronic copy of it but they will get the original. And very often they’re the things that people treasure most, you know rather than you know a copy from microfilm that looks just like a photocopied document, having something that actually you know…it might be a bit dog-eared by now and things like that but actually having a physical thing that was written at the time is very important to people.

**G304**

Something I’m really interested in working on as well is we are getting to the stage now where a lot of house mothers are passing away and people who looked after the children, and they will have taken photographs while they were working at the homes. I’m more and more receiving sort of an envelope full of old photographs that are labelled. I would like to get to the point where I can put those into those [personal ephemera] envelopes so that we can provide the photographs to people when they access their records and they’ve got an actual photograph of themselves that wasn’t a [organisation] photo, maybe even with the house mother in, because to a lot of former service users having a photo with…of the person that cared for them…is the most important photo they can have I think. I want to get to the stage where that’s something we can offer as well.

**Victoria**

This is…I don’t know if this is a controversial question…and it’s more curiosity than anything, but it occurs to me that the resource you’ve got here is incredibly name rich and that’s something which certain commercial companies are very interested in…

**G304**

Yep.

**Victoria**

And I wondered whether [organisation] had ever considered the possibility of partnering with a family history provider like Ancestry for example?

**G303**

We sat down with [Find My Past] a few years back and, you know, there was a lot of enthusiasm and a lot of comparison with other organisations where documents had been uploaded. In the end we parted ways because I think they felt that our restrictive approach, even to very old records, was not compatible with their needs, and it’s not that we didn’t like the idea. But for example, what they were saying to us is ‘Ooh we’ve just won the contract to put the records online for the Chelsea Pensioners’. Fine. People who become Chelsea Pensioners are there because of choices they made as adults to go into the military, our records are about children who had absolutely no choices about anything that happened to them when they were small, and some of the information that we have is very very difficult information and the people albeit long dead might not have wanted it to be out there for everybody to see. You know, we try to get a good balance between public interest…because we know about…we understand the richness of the material that we’re sitting on, but also about individual privacy, and if not the privacy of the individual whose been dead 70 years then something about their families.

**G304**

I have a good example, so a few weeks ago I had an enquiry…a lady called and she was really distressed on the phone and she said ‘I really need [organisation] help and support because this man who is a distant relative has put all the details of my grandmother’s time in [organisation] care online, on Ancestry and it’s really upsetting to me, I grew up with my grandmother and this is all about how she was abused as a child and I don’t want this online.’ It turns out that it had actually been one of her other relatives who had accessed the records, it was a cousin and he’d accessed records about his grandfather and they were siblings and so they had got some background information, and obviously knowing her name and knowing their own grandfather’s history it was the same, they were siblings and grew up together, and so this person had passed the information on to this distant relative to put on Ancestry. And she was so distressed and this person’s been dead a very long time, there’s no… there’s nothing that we can do to force that person to take that information down, only write a letter to say that we ask people to be sensitive with any records that we provide and to think about who they might affect and the impact they might have, and that’s really all we can do at that point. By putting those sorts of records out to the public on something like Find My Past or Ancestry I think the main thing that we often think about is those descendants and the sensitivity around it. I mean we also had a memorial that has gone up in Tower Hamlets cemetery park, to over 500 [organisation] children who passed away and took in children at the point of them being critically ill and sort of did that end of life care, the hospital provided that end of life care, and we had about three or four relatives who saw their family members photo in the paper when it went into the publication who came back to us and said ‘That’s my relative, can I access the record?’ So by putting all that information online you’re opening up the possibility that so many people could be upset by it, and ultimately, I mean [Person’s name] always said this to me, [organisation] is an ongoing organisation, a children’s charity and we want people to continue donating to the charity today, so we have to be sensitive to everyone but also to think about how, you know, it could affect our reputation as an organisation today and we want to continue providing those services to children that we’ve done for 151 years, and anything that could be damaging…you know.

**G303**

We still need to be seen as being trustworthy with people’s information.

**G304**

Exactly. Accountable and…

**G305**

One of the other issues that we have had with the family history service and this is not quite so relevant to the research that you’re doing because it’s so much older, is that people will sit on Ancestry and Find My Past etc and they’ll find somebody on the 1911 census in [organisation] and decide that that’s their relative, and will fill out the application form using the information that they’ve actually found online but not tell us that, you know that’s their relative, and when we come to do the research we find the person that they’ve found online but you start thinking that doesn’t match up with the other details that you’ve given us, and so people are just deciding that, you know, their ancestor was in a children’s home or in an orphanage or something, or they just had a, you know, slightly more unusual name…they find something on Ancestry and say ‘that is my grandfather, that’s his record’ and they will apply for it, and you sit there and think this doesn't seem right. It actually causes us a lot of work to-ing and fro-ing with the person actually trying to get more information out of them and then we discover that actually they don’t know that that was a factual piece of information, they’ve just found it online and chosen that person as their relative. And so you could have more instances of that, you know the more information you put online without…you know people see something on black and white on a screen and they decide it’s got to be right, it fits in with what I think I know.

**G304**

We’ve also found…and I’ve seen examples of it…that…this sounds awful, because we want to do a tracing service so that people can find relatives and make contact in the most appropriate way, but I think we’ve found examples where people have received Facebook messages or an email out of the blue and that can actually be really damaging to any potential relationship, and I think Find My Past and Ancestry are fabulous for family history but also can cause some issues and some challenge for people. We’re an organisation that try to find the best way to do these things and it can be a bit troublesome when perhaps people make contact themselves without using an appropriate channel.

**Victoria**

So do you ever provide access to files for people who are not the subject, but the subject may be alive?

**G304**

No.

**Victoria**

So say, someone makes a request, an academic researcher…

**G303**

No, apart from the police. Police and solicitors for specific purposes that fall under the exemption clause of the Data Protection Act.

**G305**

The only other instances where…it’s usually fairly elderly people that have got Alzheimer’s or some other condition that means that they, you know, might not be able to apply for it themselves but they’re still alive. We have had a couple of people who have got Alzheimer’s but have moments where they can communicate and talk about their childhood and things like that and we’ve provided limited information from the records to their children or their carers etc for them to interact with the person and be able to talk about their childhood with them, but there’s been very cases and obviously you know it’s on a case by case basis, we don’t have a formal policy. We wouldn’t normally do it but in some cases we recognise the benefit to the family and the person themselves, in that somebody can interact with them and have that conversation with them, but it wouldn’t be the whole file, it would be limited information from it.

**G303**

And that would be, that would be an occasion where we would share, but then we also get enquiries from sons, daughters, nieces, nephews, where we’re a little bit suspicious for their reasons for wanting to know and it’s actually understandable but it’s basically nosiness and maybe they’ve reached that stage of their life and they don’t know the history because the individual themselves has chosen not the share it, we don’t know this. So we have to do a lot of navigating to know what’s happening.

**G304**

More frequently than you would expect, we get enquiries for family history service enquiries where the person, the subject died the week before or two weeks before. Sometimes that’s because they want to put something in a funeral service, but sometimes I think it’s because they’ve been waiting for that moment where they can apply for it.

**G305**

We’ve had unfortunately a reasonably large amount of people who’ve pretended that their relative is dead to try and get information that their relative doesn’t want, or doesn’t want them to have access to, and they will tell us that their relative is dead and then it becomes a bit of a stumbling block because we ask for a death certificate and we have as well had a forged death certificate [laughs] as well, with people that desperate to get information about their family members who clearly don’t want to.

**G304**

You were going to ask about academics before? Shall I explain that?

**Victoria**

Yeah yes, do.

**G304**

For academic enquiries relating to sort of more historic research or…historical geography is our latest pursuit, there’s a lot of interest in that area…we don’t offer access to children’s files. Very rarely we allow it and if we do allow it it’s only cases that are a hundred years old, so anything up to…I think I’m working to 1917 at the moment.

**G305**

And they’re usually postgraduate.

**G304**

Yeah they have to be postgraduate and they’re usually PhD students. So we have one student at the moment…oh actually no she’s a post-doctoral researcher and she is accessing children’s files but only over a hundred years old, and that is very rare that we allow that. For anything below that we don’t offer it to anyone, to any historical researchers, anything less than one hundred years old, although I don’t know where we stand with the social work side of things, with working with…

**G305**

We’ve done different pieces of work. We work with one researcher who’s focused on black history and she’s been coming to us on and off for a period of about twenty years, and part of her reasons were…in most social care records, and certainly in historical records, ethnicity is not recorded. So in fact the 2011 census was the first census that actually asked people to record their ethnicity, so you would think that it would happen before then but it hasn’t and it’s a big gap when it comes to social care records and people you know doing research into ethnicity in the past. And what she’s discovered is that really the only way you can do it is via photographs of people, and obviously we’ve got a very large collection of photographs and she is primarily looking at the Victorian era, and the only other Victorians that were photographed were prisoners or people in asylums so the rest of the population wasn’t really photographed. She came and started going through our photographs to identify all the obviously black children, and then worked backwards from there to look at their stories and for research. She’s currently doing a piece of work into soldiers, black soldiers in World War One, but she’s taken a year’s break and she’s coming back.

**G303**

Literally next week actually.

**G304**

And for the same reasons as…you know, sensitivity as we were talking about before, usually we ask them to either anonymise the children’s names or not provide too many details. So they might provide a full name but not a date of birth or something like that.

**G305**

And we have confidentiality agreements.

**G304**

Which they sign, yeah.

**Victoria**

So even for the records where the individual is deceased that’s the case.

**G305**

Yes.

**G304**

Yeah.

**Victoria**

That’s very interesting, because it's a much more secure regime than you would find in a local authority record office for example…

**G304**

Exactly.

**Victoria**

…where similar kinds of information…there would be no confidentiality requirement or restriction placed on an academic researcher.

**G304**

Yeah. I think primarily it comes down to sensitivity, the fact that we provide an ongoing service, as a department but also as an organisation, and I think that’s just the decision [organisation] has decided to take because of that.

**G305**

And it’s to do with the sensitivity of the records as well and the nature of what’s in them you know? As G303’s saying, they’re all children who were placed in care through no fault of their own. You know we’ve always said there’s no nice reason why a child has to be taken into care and brought up away from their family etc, and you know if someone doesn’t know that information themselves…we get people coming back to us, I think our current oldest client is 93 but I think we had sisters who were 103 and 104 that suddenly decided to get their records before it was too late [laughs] that was their comment to me [all laugh] you know, we got a move on with that obviously, but you know they’d waited all that time to actually come back and get their records and fortunately it wasn’t anything terribly distressing in it, for them it was just sheer…they came in through the poverty of their family…but for other people there’s some really very difficult subject matters included in the records, we do have cases of rape, incest, murder, some you know very very difficult subject matters for people to handle themselves, but equally their descendants or other family members may not know that information about their relative either.

**G304**

And I think the limit to access for us at the moment is also kind of based on the size of the team and our ability to host academic researchers and the fact that material is not catalogued. So, outside of our, you know, being sensitive to the material we just don’t have the facilities to do it at the moment, and we are hoping to work on that to bring access a little bit wider and to be more open with what material we have but at the moment it’s just not possible.

**Victoria**

I was going to ask about the organisational records. So, they’re not catalogued?

**G304**

No. There’s a paper catalogue that was created by University of Liverpool in the 1970s. They had the collection in Liverpool until 2014 when the team moved from the head office at Barkingside to this building and G305 actually went up to Liverpool with [Person’s name] and brought back the…hundreds of boxes?

**G305**

It was 1020 boxes of material, and round about 500 ledgers.

**G303**

I mean it was a coincidence that after we moved here...I mean they didn’t give it us back because we moved here.

**G304**

I heard…I went to an event a few weeks ago with some of the academics from the University of Liverpool, and I don’t really know, but I think they had sort of decided that potentially they were ready for it to come back to us because they were changing the way that they were collecting, so their collections policy was changing and what they wanted to take into the archive was changing, so I think maybe at the time they were ready for it and it was a good opportunity. We can’t say for certain but…

**G305**

When they actually took it on it was because they were sort of doing their accreditation as a social care university and things like that so they were taking on collections from all over the place, but as times gone on they’ve moved away slightly from that so they were looking for certain organisations to have their files back and some of the other big charities had files there as well, but they gave us a year’s notice and it happened to be at the time that we were sorting out about moving and so it ended up coming back here.

**G304**

Which is why also we have…that collection was well kept by the University of Liverpool but it was kept as a collection and adding to it since that time has been a bit problematic. That’s where we are struggling to capture the organisation, post 1980 and into the modern day, so we’re now at the point where we’re starting to think about going back to different services and trying to pull in some information and to pull some records together.

**G305**

We’ve got some gaps, yeah, in policy and procedure and things like that, you know we’ve got bits and pieces for the 80s and 90s but not as thorough as we would like.

**Victoria**

And those organisational records do they also contain references to individual children and homes and those kind of things?

**G304**

Yes, so you’ll have sort of the committee minutes, the finance minutes, the more…the collection that would have been kept at head office, although all records did…all the children’s records and things did go back through head office…but you’ve also got divisional material, so each home has typically…is listed by division and you get a folder full of a file of material, which would be just paper material, and it can vary so greatly, there’s not much provenance to it or order, and it could range from a list of daily occurrences at the home to who bought the toilet paper. It’s not, there’s not much order to it, but I mean it’s been very useful in us getting a capture of the organisation, especially for the abuse inquiries and things like that. We can typically trace the staff that were there at the time and that sort of thing through records, but yeah.

**G305**

Again it’s a bit of you never know what you’re going to find until you look really. [laughs]

**G304**

Yeah, there would be a ledger relating to a home…I found one the other week that was from a specific home in Scotland that listed all the gifts that were given to the home between two years but there was nothing before or after that. You know there’s all sorts of material in there, and actually I think it’s hard for us to say really at the moment, because it needs cataloguing so much that we don’t really know a lot of the time what the potential of the material is, because the paper catalogue gives us a rough description but it’s not detailed enough and there’s no compliant descriptions at all in it.

**G303**

I mean Liverpool University’s decision may well have been influenced to an extent by the Jimmy Saville inquiry. [organisation] were very involved in that because the girls who were featured on the documentary were girls who were at a school that [organisation] managed from 19…80…86…76! From 1976 onwards we took over the management of this what was essentially an approved school for girls and we took it on from the National Mental Health Society which subsequently became MIND, and that was the school where Saville had visited and perpetrated some of his abuses and in that case we took on the records of all the girls who had been there, so we were the data controllers in that case, and for reasons which don't really make sense to us now but all the approved school records including some of the approved schools for boys as well that [organisation] ran were kept up in Liverpool, so when the Saville Inquiry and the Saville media storm broke Liverpool would have been inundated with calls from journalists saying ‘ooh we want to read the children’s files’. Well fortunately we’d pulled the children’s files back from Liverpool some years before because it didn’t make sense for us not to have control of those…and yeah, it must have been a bit of a nightmare for Liverpool because you know journalists were just kind of trying their luck basically. They should have known that they weren’t going to get it but it didn’t stop them trying.

**Victoria**

Which kind of brings me on I suppose to ask about the impact of IICSA in particular – this research is focused on England. What effect has the inquiry had on your work, the way that you work, the kinds of requests that you’re receiving?

**G303**

The team downstairs have had a lot of research work to do for the…ok, the member of [organisation] staff who has managed the response to the Inquiries was until, about two weeks ago, our line manager and also the senior assistant director with responsibility, lead responsibility, for all aspects of historic abuse, so she managed the response. It was good because she knows this department very well and she’s familiar with the records, but it just meant that the team downstairs were constantly inundated, because it started with Northern Ireland, then it went to Scotland and then IICSA started, so it’s just been, you know, from Jimmy Saville breaking and the Northern Ireland Inquiry being declared…being announced…which was 2010, 2011, I can’t remember?

**G305**

They announced it didn’t they before, and then started preparing for it before it really got underway, so we started trying to prepare for it before it actually happened.

**G303**

So it’s been a never ending stream of requests.

**G304**

Yeah so the types of research we’ve had to do have varied between the inquiries. I wasn’t here for Ireland but with Scotland we were working literally case by case, so for…was it a percentage of children that were in Scotland or…?

**G305**

Yeah, I mean broadly speaking it was the same for Ireland as well, where we pulled out a selection of children’s files. So basically anybody who had already come to us and made an allegation of abuse we record all of those when the access to records team give people their files, any allegations of abuse are recorded and acted on…G303 can go into that in more detail…but we record them all on a database. So we looked for anyone who had already made allegations of abuse and reconstituted their files to do a file analysis on. We then also did a percentage of children from each of the homes that the Inquiries were looking at, so for Ireland it was 3 homes, wasn’t it? 3 or 4. And then for Scotland it’s now 9 homes that they’re looking at, in detail, so we provided files for children but also making use of the Liverpool collection, we've been looking for the individual homes and any information that we’ve got, so when it opened and closed, you know who all the main staff members were, exactly what the purpose of the home was, any allegations of abuse we’ve had there etc. So each Inquiry is different, it’s a very very detailed list of questions, I mean some of them incredibly detailed, and you would think how on earth would you know the religious background of members of staff in the 1950s and things like that, and did they go to church was one of the questions. [laughs]

**G304**

And so the whole team tended to work on the case analysis and work on the children’s files and then it tends to be G305 and I, particularly G305, who’ve worked on the more research-y aspects of it, pulling together material that [Person’s name] has needed to actually provide to the inquiry.

**G305**

So it depends upon exactly what question is being asked of us and so the Inquiry is focused on different areas, so obviously IICSA’s just done the child migration issue, you know so we’re waiting for our next big batch of whatever it is they ask about. Scotland has kind of come in waves as well, so we provided the initial information, [Person’s name] has been up and presented all the information to the inquiry and they’ve come back with more information, it was originally 7 homes, they’ve now added another two, as people have come forward to the Inquiry directly we then get inquiries back, so we’ve had to be reactive to what’s come forward and been presented to the Inquiry, we then get asked questions about that and have to look for evidence about that.

**G304**

And that involves just downing tools and getting on with that work.

**Victoria**

So very resource intensive?

**G303**

Extremely. I think the thing to say about the Inquiries is that we cannot clearly identify why certain questions are being asked, why certain homes have been identified. I mean with the first six homes in Scotland it was easy because those were the homes where we’d identified that there were abuse allegations as part of our presentation to them, but since that they’ve come back and asked for two more. We really don’t know why, but we think it’s probably something to do with the Confidential Forum, but of course the Confidential Forum is confidential so we don’t get to know why the questions are being asked. And I think broadly speaking that’s been the case with all of the inquiries, and so it’s…sometimes it feels a bit like you’re working in the dark and you don’t know what they want, so your answers have to be as full and fulsome and robust as possible.

**G304**

And that comes back again to the volume of material. Other organisations have a much smaller pool of material to be researched and so their answers are perhaps more definitive, because their answers are they’ve got what they’ve got whereas us…our volume of material is much larger and the research aspect takes a lot longer, there’s a lot more to pull from and so [Person’s name’s] answers could be a lot more detailed, and that is…you know, an advantage for the Inquiry but also means that we have so much more work to do here.

**G303**

It also and, you know, [Person’s name] had this sense and sometimes we think it too, it can work against us, I mean the fact that we’ve got the information and are able to answer so many of the questions can work against us, because it means that they say ‘I know, we’ll ask [organisation] that question’ and it means that they focus more and drill down more with us perhaps than they do with other organisations. If another organisation sits there and says ‘Well we don’t have any records about that, we don’t have that, we don’t know, we can’t answer that’ where can it go? Whereas with us it’s like ‘Ooh let’s ask them that’ you know, so sometimes it really feels like that’s what’s happening.

**G305**

And there’s some information that’s relatively easy to put together and other information has been incredibly difficult.

**G304**

We’ve spent days trying to answer a single question.

**Victoria**

It sounds like you have a lot of contextual information already, far more than some other organisations I’ve spoken to, like in terms of knowing what homes you had and where they were and when they operated from. Do you have kind of like a body of resources that you can tap into for that?

**G303**

We have our homes book, which was put together in 1980.

**G304**

We also have what we call a library collection but it actually belongs in an archival collection, and that’s all the publications. So [the founder] himself started a number of publications when he started the charity and most of them run through into the 90s and 2000s and we still continue to produce one of them today. And they are probably our greatest source for sort of the organisational history, finding out if…tracing the history of certain homes. Although we do have definitive lists and…but we’ve also got a fairly small card index system for that [the publications collection], so if you want to know about a particular home you might go there and find an article where it was mentioned in [organisation] news in 1967 and that can fill in some of the gaps for you. And that is as useful to us as the organisational collection is I would say, for that sort of the research work.

**G305**

Generally speaking you know the book is fairly basic, it’s the name of the home, its address, when it opened, when it closed and you know what type of home it was, whether it was a home for toddlers, babies or children with disabilities etc, and then we’ve got other sources of information that we can go to for more detailed information. Some of the homes we don’t have so much on, particularly the older homes, and buildings that [organisation] didn’t own, for example buildings that we took over during the war for evacuation purposes and things like that, that tends to be a bit more limited but that’s just the nature of war time really.

**G303**

We took over castles and stately homes and places.

**G304**

We also have a volunteer who is currently working on trying to fill in some of those gaps, so what we’ve done is created an Excel spreadsheet from the list of the homes, the dates of opening and the dates of closure, and she’s working through the publications. [organisation] was quite good at doing homes ‘spotlights’, so they would do an article about what it was like to be in this home on that day of that year, or a little bit of a history of a certain home, which I suppose is a lot like blogging today, lots of blogs do that sort of thing, and [Person’s name] has been able to use those to create some sort of mini-history factsheet on a certain home, which is good for us to be able to pass along as part of the family history service to give people some context or whatever, but it’s also really useful for us as a starting point for finding out about a certain home.

**G303**

They’re useful for hunting abusers I have to say. If we don’t know…if we don’t already know about somebody because they’ve not been named to us before and the police ring up and say ‘Ooh there was somebody…a man by the name of this or this at such and such a home’ then we hunt through those Spotlight articles to see if we can find them that way.

**G304**

Or the Superintendent in…1965 or whatever, trying to find out who that was.

**G305**

One of the other things that we also do is that when we give people access to records we always try and give them a photograph of the home they grew up in as well, because obviously for some people that’s quite important. Obviously they get any personal photographs we’ve got of them in the collection, so most children have got at least one photograph, certainly up until the Second World War children were photographed when they came in and when they left and sometimes when they went for foster care placement as well. After the war it tends to be predominantly they were photographed either when they came in or when they left and then there are generic photographs taken in lots of homes, so we will always give somebody any photos that they actually appear in but quite often what they want as well is a photograph of the building, because perhaps they had happy memories or they want to show their children where they grew up. As G303 was saying some people grew up in what we would consider stately homes now and they’ve told their children but they don’t believe them. I’ve been there before where somebody has shown a photograph to their son and said ‘you see, we had turrets and everything’ [laughs] and they just didn’t…no concept you know.

**G303**

Yes, ‘Look the Duke of Grafton used to invite us round to tea.’

**G305**

Or ‘These are the bannisters that we used to slide down’ and things like that, it’s an important part of their childhood memory and it’s good to be able to give them that.

**Victoria**

I’m aware that we’ve been talking for an hour and 10 minutes almost. I just wanted to briefly ask about redaction and where that happens in the service. Is it the Access to Records team that manages that?

**G305**

Yes.

**Victoria**

In that case I’ll save the redaction questions for them. And records management as well, we’ve talked a little bit about the interface between the archives and records management. What’s that relationship?

**G304**

So at the moment we’re working on developing a more coherent records management system for the organisation as a whole – that’s actually where I’m going this afternoon. Currently the majority of all…we don’t have a capture of the organisational material in terms of records management, there’s no system for that passing through to the archive. What we do have is our…we call it content server…and that’s our EDRMs and that is managed by our information services team. What we’re working on at the moment is we’re about to migrate over to a new system which is a case management system and we’re trying to sort of negotiate us keeping access to the old system and using that to migrate on and start a more coherent records management system, in terms of electronically, which will then filter into the archive, but at the moment it’s dependent on individual services using their own sort of system. And we’ve also now got a data protection officer who is very interested in records management and working towards creating more systems for that, although one area that we are really hot on is retention, we’ve got retention policies for children’s services. And I would say there are more records management systems in place for children’s services than there are for the wider organisation. It’s just that at the moment we’re really trying to raise awareness of the importance of managing information and you know what an asset it can be to the organisation as a whole.

**G303**

But as the organisations kind of waking up to the need for a comprehensive records management system, which frankly [Person’s name] has been banging on about for years and nobody has listened, so they are more mindful of the significance of the archive. I think historically we were rather kind of the bit that [organisation] would quite like to forget. Yes, we know we’ve got to do it but you know…we’re a bit resource greedy but having said which we cost a lot less now than we used to cost and…but we are funded almost entirely by voluntary funds which is a big deal in [organisation] because most of the services are generally local authority funded or whatever…and we take quite a big chunk for a single service, you know, we cost a lot.

**G304**

And I think what the organisation is starting to realise…we’ve got a data transformation team and they’re the ones working on the implementation of this and I think they’ve come to realise that GDPR is a good excuse to review recordkeeping in the organisation and to set records management systems in place, and I think it’s about helping services to understand the impact of the records they create and why they should be creating good records, and how impactful that can be, and I think [Person’s name] will do that excellently because she’s worked in this service where we see the impact upon people accessing their records when they’re of really awful quality, or you know…we went to – I mention this as an example – we went to the Post-Care Forum, which I know you’re aware of, and we saw some service users speak there and one of the girls, young women, said ‘I was so angry with the records that I received because they weren’t the childhood I remembered having’ and I know that there’s no such thing as unbiased recordkeeping, but her memory of her experiences was so different from what her social worker had recorded, and I think what is important for us to do is to get across to the social workers and the people working in children’s services is that the records you create have such an impact in the future, because people are more aware that they can access their records now, and the records previously that were created were never kept…were never created with it in mind that the children might access them one day, and I think that is a huge part of what we are doing right now.

**G303**

But current practice should be that records are created jointly between the service user and the practitioner.

**G304**

Exactly.

**G303**

I’m not sure how widely that happens.

**G304**

Her example, it just stands out in my head as being, you know, a great way of justifying to people, you know, this is the importance in what you’re doing…and understandably it’s not always a first priority, these people are working in children’s services and their priority is to provide the care to the children, but also you need to think about the impact of what you’re recording and why you’re recording it.

**G303**

Is that the same woman who said she had to burn them?

**G304**

Yeah.

**G303**

She felt she had to burn them, but she knew she could do it because there was more, because she knew that they were stored and so it was a bit of a kind of love/hate relationship with the records really.

**G304**

And I think that’s probably really natural to feel that way about it.

**G305**

And we’ve had people here before that have burnt their records after receiving them and then, you know, ten years later they’ve come back to us and asked for another set, and we’ve said ‘oh we gave you your records ten years ago’ but they say ‘I’ve burnt them, because I was so angry at the time…or distressed by what I found out so I just didn’t want them in the house anymore’, so they had a ceremonial bonfire as it were.

**G304**

It’s a bit of a purge isn’t it?

**G305**

Yeah, and then several years later…obviously you can’t burn the knowledge in your head and having matured a bit or sat and thought about it for some time then they’ve requested another copy later on.

**G304**

And I think what this service user said as well, that she’d always had a feeling that that social worker wasn’t keen on her and that there was some kind of bias in the service she received, and that actually it just proved her point to her because the records were exactly as she thought they would be and that was…you know…it confirmed how she thought she would feel about them.

**Victoria**

So one last question, which is a GDPR question. [laughs] I just wondered if you could say anything about how you think GDPR is going to effect the access to records process in the organisation, if it will?

**G303**

We can speak for Making Connections, the rest of the organisation is dealing with Subject Access Requests probably in a more compliant fashion than we are able to. We clearly have to now try and respond in 30 days instead of 40 days, but as we weren’t actually achieving a response in 40 days…you know, we’ve kind of tried to comply to the spirit if not the actual letter of the Data Protection Act. So we’ve tried to be…we have standards about the promptness of our response to people’s requests, the way in which we try and gather in their ID very early and confirm that we’ve the records and that we’re upfront with them about the likely waiting time and we give them an opportunity to indicate to us whether there is a more urgent need than the normal waiting list times. In fact, all along we could have technically been compliant had we kind of exploited the concept of the relevant filing system, because what we could have been doing all the time is sending a copy of the main card index card, because that's the only bit of our records system that is a relevant filing system in terms of the Data Protection legislation. We are now going to go through with that, we’ve talked about it for some time, we’re now - in order to comply with the 30 day requirement - we are going to get that to people from the point at which we receive their ID, within 30 days we’re going to get that to people and send them a copy of their main card index system. So in a sense that will make us technically compliant. That’s the biggest change we’re going to make and it’s not a huge change, but you know we are constantly striving to get our waiting lists down, but we have to work within a budget.

**G304**

We’re also - I think this applies to the wider organisation but I know that it applies to us – we’re changing our reason for holding information, so before we relied on consent but we’re actually going to be using legitimate interest now as our reason for storing data. I think that is the main reason we’re going to use from here on, because I think that’s an organisational wide decision to change from consent.

**G305**

And obviously to an extent we have a legal duty to keep those people’s records for 75 years anyway, so regardless of whether people want records kept or not we legally have to keep those records for 75 years anyway, so there’s a…you know, a balancing act there anyway in terms of the actual records that we’re keeping, we can’t destroy them within 75 years and things like that.

**G304**

And we will also face sort of case by case discussion on anybody who chooses the right to be forgotten, because the problem with that is we have microfilms with hundreds of children’s records on and we can’t pull those records off of that microfilm on a case by case basis, so to a certain extent that will be a conversation that we have to have with people who chose that they want to have their records destroyed or the right to be forgotten. Which we have had very few cases of previously.

**G305**

So, you know, in the past their file is, you know, noted that under no circumstances is this material to be supplied to anybody. You know, we can’t pull them out of the microfilm, we can’t cut them out of a ledger or things like that, so you know we’ve got a process in place where we can deal with those. And there’s not been very many in the 20 years that I’ve been here, I reckon we’ve had about 4 or 5 people who’ve said I don’t want anybody to ever see this information again. So their file is notated to that degree but how we move forward with that in the future? Obviously eventually files will be electronic and for younger generations there will be that option to delete the file.

**G304**

And just on a more general level, as with any organisation just making any enquirers or anyone who accesses our services aware of what their rights are and what GDPR is and the fact that we store their information and that we can direct them to our privacy notice which will explain exactly why we store their data, which we’re putting in to all of our standard letters and any information that we send out on the first time that we make initial contact with any enquirer.

**Victoria**

Ok, well thank you so much. That has been incredibly informative. There will probably be other things I think of to ask but I can pick back up with questions later on. Just before we finish is there anything that anyone wants to add? Anything final that you might have not said up to now. No? Ok, I will stop recording.

END OF RECORDING.

**FOCUS GROUP TRANSCRIPT**

This focus group session took place on 16th May 2018 at [Place name] Archives, between Victoria Hoyle and G314, G315 and G316.

**BEGINNING OF SESSION**

**Victoria**

So, do you want to start by briefly describing the work that you’ve done here at [Place name] with the social care records? [laughter, hestitation] Who is going to jump in first?

**G314**

Ok, so we were visited in August 2015 by an independent consultant from Ofsted, and basically he was very interested to find out what we were doing in [Place name] with social care records and education records, basically records involving children. And G316 and I met with him and we got some records out to show what we actually had, cos I think both of us felt quite strongly that they weren’t being utilised as much as they should be, and he was quite impressed wasn’t he? [sound of agreement from G316] Basically.

**Victoria**

What was his interest, what was his motivation? Just personal or…?

**G316**

The reason for how it came about…I’m going to have to give you the whole history here [laughter] which I’ve just looked up on my computer. It basically started way back in November 2014 and there was a safeguarding issue relating to a museum in [Place name], and the council said we didn’t have any information, and then it turned out later on that we did. And the leader of the County Council was involved in this, and he automatically said ‘look we must never do this again, we need to know what records we’ve got and to know what’s in them so that we can answer this quickly, and I think we need to digitise the whole lot and please can you give me some advice on how much that would cost’. So I then had a series of meetings saying that I didn’t think digitisation was the answer, it was more indexing and cataloguing and context that was required, and the Children’s Director got involved in this and then after a number of other issues where we were helping with some safeguarding issues - we had a whole series of library staff looking at newspaper series here and so on - and then we were setting up the multi-agency safeguarding hub, and then there were queries about another school, where there was potential abuse and so on…so the Director of Children’s Services actually invited [Person’s name] who G314 has just discussed to say ‘look please can you give us some neutral advice on this?’, so that was following our own reports on what was required in order for that problem not to happen again. So that was extremely helpful because it was a neutral person that came in, and looked at what we were doing here and I think he was particularly impressed with the context work you were doing there, wasn’t he?

**G314**

HelenHYeah, and then we felt it wasn’t just the archive side of things, the search-room team felt they needed to have some sort of idea what to do when people came in, so we sort of came up with scenario questions, you know ‘have you got any records on residential schools? Have you got my care file?’ and that kind of thing. So just possible questions that people would come and ask, and we then attempted to put the answer, but in doing this it became apparent that we needed to have a sort of clearer way of going about things, and we stressed that to him.

**Victoria**

So there was – even before this safeguarding thing was raised – there was definitely a demand for information about these records?

**G314**

I mean when I first started, I mean I came in here in ’99, and almost as soon as I started I used to do two days here and three days in IMS, the records centre, and they were very much sort of still coming to terms with the West case and everything that had come out of that, and straight away I was sort of set a task that I had to identify records that could potentially help any sort of enquiry, so I did just a list basically of all the relevant ‘K’ references - which is what we gave the County Council archive at that point - that might have information, because the police were coming in and wanting to know, you know, ‘have you got any records of this home?’ or a particular child, that kind of thing, so that was back in 2000 and because of sort of what happened in the 90s it’s been going on quite a while really.

**Victoria**

So people, members of the public, were just coming in to the archives and asking these kinds of questions?

**G314**

Well, I mean, over at the records centre it was staff and it was official people that wanted to know about care files and that kind of thing, but yes people were coming… well police were coming in here wanting to know, you know, what we had and we needed to be able to have a clear response and a process to follow, which is why we sort of came up with a flow chart which I think you might have seen…

**Victoria**

I think, yeah.

**G314**

Here we are, yeah. So yes, they weren’t just coming in, they were writing in as well, phone enquiries, so we just needed to kind of have a procedure of how to deal with people, because obviously it looks really bad if you don’t know what you’re doing.

**G316**

It was also the concept of the single… SPOC, wasn’t it? Single point of contact, for the police, and because at that stage we were all one service it was, you know, it was helpful because we could tie it all up.

**Victoria**

Following the safeguarding concern and the visit from [Person’s name] was it? What’s the next step that you took?

**G316**

Well we then got some funding, which was available for the records centre and also archives to actually address the uncatalogued records, so that we could answer questions like that in future. So that…because the way that records come from the records centre, you just have a file title and insufficient information and that’s just been the tradition of how the records centre has worked since 1979 when it was set up. And so all the papers that we’d written made the case that if actually you really wanted to be able to tackle these properly you needed to have your records properly organised and properly catalogued and with the context and all the rest of it, so that if someone asked we could say yes we definitely haven’t got anything. That was the main driver, is ‘no we haven’t got anything’, rather than ‘yes we have’, cos it was pretty impossible to actually say ‘no we haven’t got it’ unless you’ve got your records well catalogued. So that was the motivating factor. And then we had the funding which would enable our project to go ahead and then the records centre - at that point we separated the two services – went off and did their part of the service as well based on work we’d done previously. But again with the records centre it wasn’t coming…there was a long history, because when Children’s Services were moving from offices and leaving records behind and that sort of thing we were wanting to make sure all of those records were properly catalogued, so there’s been a long history of that, and someone called [Person’s name] had done that work, so we knew roughly the sort of amount of time it would take to do that work. Again we’re not starting from a zero base, we’re starting from having done quite a lot of work in this are across the whole service.

**Victoria**

So you got the money and then the records that you were looking to catalogue and explore…can you give me a brief description of their scope and content?

**G314**

Well I mean it’s vast, we’ve got records that actually come from the children’s homes, log books, minute books that kind of thing…a whole range of…

**G316**

Basically it was the County Council records though wasn’t it?

**G314**

Yeah, yeah, the County Council records but, you know how a County Council any place works, it’s got its fingers in everything.

**G316**

So it was social care and education that we particularly focused on wasn’t it?

**G315**

The two sort of areas of the County Council’s function that would have had responsibility for the safeguarding of children, right across the board.

**Victoria**

So I’m right in thinking then that there is sort of a split in responsibility, with the record centre holding the individual case records, because they have a retention of 75 years or 100 years for adoption files, and the archives taking responsibility for records which have been selected for preservation after their retention date has passed?

**G314**

Yes, but there are a few sort of gray areas where things that have perhaps come into us may now go to the records centre and probably the other way around.

**G316**

Yes and part of the point of having this building was that we would actually transfer the adoption records across here and things that needed longer term preservation, but that was when we were all part of the same service…but I think that still will happen, because if you need to keep something for 100 years you might as well put them in archival conditions. So that’s a debate that’s still to come, because we couldn’t take them with lack of space but we will be able to now. And then obviously with electronic records we’re getting involved right at the very beginning of those, but that’s another debate probably. [laughs]

**Victoria**

[laughs] Yeah. So I’m quite interested in this split, just because I suppose from an archival perspective it’s dividing records by type rather than function, so they’re all part of the social care function, but some records are being managed as semi-current records and some records are being managed as archival records. Presumably these archival records do also contain references to individual people?

**G314**

Yeah, I mean, definitely. The records centre have got the case files – case file relating to ‘name of person’ – it’s really easy to search and find that person, but the sorts of records that we hold over in archives, they’re the sort of buried…I mean the same person might be in a minute book or a log book but it’ll just say ‘log book of Parklands’ or whatever, so that was where we needed to identify, not the individual people, but at least make people aware that if they came across… if they were looking in the individual case file and they found that that person had been at an establishment, they could then come over and use our records and perhaps find even more information that way.

**G315**

And to flag up the contents of the minutes of the various committees and sub-committees, because they were often dealing at quite a detailed level, there were lots of named cases in there.

**G314**

The early ones they actually had the full name of the person in care, and then sort of later ones, I think it’s after 1969, they’re anonymised and you just get the initials but you can still sort of work out which, you know…

**G315**

It wasn’t appropriate to pull out the names of individuals involved for the catalogue but if we flag up named individuals or people referred to by initials, and it covers these institutions, people are more likely to be able to find them, because if you just say ‘minutes of social services committee’ that all sounds quite dry, it’s not going to encourage people to look at them, so it was about being a lot more descriptive in our catalogue entries so that hopefully people searching the database will come up with what they’re looking for.

**Victoria**

If someone made a subject access request to [Place name] County Council for their care records, would they be informed or referred to you, or would the Access to Records team consult any of these materials?

**G314**

They come over. Sometimes they ask us to look, but they have come over as well and gone through, and more so I think since the project, they’ve been more aware of what we actually hold, because a lot of the records centre team are fairly new and aren’t aware of this side of things, but yeah they have come over and we’ve shown them what we’ve got basically.

**G316**

That was one of the objectives of doing this wasn’t it, just to make sure that both teams knew exactly what either end had, because otherwise you’re not giving a full picture, and it does require a bit of knowledge of the context and so on in relation to digging stuff out of the archives, it’s not so straightforward.

**G314**

I think the nature of the people asking though - the police and the social service investigation team - they’re very…they need the information now and they just seize on a name and then they’re not aware there are actually layers of research you’ve got to do, and hopefully by cataloguing them it’s maybe a bit easier for them.

**Victoria**

So what’s the cataloguing approach that you’ve taken? How have you gone about it?

[big sigh; group laughter]

**G315**

We did the minutes first. We were already cataloguing the County Council minutes, or re-cataloguing the County Council minutes because they had been done in fairly typical style where it just says ‘Minutes’ and that’s it. So we’d already done the Full Council and the various committees, we were working our way through. So we went back and looked at what we’d already done, we’d already done the education minutes, we’d already done social care minutes, so we could see how the services were structured, and then we went and looked at everything else, and sort of attempted to work out how we were going to arrange it and pinpoint the safeguarding related bits, because on both sides of it there’s masses more material than we could have covered in the project, but not all of it is safeguarding related, so particularly the education records there’s all manner of stuff but quite a lot of it isn’t actually about children, so for education we went for the school administration files, there was a big series of those, and there was the records of one education welfare officer from the 1950s, just one, don’t know where the others went. And there were some records about the Polish schools that were run by the County Council in the 40s, 50s and 60s for Polish refugees, so that was what I focused on, and G314 went and pinpointed all the…

**G314**

Yeah, all the residential schools. That was sort of bothering me because they keep changing the names and changing their use, some start looking after tiny children, then they go and look after teenagers suddenly and then they change their name, then they move location but they keep their name, so…

**G315**

Lots of them have very similar names.

**G314**

Yes, yes. I still get some mixed up…Bowden Hall and Bownham Park…

**G315**

Cam House and Coln House…and they had different purposes, so one was a special school and one was an approved school, out of those two.

**G314**

So I just felt I needed to nail down what was going on at each establishment and what each establishment was actually called, so we now have a list, which gives me great pleasure [laughs], when I feel a bit down I just open the tree up in CALM. You go up to where it says institutions and it lists them alphabetically, well almost alphabetically, we found a few later so [laughs] they’re tagged on at the bottom, I couldn’t face renumbering them all…but yeah they’re listed and they’ve got a little potted history on each one, so that’s nice, and if anyone says ‘I was at such and such home have you got any records, or the police or whatever, we can say ‘yes we have’ or ‘no we haven’t’, or it’s ‘no that was a private establishment’.

**G315**

That was quite important, trying to establish which ones the County Council was responsible for and which ones they weren’t, because there’s an ongoing investigation for a residential establishment in the County that was not run by the County Council, and every now and then it comes up again, and we have to go ‘no, it wasn’t run by the County’ and provide the small amount of information that we do have about it. So it was quite useful for establishing that sort of thing.

**Victoria**

Did you build up this knowledge base from the records themselves, or were there other sources of information?

**G314**

Mainly from the records themselves, although…

**G315**

There’s some external…

**G314**

Yes, there’s the Children’s Society…

**G315**

There’s a website that I used for a couple of things on the education side called childrenshomes.org.uk and it’s this fantastic resource by this…

**Victoria**

Peter Higginbotham? [laughs]

**G315**

Yes, very dedicated chap who’s just got everything, and there was a cottage homes institution down near Bristol and some of the children from one of the local primary schools lived there so they were cropping up in the schools administrations files because they were trying to work out what…I think the school itself didn’t really have the capacity and they were trying to work out what was going on, and I was sort of ‘I’ve never heard of a cottage home, what’s that’? Went and looked it up, well googled it, and got to the page on Peter Higginbotham’s website and it was really informative, and it was about that particular institution, so it gave me a bit of background information so I could then write a better catalogue description of the file and put some explanatory information in rather than just expecting that any researcher would understand what this place, these cottage homes, were, so that was handy.

**Victoria**

And did you also have to think about the history of social care itself, so not just the institutional histories but also how [Place name] had run social care over time?

**G314**

Yes, yes, I mean that came through with the sort of first project, the corporate archives project when we were doing the listing of the minutes, that came through from there didn’t it? You can see just from the minutes alone how it developed and that was quite interesting.

**G316**

Yes, that project had started before this other one, so you’d already go that under your belt, all that information, so yes, yeah.

**G315**

So it was quite useful because we could just hit the ground running with the actual records, not the minutes…not actual records but you know what I mean, the files, and then we could just go ‘that’s safeguarding, that’s safeguarding, that’s safeguarding, let’s get on with it’, without having to spend…it probably would have taken quite a long time to do the minutes, particularly education because there’s zillions of committees. [laughter] But because we’d already done that work we had a bit of background knowledge.

**Victoria**

So what were…other than I suppose the police and investigators, what other uses did you envision for these records?

**G316**

There was definitely the subject access angle, that’s the main thing that motivates this sort of thing isn’t it? So that people can find out, cos we are instead of their parents in a lot of cases.

**G315**

We’ve had an approach from the Polish community about the Polish schools and the Polish camps files, so one of the access team came over and went through the closed files, because when I was cataloguing them I’d made the decision not to separate out the material that should be closed from the material that could be readily accessed, and sort of make two files and then put an explanatory notice that this file has been split it into two, one of them’s closed and one of them’s open…and then promptly had an enquiry that necessitated them being split into two anyway, so I’m going to have to do that… But that was really interesting, because there is a lot of information in those files. A member of the Polish community, I don’t think they’d grown up in the camps themselves, but knew people that had, and there was masses of sort of social history stuff in there, but it’s all interleaved with individual cases. Obviously there was a lot of safeguarding. Some of the children had been quite traumatised by their experiences, of course they had, and so there was quite a lot of sensitive material in there that had to be sorted out before this person could look at the rest of them, but that was sort of for a community history type project, which has now gone quiet, I haven’t heard anything.

**G316**

They’re still going…

**G315**

Oh good.

**G316**

Yeah, they’ve done a lot of really good work for the Polish community.

**G315**

So that was something that we hadn’t really expected to…I mean I knew there were Polish schools but I didn’t know why…and then I fell down the research rabbit hole with that a little bit, because I had to do quite a lot of research and quite a lot of reading to make the catalogue entries exact.

**G316**

Because it was the Polish veterans who were getting involved in HistoryFest (sp?) and quite a lot of things like that and wanted to come to us to see if we had any information. It is about their…the memory of that community, so it’s very helpful, yeah.

**G315**

Which was not the social care side of things, but of course children’s officers were involved in some cases and the education welfare officer was involved. The one whose files we have is the one whose beat covered the area that two of the camps were in, so we’ve got a little bit of cross over between those two sets of files. The education welfare officer seems to have had quite a bit of a cross over with the Children’s Officer, going and sorting out shoes and clothes for children so they could attend school or at least going and finding out why they’re not attending school, some of them had to go out to work, so on and so forth, the home situation is not very good so the Children’s Officer gets involved. You can see that the different departments were working quite closely together at that point

**Victoria**

Tell me a little bit about how you manage access to this kind of material because there is personal information relating to individuals in it, and you talked there about providing access to material that was open versus material that was closed. I wonder if you could describe that a bit more…so I’m a researcher, imagine I’m a historian of residential schools in the 1950s, and I come and I say I want to see all the records relating to residential schools, how do you manage my request? What’s the process?

**G314**

If you’re just interested in the homes…?

**Victoria**

My interests are very broad. [laughter]

**G315**

Anything with personally identifiable information would be closed, 100 years, subject access only.

**G314**

And we’d send you off to the Access team in IMS. [laughs]

**G315**

And then they would...They would either extract the information for you or…it would depend on the nature of the documents wouldn’t it? So if there’s entries in minute books they might be copied for you and then the personal identifiable information redacted out, I think, or…

**Victoria**

So even though I’m not the subject they would manage that process?

**G314**

I think so, because it would be Freedom of Information…

**G315**

Would it be Freedom of Information? Because it’s public…it’s records produced by the public body, but the Data Protection Act…

**G316**

I think we’ve not had very many examples of this, is what’s emerging isn’t it? [laughter] Yes. Because I would think that the team over the way would do the subject access requests rather than…

**G315**

I mean if we’re just taking the Polish enquiry as an example, someone from the Access team came over.

**G316**

They did do that one didn’t they.

**G315**

He did, he came over and he separated out the sensitive stuff and flagged up where it had come from in the file, and then this researcher was able to look at the file without all the sensitive stuff about individuals, because there was still quite a lot of general information in there.

**Victoria**

It’s a very involved process, if I’m a researcher who has a broad interest and is looking for, you know, is looking to survey a significant amount of material.

**G316**

It’s interesting because it does come back a bit to how we’re trying to deal with the minutes doesn’t it, in that if you’ve got minutes that have got sensitive stuff in them it’s far better if they don’t bind it all in one minute book, it’s better if they’re separated.

**G315**

An access copy and a copy with all the paper work. This is a discussion we’ve been having much more recently with the Democratic Services team over at Shire Hall, that our County Council minutes are still bound, physically bound in nice bound volumes, but they’re… for some of the committee and panels that we receive the minutes for, there’s minutes of the meeting and then a great wodge of papers including lots of sensitive information, so we have to bang subject access only closure on the whole volume.

**G316**

Or tie off the bit…

**G315**

Or tie off the bit, if someone wants to come and look at a particular panel, a particular meeting, we have to tie off the bit that they can’t see, and then trust them not to undo the tape.

**G316**

And have it in a supervised search-room.

**G315**

Yes, yes, just keep an eye on them. But it’s an interesting discussion.

**G316**

So the ethics of that are quite interesting aren’t they?

**Victoria**

Very, it’s very interesting. I mean increasingly I think there’s a research…there’s certainly…I know of at least one PhD student who’s working on this area, who is making requests to local record offices and is receiving very inconsistent responses, so some record offices are just having them sign a form under the researcher exemption to Data Protection and giving them access to everything, and then others are going through more involved processes, so the legislation is being interpreted very variously across the board. Just out of interest, what’s your reasoning behind having such a clear line?

**G315**

Well we’d make a distinction between personal information and sensitive personal information as best we can, so we’ll…for example school log books and admission registers, which prior to the Data Protection Act 1998 we had closed - admission registers for 30 years and log books for 50 years - and you just couldn’t see them until they were that old, and now unless there is what we would class as sensitive personal information in there then they’re closed for 100 years but they can be produced for researchers as long as they sign a form, a declaration under Section 33 of the Data Protection Act, so it’s saying they’re not going to use the information inappropriately or what have you, and the admission registers it’s name of child and address of child and name of parent or parental guardian, and sometimes a note of what school they went to when they left, and log books generally it’s just sort of details of the everyday running of the school. It’s whether we’ve identified during cataloguing that a log book includes more sensitive information, so for example there was a set I catalogued for a secondary school where allegations of improper behaviour had been made against a member of staff and named children involved, ok, 100 years, subject access only, it’s that sort of level of things, so where we were coming across, say medical details, details of home situations that were obviously less than satisfactory, and individuals were named, then that’s where that subject access only closure goes on. So with the education welfare officer’s files, he was writing quite detailed reports about the home circumstances of some of the children who weren’t necessarily regularly attending school, everybody identified all over the shop because it was part of his work, and he wasn’t thinking about it in the same way because this was 1953 or whenever, so that got a subject access closure but some less sensitive…

**G316**

I think we’re taking a bit of a pragmatic approach, but it’s also making sure that when people do do that they understand fully the circumstances under which they are being given access to that and they have to sign and we keep a copy of that and we look through that just to make sure that’s working out ok.

**G315**

That seems to work.

**G316**

We came up with that in conjunction with the information compliance people, so that’s the approach we’re taking there.

**G315**

Sometimes it’s a little bit of a judgement call as to whether it’s sensitive or Section 33-able, but we err on the side of sensitive.

**G314**

We tend to discuss it. We ask each other.

**G315**

We work in the same room so it’s quite handy.

**G314**

It’s quite good, yeah.

**Victoria**

The reason I ask these questions and am pushing for detail is because I’m interested from a…I’ve mentioned this group, the academic researchers…it’s interesting to consider what kind of research is made possible by these kinds of protocols and procedures.

**G316**

Yes.

**Victoria**

So if I’m a historian of child sexual abuse for example, which I think is a very hot subject as we know, then my ability to do my work is directly impacted by the policies that are put in place in different areas.

**G315**

I think if we were approached with a request like that from a researcher, I think we’d probably sit down and talk to them about it and perhaps involve the Access people, because we have in the past…but I don’t know whether we’d just say ‘no stuff off’. We would have to sort of talk about it.

**G314**

What’s that project, the mental health…? The case files?

**G316**

We took that to the ethics committee at the hospital, so again we won’t say no, we’ll try and work out how we can do it in an informed way.

**G315**

There was someone doing a PhD on mental health just after the National Health Service came in, and we’ve got acres of case files from the two county mental health hospitals, and so they had…did they scan the covers? I can’t remember exactly how it worked, I think it was someone from Exeter who was working on…there was a particular date span wasn’t there? 1948 to 19…I don’t know 60 or something like that.

**G314**

I can’t quite remember.

**G315**

And they were looking at the types of care being provided in people’s case files.

**G316**

But it had to go to the Caldicott Guardian and it had to go to the ethics committee and so on to get all the approval for that, but it happened.

**Victoria**

It’s interesting you mentioned the Caldicott Guardian and the ethics committee, because in health records cases there is a clear process to go through, whereas perhaps with education and social care records that’s not always the case?

**G316**

Although we do have Caldicott Guardians in the county who are on the information board.

**Victoria**

Ok, so you would potentially go through them.

**G316**

Yes, yes.

**G315**

Earlier, before we were recording, we were talking about the context surrounding records and going through records with people, we already sort of have a procedure sort of set up with the local mental health trust who are the sort of ultimate owners of these mental health records. If somebody comes to us and says my great grandma was in the asylum we refer them to their records team who do the research, look at the records and then explain them to the relative or the enquirer, with modern context. They get a doctor to sort of write a report I think from the files to say this is how we would have described this person’s health conditions now, because the terminology that was used is very different and people won’t necessarily have the medical backgrounds and won’t understand the terms but also the language that was used about people was really…taken out of context it would be quite upsetting. We’ve found that a bit with some of the other records, the minutes for example, we’ve found ourselves explaining terms that were used in the records so we’re not just dropping in references to ‘educationally sub-normal’ children or ‘idiots’ or ‘mental defectives’, so we’re explaining them in our catalogue for a modern audience.

**G316**

That’s also reminded me, when I first started work as an archivist, many years ago in Greater London Record Office, the social care records from Middlesex County Council - which was then abolished -were available at the archives, but there was a social worker on the staff who actually gave access to those records. I don’t know whether you’ve followed that sort of angle up, but that was a very interesting angle.

**Victoria**

That’s definitely another approach that’s taken, is to go through a social work team. I think it’s really interesting where different organisations place the kind of authority or the kind of expertise that’s needed, so some places put more emphasis on the social work expertise that you need to access this material, some places put more emphasis on the information governance, data protection, freedom of information, and some places more on the historical context, so those kind of three forms of expertise… it’s interesting to think about how they’re differently weighted in different contexts and how they all might interact together to create something that was a little bit more rounded and holistic in approach. And I think what you’ve described here is a much more connected way of looking at records and access to records than I’ve seen in other places where it’s generally very siloed and people don’t know what the other part of their organisation is doing in respects to this kind of information.

**G314**

I think that might have happened because of the West case and because one of the criticisms after the West case was that, you know, different bodies hadn’t worked together as a team, you know we had an education file on a person, a social service file on a person, and a legal file on a person and they weren’t necessarily all talking and connected, and so I think we…

**G315**

And you had two local authorities at the time that this was happening, because the city of [Place name] was separate to the county until 1974, for education and social care, the city had their own education and social care departments, so there’s been some crossing over of records because those functions transferred to the county in 1974 and so some records also transferred to the county, so some of them are now in the records of the city and some went into the county council archive, which is what we’re currently unpicking and we’re now looking at the records of the corporation of [Place name] in the same sort of way as we did the county records, because we hold these things, we’re safeguarding them and we ought to get them sorted out, just because they’re not records of the county council…we feel quite strongly it would be nice to sort them out as well. But people were…and we know from the West case actually… that some of the people concerned lived and worked under the governance of the county and then the city and vice versa, so both authorities were involved in that case and that didn’t help. Probably by the time it was all unearthed they had probably forgotten that that was ever the case.

**G316**

I think it also helps that for a long period we had information management and archives together, and I really feel that you just had an overall picture of all of the issues and you know because we’ve had that until relatively recently I think we’ve still got that joined up approach, which I think definitely helps.

**G315**

And both of us have helped in the records centre at various times, although G314 far more than I have.

**G314**

Yep.

**G316**

And also I was just going to go on and say, having staff with long experience is also incredibly important because it does take quite a long time to get to understand a complex series of records like a County Council.

**G315**

We spend quite a lot of our careers picking it up without getting to work on it, so it’s been extremely rewarding the last however long we’ve been doing this…how long have we been doing this? However long it’s been… to actually get on and sort it out because both the collections but particularly the County Council collection were very difficult to use because of the way they’d been kept.

**G316**

So it’s just been very satisfying because we just feel that we’re getting on top of it.

**G315**

To be able to get it catalogued functionally is, it’s just so nice, and then so that you’ve got a structure, a structured catalogue that people can browse, with a bit of guidance that they can browse and find everything that they’re looking for, and if everything they’re looking for isn’t under one heading there are cross-references so that they know where to look for the rest of it.

**G316**

I hope that the work that we’re putting in now means that it’s going to be much easier for people in the future to access it without the experts, cos that’s the whole point of what we’re trying to achieve.

**G315**

We’re trying to make it accessible by the lay person, so putting contextual information in, explanations of what the terms mean and a bit about the times, about social care policy, about education policy, putting that into the administrative history fields so that people understand why this particular sort of thing is happening in this particular sort of way at that time, and it helps us understand as well. I think it’s been really worth it researching at this stage to be able to explain it, so that we’re not just handing over something that says ‘minutes’ and expecting the user to have the background knowledge to make sense of it, because if we haven’t got background knowledge and can’t make sense of it then it’s really not fair to expect other people to.

**Victoria**

Yeah. I mean a lot of these…the imagined user of these records, if say they were in care and in one of these residential homes, they have different types of knowledge to the types of knowledge that’s in the archive, they have that personal experiential knowledge about these places. I think one of the great challenges of archive cataloguing is how do you facilitate the coming together of those different types of knowledge, because experiential knowledge is often so very different to, you know, an administrative history or a custodial history of a record. So I think it’s really…you can’t underestimate the value of that, and being able to provide a lot of that contextual information, because my experience of being in a children’s home might be what food I ate and, you know, what it was like to sleep on a particular kind of bed or who my friends were but I would at that time, as a child, have had no sense of the overarching administrative structure that was controlling my life and how my childhood was shaped.

**G316**

Actually that’s interesting, that’s reminded me of another project we’re doing as part of our big project and that is called Belonging, which is…we’re aiming to work with some children in care to think about what their experience is and to use some of the records here to do that, again with people who are expert in that area so that we don’t go and put our foot in it, but we’ll be starting that project in the autumn. It’ll be interesting to see how that goes.

**G315**

I came back from the conference quite sort of interested in whether we’d be able to get up a project…so I think it was as a result of a question you [Victoria] asked or possibly [Person’s name] about were we going to be capturing the experiences of care leavers, and for us it’s a totally different area that we haven’t quite begun to think about because we were up to our eyebrows in files. But it would be good - if we could do it without it getting complicated - to have some sort of project so that if people wanted to tell their stories and have them recorded they could, if they don’t they don’t have, but it would be good to get a more rounded picture of it, because it’s sort of inevitable we’ve got the story from the point of view of the people who were in charge and that’s only half the story.

**G316**

We’re certainly doing that in other areas aren’t we? We’ve supplemented the official minutes with some memories of some of the councillors for example. I mean that’s probably a bad example because that is the official twice but it’s trying to get the community voice as well. We’re doing a lot of work on that.

**G315**

Changing the way that we think about the work that we do, because sort of traditionally it’s all been sort of a little bit patriarchal, a little bit ‘we’re interested in the records for the records sake’ and showing how the organisation worked, but forgetting that…or not even thinking…that they’re about actual people, actual real human being people with feelings and stuff, and that’s something that this project has brought out to us much more is how we… that these are…the records are important because they’re the records of people and not necessarily because they show how things were done at a particular time… I’m not articulating myself very well… but I think we’ve shifted our attitude, and the way that we catalogue things, to be more mindful of this is somebody’s life and not just an administrative file sitting on someone’s desk.

**G314**

Yeah, I mean we’ve…a tiny, tiny way to support that is we’ve got a member of staff who actually she works here and then she works in a children’s home, well it’s not a home any more it’s a children’s…

**G315**

Children’s centre.

**G314**

Yes, yeah, a children’s centre, and she’s worked there for a while and I think had family members or an association with someone who was actually in care, and she…when I was sort of talking to her about the admin history for that place she was actually able to give me a deeper understanding, having worked there and you know she knew of carry-ons there, and it was quite interesting to sort of see her personal feeling of the place.

**G315**

Cos you can only get so much information from the records about that sort of thing, whether or not it’s recorded or not recorded… So I was trying to do histories of the county’s schools going from the admin files that I was looking at and the actual school records that we’ve got, log books and what have you, but often it just wasn’t recorded. When did this school open? I have absolutely no record of it, but if you were to speak to people who had been to the school you would have a much rounder story about it. It would be nice to do some sort of history education…there was a really nice definitive short book written in the 1940s about the history of education in [Place name] from the Education Act 1902 to the Education Act 1944, fantastic, definitive, lovely, and then nothing because nobody’s done it. It’s all in my head now, I’m absolutely full of the history of the education service in [Place name] and I kind of feel I ought to write it down.

**Victoria**

Sounds like you should!

**G315**

Time, time, I haven’t got the time. I’m still working on the catalogues. But then again that’s a…it’s all administrative, this is what the County Council’s doing and it would be nice to involve actual people.

**Victoria**

Yeah, I mean it would be. I’d forgotten about that question from the conference about how do you include the voices of people who were in care or people who worked in care homes or, you know… the record has its own point of view, its own perspective, and how do you multiply and vary the perspectives that you can have on any given institution or any given process, and where does that fit within our cataloguing procedures? I think there’s some interesting…because how do you document that? What does documenting an archive mean, what could it be broadened to include in these particular cases where there is a lot of experiential knowledge and quite often what I’ve found is that people who were in care or people who worked in care homes they quite often have already created those resources, they’re online, they’re in books they self-publish, they are… you know, they have reunions and meet-ups and they talk and discuss these things, and that is happening in most cases completely separate from the archival process. Perhaps an example where it’s been brought together is Craig Fees and the Planned Environmental Therapy Trust, where there’s been a real integration between experiential knowledge and archival knowledge and how those two things can support one another, but it’s a, it’s quite a difficult way of working when you are constrained by archival processes.

**G316**

And also funding as well.

**Victoria**

And funding, yeah.

**G316**

Because sorting out the records is a priority for your funding body but the other is seen as a nice add-on generally, but we are doing it more with external funding on community archives, I mean that is pulling in the other perspective.

**G315**

What we’ve been doing is cataloguing what we’ve got and not necessarily going out and collecting more and different types of what we’ve got or what we haven’t got.

**G314**

We tend to deal in facts don’t we?

**G315**

Yes.

**G314**

Someone’s experience could good or bad, you could have a mixture, and with our sort of historian hats on we just sort of ‘well it was here, and then it went to there’…

**G315**

‘It changed its name, and then it was called this…’

**G314**

No, but it is nice to have the…it would be nice to include people.

**G315**

It would be good.

**Victoria**

So, we’ve been talking quite a while on this, on the project that you’ve done so far, so if we can we’ll switch and talk about your plans for the future, and particularly thinking about this archive. Presumably it’s going to grow, the social care and education records will grow, increasingly they will be digital, so how are you planning to continue this work and continue documenting these functions?

**G316**

I think if we move on to the electronic side and we can fill in the gap in between, if that’s ok. From the electronic side I’m very keen to actually work with the people who are creating Mosaic and LiquidLogic and systems like that in which all of the records tend to go now - certainly all the case records and a lot of the surrounding material as well - just to make sure that we can get it out and that it will survive, because what we’ve concluded is that a lot of them will stay in these systems and then it will have to keep being reimported every ten years ago or so, because that’s only how long it lasts. Some of them are getting left behind on systems that have been…you know, ‘we don’t need these records anymore let’s just take those off because it will cost less to migrate the rest’. Those are really at risk if you have that sort of thing. And I have to feel that archivists need to be involved at the beginning, setting up the criteria for those systems so you can get the information out at the end and I also think you need to get it out and put it in a format that will definitely survive, probably after 10 years, rather than keep re-migrating it and so on, because it’s just going to get bigger and bigger and bigger, and more difficult to deal with. So that’s what we’re doing our project on with Archives First next year, particularly looking at minutes from Modern.gov and from social care systems, and I actually think that will alter the way archivists, records managers, think. I think it’s quite a profound way of thinking but I just feel we have to do that, I think it’s our responsibility to the people whose records we’re looking after. So that’s what we’re just embarking upon and that’s why we really wanted to tie up with your project, I just think if we can achieve that it will be really helpful, and in order to have some weight with the people who create these monolithic systems, which are actually used throughout local government, similar ones, there’s only a few for the whole country, if you can...rather than just have one office trying to do it, if you can line up a whole series of people who’ve all got the same problems and actually say ‘look we need to address this’, and then get the specification properly sorted…so it’s a bit ambitious, but I just felt you’ve got to have an aim like that in order to be able to see what the issues are, so that’s what we’re working on. Because the records aren’t being created in paper anymore, there are some records in paper but…it’s just making sure you can get in and make sure that those records do survive.

**Victoria**

Yeah, yeah, the digital systems, it is very interesting, the earliest example I’ve found of a digital records system for social care was in the early 1980s, and presumably that system - and the records that were created in it, I would imagine - is gone, but certainly from the late 1990s most local authorities were experimenting with electronic records if not completely converted over, and by the mid-2000s most were predominantly dependent on electronic systems, and when you think that records that are being created this year for children and young people should still be accessible and available in the 2090s, that makes quite a…

**G316**

Yes, it is quite interesting because it’s really difficult getting buy in to why this is an issue, because it’s not in the four year political cycle, but I think we’ve got – after a lot of work – I think we’ve got to that position now.

**G315**

It doesn’t occur to people outside the archives profession necessarily that what they’re creating is for posterity – in some cases – or has a really long term use. The idea of a retention schedule is…it kind of makes people blink and look at you completely uncomprehending, and it’s getting people to realise that what they’re writing down today has a long term or permanent informational value.

**G316**

Yes, archivists look an awfully long way back but they also look an awfully long way forwards, and unless we’re involved in actually setting those specifications it’ll be difficult for getting those records out.

**G315**

People who’re creating the records are just looking at today, what’s happened with such-and-such child that they need to make record of today, and not thinking that perhaps when this child is 70 years old they’re going to want to know what happened today, because they’ve got a vague memory of it and they don’t know what was really happening. It doesn’t occur to people. I don’t quite know how we can…change the training?

**G316**

It’s also…I’ve forgotten what I was going to say now…it’s also a question of working out how we can capture context and things like that, because that will still be required to interpret these things.

**Victoria**

Yeah, I was going to ask, the digital systems are for the most part… they are managing the records that are analogous to the case files that are in the records centre, so the records that are represented by *these* [archival] collections are being managed and created outside of those systems.

**G316**

Yes. That’s why I’m particularly keen to also tackle the minutes because then you’ll have the main minutes there, but it’s also working out where all the policies are as well, and again that is going to require us to work much more proactively to work out where those actually are, and we are doing a project – we’re about to kick off a project – the digital storage project, which will have an electronic records manager, IT and us, so it’ll be G314 with her expertise on the council records side and Claire who’s an e-preservation expert, so there’ll be the four of us working together to work out how we tackle that next. So I think that’s another strand of the same thing, it’s come from a different angle, it’s come from ‘we want to reduce what we’re holding’, but actually our angle will be before we chuck everything away we actually need to make sure we’ve got this, this and this, because those are going to be really important for the future. Because I reckon there’s an awful lot of policy will be sitting on people’s emails and on their P drives, which means that we won’t have some of the records that we’ve got…so I really do think archivists have got to be…I think we’ve got to be much more proactive with the information asset owners and the records centre.

**Victoria**

Well I think that in terms of making the case for these things, being able to connect it through to a rights based issue is quite important. I don’t think at the moment, in terms of the access to records awareness and campaign for care leavers, I don’t think there’s yet the recognition that this kind of material and the kind of thing that you’re talking about, the sort of administrative wrap-around for the provision of care services, how valuable that is in terms of maintaining people’s information rights, that their information rights are not just…

**G316**

In their files.

**Victoria**

Yes, limited to their files, that there’s a much bigger context in which all of that operates, and how is that being captured, and how is that…because I mean it strikes me that – from my own experiences of working in local authority archives – that the change, administrative change in local authorities is incredibly rapid now, so that from one year to the next the structures of teams and the responsibilities of different individuals have shifted, and the ways in which those kinds of changes were recorded in the past are no longer necessarily available, and so tracking those changes, those incredibly complex sort of shifting waters is a challenge that perhaps we’ve not yet met.

**G316**

No I think that’s true, and it’s something that gives me concerns, because I was looking at what records would actually come out, if we look at the information asset registers and you look at all of the systems, the IT systems, that people have, if you then look at that and you compare it to your retention schedule, what is actually coming out at the end there? You’ve got some massive gaps. Yeah, so I did an exercise on that, we looked at that. I’m just trying to remember quite what we did… It was looking at the retention schedules wasn’t it particularly and then comparing that to the Council’s archive and seeing what would actually come through, and I just think we need to be quite proactive in this, not just receiving things at the end, which is going to be a bit different from archival theory in the past, otherwise I think we’re going to have a very distorted view and I think we need to look at that. Very interesting stuff that.

**Victoria**

Ok, so I think we’re sort of coming to the end, just before we finish though, before we started recording we were talking about the impact of records for individuals, and the importance of keeping these records for individuals, and whether or not there was a case to be made for permanent preservation of care records, and I wondered if we could just briefly return to that just to capture some of it. So what are your feelings on the permanent preservation of individual case records?

**G316**

My feelings were that we ought to look at the retention schedules for people who’ve been adopted or in care, because the council was in loco parentis, it’s operating on behalf or instead of the parents in a lot of cases, so it is the memory of those people, and I think we have a duty to make sure that’s available for them to look at. But I hadn’t looked quite so much at whether they would actually want those records to be preserved, I had sort of assumed that it was their right to have access to them and hadn’t gone along the next step, so that’s my perspective.

**G314**

I totally agree.

**G315**

Yeah, it all got…not exactly controversial, but we ended up in the Q&A at the end of the conference talking about sampling or otherwise and I said that I didn’t see the point of sampling in this case, that I felt it wasn’t an appropriate approach because if you’re one of the lucky few in the 10% that was kept well good for you and if you were among the 90% of what wasn’t kept then tough luck, off you go, and that’s not acceptable I don’t think. And some people went [gasp] ‘but they take up so much space!’ and I think it’s symptomatic of the approach that I was talking about earlier, of thinking of the records as being records, and bulky and administrative, rather than thinking of the people that they describe as people who might need to see them at some point. And it’s always been ‘well we can’t keep everything because there isn’t space’ and with some things yes but I think in this sort of case a 10% sample serves no purpose at all except to show what sorts of records were kept, and to reduce the bulk of what’s stored, and I don’t think it’s appropriate to do that with these records. The more I think about it the more I think we should be keeping them, because they have such bearing on people’s lives.

**G316**

The other thing that I was quite moved by was a piece of radio interview by Lemn Sissay on Radio 4 a number of years ago, about applying to Wigan social services for his personal files and that they had been lost in ‘the Iron Mountain’ - I don’t think it was realised at that stage that Iron Mountain was a company – and I just felt so sad because I felt that was recordkeeping gone wrong and that had affected one person and that then really had a massive impact on me that programme. And then when the new Scottish regulations came into being, where they actually enhanced recordkeeping because of what had happened in Scotland, I went and spoke at the conference there and I actually quoted that because I just felt so strongly that we ought to be looking after those records, so I felt even more strongly than I did before after hearing that piece, and I think he could be quite a good advocate in what we’re trying to do.

**Victoria**

Yeah, I’m working through various channels to try and make contact with him, he’s a very busy man so it’s difficult to, but I think he would be a good…sort of public voice for the outcomes of the research because of his personal experiences and certainly, you know, there are numerous examples of people who’ve had similar experiences. You know, people who’ve been told ‘oh I think there was a flood and your records were destroyed in a flood’ and then they apply again 10 years later and they get something, and then they apply again 5 years after that and they get something else but totally different. So there are lots and lots of example of where recordkeeping failures, lack of documentation, lack of indexing, lack of cataloguing, and lack of organisational memory about what has and hasn’t happened you know? The number of people who’ve told me that their records were destroyed in fires and floods! I don’t believe we’re that disaster prone. I think that, you know those…

**G316**

But that story just made a really massive personal impact on me, and it was the sort of thing as to why I wanted to get into archives, when I was working on the initial things with social services retention schedules years ago, when the Society of Archivists first brought those out, and I was looking at those as a trainee and I just thought, you know, this is really important stuff.

**G315**

If you think about it from the perspective of somebody who wants their records, to be told that their records have been lost is one terrible thing, but to be told that they weren’t selected for preservation because the records management system worked, ‘worked’ in inverted commas’, from the perspective of ‘ah, they’re just files’, that must be worse, or almost worse, or maybe as bad. Pretty terrible that you weren’t considered important enough to keep.

**Victoria**

Yeah, and retention schedules can be quite blunt instruments, particularly in cases like this where the provision of a social care service sometimes isn’t black and white, so I spoke to someone for example who as a child had a visit from a social worker every week, continued to live in the family home but was visited by a social worker every week, was taken out by a social worker, used to go on like respite breaks with foster carers and things like that. Went to access his records and was told well you were classed as a child in need not a child in care and so as a result your files only had a retention up to the age of 25 so they’ve actually be destroyed, whereas if you’d been taken into foster care they would have been retained. So experiences that can feel like being in care, can be treated from a records perspective as though they were a different category of experience. There’s dangers attached to being too prescriptive about what is and isn’t a care experience as well.

**G316**

And it’s who you’re keeping the records for. Are you keeping them to protect organisation’s reputations and so on? Or are you keeping them for people who are in them?

**G315**

People you were serving.

**G316**

Yes. So you’ve got to see both of those angles.

**Victoria**

Particularly if you’re thinking about those records as being a source for people’s personal histories and memories.

**G316**

Yes, people are interested in family history, they come into the archives to do that, so it’s extra important that we’re able to do it for the records of our own institution.

**G315**

I think we’ve got a duty as well to remain impartial between our employers and other people, cos the North Welsh case where there was a report that was never published and was suppressed, all copies were disposed of and then the record office found one in their County Council’s archive, there you go, and I was listening to the news with my other half – and she’s not really interested in this kind of thing at all – but she turned to me and said ‘so what do you do in that case?’, where it’s something that could potentially cause issues for your employer but it’s the right thing to do to say that you’ve got it? I think we’ve got an obligation to – without sounding ludicrously pompous – we’ve got an obligation to the truth and to the people that we as an organisation serve and not necessarily to the political whatevers of the people running the show. Yeah.

**Victoria**

I think it’s a really good point, because potentially an archive or a records centre can hold material which when investigated is destructive to the council, can cost significant sums of money in damages and reparations payments and criminal cases, and I think that some of the London boroughs are experiencing that right now. I don’t know if you’ve come across any of the…there’s two quite powerful survivor’s groups around the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, the Lambeth survivors and the Islington survivors, and they are using records, actively using subject access requests, to pursue reparation and in those cases the information governance teams are placed in that position, half way between the organisation and serving the individual, so they’re releasing information which can come back and cause the Council millions and millions of pounds in costs. So there are serious implications to recordkeeping in these cases, and justice implications.

**G315**

Because if you start suppressing that sort of thing then it all gets a little bit dictatorial and we ought to be being open.

**G314**

One of the things that came out of the project was that…I think it was quite…[Place name] County Council’s approach to social care was quite a positive one, and I don’t know why that surprised me but it did, because you do hear a lot of negative…you know, the general press, the national press, approaches to social care. But actually certainly in [Place name] there was a proper process in place and there were quite positive outcomes.

**G315**

And you can tell the people…

**G314**

The Children’s Officers. They really cared, you know, they were diligent and inspected homes and they went and…

**G315**

Visited children in non-local authority homes, and children who were placed in homes in the county from outside the county, they were sort of making sure they were all right and looking out for them.

**G314**

They weren’t perfect but at least they were trying to, you know, do the right thing.

**Victoria**

Yeah, I think it would be too one sided to think that all social care records are telling negative stories.

**G316**

Absolutely.

**Victoria**

I went to a conference about child residential care, and they had a session which was led by three adults who had been in care homes between the 1960s and the 1980s, and two of them had very negative experiences, and experienced abuse, but the third person surprised everyone in the room by standing up and saying ‘being in that care home was the best time of my life, that’s where I would go back to, that’s my happy place, because I had been so terribly abused in my home setting that to go into care was such a relief’ and what was very sad about his case was that he’d been in a charity home, one of the National Children’s Homes, and all of his records and the records of the home had all been destroyed, so much so that he now can’t trace the people that he was in care with. He remembers first names – he was only very young, 5-8 years old – and he can’t trace them, he can’t find them, and he says they’re like my brothers and sisters, I think of them as my brothers and sisters and I will never be able to find them because those records have been lost, and actually if they’d survived it may be that that information would be redacted as third party information so he wouldn’t get to know those anyway, but in that particular case that makes a… Quite often when people think about access to records they think of it as being therapeutic and for justice, but in this particular case it would be therapeutic but it also would be about this person reclaiming a part of their life that was a time of great happiness, and that perhaps, you know, has kept them going through difficult times in their adulthood. I think it’s very powerful when you think of them like that.

**G316**

Some of these stories make a very powerful case to getting this sorted, yeah.

**Victoria**

Ok, well thank you very much, I will stop recording but before we do, is there anything else that you want to add before we finish? Anything that occurs suddenly?

**G314**

I don’t think so.

**G315**

No, no.

**Victoria**

Ok.

**END OF SESSION**

**FOCUS GROUP TRANSCRIPT**

Group session held on 15th May 2018 between Victoria Hoyle and participants G308, G309, G310, G311 and G312.

**BEGINNING OF RECORDING**

**Victoria**

If you could each state your name for the recording.

**G309**

**G310**

**G308**

**G311**

**Victoria**

Thank you very much, ok, if we could just start out by a brief description of the work it is that you’ve been doing with child social care records?

[laughter and deferring to one another]

**G309**

Ok, I’ll start I suppose. What we do, we’re putting more meat to the bones of the files. Whereas prior to us starting you had files with just their headings on, the names, the headings on, nothing in the key people section and we’re sort of filling in that key section, to make it easier to cross reference the files, to see which person belongs to which family, what relationships…the files may stumble on relationships that people don’t realise is there and we play a very important part in that. I think it’s worked so far hasn’t it?

**G311**

The output of that is quite interesting because in putting the information on to a database, within the larger team, within information management, we have colleagues who are dealing with requests for information from the public and they are then trying to track down the records that Gloucestershire County Council holds and we have had examples of them coming up to us and saying I can see you’ve worked on this file and because you recorded certain information we were able to identify that we held some information on that person and therefore pull up the files, so that’s been a really good learning experience for us, in us understanding why we’re doing something and what the importance of it is. So that sort of key data in relation to say a person’s file but also any key relationships that they’ve had or any organisations that they’ve been involved with…

**G308**

And we include nicknames as well if we’ve got them and we remember, because sometimes somebody might only be known as ‘Spud’ and his name’s actually [Place name].

**G310**

And also there are situations where people are named because of crimes they’ve committed and those are identified so they become people who we identify and have to make a note of or highlight, and also occasionally police operations that might have happened and this is going back to the…well personally to the 1940s, so….

**G312**

So in terms of process what the team does is they’ll literally get a box of files out and sit and go through each one and compare it to the index entry on the records management database and add a load of extra detail, a load of extra metadata, correct things where necessary, so yeah as G309 was saying you’ve got the file title, also you’ve got correcting review dates as well, so from a data protection point of view we’re making sure that we’re complying with not keeping stuff for too long and keeping it for long enough…and so they go through and do all of that and then yeah add in any other people and for really historic files you know you might get someone halfway through who hang on that’s an entirely different person, so without the work these guys do that information wouldn’t be found in a search of the database.

**G308**

That can happen in family files as well, so you might have eight files or more on one family, and parents will inevitably get married two or three times during the process, children will come and go, there’s usually quite a few children by the time you’ve got eight files going. And so you’ve got assorted spellings…are you going to list all the assorted spellings or stick with the one on the birth certificate, if it’s in there? Are you going to go with all the different dates of birth that are listed as possibilities? Because the more information that you put in on a person the weaker it gets in a way, in a way it’s easier to search all of the different variants but in a way if you’ve got six different dates of birth because it’s been typo-ed through different files which one’s right? And if you’ve got one that seems to be right do you go with that one and then put a note at the bottom?

**G310**

And there seems to be definitely more of a focus on women and their children, so yes you know the fathers are involved, whether they’re putative fathers or married, but it tends to be… I mean I personally have only had two…or well I can think of two three files where it was just a male adult and a child, several children, but it tends to be…

**G311**

But it’s interesting that the files vary in that some contain very little identifying information about an individual and others quite a lot [laughter] in a lot of different spellings, so you work with what you’ve got and record that on the database and sometimes there are gaps and sometimes from the information that you’ve pulled off the file you’re able to sort of close those gaps and give more certainty.

**G312**

And yeah in terms of file titles and things, historically a lot of the old ones are just listed by whatever is written on the front cover and so you know that might just say ‘Smith Family’, which is not really any use to anyone if you’re trying to search for John Smith, you at least need something in there because if you just search Smith you’re going to be inundated.

**G308**

And if it turns out to be the Roberts family inside the file and not the Smiths…

**G312**

Well exactly, that too.

**G309**

Yeah yeah yeah.

**G308**

You know you just go with the contents. [group laughter]

**G310**

There’s been a definite change in the way files have been compiled over the years…

**G308**

Over the years, yes.

**G310**

Yeah the amount of information and quite key to it all is the language used during the 40s, 50s, 60s, that’s changed considerably…

**G308**

Social history has changed, the way that children were dealt with and that families were dealt with.

**G309**

It’s almost like you’re tracking the changing trends of history, so if you look at files from the 1940s compared to the recent ones you can see how formalities have changed you know, whereas the officials were known as ‘Mr A’ or ‘Mrs S’…

**G312**

Even the parents. You go well I’d love to fill in the names of the parents but it’s ‘Mr Jones’ and ‘Mrs Jones’, it doesn’t really any help.

[group laughter]

**G311**

But also, a point further from that there is sometimes appearing to be that gender divide where the male is referred to in quite a lot of detail but the mother is only referred to as ‘the mother’…

**G309**

Yeah, yeah.

**G310**

Yeah.

**G311**

And doesn’t have a sort of an identity on the file.

**G309**

Yeah that’s something that has come out a lot to be honest. You can see again how that changes over the period of time that the files were produced.

**G308**

Also there’s random information scattered through the files, so you might have 80 pages and if you’re very lucky your eye will just catch a scribbled note at the top of the page ‘Adopted, November 1950.’ [group agreement and laughter] And that’s the only reference that you’ll find to it.

**G311**

It’s almost as an afterthought actually isn’t it.

**G308**

It’s just chance that you happen to see it.

**G310**

It might be in file seven of nine you know, at the bottom of the 27th page or something and…

**Victoria**

So what’s the date range of the files that you’re dealing with?

**G312**

It is the 40s right up to the early 2000s.

**G308**

Children picked up from bombed out buildings I’ve had, in World War Two, yeah.

**G310**

Children whose fathers, in this area, were American service men, that’s very common.

**G312**

I feel as though there might have been some from the late 30s.

**G308**

There may be from the late 30s. Certainly there are parents being born in the 1890 somethings, which is quite interesting because you’re looking at what’s their life been like, in terms of change.

**G309**

It’s amazing, a lot of the old files are handwritten and there’s some lovely, really nice…some of the handwriting’s really nice. I mean other handwriting is…

**G310**

Yeah that’s an issue. [group laughter]

**G309**

It’s a mission in itself. Is that a ‘h’ or whatever?

**G308**

I tend to skip, if it really looks like a page of knitting I just find something that’s been typewritten because you can spend 20 minutes deciphering a page and then find it didn’t say anything.

**G309**

That’s the thing, you can spend a long time on these files…

**Victoria**

Sounds like it, yeah.

**G309**

But you’re trying to capture it in a certain timeframe, if you know what I mean.

**G312**

We aim for three files an hour and it tends to be about doable, which isn’t too bad but then you can get some that are…you’ve all had boxes of files where you’re like no, no…

**G308**

That’s a week’s worth. [laughs]

**G312**

And then some that you blitz through as well, they’re just really tiny, one sheet of paper in it that’s got a few details.

**G308**

Or some of the newer adoption files, certainly from the 90s onwards because all the information is lovely, typed out on a file sheet and you just put it all in, da da da da da job done.

**G311**

As the years have moved on you’ve moved sometimes to sort of proforma forms, so you know the form is asking for certain information rather than a sort of a free hand I’m going to write all that I know, that’s something that has come with the…well…I don’t know, 1970s, 1980s?

**G310**

Yeah, 80s probably.

**G312**

It makes it easy to know where to look for stuff doesn’t it?

**G311**

It does.

**G309**

Oh absolutely.

**G311**

It does.

**G309**

I mean I get quite amused cos G312 has done these spreadsheets and you’ll have one file and you’ll think oh just one file and then you go and open the box and actually it’s not one file it’s five files on one person. [group laughter]

**G312**

But when they were first put on the database they’ve been put down as one and then yeah…

[G309 laughs]

**G312**

I think you’ve all had quite a lot of those.

**G308**

Loads, yeah. I think yeah some days I get ten new files to do and other days…

**G312**

Yeah, so we create…the team creates new file entries on the database for however many files there are. So previously you’ll get…I don’t know…’[named person] (2 files)’ and then…so we’ll do it so they’ve got two separate entries which is better for keeping track…

**G308**

It can be very frustrating though because you can have five files and one of them’s actually just a photocopy of one of the others.

**G310**

I’ve not had that yet.

**G308**

I’ve had a few of those.

**Victoria**

It sounds then like it’s quite a complex process.

**G309**

Yeah, mmmm.

**Victoria**

So this might be a difficult question to answer and you might all have slightly different methods but…it’s the morning, you come in, you’re presented with a file and you have to extract all this information and put it in to the database, what’s your strategy, what are the steps that you work through?

**G311**

Good, good question.

**G309**

We have a…we have a sort of skeleton plan, that G312 and Michelle have set us down prior to the project, you know this is what you’re looking for, so as long as you’ve got your skeleton plan in mind…it’s all written down, as long as you’ve got it…

**G312**

There’s a massive guidance document.

**G309**

As long as you’ve got it all in mind you get to know what you’re looking for you know, you’re looking for first name, middle names, second names, nicknames this type of thing, addresses…that’s an interesting one cos some families moved addresses like you change seasons, but you have to know the latest address, so you’re looking for that so generally you’re looking for like the name, the second name, address…

**G308**

The years… the date of birth…

**G309**

The date of birth…

**G308**

The years that the file covers…

**G310**

Yeah, coverage yeah.

**G309**

That’s the other thing cos you get a lot of files with ‘file 1, file 2’ but you don’t get the period of time that it covers.

**G308**

You also get lots of ‘File 1’ which is very confusing, because they’ve all been done by different people.

**G310**

I tend to also quite early on in the process look at the destruction review date, so we’ve got lots of codes and typically we’re on RSC 03, a lot of them.

**G312**

At the minute, yeah.

**G310**

At the minute, yeah, and that has a certain period of time from the date of birth of one of the key people or the youngest member, so it’s…I’m wanting to get that done as quickly as possible.

**G308**

I tend to do that first too, because it’s better than forgetting it, because that’s one of the crucial piece of data that we have to collect in order to maintain that rotation of the files.

**G310**

Yeah, that’s when it’s going to be reviewed again.

**G311**

The first thing I do when I look at a file is I actually look at what I believe to be the start of the file, the start of that journey, which is usually the back page, and I have a quick sort of look at that and then I look at the very end of the file, which is the top page, just to see what timescale I’m spanning, but also that first page that you look at is hopefully going to identify in some way the subject, whether it’s the fact that the child has been born, received into care, or had their first contact with social services in some way. And then you almost sort of piece the bits together after that, and if you start to recognise a name, you know, two or three or four times you’re thinking that, you know, perhaps that’s a key person, so you’re thinking you know how are they involved with the individual and you’re recording that down. Sometimes you need to go back and amend what you’ve done because you can be on a wild goose chase.

**G308**

But we have got a notes section in the database itself.

**G311**

We have.

**G308**

So that’s quite handy sometimes just to scribble down as it were on the database, but yeah the names as you collect them and then these dates of birth and where they were, because children – a lot of the ones I’ve got at the moment – seem to have been in court, quite often for huge misdemeanours like handling…what did you have?...handling a stolen 50p!

**G312**

50p was more money back then of course.

**G308**

But that could get you a few weeks in a remand home.

**G310**

Yes, absolutely.

**G312**

So the retention classification codes depend on…[Person’s name] has probably been through this already?...depend on what happened with the child, whether they were in care, whether they were adopted, fostered, just had passing involvement with social services who bought them a pair of shoes, and that wasn’t reflected in the old database entries.

**G308**

It’s not always clear though is it? Because sometimes you can be quite sure that somebody has been in care but there’s no mention of it, you know, you think they must have been.

**G312**

And you go I just want this one thing…I want the word ‘foster parent’, I want something to say they were in this home…

**G308**

Because you can get letters leading you up to a point but you have to be very careful not to record that as an event that happened because a letter that says there is a place in this foster home doesn’t mean that they went there.

**G309**

No, no.

**G308**

And if the story hasn’t continued, you haven’t got that evidence. And I’ve had a lot of false starts, you know it’s oh tried Mrs. Jones, no she was full, tried Mrs. Henry, she was full, oh we might go to Mrs. Watson and then nothing else comes of it, but those aren’t three foster parents, they’re just three people they phoned. And so they wouldn’t be key people.

**G312**

In terms of the covering dates as well, it’s really useful when people have put in a subject access request, a lot of the time they’re quite specific and they say I want information on when I was in this place at this time, so for the other half of the team who are searching the database for a specific period of time, it saves them going through a load of massive paper files that are just not going to be relevant for them, because these guys have done that bit of work and gone ‘that doesn’t cover it’.

**G308**

Also for some of the residential homes that there was a major concern about in the past, the area of concern covers a particular period but the home might have been functioning 30 or 40 years back, so I’ve got some that went to a particular home back in the 50s whereas the major issue with that home was in the 80s and so I’ll quite often just put in the database what year they went there, because it just saves somebody digging in the file when they might not need to.

**G309**

It’s amazing how many establishments have changed use over the years as well…

**G312**

Yes.

**G308**

Yes. And what they record in terms of…

**G309**

…over time, yes, cos that’s what you have to try and keep a track of really, why people are sent to that establishment, you know what was their…what was the establishment’s sort of guideline, what were they out to do, that sort of thing, you’ve got to try and capture that just to put people in the right direction really.

**G308**

It’s the difference between a remand home where they’ve been sent to court, and then the approved schools, and then just the straight residential homes because they have no one to look after them, and then the residential homes with schooling attached, but looked like they were a bit stricter than that.

**G310**

Trainee Ships as well.

**G308**

Trainee ships, a couple of trainee ships yeah.

**G310**

Yeah very interesting, Portishead…

**G308**

I found another one as well that was like an army regiment trainee thing.

**G310**

Yeah, yeah.

**Victoria**

So it’s a very complex picture of provision…

**G312**

It’s very diverse.

**G308**

You never know what you’ll get.

**Victoria**

So when you started out with this did you have a potted history of social care in Gloucestershire?

**G308**

No.

**G312**

We’ve sort of learnt it as we go along. I didn’t know anywhere near this much when I started, I had no…no I had no idea.

**G310**

And you learn a bit more about other counties, neighbouring counties, because people transfer in, so sometimes you get paperwork relating to their other residents.

**G311**

But also the legal terminology has changed, so you’ve got files that refer to a care order or a supervision order and I think we’ve built up a sort of body of knowledge between us haven’t we? In terms of a) what the decades represent in terms of the terminology, particularly in terms of the social services or legal process, but also I think now it’s much easier for us to look at a file and say well that’s the 1950s, just from the way that information is recorded and the language that is used, it sort of reflects the time.

**G312**

Even the type of paper and the font.

**G311**

Yes, yeah.

**G309**

You can even track somebody’s different periods of their working life with social services, cos they’ll start off as a social worker…

**G312**

Children’s officer or something.

**G309**

And then they’ll end up…

**G310**

The Director.

**G309**

The Director like, and you can see through the years how they…

**G310**

So you learn about the staff as well.

**G311**

You do! You do!

**G309**

You can see how they chewed on the cud you know, how they…

**G308**

Some of the social workers, so they’d just get married halfway through a file and it’s really confusing [group laughter] cos you don’t know if [two people with the same first name] are same person.

**G309**

And the spellings as well, they don’t seem to be too sure of the spellings to start with.

**G308**

What, of their own names?! [laughs]

**G309**

They’re written in different ways you know and you sort of…

**G308**

But social history as well, you were documenting the coming in of biros in the 1950s, and then suddenly there were red ones and green ones and they were playing with them.

**G310**

And then Roneo before photocopying, photostating then photocopying…

**G308**

And then the big fax machines.

**G312**

And the horrible heated paper that just… it fades.

[sounds of vigorous agreement]

**G312**

It’s only from the 90s and you just can’t read it.

**G309**

And they’ve got like paper that is like bigger than A4 haven’t they?

[sounds of agreement]

**G308**

The foolscap yeah.

**G309**

It won’t even fit in the file.

**G308**

So you lose the top and the bottom!

**G312**

So we have between us I think built up quite a bit of knowledge that then gets really useful, so the more you do this process the more you’re like so I found this sentence in a file but I know what that means because I’ve seen 14 other files and that’s what that means.

**G308**

So we’re quite good at forensics in a way.

**G310**

A lot of forensics involved yeah.

**G311**

It’s investigative.

**G312**

So we keep a bit of a glossary as well of useful terms that then we can share between the team and have access to, so you can go I’ve found this phrase, I don’t know what it means, let’s have a look and see if it’s on there. Yes it is, brilliant.

**G310**

And picking back up on what G311 said about the legal process and different outcomes of hearings have changed a lot over the years, you know if a child had committed a misdemeanour and it was reported back in the 50s or something there would be one particular punishment or resolution to that situation and as it goes through the years it changes, and you know so yes it’s a fascinating journey through recent social history.

**G308**

It can be quite shocking as well, some of the things that we read. I had one… Can I give you an example?

**G312**

I’m assuming you’re not going to give the name, so…

**Victoria**

I would love an example!

**G308**

I won’t give the name on the grounds that I can’t remember and it was a long time ago, but it surprised me. It was a file about the children and it’s the one I told to you the other day [speaking to G310], and there was an input from another county and it said ‘This file should be kept with...a copy of…with any file that goes with this family’ and it was a file about the father, and when he was 11 or 12 he’d actually killed a younger child, apparently deliberately as far as they could tell, and he got sent to a remand home for six months, because he was… it was back in the late 40s when this had happened but he was obviously too young to be hung, which is what would have happened otherwise, but yes, it was a very shocking story and there was a lot of evidence that had been collected around it. But that was it, the only other thing in the file was that was his name, that was him, and it carried on talking about the children.

**G310**

These descriptions are very perfunctory, they’re very just matter of fact.

**G311**

Sometimes it feels that they are quite judgemental, because of the language, and that may be to do with…we are ourselves perceiving it from where we’re at today, so uses of phrase like ‘she was a dull girl’…

**G312**

And you have ‘imbecile’ used as a medical term. That was the official term.

**G308**

It was the official term, yes.

**G312**

Diagnosis? ‘Imbecile’. And you look at it now and you go that seems a bit harsh! [laughter]

**G308**

But equally…

**G311**

Cretin!

**G308**

…’Cynthia is looking particularly attractive today.’

**G312**

Oh yes.

**G308**

‘She was wearing that nice red dress.’

**G312**

But there have been times as well where, especially Michelle and I, have done extra background research where we just need to know the wider context for the team, so where we had approved school orders and it was does that count as a child in care or not? What does this actually mean? So yeah, looked it up, did some…I’ve read more legislation than I ever had in my life before since starting on this project…and it turned out that yeah that does mean that child was looked after by the local authority, so there is background research like that as well where you find yourself going ‘what am I reading?!’

**G309**

Yeah, yeah.

**G312**

But it’s all so useful and it’s stuff we need to make sure we’re doing things right.

**G309**

You’ve got to have a certain amount of…not coldness but a certain detachment from every file because if not you can be drawn in.

**G310**

Absolutely.

**Victoria**

I can imagine yeah.

**G309**

If you’re not careful. We were warned, or I know I certainly was when I started this sort of project…now, you know if you’re going to get drawn in to this sort of thing you need to…you might need counselling, you need to be talking to somebody. The managers in the office like [Place name] and [Place name] have always said you know if you get drawn into it in any way you can talk to us about how you feel, we’ll put the perspective back into it, you know what I mean?

**G308**

I’ve had one sometimes and it’s quite random because of the files we’re just pulling off the shelf but I had a file about a child who was found, one of the last actual foundlings in the County about 20 years ago, and the story of her being found and then the foster parents that she went to, and then having to give her a name and get her registered and everything, parents never turned up, and then further files on her and the foster parents kept her until she was adopted, so then I had a file later on a couple of weeks later about the adoptive parents applying to be adoptive parents, and then a bit later them saying oh yeah here’s the adoption. And I thought I’ve got the whole story here, right through and it felt really nice because they didn’t change her name much from what the foster parents had given this child, but I thought there’s a whole story in her files that if she ever asks, and she probably is in her early 20s now, but if she ever asks, it’s all there and I’ve actually worked on all of those files. And that’s quite nice to be able to do that.

**G312**

Although you get the other side of it as well, where you get families that return, and just keep returning and you go oh no.

**G308**

Oh yes.

[general sounds of agreement]

**G312**

And then you get the next generation, so you get you know…the parents go through care and then they go into youth offending or wherever else and then they’ll have a child young and then the child goes through the same thing.

**G311**

I don’t know whether it’s appropriate to say but I’ve heard my colleagues in the project team actually say I’ve seen your name G311 on this file, because in a former life I was a solicitor in child protection, so I would be approaching it from taking a case to court, knowing what the outcome was but never knowing you know twenty years down the line what had happened to that individual and then I have come across files where I have seen to some extent what has happened to that individual, they’ve you know gone through a process, so from that perspective, my own personal perspective, it’s been quite an insight into what the complete process is and I think it’s a bonus when you do get a series of files that actually give you…

**G312**

Closure.

**G311**

Yes. But also give you a life history, because you have the reassurance of knowing that if that individual wants to look at their records there will be something to piece together, rather than you know just an odd bit of information.

**G310**

One of the interesting things I’ve found was that some of these cases…not all, not many sorry, but are not necessarily from a lower socio-economic range. So I had a file where there were two very well qualified people, I think one was… somewhere up in Tewkesbury someone was a company director, and they had a child who was as they said ‘malformed’ and you know the report was how the parents – it was their first child – said ‘this isn’t suitable for our lifestyle and we must get rid of it basically.’ Oh my god, you know.

**G308**

But depending on when that way the adoption agencies might not have taken it because they only tended to take the ones that were perfect.

**G312**

We have had one about a disabled baby where it said ‘this child is not suitable for adoption’.

**G308**

Yeah.

**G309**

I must admit I do…the one thing that made me smile when I was doing some of them…the first thing you see about the child is not about whether it’s healthy or not, it’s if it’s black or white.

**G310**

Yeah, yeah.

**G309**

‘This is a coloured child’ As soon as they say a ‘coloured’ child that’s going to put them into a category, cos you follow that and then they’ll find it more difficult to foster that child.

**G312**

The foster parents and the adoptive parents will express a preference either way.

**G310**

I can trump that because I had a series of files where it was the colour of the hair that was most important, if they had red hair. These were files where the foster parents were being interviewed about what they want and it’s a whole process and they said ‘definitely not any redheads, because redheaded children are only trouble.’ Anti-Irish, anti-redhead.

**G311**

But also files have been identified as a ‘problem family’ haven’t they?

**G308**

Oh yes, you read letters…

**G311**

Very very obliquely it’s made reference throughout, which is…yeah, I would imagine quite a burden to carry.

**G308**

But equally though I like some of the research that goes on, especially tracing family members who’d gone abroad and you’ve got the international social services involved. You’ve sometimes got the different United States forces for all those naughty airmen in the 50s, and then you’ve got the international adoption files as well, so you’ve got translations of things from whatever country you like, you know children are being adopted in one country and then having to be adopted again in Britain as a separate process.

**G309**

I used to…I found it quite amusing actually cos you’d see mother ‘so and so’, father ‘RAF’ and then a few pages on ‘father returned to America’, or ‘sent overseas by his commanding officer’ [laughs] never to be seen again type of thing.

**G310**

Yeah yeah it happened a lot.

**G308**

And one or two you get a letter from a parent, I’ve had a letter from such a parent from California and he wrote back and said ‘I’m just letting you know that yes I am your father and I’m sorry but at the time blah blah blah, by the way I was actually already married so sorry about that, but if you wanted to get in touch here’s my address’ and that’s on file and…or files where you get Christmas cards, where the children are taken away…

**G312**

Or letters.

**G308**

And letters and cards from a parent and that’s very sad.

**G310**

Photographs going back into…well every generation, yeah, yeah.

**G311**

Indeed.

**Victoria**

What proportion of files would you say have those kind of personal items in them?

**G312**

It’s not the majority.

**G308**

Not many, no no. It’s few.

**G312**

Maximum 20%. Or 10-15?

**G308**

Oh I’d say lower. Closer to 10.

**G311**

And depends on the nature of the file as well.

**G308**

There’s a lot more in adoption files.

**Victoria**

I was going to say are there types of files where it’s more likely to see that kind of material?

**G311**

Adoption files I think, you see the cards that are all sort of in an envelope you know, ready one day if that file is accessed for them to see, that you know that there was a continual supply of birthday cards or Christmas cards. I’ve seen that.

**G308**

Also there are some sad ones, they tended to take…there was a phase where they’d take a photo of the parents on their last day that they saw the child. How you could expect a smile, they look desperate sometimes. And imagine that, the only photo you’ve got of your parents is them looking forlorn.

**G311**

But also you then get entries on a file that actually almost as an afterthought, after the event has happened, say three or four months later to say ‘oh and for the life story book work could you provide us with a photograph of yourself’ or something like that, but the event has probably already happened and then somebody has suddenly then thought ‘oh yes, that might be useful to have’. It doesn’t always happen that way but...

**G310**

Cos there is quite definite profiles on the foster parents who then maybe go on to become the adoptive parents and the natural parents or parent, so you get… one thing I was going to mention I’ve seen, in a small number of files, the rise of same sex parents and the you know the whole adoption process going down that route, that is really interesting.

**G308**

Opening up more.

**G310**

Yeah, opening up more.

**G308**

But then you also see when children have been passed from 10 or 20 or 30 sets of foster parents and all the way through its saying ‘little Johnny is awfully troublesome’ and you’re thinking did they not connect the two things? That he doesn’t know where he lives.

**G312**

In terms of like letters and things like that I’ve also had it in some files, where children were just in care, children you know who were in a children’s home, mostly in the 60s and 70s the ones that I’ve seen, where the parents just couldn’t cope or the mum was ill or whatever else, and they didn’t want to let the child go but they had no choice and then you’ve got aunties and uncles and other family members writing letters and things like that.

**G309**

There’s some very touching letters you get from mum to the child that’s been adopted, saying ‘I didn’t want to do this, but circumstances have forced me to’ you know, and as you said ‘I’ll always be here and here’s my address and here’s my…’ you know, so they’ve always got that option.

**G312**

There are some where you really really want that person to put in a request. You really want that person to see their file.

**G309**

Yes you do.

**G308**

You almost want to write to them and tell them. [laughs]

**G312**

There are some people where you’re like ‘I hope you don’t’…

**G308**

But I think we also went through an era where we all felt that actually this is a rubber stamping exercise, where the box had to be ticked that mother consented and mother was say 15 or 16 in the 40s and you had this inference from the file, and all I can say is that it was an inference, that you know there was no other options, so from a…I suppose from a legal point of view, it ticked the box to say there was consent but actually when you looked at the file as a whole you, you know, really got a stronger feel of actually there was so much more going on than simply you know ‘yes I agree’.

**G312**

You get a lot of sort of case notes where it’s ‘went to speak to Miss whoever today, she still can’t decide whether she’s going to go through with the adoption or not, but I’m proceeding because that’s what we’ve got to do.’ And…yeah.

**G308**

And they say ‘mother consented in her own words’ but it’s actually the same words in every file.

**G311**

Yes.

**G308**

So they really knew what to say these young mums.

**G311**

That was why it was so…it was almost…it wasn’t a proforma but they’d written out the words that were obviously in the legislation that needed to be…

**G308**

That had to be said.

**G311**

Yes.

**G309**

I’ve noticed in a few of the later files, as you’re coming up towards this era, there is a lot more encouragement in getting mum to keep the child, you know, and assisting mum to keep the child, and I did notice in one or two cases where the parents, like the grandparents of the child you know, had an awful lot to say about not keeping the children type of thing, but mum the actual mum wants to keep the child, you know, and you saw that assistance, you see that assistance, cos they would go into a mother and child home, there’d be like a specialist nursery or something like that where mum and baby could be together and bond together, you know, so you can also see that side of the coin. And I found it interesting that…not many…but you go through some of the files and there are happily ever afters for the child concerned, you know, you see them go through birth, through difficult times, and then he leaves school and then he goes and joins the army of something like that and you know you think to yourself well they’ve done the job, they’ve helped him traverse that difficult path which is… but that’s not in every file.

**G308**

I had a family, a foster family, and they took on a whole family of children, I think there were 6 or 7 of them of different ages, and they were pretty much given a house to do it and they said well we’ll take them on, the youngest was 2 and the eldest was 10 or 11, and they took them right through, and so the oldest ones were off to university before the youngest ones had left school, and they ended up going and getting an award of some sort of civic achievement and a huge thank you, because they’d brought up this large family as a family and done a good job with them, you know, and as G309 said, to see the oldest ones going off and achieving well in the world you’re thinking it’s down to those foster parents, who took them on instead of splitting up the family which is what would otherwise have happened.

**Victoria**

You must inevitably think about people in the files, wonder forward, and do you ever have any kind of feedback from access to records or anything about people who have seen their records?

**G309**

We have had from FOI up here we’ve had people say oh thanks cos of your work, cos you’ve made this connection we were able to track a file which we’d given up on. That’s on a couple of cases.

**G312**

Yes we get sort of administrative feedback, we don’t really get any personal feedback.

**G310**

Not personal no.

**G308**

No, no, but we do find you know files like G311 said of cases that she knew in a different lifetime and I had the same for a lot of students I used to do pastoral support for, you know fairly recently, but of course a lot of them were in care, and they wouldn’t tell you a thing at college, but it’s all in the file. If I’d have known, I wish I’d have known, it would have helped.

**G311**

And that is incredibly rewarding and it makes you realise and appreciate how sort of important it is to a) have somebody record the information in the first place, and make it as accurate as possible in terms of factual, but also some of the files I’ve seen you actually think if I was that person now looking at my file I would have more of an understanding because a picture has been painted rather than you know just a couple of pieces of paper with a tick box sort of type thing, and I think that’s…some of the files I see I think gosh is that really all the information that an organisation would have on a person?

**G308**

I’ve seen one or two where they’ve edited it and the social worker’s actually said, you know, for the access to records request, I have left out the part where the mother actually says what she thinks about this baby, because I feel it would be too upsetting, so they’re still editing at that point within access to records, lots of facts, but they’re deciding what they’re going to reveal on a personal level.

**G312**

That does always happen though, because…

**G308**

Is that part of the real process? But you’re still not getting the full story.

**G312**

It’s part of the subject access process as well, if it may cause undue distress.

**G310**

I’ve seen a situation where…I think this would be back in the 50s…where a mother, I don’t know what age she was, she was in her teens, the assessment was that she was very unsuitable to be a mother, and she was told just after birth that the baby had died but actually it had been taken and put into care, and you know obviously that’s on the file and you sort of think I wonder if she’ll ever find out you know.

**Victoria**

So it says on the file that’s what she’s been told?

**G310**

The social workers say ‘the mother of this child’ – whose named and obviously we’ve got a file on this child as it grows up – ‘was told that the baby died’ but in fact what had actually happened was it’s been taken because at the time it was deemed that that mother would be very unsuitable to look after that child, low mental capacity or one of those stock phrases.

**G311**

One of those phrases.

**G308**

Equally you get several mothers who seem perfectly incapable of looking after children who are left with 11 or 12 and everyone thinks that’s ok and it’s getting worse and worse as you go through the file and you think why isn’t anyone intervening?

**G309**

But then there was an insistence wasn’t there at one point, or I’ve seen it in some of the files I’ve done, where they insisted that the mum has six weeks with the baby.

**G311**

Yes and I think that’s often reflected in the changing legal process, that the legislation has at one point has said you know, you cannot accept consent until the baby is x number of weeks old, so we had in sort of the 40s you know the child would be taken away and then the carer couldn’t apply for an adoption order for, you know, was it three months? [sounds of agreement] That period, and then it obviously changed because you found that adoptions were going through a lot sooner, so again yeah that’s sort of information that we’ve pieced together in terms of background, to give us a structure.

**G308**

It wasn’t always like that, I had one where the baby arrived with the Corona man, because he knew of someone who had a spare baby and would you like one!

**G311**

Actually yes.

**G310**

I remember that one.

**G308**

He brought it around the next week. [laughs]

**G311**

Yeah there was a certain trend at one point where certainly somebody who would have been quite respected, whether it was a medical professional or a sort of a fixer of their time, a lady who would sort of put the two parties together, and they were known to the authorities and it was sort of…that was how it was done.

**G312**

‘Adoption was arranged through Mrs so-and-so.’

**G308**

I’ve clocked her so many times that I actually put her in the files now, if she turns up again, she worked in a particular place, at a particular time and as you say she seemed to be the fixer and so I log her now if I find her.

**Victoria**

As you will know from reading the information about the project we’re particularly interested in the rights of care leavers and how they access their material, and one of the things that I think has come out of the session so far is just the changing nature of the record. So if you’re in care in the 1950s and 60s you can expect a file that’s rather different perhaps than if you’re in care in the 90s. So I wondered if we could just unpick those distinctions a little bit, and I wonder if you could give me a sense of..if someone requested a file and they were in care in the 1950s and 60s what would be different and in that file to if they were in care in the 1980s and 90s.

**G308**

Possibly less information.

**Victoria**

In the latter?

**G308**

From the 1950s and 60s…there’s a lot of narrative in them but not necessarily…sometimes – it varies so much – sometimes there’s a lot of information, but generally there seems to be patchier information. It’s maybe just the way it was collected, but sometimes in the 50s you’d get somebody who would collect every last date of birth.

**G312**

I was going to say you do get the other extreme, you’ve got loads of narrative, loads of description from the 50s, school reports from the 60s I think I’ve seen, school reports on every child in the family…

**G308**

But otherwise it can just be ‘Mr and Mrs’…

**G312**

It’s one or the other.

**G308**

Yeah, it’s one or the other, not much middle ground.

**G312**

There are two extremes from that period I would say.

**G309**

And it’s very official, in the early years, it seems to be a lot more – as I said before – ‘Mr A’, ‘Mr B’ and I must admit some of the files I was looking at I thought… I used to make a bit of a task to find out what that initial stood for, cos sometimes they’d just sign their name, you know, so I’d be sat there with like a device on my phone where I’d be looking really closely at the page, ‘I know what that name says’! And when you find it it’s like a eureka moment. [laughs]

**G311**

I think certainly from the later files, the 1980s sort of onwards, I would see more often than not a running commentary in terms of social work records, on the front page as it were, and that would go from recording visits and incidents or whatever, and then on the other side of the file you would get the official forms and any perhaps correspondence and a form that said ‘child changed foster placements’ and things like that, so you would almost get two sorts of records within the record, and also I’ve noticed in the later files you have had more of a closing summary, where that case has been concluded in whatever way, whether a care order is made or an adoption or something like that, so you’ve almost had sort of a summary and a chronology of the significant events for that individual, whereas in the 1940s and 50s yes you might get verbatim writing about oh we visited them in the garden, isn’t it lovely, and all that kind of thing but you didn’t necessarily get key…key milestones, key factors for the individual, so…

**G312**

A summary of our involvement.

**G311**

Yes.

**G310**

And you do get key…as time progresses you find social workers or key workers, from the medical social profession anyway, that write in a certain style and there was a series of files I had where…I think it was Fred something, I can’t remember who it was, but he was a key worker and he wrote half a page about you know going to a house and what it was like and all that, and this was quite late, in the 80s, 90s, so…but he did, as you suggested, he did kind of put in a lot of key facts, you know he was there to do a job basically, he was there to do an assessment, but quite flowery language.

**G308**

Quite funny as well actually.

**G310**

Oh he was hilarious, it could have been a script.

**G312**

Incredibly well written.

**G310** [speaking to G308]

What was his name again?

**G312**

Probably best not to put it on the tape. [all laugh]

**G311**

But I think that just showed that depending on the individual who had conduct of that file really depended on what information was recorded.

**G310**

Yes, it was very individual, yeah, yeah.

**G311**

It really was.

**G312**

I think they’ve become more consistent, in some ways.

**G311**

Yes.

**G308**

Yes.

**G310**

[hesitantly] Yes.

**G312**

I think there was a golden era and it’s kind of perhaps not always kept up since…

**G308**

You can see where they got too busy and their caseloads got too big and it suddenly becomes scribbles and scrawls and it says date of birth and they write ‘aged 37’ and you think ‘since when?’

**G312**

Aged 37 and there’s no date on the form.

**G308**

No date on the form, yeah yeah.

**G311**

And that’s been a real bug bear for us, hasn’t it? [sounds of agreement] You know and they did seem to be certainly in the 40s and 50s that things were recorded by age rather than date of birth and I think date of birth has come in the sort of 70s, 80s. So that’s a really interesting contrast. I’m trying to think what else?

**G312**

I think the files from the 50s as well vary very much, and the 40s, by what type they were, so the adoption files are frequently really quite thin with just a load of forms in. There you go, boom, done. Whereas someone who was in care might have a lot more detail because we’ve had much more input and much more contact.

**G308**

I think the judgement that was on people as well, after the war if you think about social history there was a complete lack of housing, and so you’ve got people living in camps, and in tin huts and tin shelters, all over the place, all over the county.

**G310**

In caves! They were in the forest.

**G308**

And the government thinking actually they’ll have to stay there, you know, yes we know it’s not good, we’re visiting every month, if it gets dreadful we’ll…but there’s no-where to put them anyway, but that time and people were trying so hard, you can see it in the files, they were trying to make the best of it. Yes they’ve got a tin hut on the corner of a swamp but they’re keeping it clean, the kids are clean, they’re well fed, it’s ok, but you go to another one it’s a complete pit and awful and they take the children out, so I think things must have been very bad for them to remove the children back then, if people were managing.

**G309**

I tend to look at the diaries as well, the diaries now are a lot more detailed when they do visits, they have like dates, of when the visit took place, what happened on that particular day, and then they go on to another day, what happened then, so you get a lot more detail now, although there’s more pressure and there’s probably more pressure on the social workers in as much as they’ve got to produce these type of more detailed documentations. You get the feeling that maybe they are probably swamped a little bit with what they’ve got to do administration wise, whereas before in the earlier 40s and 50s you might not get they detail, you know, they’ll just say, as G312 said earlier, ‘I went to visit little Johnny’ and did his adoption and that’s about it, that’s the account that…

**G310**

There’s also a trend I think as well for the type of therapy that people were offered, because clearly if you’re living with 11 kids in a tin cabin by River Severn there’s a lot of social pressure and social anxiety, and there was an expectation that these people should maintain things – by the authorities – that things should be maintained up to a certain standard, which is understandable but you know clearly not possible in some circumstance with not much money coming in, and there’s been…I’ve seen in files a more of a move away from medication and lobotomies and all sorts of terrible things like that towards more counselling and other kinds of therapies like that, so this is for people in very difficult situations and that you know that has been reflected.

**G308**

But a lot of parents…

**G312**

A lot of people committed to hospitals and asylums and things.

**G310**

That’s very common, with mothers and things.

**G308**

The children in care for two weeks while mother recovers, gets her breath back, ok right you’re better now, have these six back, yeah and then of course it starts again.

**G311**

I think the later files I’m picturing that they are more often signed, you know entries are signed so you’ve got the professionals name and their position, so you’ve got – perhaps it isn’t accountability – but you’ve got some record of actually the professionals that were involved, rather than just a name, and you surmise that that was maybe a children’s officer or someone in authority but you don’t know, and I think the later files are better, I wouldn’t say they are wholly accounted for in that way, but they do seem better at you know, having the name and whether it’s social worker or psychiatrist or whatever.

**G310**

Another kind of very interesting thing, after a certain date, I don’t know when, there were unique identifying numbers called PRNs – Personal Reference Number? – so the person in question would have that but if it was relevant siblings and parents and that did…you know you could then have a name which hopefully was spelt the same all the way though, a date of birth which hopefully was the same and a personal reference number, so it makes identifying the child…

**G309**

PRNs are absolutely fantastic.

**G312**

We’ve added them to the file entries on the database, if it’s someone called Tom Smith you’ve then got a really quick way of finding him.

**G309**

Yeah. It just brings everything up. And what I’ve found interesting – this is just a little caveat really – I’ve found my address in a file from 1950 and we didn’t think our house had been built until the late 1960s, but we’ve found out – I went home and did some investigation – we’ve found out that where we lived the houses used to stop on the corner, on the road next to us, so our house was a field more or less, but the address was exactly the same and it was an adoption, and I had to look at it twice, you do when you see you’re address and you’re ‘what, what?!’

**Victoria**

That must be quite strange, when you know the places.

**G308**

Yes, sometimes you know the people. People I was at school with when I was a child.

**G311**

And there are a lot of properties within Gloucestershire well that you still know of now as very large properties, large houses, and you know I’ve made assumptions as I’ve past those, you know I’ve wondered who lived there, and then you realise that you know those large properties were used as children’s homes or residential places or schools.

**G312**

Supported lodgings.

**G311**

Yeah. So they’ve had a history to them.

**Victoria**

If you were presenting a file to a care leaver, what kinds of information do you think someone would need in order to be able to navigate and understand the records about themselves?

**G312**

I think some sort of idea of the social history context, especially if they’re the older ones for the language and terminology used. I would definitely nwant someone to have that understanding of it didn’t mean then what it means now, and yeah, I think some sort of understanding of why things happened like that. So I would say the context of the time would be a really big thing.

**G308**

I think that’s right yes.

**G311**

Really important I think as well because sometimes you see that you know an outcome now would have been different if it had been dealt with in the 50s, so it’s that really wider context of what were the options open to the authorities at that time, you know what couldn’t they consider, so that whole thing of a 15 year old mum in the late 1930s, early 1940s, the context of the war ,there was wasn’t a social welfare system in the way that there is now, you know, all of those kind of things that we probably take for granted because we’ve learnt those things but you know they need to be explained before somebody actually, you know, sits and looks at that.

**G310**

I think also that the function of all the different institutions as well, if someone was trying to navigate their way, what exactly is the difference between a remand home, a care home, supported lodgings…

**G311**

A reform school.

**G310**

A reform school, a training school.

**G308**

I think also an understanding that in these files everybody, the parents and the social workers and everybody involved was making the best decision they could at the time given as you say their constraints, the resources, the social history, they were really trying to get the best outcome for that child if they could.

**G309**

It’s just showing people where they fit in life as well, if somebody has come for this file they’ve obviously lost sight of where they fit in life, so you need to go back and find out where it started and how events have taken place. I’m not saying that the idea is to blame or anything like that but to find out who had control of that situation at a particular time. I think once you…the person that’s looking for that information gets that they know where they fit in life.

**G308**

I think there’s a difference too, because now children are told when they’re adopted, the adopted parents are told tell them as soon as you possibly can and tell them that they have a right to this when they’re 18. It’s different coming to a file when you’re 18 to coming to it when you’re 60, if you’ve got 60 years of life behind you your perspective will tell you to be a little more aware of how things have changed, whereas 18 is a very different place.

**G311**

But I think there needs to be acknowledgement that it’s a very individual thing and therefore we’ve seen records where people have you know wanted to access…they’ve been adopted, they’re now using the legislation to look at their history and some of those are…they’re very clear, they want to access the record to find out about medical information only, and yet others want to go further and find out you know who was their birth mother or their birth father.

**G309**

Absolutely.

**G311**

So there isn’t sort of one size fits all is there? And you sometimes get people who’ve come and done that and gone away with the bit of information they wanted and then they’ve come back after a period of time and said actually now I’ve processed that I do want to know a bit more, so there’s often a timescale involved in that.

**G308**

I think it’s a shock as well, if you’ve been adopted and your name was John Smith for example and suddenly you’ve got a completely different name! Especially because of the 6 month quite often period between being born and adopted. You’re sort of well who am I? Am I that person or this person? Because your parents obviously, or your mum at least, set out with a completely different agenda probably than the one you’ve ended up living.

G311

I’ve got a sort of personal story where my mother in law found out when she was in her very late 50s that she had been adopted and she eventually got hold of her birth certificate and she was actually one year older than she had understood that she was. So she had been given information…she had been told she was adopted but the information that she’d been given was this is your birthday and you are such and such an age and she then had lots of information to take on board from that, and she always maintained that it really rocked her to the core because it was a fundamental piece of information about herself that was factually wrong that she hadn’t been able to verify.

**G309**

It actually throws things out of control doesn’t it?

**G311**

It does.

**G309**

Really, something like your birth date can really have…it’s like a stone, a stabilising effect in your life, and if you’re told that you were actually born a year earlier, that is like….

**G311**

I can almost see how that could have happened because some of the files that we have, sometimes it’s not clear whether that’s a six or an eight you know, and then it feels that sometimes, some of the historic files, they just, they don’t know so they’ve gone back and looked at ‘oh that date of birth was written down’, they haven’t verified it for themselves they’ve just looked at what’s on the file.

**G312**

And you can see the point where they got it wrong, and then they’ve stuck with it.

**G311**

Yeah, yeah, it’s interesting.

**G309**

Very.

**Victoria**

You’ve built a real wealth of knowledge and expertise it seems in these kinds of records, but I…we’re coming up on an hour and for my final question I sort of want to ask about the personal angle really and how doing this work has kind of impacted on you emotionally and also on your perspectives on the world?

**G310**

I’ll take a lead on that because this is very new territory for me. I come from a very different background, so it was a steep learning curve for me emotionally and in terms of you know historical perspectives, and I’ve learned to not delve too deeply, not to be…you know you start to…you get to…there are phrases, there are words that can draw you in, and you think what’s happened there, oh gosh, before you know it you’ve spent 20 minutes, half an hour, reading something truly terrible but you know, for the time. We’ve always been encouraged to take breaks on a regular basis, which you know I’ve taken advantage of, but yes it’s been a steep learning curve for me personally. In terms of perspective, well, I suppose what sticks in my mind for Gloucestershire is we had an occupation of American service men and there are a lot of descendants from those servicemen here in the county still.

**G312**

They left a legacy.

**G310**

They left a legacy yeah. [laughter]

**G308**

I’ll share something personal that I don’t think anyone apart from G310 knows. That my sister was adopted and so she’s in the files, and it recalls she was very happy with her new baby sister, that was me. It’s actually, because I’ve looked at the file, because it is actually part of…it wasn’t done by me, it was done by somebody else but I went and looked and it’s one of the very instances I’ve got of my mum’s and my dad’s writing and they both died nearly 30 years ago now, so it’s quite interesting to see that, and it’s one of those files that is like a one page wonder and it’s one that I could have done with being a bit bigger. But it was nice to have that, and have a little bit of the background, no more than we already knew, but just to see that my mum had signed it and my dad had signed it, and that made me feel like a little warm glow because I haven’t got that evidence, of certainly my dad’s writing, anywhere. And I thought that’s what you’re aiming for when somebody has access to their records in a way, is to say ‘ah, I recognise myself in this, I’ve got a connection back to real people.’

**G309**

It’s also shown me different diversities in Gloucestershire, and there’s one phrase that’s always stuck in my mind that I was told by [Place name] when I first started, she said ‘just remember this is a minority, we’re talking about a minority of people, a minority population within Gloucestershire, and there are millions of people across Gloucestershire, and you’re looking at a small minority, if you keep that perspective, then you know it’s not going to be so overwhelming you know, but you can’t help…because you’re only looking at the minority you can’t help but look at the diversity of that minority as well. It just keeps the perspective. And the very fact that you haven’t time to delve into it too deeply stops you from delving too deeply, I think that’s the key thing.

**G312**

I think for me I don’t look at them as real people, I look at them as historical documents, you know, it’s… I distance myself from that fact. One of the things that I’ve found quite shocking and quite difficult is that yes, it’s a minority, but the amount of abuse, of children getting adopted, of children getting taken away, of children needing care, the amount of that has been something that has really… surprised me I think yeah. Because…so my background has nothing to do with this, you know I’ve had a very fortunate childhood, I was miles away from anything like this, and then to go there’s a stack of files this high that this has happened to all of them. I don’t know, I have found that quite difficult, the extent of suffering.

**G311**

And mine’s probably the opposite of that because my background, you know, is the opposite of that. So what have I taken from this? I’ve taken some great personal satisfaction in understanding some longer term outcomes for some individuals. I’ve been in some ways surprised sometimes at the expectation of adopters when they’re given a baby or a little person, the expectation seems to be and it’s recorded on the file that they’re expecting you know a perfect outcome and then you find you know that 18, 20, whatever that you know…it’s life, it’s what happens. I’ve personally found…I’ve not found it difficult to deal with but I think that that’s interesting that certainly in terms of some of the really historic cases the expectations were very very high, in terms of you know what people were getting out of this. I would like to think that sort of our journey and seeing a whole breadth of many many years somebody from within the profession would be looking at that and seeing and helping it to inform social work practice in terms of you know removing children or bonds or connections or telling people when they’re adopted and all those kinds of things, because I think there’s a wealth of information within that that actually you know could help inform and prepare people better for the experience, whether it’s as an adopter, as the foster carer, or as the individual that has gone through a system.

**G312**

I think for me yeah that’s a massive positive, it’s that we can have a positive effect and help things to be better.

**G308**

We’re making it better, we can’t solve any of this horrendous stuff that’s in the files, we can’t make that better, but we can make this bit better.

**G310**

And of course it might also inform other organisations, not necessarily social services but I don’t know, the Services, the Army?

**G308**

Education.

**G310**

Education.

**G309**

It’s been an emotional process for all of us, but it can be – if it’s used in the right way – a good educational process for the social workers…

**G310**

Yes, that’s a very good point.

**G309**

And I think if they learn from that, you know we’ve done our jobs, if they learn from that, actually we could do it like this…obviously without trying to be an expert but they obviously know which direction they’ll want to go on.

**G308**

And that they need to learn to talk to each other. I don’t know why they still don’t. You know, what was Victoria Climbie? 20 years ago? And they said never do nothing and people have been doing nothing ever since, and it makes me very cross.

**G312**

I think…you were talking about the education side of it, but from a personal point of view as well, I have loved getting a deeper understanding of social history and social care and I have really loved rounding out that knowledge.

**G311**

Yeah yeah, I have too, it’s improved my general social history for that whole period.

**G310**

Yeah, absolutely.

**G311**

And I think you know the more that sort of thing can be done for people generally the more we improve everyone’s understanding.

**G312**

And learn from the past, and try not to make the same mistakes over and over again.

**Victoria**

That seems like an excellent point to end on [all laugh], so I’ll stop recording.

**END OF RECORDING**