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

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| Title | *MIRRA (Memory – Identity – Rights in Records – Access) research project data deposit interview transcripts: group two* |
| Author | *Elizabeth Shepherd, Victoria Hoyle, Elizabeth Lomas, Andrew Flinn* |
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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 8th May 2018 between G201 and Victoria Hoyle, at Victoria’s office at UCL.

BEGINNING OF INTERVIEW

**Victoria**

Thank you again for saying that you’d be happy to chat about these issues. I wonder if you could start by just briefly giving me some background to your current work with the [Place name] Survivor’s Network and particularly with regards to access to records.

**G201**

Ok, well [Place name] Survivor’s Network was set up about two years ago and its aim is as a campaign group for seeking justice for survivors of child abuse within [Place name] children’s homes, foster placements, secure units, boarding schools, wherever they were placed but by [Place name] only. I got involved in this because at the time I’d set it up I’d retired and become an Emeritus Reader in Child Protection, so I had the use of the university facilities and I thought I’d do this which I’d wanted to do for a very long time, and that’s because in the 90s I worked in [Place name] Social Services as a Senior Social Worker and I whistleblew as they call it. I don’t see it like that, I see it as doing the job I was paid to do – protect children – and I exposed the [Place name] child abuse scandal. I realised that there were abusers in every single one of the 12 homes that I knew about then - I now know there were 27 homes and we’re still counting - and I could see and witness some of what had gone on and I went to Scotland Yard with a suitcase full of papers outlining crimes against children, that were allegations, suspicions or things I’d actually witnessed, and that was the beginning really of a long process of exposing the issues and there was a lot of media coverage at that time. It led to 14 inquiries, every single one a cover up, and there’s never never been an investigation of what happened to the children in [Place name]’s] care. [Place name] Survivors have gained an apology from the Council leader and also an acceptance of culpability which opens the doors legally and I in person got a personal apology from the Council for the fact that they didn’t listen to me and that they denigrated me over so many years. So things have moved on but there’s still no investigation of any kind and so the onus for doing that is on myself and working with the [Place name] survivors who come forward and we’ve now got nearly a hundred that have come forward in that time. And we’re very very small, we have no resources, no funding, no administration, so you know it’s quite difficult work.

**Victoria**

And part of what you do is in supporting survivors to get access to their records, is that right?

**G201**

Well the first thing is…we have a website and survivors contact us through that website by literally giving a number and saying ring me, they don't have to give any detail at all, we don’t ask for that. So there’s a very simple contact form, and there’s a phone voicemail system that comes up on our email, you can’t have a conversation on it but we get the message. We then phone them and talk to them and arrange to meet them, which for most of them they still live locally around [Place name]. It’s amazing really, very few have been outside London. And when we meet them we complete the files application form that [Place name] Council have and we ask them to bring their photo ID and proof of address in the last three months and we there and then just do the form with them and send it in and then I destroy all the [copies of] ID and it’s all on my university email system and not on the [Place name] Survivors system because the [Place name] Survivors’ email is accessed by more people than just me. So that’s how we do it, and then we wait a week or two, and then there’s numerous problems, numerous, which we can go into in a minute, and when the file… they state that they wish for me to represent them in accessing their files and then I type that I want… as and when the files arrive… that I want to be notified as well as the survivor if they’re on email being notified, and we then make a decision between us at that point in time as to who collects the file and what we do with it, because everybody has a different view. The norm is for me to collect it and take it to my room at the university and they come in and meet me there where they feel safe and comfortable and I set aside three or four hours to just sit with them and look through it. It’s not a therapeutic process in any shape or form, we haven’t the resources to do that, but it is very very…you can see the relief just pouring off them, literally physically you can see that, and we look at the gaps in the file and there are many many gaps, and we look at the redaction areas, the areas of redaction, and try and work out why those things… some things I can explain to them, it’s very clear why there’s been redactions and I totally understand it. What I do when I first make the application, I ask them about their family and who…you know, if they’ve got parents that are still alive, and so on, any siblings, because that’s really important, if we can get agreement, if they’re still in touch with their family – and a lot of them are – then it saves so many redactions. So I’ve done quite a few now where the siblings have applied together, cos the files were not in their individual names back in the day and I’ve looked at files from the 60s through to the mid-90s and the files were in the names of the parents. So I spend a lot of time teasing out what names their parents might have had, because you know, I realised early on that they just say there’s no file but if I find a maiden name of a mother or something, well they had several relationships, several marriages, and I get some early names we often find the file in those names, because the files were in the parent’s names. That’s really useful, that cuts a lot of corners if we do that on the form straight away and if we get the siblings agreement straightaway. We’ve had some problems with that because sometimes I’ve been with a survivor and they tell me they’ve got say a brother who they’re still in touch with, and they get them on the phone and there and then I’m explaining to the brother and the brother says ‘G201, just get the file, you’ve got all my permission for everything’ but that’s not enough for the Council, and then I…it’s not easy to access this sibling, who may be you know in a locked room somewhere and never comes out or has all their own mental health problems and other problems, and so the extremely vulnerable really really miss out, you know they don’t have a place in this process, it’s almost at times impossible. Those cases I just have to go right up the line and make a big fuss to you know get them to agree to let me have everything relating to the sibling. I just think that as a professional social worker - I’m still a registered social worker - that my judgement should be respected and if I say that I have spoken to this person on the phone and they’ve said they give their full permission and that they really want me to do this that should be sufficient I feel. But it often isn’t seen like that and it’s quite distressing really.

**Victoria**

So when you make the application to [Place name], where does it go to? Does it go to the social work department?

**G201**

No not at all, social workers have nothing to do with this process at all. It goes to administrators who are not trained in working with survivors and all their vulnerabilities, they’ve no idea of the enormity of this act of getting the file for someone and what it means to them, they just don’t get it, at all. I can give the example of someone that was 18 years in care and when we got there there was about 8 sheets of paper and they don’t… they just handed it in an envelope, there was nothing to say, you know, ‘I’m really sorry, I understand you were 18 years in care, this is shocking but we’ve really searched, we’ve done everything we can’. It just needs humanity and there’s no humanity, it’s literally giving you an envelope. So when I first was involved, this is what I was learning as I went along and I was so distressed myself, I’d go with the survivor and then I’d see the torment that was caused, so early on I said survivors aren’t coming to get these files and we’ll take you right out of this process, it’s abusive and it replicates the abuse you’ve suffered and I don’t… you know ‘I’ll pick up the file, or I’ll arrange with you how we’re going to do it, we’ll work something out’. So yeah that’s what’s happened. There is an office of people, I work with about three different ones, and they’re very bureaucratic in the extreme and I do feel I’m a special case, I’m not just anybody applying, you know, I’m a hoop that the survivors go through to have an easier access to this process, which otherwise is very hostile to them. So I feel that I should have maximum respect quite frankly from these staff and I don’t feel I get it at all. So there are classic objections to the ID, for instance photo ID. How many of the survivors have a driving license? None, I can tell you. Not one. [laughs] What about passports? Almost none right, if they have it’s an ancient one they haven’t renewed. So photo ID is a huge problem, and if I present a disability pass or something, you know, I have to argue why they should be accepting that. It’s a big struggle. Some of them now I’ve been getting their birth certificates where photo ID is a problem as a bit of extra proof. And proof of ID in the last three months…it says on the [Place name] guidance for filling the form in ‘proof of ID in the last three months such as’, ‘such as’ a utility bill or a council tax bill, ‘such as’. So I took them at their word and when I see something that I think is fantastic proof of ID such as a letter for a hospital appointment with the full address on it and the full date of birth and details of the person in the right name, I’ve put that through and it’s been rejected, and the same with similar documents that I think… you know a blue card application letter, which is so hard to get anyway! So that kind of thing, a letter from a social worker, Council documents or health service documents that could be checked in two minutes. I think there’s a level of documentation that should be accepted as proof of ID and generally I just get the standard reply saying no it has to be a utility bill or a council tax bill and most of the survivors don’t have such things you know. These are not… they may be part of the normal world but it’s not part of their world. No, their world is hospital appointments and disability things and you know all the rest of it.

**Victoria**

Have any of the survivors that you’ve worked with tried to access their records in the past, or is this the first time?

**G201**

Yes. I’ve been surprised actually how many have applied in the past. There’s different things go on here. One is, quite a few saw them when they were a child, 18 or leaving care or part of a leaving care team or something like that, where they still had contact with their social worker and they say they saw their file and it was very big and they can describe it and they can mention things that were in it like swimming certificates – which are the things that mean so much to them right, school reports and swimming certificates, all those sorts of things, photographs – and they say ‘oh when you get my file G201 you’ll see photographs’, and of course there’s no photographs, or they say ‘when I saw it and I was 18 or 22 there were photographs, my social worker took me and got it for me and said I should see it’, you know they weren’t given it but they were sat with their social worker and they looked through it and perhaps that was the time they were given a bit of information they hadn’t had before about their parents. Might have been part of life story work when that came in, you know, or just a decent social worker wanting to clarify some things for them about the homes they’d been in or what happened when they were born, it was that kind of thing. So then there’s others who have applied for them like 10 15 years ago and they’ve got generally quite a big file and we apply for it afresh and we’ve had…we certainly had one where they said there was no file at all.

**Victoria**

But there was before?

**G201**

Yes, we’ve got quite a big file already. In fact I think I’ve had two like that. And then there’s others, when the file comes now it’s nothing like the one that they had got 10 or 15 years ago, so where’s it all gone? I haven’t seen any file which contains the notes from residential establishments, or foster care. Now, foster carers had to keep daily diaries and so did the residentials, they had a lot of books and everything was put on there, so on the social work notes it might say there’s been a serious incident you know, a child had set fire to the building or something like that, but there’s no residential notes about that so you can’t see what led up to it or the circumstances of it or the context of it. Now I don’t understand that, because when I worked for [Place name], 86 to 92, all the residential…when a child left a particular establishment all those log books were sent back to me and I put them on my files, they were attached, quite often in an envelope secured at the back of the file or you know, they were often in local authority envelopes, the official type envelopes, and you’d just make sure they were secured and staple them on to the file. Well they’ve absolutely all gone, I haven’t seen a single one, so that’s a bit of a mystery really. And that’s the detail that the survivor would like really, and it would also give them names of their brothers and sisters in care, which is very important to them and they struggle to remember their full names to be able to trace them and that’s a very important part of what they want to do.

**Victoria**

So most of the people, they presumably have a number of different motives for wanting to access this information?

**G201**

Well most of them have no idea at all that they can access it or that they have a right to it. No one’s ever told them they’ve got a right to it. They’re completely shocked when I say ‘It’s yours, it’s your right to have a copy.’ Some people early on have been sent originals, which might explain why now they say there isn’t one because obviously they were just giving the files, but now it’s obviously copies. So yeah most of the them it’s me that explains to them how important it is for our campaigning role really if you like because if we’re going towards a redress scheme that means a lawyer and it will save an awful lot of time if we can put forward everybody with the files all in one go which is what…we’re nearly at that stage. They understand that, and also that I can advise them once I’ve seen the file, I know for instance if there’s any chance of a criminal prosecution and then I know police to put them on to them to discuss their options about that, because even if in the end they don’t want to at least they’ve been through… they’ve had a right to do that and been listened to by police. That’s really important. And then I took about 40 of them to a lawyer, but obviously she was acting free and now we’ve got so many coming forward she’s stopped seeing people, but we’ve got that many accounts in great depth. Which I don’t do, I don’t ask questions at all, but obviously a lawyer does it from A-Z, it’s very important. And then we’re now…because the redress law is so convoluted that unless its sexual abuse over some time it’s very hard to get any kind of settlement from the Council. Physical abuse is capped at a very small amount of money, not sufficient to pay a lawyer, and neglect is even less, and of course…so out of all the people I took to her it was only about four or five that she could represent individually and make enough money to cover her costs. So we went to [Michael Mansfield] Chambers who is representing the [Place name] Survivors and he’s put forward a proposal for a redress scheme on our behalf to [Place name] Council. We’ve got a meeting in a couple of weeks to look at if they will run with it or not, I’m hoping that they will. That way everyone will get something, and maybe the top end people will get less but at least everybody else will get more, and even if you go through the top end it can take between two and five years and some of them are quite elderly and very sick, there’s a lot of survivors…very very ill, really serious illnesses, disabilities, so I don’t think it’s good that they hang around, they need to see some benefit from some money early on. So they know that that’s the theme of it. They also know that it enables me to do the timelines, which they get a copy of when I’ve done it, and then I can collate… because their files are not searchable material, but my timelines are and I do columns of names of staff, names of establishments, names of other children and so on, then I can collate it quite easily. If someone comes along and says I was in this home in this year I can very quickly check who else I’ve seen that was in the same home at the same time, and so for instance one home we’ve now got 15 people who were in that home over a particular timescale and that’s all going to be a police investigation. Well it’s only because I’ve done the timelines that I’ve got access to that, I couldn’t possibly remember the detail otherwise, so much data. Whenever a child gave…started talking about being abused to anybody they were moved home, or the staff accused were moved homes or the entire home was closed and the building closed for a month or two and then it reopened under a different name, and so you know that makes so much complexity, cos children were being moved all the time, staff were being moved all the time and buildings were coming and going, so yeah, there’s no way anybody could retain that information, it’s not straightforward.

**Victoria**

No, and it shows how challenging it would be for an individual survivor to put together that big contextual picture, without your support in managing all of that detail.

**G201**

That's right.

**Victoria**

You already mentioned about people wanting information about their brothers and sisters in care, people that they had known. When people come to you and you sit with them and talk about their files what are they hoping to get from that experience do you think?

**G201**

Validation is the most important thing, because you know if they’re in their 50s, 60s, 70s now they’ve not told anyone before, maybe whispered it to a partner or something but hardly any of their children know what they’ve been through, and grandchildren, so to hear someone who knows the names of the home, who knows the staff involved, I worked there enough to know a lot of the people involved, and can try and sit and make sense of it with them. If they say that somebody…because obviously you’ve got all the residential staff but you’ve also got the social work staff…and the general abuse network was more with the residential staff and the social workers were seen to be kept at a distance because they could interfere and the child could talk to them and trust them and so on, so there’s quite a few non-abusive social workers and they’ll say oh they really really liked a particular social worker and I really check that out and I say ‘but they didn’t do anything about the abuse you’re telling me about’. ‘I never told them because they came every fortnight and took me out for a meal and I didn’t want to spoil that, that was the only nice part of my time in care, I loved it, you know, and I used to go and they took me for walks, they took me out’. One of them took kids to football matches, you know. They did nice things to relate to the children and these really nice social workers… you can read on the file in the notes that they were knowing something wasn’t right. They’d turn up and say ‘once again the child wasn’t there when I’d arranged a visit’, yeah, and then they’d even say ‘I’m getting really angry now, I’ve been four times and I’ve not managed to see this child’, that kind of thing. You can see they’re not happy, they’re not happy in reviews when they want to rehabilitate a child back to their families slowly and carefully and the residential workers are saying ‘absolutely not, there’s no way, every time they hear their father’s name they have a tantrum and they’re upset and you’re not considering this child.’ And you can see how the web of lies was being created to separate the child from their family and from the social worker. So, I’ve been chasing quite a few of these social workers and it’s amazing how many I’ve found, and they’ve all come forward wishing to help, and it really helps a survivor to know that this person does remember them very fondly and still cares, and they’re not meeting them but they send a message via me to say they’re sending you all their best wishes and it’s lovely to hear about you and it just means so much, so much. So that’s a really nice thing to do from the files. And then obviously some were separated… well, another tactic of the abusers was that siblings should be separated because they didn’t want children telling each other what was going on and that was a risk factor. So for instance there’s two sisters who all the way through with their social worker they’re saying they want to be together, they love each other dearly, they protected each other in an abusive family situation, so they, you know, they went on being really caring about each other and still are. All the way through the residential workers prevented it and they were always split up, and they were never together in all these homes, and they couldn’t even visit each other or see each other, and it was the most terribly painful thing for them, but every review and every meeting with social workers they said systematically that they wanted to be together. So that’s a good example of manipulation, so the file can help you disentangle that for them. You know, it helps them to understand the rationale, because the people that were doing these…making them…we know about them and they were abusers, they are proven to be abusers, and we can say, knowing that, ‘they were manipulating you, can you see? If you’d known about your sister you would have been a risk to them’. It all comes clear, so that's very useful I think that they see some of the dynamics. Other things… like they say in a particular home they couldn’t be there at the weekend. I say ‘that’s unusual because that was your home’ you know? ‘Oh no, Friday night we all had to leave and we just came and slept on the streets of London, we’d nowhere to go.’ Sometimes one of them would have some parent that wasn’t the best parent but they all went and slept on their floor. They’ve got loads of stories. They stayed in squats with hippies and all sorts of things in the 70s and 80s, and so they say they took it as just the rule, but I know that isn’t the rule, so I’m looking on the file and there’s nothing to say this other than *they* [the child] went missing. It’s portrayed as them going missing. But they portray it as, well, they had to go. So I think the homes were used for something else at the weekend, or there was abuse going on that they didn’t want all the others to be party to. Yeah. It’s complicated the abuse dynamics but that…when you say about the file that’s what I go through with them. I don’t get into the emotions of it all. We have managed to set up a dedicated trauma service for [Place name] survivors which is run by two psychologists and they’ve been fantastic at involving us in all their planning and interviewing and everything and it’s just for survivors, and they’re just starting to get through to it now and get therapeutic help. You know we couldn’t pretend to do that, but I do think that the value of seeking justice is underrated in terms of survival, you know, it’s still put on the survivor that has to deal with their problems and change and who has mental health issues, you know it’s all up to the survivor to solve everything, but actually if you come at it from the other way…and so we insisted this service was called a trauma service and it doesn’t have a mental health label or anything, and when they said ‘we'll start with an assessment’ we said no, they’ve been assessed the whole of their lives they don’t want to be assessed anymore thank you. So we’ve changed it to ‘a conversation’, so they are welcome to ring up and speak to a psychologist and have a conversation. It’s really important not to continue the labels, because it’s not about you…something wrong with you it’s because of what was done to you, and they get that, they completely get it, and that enables them to go and get the help, otherwise they’re worried that if they get help it will affect their children and…you know, that they’re not fit to care for their children and all the rest of it. Because that’s what they went through they think it will all kick in and maybe it would as well, so yeah, we don’t want to be party to any of that.

**Victoria**

You’ve mentioned about numerous problems about the access process. I don’t know if you want to pick out certain ones? I mean one thing you said that struck me was around gaps in the files, absences of things. Is that a good place to start?

**G201**

We could start with that yes, because when I do the timeline… I get the file, do the timeline and then I meet them, and then I get their account and it couldn’t be more different, and so I’ve got a column which is their account, or I dot it around in italics so I know anything in italics on my timeline is their voice. So I’ve put their voice into their history, which isn’t otherwise there. In fact it’s hardly there at all, because they hardly attended reviews or…where is their voice officially? It’s not. Only in the very recent ones, where there’s a whole form to be filled in by the child, so someone has them do it, now that’s a whole new thing. But these survivors in main their voice is nowhere, unless somebody they trust reflects it and says ‘there’s no way at the moment that they want to go back to that home’ or something like that, then you know, that probably is right, it’s what they’ve been told. So yes we’ve had files where a child’s been in a foster placement and it’s masses of notes, social worker obviously very methodical, writes loads every visit, and then they go to a children’s home where we now know it was run by major league child abusers and from the minute of getting to that home to the minute of leaving, might be like two years or something like that, there’s nothing whatsoever on the file. And then it picks up again, sometimes with a new social worker sometimes with the same one, again very detailed. Generally I must say I can’t…the social work recording is good and it’s the days when it was often handwritten, you know, and it wasn’t so mechanistic as it is these days and they were allowed to express opinion, which they’re not really allowed to do anymore, though I’ve always taught that it’s important to express opinion so long as you say it’s opinion, but that’s not…you know it’s all about evidence based. I think it’s the wrong approach, because the most useful things in the files I’m reading is the opinion, because that is the intuition and gut feelings of very sensible social workers saying all is not right here. ‘I arrived today at the foster placement and the child just looked nervous. They looked physically well and, you know, quite chatty but there was something nervous about their presentation.’ That kind of thing, and they’re hugely important comments with hindsight. There’s quite a few that were in foster placements being sexually abused by the man, a man in the household, might be the foster father, older foster brother or uncle, I’ve had lots of those cases and they couldn’t tell anyone, absolutely couldn’t tell anyone, but it showed in their behaviour in a lot of…things like wetting the bed, you know, nobody could quite understand the level of their behaviour. A very common thing I’m finding, which is probably not exactly part of your research but I’m finding, it’s fascinating, children in those situations who were eating the weirdest of things. One was eating shoes, all the rubber off shoes, off rubber bands and rubber sponges and another was eating moss and soil and twigs, covers of books, bits of rags, bits of wallpaper, one had lead poisoning because he ate the wallpaper. Fascinating. So social workers would see those behaviours, but they didn’t know the reason for those behaviours, so yeah.

**Victoria**

You can start to read between the lines, so to speak, suggest perhaps where some of those gaps come from?

**G201**

Yes, yes, and you know none of these behaviours were apparent in school. That tells a story doesn’t it, in itself? So, yes, it’s absolutely amazing to compare the survivor’s account with the written account on the file, and then the social workers’, such a detailed thorough account but they weren’t getting to what was going on, they were missing it completely, and that’s sad really because they were good people and they just went and did their visits and had a nice time and a cup of tea and took the child a birthday present or a Christmas present and, you know, did all the right things and missed what was going on 100%. Terrible. So, you know, the gaps are as important as what is there really. There’s also lots of gaps in legal documents and I’m coming across people on Section 20, what was called voluntary care, where actually the parents obviously never gave their permission, it just was almost like second nature, ‘Oh what’s the status?’, ‘They’re in voluntary care.’ But nobody had gone through a process of any kind to do that, you know, that’s an interesting one. Very very few legal documents are to be found. Interesting, when it was the London County Council, you go right back to the 60s, lots of legal documents and lots of official documentation and official headings on the reports. You know ‘Report of a Visit’ is a standard form where social workers go into great detail on their visits and they had to be regular and so on. Very thorough work went on, but of course there were children’s departments then, before social work went generic, so these people in those days were highly skilled children’s officers and it came under the Home Office so there was more procedure about it, but not procedure in the way it is now, mechanistic, procedure we could well do to learn from because it was exactly what you needed to see about a child’s care. And the medical reports were rigorously on time and throughout the whole period the child was in care, the assessments of foster carers is all there, there’s a lot of very thorough work, which I find interesting. And once we get into 70s, post-Seebohm and generic work, there’s a lot of turnover…that’s another thing, the LCC they had the same workers more or less the whole time, they had their child care officer, and they travel all over and they’d go to the ends of the world to keep the parent in some sort of contact with the child, even if they weren’t the best parent they’d manage it, you know I’m very impressed actually, very impressed, and when they went to places like…the homes in those days were out, the big village-y homes like [two place names], and they visit there and whole families of children were put in those places, four or five siblings from a family, and they’d go there and their reports of those visits are just lovely because they’d go and play tennis with the children, then they they’d notice that someone’s very good at tennis but someone doesn’t have the proper eye-hand co-ordination that they should have. The work that went on I think was just brilliant and how they managed all the situations with parents and so on, and I know there was…life in those homes was harsh but it was different, it was mainly physical disciplinary, although there was some sexual abuse as well… But then in the 70s they were moved out of there to homes within boroughs and then life changed dramatically and they had massive turnover of social workers, so the residential workers who were more consistent were able to define the story of the child. So a new social worker would come along and it would be ‘oh this child is disruptive, they’re aggressive, they’re causing mayhem in the home, they have to be locked in their room…’ and so on, and all that agenda is there. Which a social worker who knew them from the beginning…they wouldn’t allow that. Then of course they were not specialist children’s workers, they were generic workers, I think some skill was lost along the way there, until you get further along and we get back to it. So yes, gaps, that was a long answer to your question!

**Victoria**

It’s all excellent stuff, really useful.

**G201**

Early on we gave [Place name] a set of points of things we weren’t happy about. [A scanned copy of this document is appended to the interview and was referred to throughout.] October 2016 we did it, right early on. This is things we were unhappy about. They copied the file…the files are in folders right, as they would have been on some shelf in some office, and there might be 10 folders or 3 folders or whatever. They take everything out of the folders. Now we want everything as it is, we want it exactly as it is, partly because it’s chronological, even if it’s a mess. You’ll get a review next to a medical next to a court hearing next to a social work record and then back to another review. But what they do now, they extract everything and they make a file, a false file, so there’s a section that’s medical reports, a section that is reviews, a section that is correspondence, a section that is social work records, a section that is financials. And I hate it. That’s why I have to do timelines, because it’s all in no order whatsoever.

**Victoria**

Do you have any idea why they do that?

**G201**

No. I don’t want them to do it, I don’t like that they do it, we’ve asked them not to do it. Within the old files there is some duplication of course, some empty forms…some social workers got forms for reviews and the review didn’t happen, and you know we don’t mind, we say leave it all in there, we want it as it is, warts and all really. And also when they copy it they copy it double-sided so you might have a medical from 1963 and on the other side a medical from 1984, so you can’t lay it all out and put it in any kind of chronological order, not even in a paper way using paper, you can’t do it, the only way is tediously page by page entering data into my timelines, that's the only way of doing it. I don’t understand that. Also, when they copy it, for a long time they were copying…I suppose to save money…quarter size of a page, so if you’ve got an A4 page like that it would come like with four. [Demonstrates using A4 page.]

**Victoria**

So you’d get four A4 pages on one sheet.

**G201**

Yes, and I couldn’t read it. We’d sit and nearly weep with the survivors and I’d say this is so interesting but we can’t read it. We got the magnifying glass out but we just couldn’t read it. We argued strongly on that, we said we want some care. Also, a lot of pages… and they’ve changed that now, they’re doing A4…a lot of pages were too faint and we don’t know how faint the original documents are but you know with photocopying you can up the tone and even if something is quite faint you can usually get a decent copy and we just wanted more care because there were lots of things we couldn’t read, and you know that’s cruel isn’t it? It’s cruel. It’s even worse than the page not being there.

**Victoria**

Tantalizing you with it.

**G201**

Tantalizing. Awful. So there was lots of things about the way we were getting the files. And then they split that up so someone might have three folders but actually there’s not much in any of them, hardly anything in any of them when you get to it.

**Victoria**

You mentioned about redaction as well. What kind of things do you find are redacted from files?

**G201**

Well we know what it’s supposed to be and sometimes… you know, I know it’s a difficult job, sometimes I know there might be a meeting about four children and they left the names of the other three in there. But we’ve had siblings getting a vast amount of an estranged sibling’s file on their file because of a similarity of names and that’s been difficult at times because if you’re not in touch with the person, you haven’t seen them for years and they you’re suddenly reading all about what happened to them, it’s awful.

**Victoria**

So you’re actually finding things that should be redacted that haven’t been?

**G201**

Yes we've had quite a lot of that but we’ve reported it and they’ve acted on it straight away. I don’t really want that bit being put in any report or anything, I don’t want them being criticised for that, because we’re not out to get the Council, we want it to work, and I’m a broker so I see it straightaway and package it up and return it you know. Where it’s gone wrong is when they’ve posted it. In the early days they were just posting things to people and we had to stop that very quickly because it ended up on their door mats and then I was getting phone calls with them being suicidal, they absolutely couldn’t handle it or manage it. I said no way is anyone ever to be posted a file, unless they’re the other end of the country and they absolutely…it’s their wish for that to happen. I think there’s been one in all the time that was fine about it. Well no, he wasn’t that fine about it, he got it and thought he would be fine, ‘tell them to send it to my house’, and then his sister rang and said he’d got his file and he was very very upset and he’d come and stayed with her and she was helping him look through it. It’s so traumatic! There should be a rule to never never post them really. Where were we? Oh, about redactions?

**Victoria**

Yeah.

**G201**

Yes, sometimes we’ve had information we shouldn’t have had, but you know I can usually get to that quickly and explain it to the survivors, ‘I’m returning these pages because…’ and some I haven’t noticed and the survivor says ‘no this is a completely different family with my name’, you know same name but different family and they spot something I haven’t spotted. And then we’ve had where the survivor’s had some of it beforehand and then we get a redacted version, that’s been quite interesting as to what’s been redacted because it’s not third party information.

**Victoria**

Ah ok, so what types of things other than third party?

**G201**

I think I won’t say because I think that’s in other arenas.

**Victoria**

Ok, fair enough. It’s interesting to know that that’s the case though.

**G201**

Yes and we wouldn’t know if not for someone having some pages beforehand.

**Victoria**

And are the redactions explained? Is it accompanied by a letter or anything like that?

**G201**

No, no, no, just great big gaps. Great big gaps and you’ve no idea, but obviously if they get into legal cases the lawyers get full copies normally, and also the police do as well. So I’ve got one person who’s got a case going to prosecution and he’s got his complete, he’s got no redactions. It seems terribly unfair really. I do understand, you know, the need, obviously you need some redactions I do understand that. But it’s a very skilful job isn’t it redacting? Very very skilful.

**Victoria**

There’s a lot of nuance involved in making those kinds of decisions, and I think there’s a lot of inconsistency across the country in terms of how the legislation, the data protection legislation, is applied, and of course we’re interested in redactions for other reasons. There is the social work modification that allows for redaction of information that may be damaging or distressing to a person.

**G201**

On what grounds?

**Victoria**

Well, the bar for that is pretty high, it should be after assessment by a professional. It might be that there’s ongoing social work and that the disclosure of information would cause a problem there, or that there may be…that someone is receipt of other services, mental health services or something, and that the receipt of information would cause significant distress that it may be of danger to themselves or someone else.

**G201**

Which is why we were so keen that the trauma service needs to be there, to back us up in what we’re doing. I haven’t had anybody distressed having seen me with their file, that’s the fact. The distress is when they’re on their own in the middle of the night reading their file, and it brings all the flashbacks, triggers and all the rest of it, but I always make sure there’s a way of packaging it up, you know, in a way they can manage, so if they want to leave it with me and come back in a couple of weeks or whatever and have another look at it…whatever they want, it’s about them having control and feeling it really strongly that they do have control over it. It’s not a monster that’s going to take over them, that will help them have control actually, because we’re doing something with it that’s in their interests and they love the fact that I put their account with it, because then they know that I’ve listened to them. Although they know it says something, you know, an incident that happened, they know that on the timeline it’s their version and I’ve heard that. And you know they come back and they’ll say… they’ll add to it, when they’ve got the timeline with their account, they’ll come back and add to it. Not intentionally, but they’re coming to see us about something and then they chatter chatter and then I get it up saying ‘I need to add that in because you didn’t tell me that before.’ Because they’re getting more courage to think more about certain things that happened.

**Victoria**

And to remember and put pieces of the jigsaw into place?

**G201**

Yeah, really important. Really important. And it can help… if they just remember a tall Scottish guy with red hair or something and I can say well I’ve got four other people who were in that home at that time, not give them the names but you know… I’ve had that description and I can put a name to that person, when I’m really sure it is the same. It helps enormously, enormously. And then there’s all the shadows, all the shadows, shadowy memories. I’ve got a few people who’ve described being taken at night to…remembering - and I realised I was hearing it, I was hearing the same place - a metal staircase at the back of shops, somewhere in [Place name], looking out of the window seeing the main road…lots of detail, fragments of detail about being taken there, and not remembering what happened in this place. You know slowly fleshing out some of these kind of memories, across the different people. It’s a fine line because you don’t want to contaminate evidence or…but there is a point where cases are never going to go to court because a person’s dead or whatever, and it wouldn’t effect a redress scheme because I can evidence what someone told me in their initial accounts. But it is a minefield, because you can’t not be really caring when there’s things that mean just so much, so much. They want to know what’s happened to the other children, especially the ones they were worried about, young disabled children that they knew were being abused every single night, they want to know what’s happened to them.

**Victoria**

Do the survivors come together at all, have there been any…

**G201**

There have but it’s very difficult. Not reunions, we don’t gather people together because there was a lot of peer abuse and what I know about I can manage, I can say to someone that person’s going to be at this event you know, or would you rather I told them not to come and you come, I have to try and manage it. I can’t say I know about everything that went on but it was obviously steered by the abusers in the homes and they were voyeuristic and they got children having sex with each other and all the rest of it. So we’ve had a…there was a Council meeting, 28th September, where the Council called it to approve the payment…they had to get public agreement to pay a QC to do some level of investigation of an issue we’d raised and it was a million pounds so you know they had to have a public executive meeting and so on. So they said to us it’s public, everybody can come, so I just sent an email to everyone saying there’s this meeting and 50 turned up, which I wasn’t really shocked, with their supporters or whoever they need to get them there, and the meeting didn’t really happen…they made sure they did what they had to do but survivors just stood up and spoke one by one, one after another without invitation and just told their stories and nobody could or would stop them. And I’d said survivors are coming I want a quiet room next door, and I don’t want anyone dragged out by security, you know I want to have it properly organised, so they had tea and coffees in the next door room and it was quiet with someone there, if they needed to go out they could just go for a bit and calm down and come back in. So that worked very well and we wanted no visible security or police, and there was security there but they kept completely separate and were not visible. Because I know what will trigger, I know the triggers, yeah, and if you take that audience and have security someone will start screaming and shouting, and some stood and swore and said what happened and then other people spoke very quietly and it went on for hours. I’ve never known anything like it really it was the most amazing thing. So that was one example. What happened there was some people spoke about things which were with the police and I had to…the press were there and I had to talk to the press and say please don't report this, so there’s a lot of management around it. So there’s that, every situation they come together, is quite tricky, very tricky. Basically we go for a group of four for official meetings with the Council, with the lawyers, so it’s people who are in the community interest company, me and [named people]. Sometimes that changes a bit depending on their interests, some like to go into the health meetings, some like going to legal meetings, you know different interests, and the others…we’ve had big meetings where we’ve got everybody’s agreement that these four will represent them and let them know what’s happening. That’s worked alright, haven’t had any arguments so far in that way, so easily one could be misunderstood or something.

**Victoria**

Do you think that the awareness of the records issues and of the local authorities has been changed at all by IISCA, the independent inquiry?

**G201**

What, not destroying files?

**Victoria**

I suppose the moratorium [on destroying files] is the most significant, but I just wondered if there’d been a difference in approach or awareness as a result of that happening?

**G201**

No I wouldn’t think so. I don’t think it’s made any difference to anything quite honestly, I think it’s completely redundant. I think it should be shut down straight away, a complete waste of money. Divide the money with survivors groups. No I think it’s a shocking waste of public money. Yes, the rule of not getting rid of or destroying anything…but how would we know what was or wasn’t? There’s no way of monitoring that is there? They won’t tell us where they [the records] are currently stored. We’ve done freedom of information to find out where the files were stored from the 60s through to now you know. No they won’t tell us. But various social workers and people have told us that for a long time they were in two garages on one of the Council estates, and they absolutely can prove that you know. Administrators actually worked in these garages and they were really fed up working. Someone came forward saying she had the job of putting stuff on microfiche in the 90s and now they say nothing is on microfiche, there is no microfiche. Well we’ve met somebody who said that was her job, so I don’t understand that. There’s bits on files. One file it said ‘file to be stored at a certain address in [Place name] until such a date’ and this woman’s got nothing, she’s got nothing, and it’s interesting, that bit is on the file so an administrator wouldn’t know the importance of that probably, it wasn’t removed. So then we were writing saying ‘what is this address? Why were files stored in this building? What was this building?’ No one knows, not at all. Then I’ve had a survivor who said he applied for his files and was told it was destroyed in a flood in the town hall. I’ve not heard anything… Another one was told it was destroyed in a fire. I haven’t heard of a fire or a flood. There’s no transparency, and also where are the documents now? Because documents are in all sorts of places aren’t they? What about the legal department? They always had their own files, so… I think to be fair the person in charge at [Place name] does now do extensive checks… Adoption and fostering were always separate, and there was another one that was separate… residential care, financial records were kept separately. I’ve known some investigations that have found things out through financial records more than anything, so you know…

**Victoria**

It’s really interesting that they’re not able to give a timeline as to where records were kept and how they were being managed over time.

**G201**

And who was responsible for managing them? We wanted the names of just who the senior officers were that were responsible at certain times, because it would have been within the remit of like an Assistant Director wouldn’t it? And of course they all had so many different titles over the years. [pause] Let me see if there is anything else… [checks sheet of issues raised with [Place name] Council] We asked that forms that were colour coded should be reproduced in the same colours as the originals. That’s because…are you familiar with change reports? [Victoria shakes head] Well they’re crucial because every time a significant change happens with a child - this has always been the way going way back - a change report gets completed, so it just says ‘on such a date moved from this family to this children’s home’ or ‘mother’s address changed as of this date’. So they’re were always a yellowy colour at [Place name] and they were one of those things that you tore off a bit went to this file and a bit went to this file, you know what I mean?

**Victoria**

Yeah, yeah.

**G201**

I can’t remember what they’re called…duplicates?

**Victoria**

Duplicates, yes.

**G201**

So those shone out in a file instantly, if you wanted a quick… you’d go for all the yellow bits and you’d do a timeline on that and then you could build around that you know. So we wanted things in the same colour that they were in but that hasn’t happened.

**Victoria**

Do they just provide them in black and white, in greyscale?

**G201**

Yes, and then if something is a colour it doesn’t photocopy very well if it’s not photocopied in colour. We said… ah, a lot of the [Place name] homes were outside of London, [place names] all over the place, and the survivor is told you need to apply to that place. That for some of them could mean three or four more applications, and the rest, so what do we do? We haven’t the resources to do that. I think that’s [Place name]’s job, I think… and so we asked that [reading from the sheet] if the applicant was placed outside of the authority the applicant needs to check… it would be helpful if [Place name] provided the other authority with contact details of the access to files officer in [Place name] who could then confirm the ID and save the applicant presenting ID at every subsequent authority, that’s one way we thought might save a lot of trouble. For some survivors there are many authorities to approach, [Place name] should prepare a list of contacts and phone numbers for access to files officers in other authorities as this information is not easy for survivors to find. It’s not easy at all to find, and some – I should say many – cannot access the internet. Now how are they even going to start going to some other borough? Hopeless. I did one that was [Place name] and that was enough misery for me because they had a different system and they charged £10 and I had to pay it somehow you know and that’s me.

**Victoria**

All of these authorities…from the research we’ve done so far we know that they do have their own idiosyncratic ways of doing things, and if you’ve had your records from one local authority and you get some from another local authority chances are you’re going to have a completely different experience.

**G201**

Yeah.

**Victoria**

And some places have really good very best practice services and they put a lot of investment and resources into them and then others are, you know, have very poor reputations for it. And I suppose all of that requires a lot of contextual information as well. So knowing, where were the homes? What local authorities are they in?

**G201**

Yeah, what was it then, is it something different now?

**Victoria**

Do you think [Place name] has a good sense of that information?

**G201**

No, they’ve no idea. They don’t know the names of their own homes let alone their own homes that were out of borough. They can’t tell us! Some survivors have asked in their own right for a list of the homes and a list of the staff, the dates when the homes were open and closed…but they know nothing. When we raised that at a meeting with the Council leader we told well in other…well in [Place name], [Place name] get all their information from the survivors, we were told, in other words it’s up to us. We go…one of the most useful things was going through Council minutes, very boring but very important because we’ve found planning applications for homes which proves that they were their homes, otherwise they’re saying ‘it wasn’t our home’. And the flipside of that is staff who they say never worked for them and that they’ve no record on their HR file and the person isn’t claiming a pension, finished, that’s the end of it, and I’m saying ‘this person is a risk to children’ and they’re saying ‘well it’s nothing to do with us.’ So that’s another value of the file because then we say ‘but their name is on this file’, otherwise they just deny it and say it’s nothing to do with them. There’s a query at the moment…you know I refer some things to the LADO [Local Authority Designated Officer for Safeguarding], which doesn’t function in any shape or form like I’d expect it to but they…if they find…well I find, I find that someone employed by [Place name] was abusive, I’ve got an account of abuse, now lives in…works in a different authority right, they’re saying that this new data protection thing doesn’t allow them to share this information about risk to children with another authority. And they’ve come to me recently saying that ‘you can refer it direct, but we can’t do it via us.’

**Victoria**

Interesting.

**G201**

They thought child protection would trump other legislation, but this data protection legislation trumps child protection in the hierarchy of law. Just like immigration is higher than children’s law, now this law is higher than children’s law. Imagine the implications of that? Now that man… instead of just working with one person in [Place name], who fields it to all her colleagues in the right and proper way, now I’ve got to do it directly with every…do the research to find out who they are, they won’t know who I am, it’ll be a nightmare.

**Victoria**

So potentially the new GDPR is going to have quite a significant impact not just on the Survivors Network as an organisation but also on the work that you’re doing beyond that?

**G201**

Yeah, highlighting people who are a current risk to children. Isn’t that just awful?

**Victoria**

It’s something I need to look at more closely. There are supposed to be exemptions, as I understand it, for information sharing where there are safeguarding implications. I’ll have to talk to…

**G201**

They might find that. They were having a legal meeting about it.

**Victoria**

At the moment there’s a lot of misinformation and whispers going backwards and forwards about what is and isn’t allowed. It’s true of data protection generally. What I’ve found is that some people will make a claim, you know I’ll speak to somebody and they’ll say ‘oh we would never do that because that’s data protection and it’s in violation of that’ whereas another person will say ‘well that’s nothing to do with data protection actually and we can do that thing’. The legislation sometimes works for or against, it’s very difficult because it’s open to interpretation.

**G201**

Yes, it will be defined by case law. Poor people who have to go through it. That’s the other thing, some…where there were huge homes, like [Place names] and places, there are archives for those homes and there’s information in those archives, but the information relating to individual children is not accessible to the public. So I don’t know what they’ve got and what they haven’t got. Again you need a person to be a broker for all that don’t you?

**Victoria**

So they’re held by the local archives?

**G201**

Yeah, [Place name] archives have got the [Place name] archive. [pause] Let’s see what else… [pause; reads from the sheet] Handwritten content difficult to read… well, you know [G013] yeah? She said to me that when there’s handwriting that’s difficult to read, they transcribe it. Isn’t that amazing? And of course they should, in a reasonable sized font, you know. We just can’t read it. Well that’s it [offers the sheet], you’re welcome to a copy of that anyway.

**Victoria**

Thank you that’s very useful.

**G201**

Early on those things arose. There’s some things we’ve resolved and some things we haven’t resolved. Certainly this dividing a file into all these ridiculous sections. And that’s not even social work, I mean…

**Victoria**

That’s not something I’ve ever heard of before.

**G201**

No.

**Victoria**

I don’t really know what the logic is for that.

**G201**

I don’t know where they got it from because it’s not good practice anywhere to do that. There always was a bit at the back which was…legal papers, we used to have a legal bit at the back so that you could have quick access to legal papers, but generally it was just chronological.

**Victoria**

Well, we have been talking for an hour and fifteen minutes. There are just a couple of things that I want to return to briefly if that’s ok?

**G201**

Of course.

**Victoria**

One was about… you mentioned about photographs and those personal documents like swimming certificates and things, and I know from speaking to people who've been in care that those things are really important, and I just wondered what percentage of files have those kinds of things in them?

**G201**

I would guess something like 10%, at the most. Most have nothing personal in at all, but those things mean the world to them. I think its somewhere on these [gestures to the sheet], we’ve said that those items should belong to the person in the original, they are their things, birth certificates…

**Victoria**

They have the original birth certificates?

**G201**

Yes! They should be….that’s theirs isn’t it? I mean it belongs to them. It’s the same with, not just birth certificates but passports, original passports. Don’t all of us keep those going back years, look at them and look at the pictures? And they’re very important because they tell us where the children were taken, so you know it was part of the abuse story. But yes, simple personal things…the personal details overall are hugely important to them. That someone cared, that a social worker cared enough to go and see them in a play, a Christmas play or something, you know, if they’ve forgotten that it’s a lovely thing for them to remember, so it’s important.

**Victoria**

I do know that some authorities are giving those personal things.

**G201**

They are? The originals? Good. We don’t get the originals.

**Victoria**

There are certainly a few people I’ve spoken to where that is their practice, although as you say it’s generally a low percentage of files that have those kinds of materials with them, and in fact it’s the charities that kept a lot more of that kind of thing.

**G201**

Like [Place name]?

**Victoria**

Yes.

**G201**

They loved their photos there.

**Victoria**

Largest collection of photographs of children in Europe! [both laugh] You mentioned also life story work and I know you said most of the files you’re dealing with are up to mid-90s…

**G201**

But when did life story work come in, for goodness sake I can’t remember.

**Victoria**

I’ve seen references to is as early as the 1980s but I don’t know when it became widespread.

**G201**

We were certainly doing it in the late 80s, early 90s, I knew about it.

**Victoria**

And do you find any evidence of that?

**G201**

No, I’ve not seen a single one. But we’ve got one or two now coming forward who were in care recently…I mean the last [Place name] inquiry was 1995, so we kind of thought our line would be drawn in 95 but we’ve had some saying no nothing much changed and stuff was still going on after that so we’re seeing more recent…you know they’ve got big files, it’s a very different era altogether, a lot more documentation, yeah….

**Victoria**

But as you say, a shift from opinion to evidence based practice?

**G201**

Yeah, more factual yes.

**Victoria**

I’ve heard a few people point out that there are pros and cons to the provision of opinions because sometimes opinions are very derogatory or critical, but the loss of that opinion is sometimes the loss of those personal details, those kind of feelings and emotions of an interaction get lost from the files.

**G201**

Also the information which you can’t firm up, it’s quite common in social work. You hear things, you think ‘is it true or not?’. At one point I removed five children under five into care, so none of them could give much evidence, they were all tiny tots and right at the beginning of numerous files when I went through everything to compile the court case, I found a social worker had said ‘I’ve heard a rumour that this man had five children in a previous relationship’ and that just got me going and I traced every single one of them and they all came to court as adults and gave evidence for the children, so if that social worker hadn’t just… you know ‘I’ve heard a rumour that…’ and it was quite clear it was a rumour. I’ve no problem if it’s clear that…or even if you put ‘I’m not sure if it’s true or not but this is what I’ve heard being said…’ it’s important, it’s so important. And people are afraid now to express their gut feelings, and are not even to taught how to do that and how to process it. Only Harry Ferguson, you know his work? [Victoria shakes head] Harry Ferguson is trying to bring all that back, you know, he’s writing and teaching about when you go into a house what are you smelling, be aware, use all your senses, it’s really good, really good. And there’s a way of teaching where there’s a house that’s set up and you see what the person…what they want the social worker to notice and what they pick up. It’s a really brilliant way of training, you know it’s brilliant. I think he’s good in that way, he’s trying to get the humanity back into it.

**Victoria**

You said mechanistic earlier, and I suppose with the introduction of digital systems and things, there’s perhaps a connection between changes in recording and changes in the infrastructure. If you’re using a digital recording system then it has different ways of shaping what you write and say?

**G201**

It’s prescriptive, it’s tick box most of it. Have you had survivors who’ve come forward who’ve only got a computer print-out?

**Victoria**

I haven’t spoken to any one yet, but we will be in the very near future. I’m having a workshop with young care leavers who are under 25, whose records will be predominantly digital, because I am interested to know what that looks like.

**G201**

Because I don’t know what it looks like. I know what it looks like on a computer but I don’t know what they’d be given.

**Victoria**

I’ve spoken to some information access people who talked about the way that they collate that information from the different systems that they have and the different…because these systems change over time, they don’t have a very long lifespan, so one might be in use for 5-10 years and then there will be a second system and a third system.

**G201**

With a new company taking over.

**Victoria**

So that’s very complicated because a lot of these systems are not designed for long term access, they’re designed for use in the present. It’s an area we’re particularly looking at, I’m going to a meeting with some colleagues to talk about that specifically next week because it should be part of the procurement exercise to understand what the implications are, because at the very least files for children who are looked after should be kept for 75 years, well we know that digital technology changes rapidly so what will a file produced on a data base be like in 75 years and how will be provide access to somebody.

**G201**

Because it you print it out it’s going to be a strange thing isn’t it? It won’t be easy to navigate will it for someone.

**Victoria**

Quite often these systems are dependent on links between things and if you print something then the links between them get broken. There might be documents that should be associated digitally with one another and then they’re separated physically. So yeah, there’s a lot of different issues to think about in that area, with the modern records and things that are being produced now and projecting forward into the future and imagining the scenarios that we might encounter.

**G201**

There won’t be all the scribbled notes that are so informative.

**Victoria**

Well that’s a question about practice isn’t it and how much of that stuff gets transferred into digital systems now? Whereas it might previously have been put onto the file will it now be lost completely? Same with photographs and personal materials.

**G201**

I don’t know what would happen. Maybe it's given to the young person anyway now, in a different way. But they’re not at an age where they would keep everything or think it was important.

**Victoria**

Not necessarily.

**G201**

At the time that I got my swimming certificates I wouldn’t have thought they were important, you know. Later on maybe they would be, so yeah. I know some that got their file and burnt it.

**Victoria**

Yeah, and I’ve spoken to at least one person who would like to have their file destroyed, not only the copy that they receive but the original.

**G201**

And what’s the position on that then?

**Victoria**

Well the position of the authority in the past was absolutely not, because it’s a record of…it’s an organisational record. But there is a question under the new data protection regulation, there is the new right to erasure or to be forgotten, so once information is no longer of use or value, that the individual subject should be able to request for it to be destroyed. But in this case it’s so complicated because as we discussed these files are not necessarily only about one individual, they’re about many individuals and how do you…so if one person wishes to be erased, what about the rights of all the other people? And do they have a continuing use by the organisation over and above archival purposes? Some really interesting issues and people I’ve spoken to, some historians, who believe these records should be being preserved in the long long term as part of our historical record. I don’t know if you’ve heard about the ruling in Canada, after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission after the inquiry into abuse in indigenous residential school, the high court ruling is that the testimonies of survivors should be destroyed unless they give explicit consent for them to be preserved, and there’s been quite a contentious debate between different interests about that because some survivors feel very strongly that their testimonies should be preserved, they should be publically available and recognised and then others feel that it’s private to them and in fact that testimony belongs to them and they only gave it for reparation so it should be destroyed, and historians and archivists are in the middle saying well it’s bigger than the individual it’s about the nation and the nation should remember.

**G201**

Fascinating, fascinating.

**Victoria**

There’s lots of different rights, different considerations that have to be balanced, and it is really really hard, but I can absolutely understand…as this individual put it to me why should a local authority forty years after I was looked after by them continue to hold this…what they consider to be false narrative about their life and who they were.

**G201**

Is this after redress, after they’ve had a legal case? After? I can kind of understand that. My issue would be if there was criminal prosecution, but if there’s nothing outstanding and they’ve got their reparation and anybody that can be prosecuted has been prosecuted, I think I agree, because women in particular will say their histories are used against them in relation to their own children and grandchildren. Yeah, that’s a big one. And it will be because the core assessment form says was there a history of childhood in care and is there a history of child abuse? And neither of those questions should be on that form. It also says is there a history of physical disability. That shouldn’t be on there either, there is no known link in research between physical disability and abuse. Just because you’re physically disabled doesn’t mean you’re more likely to abuse your children, there is no connection. There is with learning disability and there is with mental health, so there’s a reason to put those on. It’s a muddle the assessment forms, because they’re muddled between children in need and child protection…children in need is asking much broader questions on the basis that it’s supposed to be supportive and helpful but then these questions are being used in a discriminatory way, so yeah I do believe that history in care sets off all kinds of alarm bells with people thinking can this parent parent? it’s just awful. Yeah if that could be destroyed I’d be all for that. Anything else?

**Victoria**

Not if there isn’t anything else that you want to add?

**G201**

No I can’t think of anything else.

**Victoria**

Thank you that’s been incredibly valuable and thank for the copy of this [indicates the sheet G201 provided], I will append it to the transcription if that’s ok with you.

**G201**

Now it’s technically ISN’s not mine, but there’s nothing…. But it would expose [Place name] wouldn't it? I don’t want to expose them in that way really. It’s for your reference.

**Victoria**

What I would normally do in the circumstances when reproducing any information I will anonymise the context so I wouldn’t make reference to [Place name] specifically.

**G201**

But I will be an identifier. [laughs]

**Victoria**

I know that you said you don’t mind being named, but the way that we’ve approached it is to use discretion, so that in the event that I’m quoting something that’s your personal opinion then I would use your name, in the event that I’m using an example then I might anonymise both you and the context and probably use a pseudonymous statement like ‘an interviewee with personal experience in a London authority’.

**G201**

Yes, to make the point there. I mean some of it wouldn’t matter because it’s innocuous really, like the thing about being outside of the borough I don’t see any harm talking about that because that must be a common problem, it’s only anything that you think might hinder our relationship with them when we’re trying to battle our way and get some agreement. Some of these things have now been addressed so I wouldn't want to hang them out to dry on those, other than to bring it in to your other…where it fits, to say this was also seen to be important. You’ll know anyway, I’m not worried about it, there’s nothing secret or private in there.

**Victoria**

So when I’ve transcribed, I’ll send you a copy of the transcription, you’re under no obligation to read through it because it will be long…

**G201**

It will be yeah!

Victoria

But what I do is I put in square brackets anything that I would redact or pseudonymise if in the event of use, so it’s in the original transcript so you can see it’s been done and transcribed but for the purposes of the reuse. And anything that’s used after the life of the project, so once the live research phase is over and we use any of this data, if it’s put on to the university research data service….

**G201**

So nobody’s traceable then?

**Victoria**

As far as is possible, it’s very difficult to anonymise in situations where individuals are closely related to specific contexts but we do the best we can. I’ll stop recording now.

END OF INTERVIEW

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

Interview between G208 (who wishes to remain anonymous) and Victoria Hoyle, recorded on 26th September 2018, via Skype.

*NB: Some sentences and sections were redacted at the transcript stage, at the request of G208, to respect their anonymity and the anonymity of their employer. Where this is the case it has been noted in square brackets. Some additional comments were also added in at this stage and these are prefaced with a note in square brackets.*

**START OF INTERVIEW**

**Victoria**

Just so you know G208, I’ve just started recording.

**G208**

Yeah, yeah that’s fine. So I joined the industry about 10 years ago. I came in part way through ICS [Integrated Children’s System] knowing nothing about social care, as I said I could barely spell the words. I came in from a very different background, mostly with finance and telecom providers but that’s by the by. The one thing that ICS was trying to do was it was trying to prevent mistakes by dictating what people recorded and, in many ways, how they recorded it. And as well as being a problem for the people that were actually practising social work and trying to work with families and children, it caused no end of problems for us because the data we collected was specified and we had to be approved by what was then the Department of Children…DCSF…I can’t remember what they stand for but that was the tick in the box. If you didn’t have the tick in the box you couldn’t even sell a system in the UK.

**Victoria**

Right.

**G208**

Which fundamentally limited innovation and various other things in a technology sense. Over the period obviously ICS was thought, and proven to be, too rigid. It was too onerous for a lot of the children that were coming into contact with the care system. So eventually it was decided that it wasn’t to be used anymore, it wasn’t fit for purpose in a lot of senses, although I hate that phrase. And so people were allowed to go back to…not doing their own thing but doing what they felt was right for their individual locality, and that’s where you see a lot of variation, because different areas of the country have different practice standards and hence different recording standards, which makes life as a systems vendor quite interesting as well as for a practitioner moving around the country. So, what we did was we looked at what was really important to people to record, and what the other systems were doing. Now a lot of the other systems are very workflow driven, so they treat everything as a mechanistic process. You follow the process and you record what you record when you need to record it as told by the system, and we felt that had a number of problems. The first thing is dealing with a person as a social worker does is not the same as dealing with a machine that turns out nuts and bolts. They’re variable, they have ups, they have downs, they have things that come in from all over the place that change the direction of their lives, and so we felt that wasn’t a great way to record, and we felt it was very restrictive. As we did our own research in this by talking to social workers that worked on those systems what we found was that they had pages and pages and pages of notes about families kept outside the system because the workflow wouldn’t let them move on to record that until they got one other piece of information. And sometimes it was a trivial piece of information you know that even on occasion the families didn’t know, especially when you’re dealing with very chaotic families. So what we’ve tried to do is we’ve tried to be as relaxed as we can about gathering that data while accepting that there’s minimum datasets that we need, and those minimum datasets are now still largely driven by government. But they’re not driven by ICS, or any equivalent thereof, they’re largely driven by what the local authority needs to return to central government, because that’s considered the minimum dataset that you would need to record to fulfil your statutory duties as a local authority. And you can go look at the kind of data in those kind of returns. So there’s one called the SSD903, there’s another one called the CIN (Children in Need) census, and some of them are… well I think in fact they’re now all at individual level, so you provide quite a lot of data about the child to central government, normally done by the system identifier, so where we have a system identifier say 12345 we send that up to central government. And some of those datasets are really interesting and there would be a lot of value if people could actually get hold of them, because I think the CIN…not the CIN census… the SSD903 started recording in 1992 and tracks children year on year so you can imagine the wealth of data that holds centrally about children across the country. So that’s really the minimum dataset that we get asked for, and then the system is required to make sure that that is collected and validated and good for production of these returns that go to central government on an annual basis, or sometimes if we talk about adoption they go on a quarterly basis. And that is really what the system is geared around. When it comes to the way that people buy systems now, it’s all done by tender because of open public procurement procedures and those type of things, that’s what governs it, but generally what they’re looking for is something that allows you to produce those returns and to manage the money. So obviously these children in care cost you money so you want to be able to pay people to look after them etc etc etc pay for services for them, all those kind of things. And then a lot of it is about ease of use for their workers. So is it easy to use? Is it clean and clear? Does it save them time? Does it produce the things that they need on screen really quickly? All those kind of things, from an end user perspective. So, does it reuse data continually? Which of course has its up and downs, because if you reused a correct piece of data that’s all good but if you accidentally get it wrong and it reused it 20 times you’ve got an awful lot of correction to do, and in fact you will find it goes back a long way. And those are the main kinds of criteria that they buy on now. There’s very little about…people talk about ‘can I see the child’s journey?’ But when they talk about it they’re talking about it from their practitioner’s perspective, or the auditor’s perspective, or the manager that’s been brought in for a consultation’s perspective, etc etc etc. We’re very rarely talking about it from the child’s experience and in the child’s words and in the child’s views, it’s very much the social worker’s interpretation of those kind of things. Which is why when we designed our latest generation of products we put in the ability to hold video, audio, pictures, all those kind of things because we thought at least if the social worker is basing their text on their interpretation of a picture and you can see the picture you could actually form a different interpretation, or you could actually see what was the basis of what they wrote.

**Victoria**

That’s very interesting. Let me come back to that in a second, because there’s quite a few things that you just said there that I want to talk a bit more about first. In this tendering process that goes into the procurement of a new system, in your experience who is involved in that process from the client’s perspective? What is the range of expertise that’s on a panel or involved in putting together a specification?

**G208**

Oh that can be a myriad of different groups or very few groups. So you’ve got one fundamental group which is IT and information governance, security, that kind of grouping, and then you’ll have various groups of practitioners, who may be… in some cases they will go down to individual practitioners, and in some cases they will stop at various layers of management across various groups, so you’d have people that were involved in child protection, people that were looking after children in care, maybe people who were dealing with the legal processes, people dealing with the finance processes, people dealing with adoption, fostering, basically all the different service areas.

**Victoria**

Right, and in your experience has there ever been a looked after child or a care experienced person involved in that process at all?

**G208**

Not that I recall, and if I can’t recall it it’s certainly not obvious.

**Victoria**

No. So I know that sometimes in other processes within Children’s Services departments they’re very keen on involving young people but it strikes me that perhaps these systems are seen as being, as you say, for internal eyes.

**G208**

For the professional.

**Victoria**

For the professional, yes. And do you find that in specifications there are requirements around records management and retention of information?

**G208**

Yep.

**Victoria**

Yes, so what would be the standard for, kind of, records management functionality would you say?

**G208**

There’s a BS standard but I can’t remember its number.

**Victoria**

Don’t worry, I don’t expect you to remember standard numbers [laughs].

**G208**

So there is a British Standard that is often referenced. I’ll make a note, I can easily look that up. Yeah, that’s often referenced, but there are also other specific references because…it depends on the journey of the child and where they got to – maybe we can talk about that in a minute – but you get different lengths, so for example adoption has a different length [of retention] to somebody that only ever had a referral and that never continued. So we get different types of records with different lengths of retention, both for online and for destruction, so in our older systems we used to have a model where records remained online and then they were archived and then they were removed, in the new one they tend to remain online until they’re removed simply because storage is easier, cheaper and all those things, compared with years ago. But yes, they have those.

**Victoria**

You mentioned about creating these new opportunities to also input video and different types of media, photographs and things like that, into a record and I wondered how much the system required or was conducive to including the child or young person’s voice?

**G208**

Yeah, that’s one thing that we’re still looking at. That’s a really interesting piece and that’s one of the things I think we’re coming up to discuss with you next week. But no, not really, would be our view at the moment. There are obviously people out there that are trying it, so Mind of My Own MOMO is one of the ones that’s used around the country but I don’t think it…it allows a child to have their view at certain points in time and it also allows the child to contact their social worker but it’s not really about recording their experience or having their experience recorded with them. What I mean by that is, and one of the things that I should probably also declare is, that I am a foster carer as well so I have a kind of insight into some of this stuff, because I sit on both sides of the fence as a semi-professional and as an IT supplier. Because sometimes you come across children that wouldn’t be able to record their history, for example we look after under 5s, there’s no way that the three year old we’ve got at the moment could ever attempt to understand his history. But you know we try and help keep a record of what he’s doing and how he’s growing and those kind of things on his behalf and we think those kind of things, when the child’s doing it themselves or the carers are doing it with them, is really lacking at the moment, and that creates a whole load of other interesting problems.

[Comment inserted at transcript stage] Ofsted comment on this in their inspections but it is unclear what they actually look for since the child has no physical input into their record. This could be looking at materials stored alongside the record, surveys or the professional recording on their behalf.

**Victoria**

Yes absolutely.

**G208**

Just one more thing while we’re talking about this use of videos and pictures and things, some social workers can be very resistive to this, which is quite interesting, and some social work departments are quite resistant to it as well. The reason being they worry about consent and all those kind of things about…GDPR gets cited occasionally these days as well…it’s a really interesting one because actually if you think about it, it could be a massive time saver for you because a picture or a few seconds of video will explain an awful lot more about what’s going on than you could ever do in words. It’s really interesting to think about some of these things, and one of the things we think that stops that in some instances as well is the courts, because people seem to think that the court would not accept those kinds of evidence, whereas we think actually from anecdotal evidence that we’ve got that the court would actually welcome it, because if you can see a child it’s a very different perspective. We, again, going back to the foster caring bit, one of the children we had we were actually asked to supply pictures for the court because the judge thought that it was going to be particularly acrimonious and what he wanted to do was he wanted to get these pictures printed at A3 size and stick the little girl around the court so everybody could remember what they were talking about, which I thought was a really interesting and thoughtful thing to do.

**Victoria**

Yeah, and thinking about in terms of what you were saying, when children are very very young they’re not necessarily laying down memories of themselves at that time for themselves, and when they get older and have questions about, you know, who did I live with? What was my life like? What did I look like? Then those kind of materials can be really valuable for memory work, identity work, understanding your own journey in a way that’s much more akin to what you would experience if you were living in a birth family setting.

**G208**

Yes, yes, indeed.

**Victoria**

Yeah, so life story work is a term that comes up regularly when talking about recording for those kinds of purposes, for kind of memory purposes, and I wondered if they systems were sort of set up for that?

**G208**

No. None of them are.

**Victoria**

So that happens elsewhere?

**G208**

It happens elsewhere, it happens outside, and so in my experience it’s often somebody comes around and talks to you as the carer and they’ve also been and talked to the birth family, if the birth family will engage, and then they write something up, and that’s generally held outside of our system. One of the things I should say is although the production of it may be outside, the final storage of it now may be inside of our systems. In years gone by there was a different system…so if I took you to our previous generation of systems they didn’t store any documents, so if you wanted a word document you couldn’t attach it into our system, you would normally store it on a separate document management system, so you’ve got this kind of split record which is…together you’ve got case management and document management and they were called the electronic social care record. Our latest generation systems and some of the other vendors now bring those together into one, so you would now store them together even though the system doesn’t provide you a method of producing it. You would produce it outside of the system, they’re often using standard Office tools like Word or PowerPoint to produce them, and then they’re storing them at the end of the record if you see what I mean.

**Victoria**

Yeah, yeah, and I know that life story work can be again very inconsistently done depending on where you are and I suppose if it’s not part of the kind of regular function of recording but is an adjunct activity then…

**G208**

It always seems to happen at the end.

**Victoria**

Yeah?

**G208**

It always seems to be ‘oh the child’s moving on, we need to do it.’ Not ‘are we recording this child’s life as we go along?’ It always kind of feels like the last tick box at the very end of the process is what it feels like.

[Comment inserted at transcript stage] Thinking about my statement above I suspect I am giving a biased view. Having only cared for young children who have recently entered the care system then we are always the first to do life story with them and because we care for them short term is always falls to us to do it.

Looking at our training materials then the ideal life story work would be done over a period of time and contain different sets of materials for different ages. For example: create a file with pockets in with different levels of details for the child at different ages.

**Victoria**

It’s very interesting, I’ve spoken to quite a few care leavers, including some very young care leavers only 18 years old, who have almost no photographs of themselves or anything, any objects at all, from their childhoods at all prior to them starting to record themselves as young people do using social media, so really it’s only when they became teenagers that they have any record. I was in a room with sort of five young care leavers between the ages of 18 and 25 and not a single one had a photograph of themselves as a baby, and they’d all been taking into care very young, and I found that quite shocking.

**G208**

Yeah, it’s a real shame. As the foster carer speaking we make sure that we do keep a record, everything that we do with them we’ll try and take photos of or videos of, every first step you know, every time they do something new, we record that and we keep it. We also keep boxes of stuff, and it is stuff, but it’s all those things that help make a memory. So it’s like their first drawing at pre-school, it’s like their first painting, they’re first shoes, all those kind of things we’ve done, and that’s because [named person] my wife did it for our kids and our kids who are now in their 20s will still occasionally go through their memory box that we game them when they were 18. They’ll still go ‘oh look, I remember this’ you know, ‘I remember going to this particular sporting event’ and they’ll find the ticket for it, and what we’ve tried to do is with the children we’ve had in our care is recreate that for them and keep it, but it’s not mandated for us to do it and it’s inconsistent across, you know, not every carer does it. And sometimes it’s really hard, you know, you will get a child that will wilfully destroy it, because of what they’re going through and then it’s really un-recreatable those kind of things.

**Victoria**

One of the things that we’ve discussed, reflecting on life story work, is whether or not it would be appropriate for it to be more completely integrated into the recording process? Whether or not it’s possible to bring together the kind of social work, core social work functions of child protection and corporate parenting, with this memory and identity work? And I don’t really know that we’ve come to any conclusion yet, but certainly it would seem that more often the records of the function of Children’s Services survives in ways that these other kinds of records don’t, and particularly when an adult comes back to try and access their records they often find that even if they have memories of photographs being taken of them those photographs and things no longer survive.

**G208**

Yeah, it’s one of the things that’s always worried us because when a child leaves our care…again this is foster carer me talking…when a child leaves our care we provide copies, we used to provide copies on DVD and sometimes we still do but it depends on the capacity, but we tend to provide copies of everything to three groups of people. The parents, because we feel it’s good for the parents to have a record of the child that they have lost; now some of them they may just stick the memory card in their phone and reformat it within 10 seconds but hey so what, that’s their choice. We give one copy to the adopters or to the next carers for the child, but obviously we don’t know where that goes after that. And the third copy we give to the social worker for filing, we have no idea what happens there, because obviously it’s a physical medium, they’ve got to store it somewhere, they’ve got to archive it somewhere, or they’ve got to copy it onto their electronic systems, and that’s…doubtful whether they would always do that. And you again end up with this inconsistency. I think one of the things for us about the child recording their own record is I would say that for us it’s an important thing to do, and we would say that it should be interleaved with their child protection records or any other records because those records contain the views of many many other people, parents, all sorts of professionals, why shouldn’t they contain the individual views of that child? Even though the child may lack understanding, clearly isn’t at the same level as some of those professionals in understanding about what’s going on to them, or their health needs, or any of those things, but their voices should be there and they should be heard and it should be available for people to take account of. The problem with that, as we see in other areas of care, is there’s no portability of it, so if I for example move across boundaries within the care system, my record doesn’t flow with me easily and we’re not advocating that there should be a national standard for all of the record, because that doesn’t seem like it’s a really good thing because we’re going back to ICS and limiting innovation and all those things that we started the conversation with if we’re not careful, but it does seem like there should be some base level of portability, and at the moment that’s probably a PDF file, but that’s then not ideal because you’ve got one document that’s not interleaved anymore. It’s a really interesting problem. There are similar problems in adult care that nobody has solved and they involve money, so if you can’t solve it when there’s money involved it seems like you’re unlikely to solve it when there’s no money involved. But we believe that they should be shared…but then you have to worry about who sees them and the consent to see them and all those kind of things, which again we think doesn’t put us off doing it but it needs thinking through and working out.

**Victoria**

Yeah, and I hope that’s something this research can contribute towards in terms of understanding the sort of multiple perspectives and also understanding how they fit within the legislative and regulatory landscape, which is very complex and fragmented in this particular area, and I think a more developed conversation similar to the one that’s been had around health records would be a starting point for thinking about how to, you know, approach some of these problems. You have brought up round to one of the other questions I had which was about systems compatibility and interoperability. I know from talking to some social care practitioners that services are often using multiple systems, and within a local authority there may be multiple agencies, multiple departments involved in a child’s life, so for example if a young person is also involved in criminal justice records of that will be managed over in criminal justice or youth offending services, and then there will a record over in Children’s Services and those systems very rarely speak to one another, and I wondered to what extend people are looking for compatibility or interoperability when they’re in the market for a system?

**G208**

Interesting one. They can look, but they won’t get it. And that’s largely due to economics. The prices of systems have dropped dramatically, and prices of implementations have dropped dramatically, over the last years, while the expectations of them has gone up, and there are very poor economics in the productions of these systems so you have to look to make money elsewhere and unfortunately one of the places that remains to make money is in the integration of systems, because it’s complex and hence has a higher charge with it, which is why it very often doesn’t get done. One of the things that we’ve attempted to do with our latest generation systems is actually to enable the collapsing of a number of those services onto a single system with security that allows them to work together and share the record appropriately without clashing into each other or breaking consent rules. So from some of the other vendors you would have a separate system for troubled families, a separate system for early help and a separate system for statutory care. With ours that’s one system with three different groups of users and the record would progress through, so you don’t even have breaks between systems, so you could see very clearly that this person came into early help, was then referred to troubled families, that didn’t work and they ended up being a child in need in the statutory part of the system. You can track that really quite well through the system as you go. When it comes to other systems like youth justice, all those kind of things, or even if you wind back the process a bit, wind back to the referral stage where somebody is being evaluated as to whether they should come into contact with the care system, if you look at those things then you get a myriad of systems, you get NHS systems, police systems, education systems, those kind of things. Then there’s a lot of problems around that to do with information governance, to do with security, to do with the access of systems, all those kind of things, and it’s just a tricky area that takes a lot of working through. There are moves…so techUK who you might have come across? techUK have got an open API charter of which we are the only social care vendor to have signed it, we make a set of our APIs available free of charge to anybody who wishes to use them and so far not many people have wished to use them, but we would hope that will change. I mean one of the areas we are seeing a lot more interest in integration, and there are easier ways of doing it, is education data. So knowing how well the child in care is performing at school is becoming easier, there are now ways of getting that data to be available to the social workers who are, you know, looking after the child, that’s becoming easier within one system. But there are a lot of other areas where it’s just not. And the other thing is you also have to remember that while we have a modern system now not everybody has that and so integration between the systems and getting data in and out of them can be really tricky and really hard.

**Victoria**

Which obviously is a preservation concern as well, for long term retention of these materials.

**G208**

Yes, absolutely.

**Victoria**

That brings me on to another question which was about…

**G208**

Sorry, can I just make one more comment on that one?

**Victoria**

Of course, absolutely.

**G208**

The other one that we see that is really tricky, which you haven’t mentioned and I was surprised didn’t come up, is email.

**Victoria**

Yes, yeah.

**G208**

There’s so much information that flows by email, how do you get email into the record and those kind of things, and that’s a really tricky one as well because there’s so many different potential pitfalls in that that it tends to not get done in an automated way, you can do it generally by copy and paste, there are some systems that have buttons but it’s really tried to then file it in the right place and make sure that you’re not just filing rubbish. Because emails go backwards and forwards with all sorts of stuff in them, and if you file each reply to each reply you end up filling the record up really quickly with just garbage. We did an experiment a number of years ago now where we allowed the case file to be copied into an email chain. So you could address it to 12345@ and then give it the email address and we picked it up and filed it automatically in the record but we found that we were picking up so much rubbish the record was filling up really quickly with stuff and it just made it much harder to read and pick through so we get a lot of requests for those kind of things but our response to that is normally well no you need to think about what you’re recording and not just automate recording absolutely everything because of what it may contain. It’s a problem.

**Victoria**

I suppose there are implications as well for work processes. I know I was speaking to one data protection manager in a county authority and she was saying to me ‘well in a lot of cases with email, practitioners are referring to multiple cases in the same message’ so they might be talking about children from different contexts, they might be communicating with a colleague or a manager, and so it’s very difficult sometimes to assign a particular message to a single file, or it might need to go onto multiple files, and in some cases the information being sent about one child is very inconsequential and about another its sensitive and that brings up a lot of problems for her at the back end in providing access to that information, in terms of thinking about redaction.

**G208**

So we’re also working with…sorry I’m just thinking…no I’m not going to tell you who they are…by telling you who they are I might break a confidence…

**Victoria**

Sure.

**G208**

But we work with a national charity that provides services to local authorities and nearly all of their stuff is group work, and our platform now does enable you to record against groups but it creates some really interesting problems when it comes to records access. It’s you know, one thing when you’re dealing with a family or a group that live in the same house, but when you’re dealing with people from across the same city that may have been involved in some child sexual abuse, and you are recording about them as a group because you’re working with them as a group, it creates some really interesting problems about records access, because obviously the thing may well be littered with references to multiple individuals, in just one single note for example. It’s a really interesting problem.

**Victoria**

Absolutely, and she was saying you know how the appearances of that can be very disturbing for the person who is accessing the record because they don’t know that what’s been redacted is referring to a completely different person whose not related to them or doesn’t have anything to do with them. And yeah, it’s a challenge. To what extent should the recordkeeping….you know who is the recordkeeping serving?

**G208**

Yeah. Coming back to the group thing, lots of social workers like it because it can save them significant time. In many systems then the way that recording against groups works, and we found this we had this in our previous generation system, where I record against the first child in the family and then I would duplicate everything for the second child and change it and so on and so on. That’s fine and it does save you some time but you’ve got to remember to change it, and we certainly had instances where customers had particularly large families and Ofsted had picked up on say the eighth child and had found that the person who had duplicated it from the first child had forgot to change it, so there was all this cross-contamination of the records that was going on. In the later systems then we allow you to create a group and you say which questions are asked at group level and which are asked at individual level. So group level might be what’s the housing situation of this family, individual level might be what the health situation of the individual and you record each one of those separately, and we can view them as slices, so we can say this is child A, this is child B, this is child C, or we can view them all together. And when it comes to outputting them then you would get child A’s, child B’s or child C’s, whichever one you selected, and then if you were giving that to the person you’d only have to redact certain bits of it and we save time that way. But a lot of it is being pushed as a time saving device for the actual users of the system, so I want to be able to blanket this to everybody because it saves me time, but in doing that they often forget that they may be cross-contaminating records in various ways that they haven’t even considered.

**Victoria**

Yeah, and it’s that struggle of funding the balance between allowing someone to do their job in the most effective way possible while also serving the multiple rights and interests of the people that are involved in it.

**G208**

Yeah, absolutely, and that’s one of the things that we have to worry about all the time, because a data protection officer’s worry is completely different to a social worker’s worry.

**Victoria**

Absolutely, yeah, yeah. So thinking about this issue around legacy systems. You mentioned that some people have got records that are in old systems and I’ve come across various different approaches to this in the providers, the agencies that I’ve spoken with. Some appear to be…when they move on to the next generation of whatever system they’re using they leave the legacy records from the previous system behind in that system, kind of using it as a storage tool; others want to migrant those records on into the new system and I guess that’s particularly important for live cases, but also I’ve seen some cases where people are actively scanning analogue records into digital systems as well. I wondered, in your experience, what’s the trend there?

**G208**

I think I can explain. The trend towards paper is ‘get away from it’, so we certainly have systems in place where you can use a scanner to scan the document as it comes basically, so it’s come through the mail room to the department, the department open it, they scan it, it goes into the record, it alerts the person responsible for that record that it’s there, and asks them to take note of it and maybe take some action depending on the ways its worded, and that’s fairly common now, that is very common. We’ve seen a lot of effort of back-scanning paper records for live cases, or for cases that have been open in the recent past. The numbers tend to be two years or five years, depending on what horizon they plan on and what horizon they work on a lot of the time, they just use the same one, so that’s quite common as well. In terms of when you move off a system from our perspective there’s a number of ways of doing it. Normally there’s a rush, there’s a rush to get off the old and on to the new, although in some cases we know of people that have transitioned from our systems to newer systems that aren’t ours that can take them four years. [sentence redacted] In terms of migration we would recommend that obviously you carry forward everything that’s live, depending on how you do that and the scale of the system is up to you. So we’ve got one [system] that goes live on Monday, they’re a very small part of a local authority, their case holding is not much, so they…and because of the number of systems that they’re reconciling into one…the cost of data migration would have been more than retyping it and they are retyping it but it’s a relatively small number of records, it’s in the low hundreds, a couple of hundred records, and they’re not taking the whole record they’re only taking parts of it that they need for this new system, so they’re retyping, which is adequate. In other ones that we’re doing at the moment, we have one system going through where we are doing electronic data migration for the records of children and their families which amounts to almost half a million people.

**Victoria**

Wow.

**G208**

Yeah. There are all sorts of problems with this, not least of which is missing poor quality data that we have to deal with, because the newer the system the more rigorous it is in checking the data, so you end up with data that’s just not there in the old system and you ask ‘well how did you use it?’ and you usually find that if we go back to the statutory returns that we talked about a while ago, what they did was they tried to produce the statutory return, they recognised the data wasn’t very good, so rather than correcting it in the record they’ve corrected it in the return.

**Victoria**

Ok.

**G208**

Leaving the record out of date, which isn’t good practice, but it may be expedient to get the return done for central government. And often when you look at the organisational siloes that group producing that return is not the group that’s responsible for the quality of the record or recording the record in the first place. So actually for the people doing the return to sit there and go hey I’ve got these 20 records for you Mr Social Worker that you recorded that aren’t very good, you need to go back and do them, well, you know, they were last year, I’m on this year now so you know what I’m not going to go back and do that, I don’t have time, it’s never going to happen. So that’s quite common. Or you end up employing a small army of people to do the data correction, so you end up with these inconsistencies and bits of missing data that make life a bit harder, and then sometimes again it’s just there is no equivalent format so you have to do something else with it. So you maybe have to put it into a document that you attach rather than actual specific fields in the system, because obviously as times gone on that data either disappears or is no longer needed or things are now just so different technologically. A good example: child protection registers used to be mandatory in England, it’s no longer mandatory, some people will still use it, newer systems don’t have it, therefore if you want to take that data forward you’ve got to find somewhere else to put it and normally that’s in a document because you’re not going to be able to use it from then on, so you stick it in a document as a kind of historic record that you’re not going to take data from anymore. So there’s lots of problems with migration. We certainly have some customers where they take a cohort not everybody, and they define their cohort on a number of years, so for example anybody that’s had contact with the care system, with our care system, in the last three years we’ll take their record forward, anybody else then it generally gets left as you pointed out, for a period of time and then they’ll work out what to do with it later. Sometimes that’s because they don’t have budget to deal with it, so they’ve got budget to put the new system in but they never got budget to actually totally get rid of the old system. So we had a number of customers where the system has sat there basically acting a data preservation role for a number of years, [sentence redacted] There are models available for those records, we can extract them and put them into a specialist data preservation system that we have available to us through another company that we own, and we’ve looked at doing that a number of times because what we can do is, if you want to do that, we can do a really good proper job of it and we can incorporate the data from multiple systems into that one archive which gives you a clearer view if you like, so where we talking about the document management – cos those all have to be managed as well when you move systems – they generally get left, even for large records they generally get left on our system because the cost of moving them is just prohibitive and the time to move them is prohibitive as well cos it can take weeks just to physically move data from one place to another, it can take weeks. So we can take those documents into that preservation solution, we can take the case management documents into that solution and we could include other document sources that you may have lying around as well. In very old cases you can sometimes find that you do have multiple sources, so you’ve got your case management system like we provide, document management, but you may also have Windows network drives kicking around, even individual department drives you’ll find those that you want to preserve as well, because otherwise the data gets lost.

**Victoria**

But it sounds as though that’s a relatively small proportion of clients who are looking for that kind of service?

**G208**

Most of them migrate a cohort. How big that cohort is is up to them, it’s entirely their choice, so some of them only chose children in care, or who are looked after, or who are in the adoption process, some of them chose anybody who’s been in contact, some of them will chose everything, it’s entirely up to the way they want to run…sometimes it’s what they want to report on as well, for their local reports.

**Victoria**

So in terms of the statutory obligation to retain for example looked after children files for 75 years, presumably that data has got to go somewhere to be preserved for 75 years, do you ever liaise with records management teams to transfer information into their systems?

**G208**

No, normally they’ve got facilities to do it themselves. So what they would do is they would extract it, probably as…is it PDF/A which is archival format? I can’t remember. They would normally produce it in that form and then store it in their own archival system.

**Victoria**

Right.

**G208**

We don’t have anything to do with that generally. We would normally, like I said earlier on, we normally have a system whereby we have the record, we keep it live and then we say this is ready for archival or subsequent removal now and then they do that process themselves. We know they sometimes don’t do it, we know they kick around in our systems for years after they should have been done, but you know I guess it’s a question of time, effort and money like everything else.

**Victoria**

I realise we’re coming up to about an hour we’ve been chatting. I’ve got a couple more questions, I don’t know are you know ok for a little while longer?

**G208**

That’s fine, I left a buffer because I’ve done these things before and they normally overrun.

**Victoria**

[laughs] Well everything you’re saying is so very interesting to me. I was wondering, in your experience, how well implemented you think your systems are on the ground? You know, are they being used by practitioners in the way that they’ve been designed to be used, or the way that you intend them to be used?

**G208**

Hard question! I totally understand the question. The answer is…how do I put this? I think it depends on how long it’s been in use. So every customer wants a system that’s modifiable, to one degree or another by themselves, and every vendor provides that, so in essence you’re giving them a rope to hang themselves with, that’s what you’re doing, but you can’t avoid it. Ideally we would like to say ‘no, do it this way or do it that way’ but there’s a number of reasons why we can’t. It limits practice innovation for a start. So if you want to try some new piece of practice and you’ve done your research on it, you want to roll it out to a small group of your social workers who are working with a particular group of children, if the system doesn’t flex you won’t be able to do that and you’ll end up recording somewhere else. A really good example of that is the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs, when they came along around 2010, 2011 time, they were very innovative, the first one was in Devon, and they were using SharePoint and Microsoft Office to do it with because our system didn’t support it, because it was never designed to support it and didn’t flex far enough, so yeah they had tried and failed putting it in to our system and that’s when we were asked to take a look at it and ended up doing something completely different. But the longer the system is in the more likely it is to be modified and used for things that it shouldn’t be. We come across some real problems and if you go back to migration, when you’re moving off, that’s when they cause you really big problems, or when you try and use an integration with another system. So if we’ve come up with some standard integrations, which we have, then because you’ve modified the system out of the bounds that we would have recommended and supported but can’t stop you doing, that integration won’t work and you’ll be disappointed. So with the newer systems we are trying to keep them much much more in line and trying to say yeah if you want your own…if you want to change things, put your own processes in, don’t modify our standard ones. Or if you’re going to modify standard ones please work with us so we can understand how you’re doing it and why you’re doing it so you’re not going to break things, because often they end up painting themselves into a corner if you like where they can’t get out. I’ve seen real horrors. Not in Children’s but in Adult Social Care where some of the key processes, the customer didn’t like it so they trained their staff to do exactly the opposite to what we would recommend and then they started saying that our support staff didn’t understand what was going on. Well, yeah, I wonder why? It’s because you know you’ve used it exactly how it’s not supposed to be used. But we do find that, they do bend things rather than fixing them, and sometimes that’s a necessity, sometimes it’s a short term thing that they fix later.

**Victoria**

Yeah, I read some interesting things about how, in some of the studies of the ICS, the ways that…the quite innovative and creative ways that social workers found ways of working around the system, to kind of dupe the system, to allow them to do things in ways that they wanted to do, and I suppose any systematisation invites people to do that to some extent, people want to push back and do things their own way. I wondered, finally, if we could talk a little bit about GDPR, which you’ve mentioned already…

**G208**

A fun subject!

**Victoria**

A fun subject, yeah. So this is not my area of expertise but one of my colleagues on the project Elizabeth Lomas is a data protection specialist and we’ve been particularly interested in the ways that social services departments think about and activate data protection, GDPR, as a kind of a way to shut down conversations about recordkeeping. So quite often GDPR is being cited as a barrier to doing things differently.

**G208**

Yep.

**Victoria**

And I just wondered about the impact of GDPR on your work. What are the requirements that clients are asking for to comply with GDPR?

**G208**

Ok, we did…correction, I did…an awful lot of work on this across all our product sets, both old and new, for GDPR. [Sentence redacted] . So in GDPR terms I guess the biggest things we got asked for was subject access requests, ‘we’ve gotta have subject access requests’, which to me seemed to miss the whole point because you know there’s a much bigger discussion to be had about consent, and how we record consent, and how does consent affect that record, but we can come back to that one. So, subject access requests, yes, we’ve got them within our latest system, there’s an admin button where you can say give me a subject access request output for this file, and it can take several hours but it will produce you all the documents that it knows about and enable you to print them, if they are printable obviously you can’t print video, but it will do everything else. We haven’t gone as far as electronic redaction yet, although we’ve had conversations about it. Because having seen the way this works in local authorities…so I got asked to go and understand the problem by one of our customers who are a London based local authority. I went in and was greeted by a conference room with a wall of A4 lever arch files and there was a lot of them, I think there was 29 of them, you know the big lever arch files, and they were all full of paper from one person’s record. And they said you know this is the problem we’ve had, we’ve had to print all this and now what we’ve got is an army of people redacting them with a big black pen and you kind of look at it and go ‘wow, that’s not a fun job’ but you know, what we found was – certainly with previous systems – it was even hard to work out how to get those pages because certainly where you’ve got multiple systems in play that’s tricky. With our latest generation system, if you’re using it across multiple services, it’s one button for everything which saves you some time and hopefully you’ll catch it all. But subject access requests with GDPR was the biggy from an end user perspective. From an IT perspective we got asked lots and lots and lots of questions about systems security and we pretty much got a new contract fired at us from every customer whose system we look after, which we had to go through. That was a big effort because some of them were asking for unreasonable things and just using the excuse ‘Because GDPR’. Which meant we had lawyers arguing with lawyers for weeks on end. Most of the rest of it people have been relatively happy with. So if you look at the rights then the subject access request was the big one. Right to portability? We’ll give you it, we’ll basically give you the output of the subject access request if that’s what you want to port, but it’s not easily electronically importable, we can give it to you but you won’t find any system that will consume it because there aren’t any methods of portability as we discussed earlier, they’re just not available. The right to have your record changed if it’s inaccurate, yeah, that’s fine that was no problem because people mis-record things anyway so we have to provide change mechanisms for those. Right to be forgotten has been really interesting and really quite painful, because for example we can’t remove the record from the database in a lot of cases because we would absolutely wreck a lot of other records, particularly when it comes to payments. So for example in the child’s case, if we remove a child that’s had payments made to a foster carer we would corrupt the foster carer’s records because payments would go missing. So what we’ve had to do is create a method whereby we remove anything that would identify the child but leave the record in place, which basically means we strip it down to a skeleton so we don’t break those financial records. The biggest one that seems to have been swept under the carpet is the one I mentioned earlier, which is consent. Consent is recorded throughout the system but nobody has had a debate about whether consent should have an effect on the system. So, for example, if you don’t consent does the system behave differently to if you do consent? And if you don’t consent to, I don’t know, education being involved, are education folks automatically locked out of the record? Those kinds of things. Those debates have not been had. We tried to have them but they got brushed aside. I think it creates too much of a problem at the time for them. It’s probably a debate we can have a few months, maybe a year down the road, but it also brings up another interesting subject, which is whose record is it? And all these things. And I think [Named person] and I would say fundamentally we believe it’s the person’s record. You’re recording it on their behalf and you’re recording your opinion about them but fundamentally it’s theirs. [Named person] [sentence partially redacted because of identifying information] is a massive proponent of OpenNotes from the US. I don’t know whether you’ve seen that?

**Victoria**

No, I haven’t.

**G208**

OpenNotes is really interesting. It’s not a technology it’s a movement, and it’s a movement of both patients and medical practitioners to provide open and easy access to people’s medical records, and not in the way that we have here but the full notes, and there’s some really interesting case studies. There’s interesting things like blog articles about how practitioners are writing about how it’s changed their note keeping, because it’s no longer about them being able to give those notes to another medical professional to understand, it’s about them giving the notes to their patient so their patient can understand, which means a completely different way of writing. And I think if [Named person] could he’d love to have a national debate on that for social care. It would be really interesting.

**Victoria**

It would be really interesting. It’s fascinating actually because when I first started on this project and I was doing literature review and I was taking a historic perspective on the attitudes of social care practitioners, social workers, to access to records and I found some quite radical suggestions in the late 1970s and early 1980s for open access for clients. I mean they were mostly talking about parents and guardians rather than the child themselves at this stage but throughout the 80s there were various studies done you know where social services departments made it an active practice to co-produce the record with the client and the family and everything was open and accessible for people to read. And some practitioners as you can imagine found that completely unworkable and untenable whereas others seemed to embrace it and it did as you say change the way that they thought about the record, changed the way that they thought about their clients because they had to take into account how the individual would both perceive them differently if they found out what they’d written about them but also had to think about you know how the client would feel if they knew…and they were having to confront some quite difficult questions about how honest can I be with this person versus how honest am I when I write things down. But that seemed to really come to an end in the 90s, there was a turn I think much more towards recording as a bureaucratic process. So what you’re talking about is kind of a return to that ideologically, and from my perspective as a researcher would be a really valuable thought experiment.

**G208**

So you know what happened in the early 90s? [Sentence redacted]

**Victoria**

Go on.

**G208**

The Community Care Act brought in the computerisation of records, [sentence redacted] It’s very interesting, because before that everything was paper, everything was paper and so I wonder if the coming of IT changed that somewhat because by necessity it standardised some of it into more structured data fields.[Sentence redacted.] .

**Victoria**

Yes, I will do, because I have wondered what caused the change and of course you’re right the early 90s sees a lot of new standards and government guidance about how things should be written down and the care planning and the assessment protocols and all those kinds of things which are conducive to being recorded electronically in ways that those kind of more free-flowing narrative accounts of the 70s and 80s aren’t. And speaking to care leavers if you were in the care in the 70s and 80s then you will probably get a much fuller record than if you were in care in the 90s and 2000s. You might find that you 1970s records are incredibly derogatory, prejudicial, full of awful things about you, racist language and all sorts of things. Some of the things that people have read about themselves are appalling. However, they’ll also say there is an enormous amount in those records that is not reflected in later material, and practitioners have said to me as well you know, now there’s a lot more…it’s a much more administrative process than part of the social work process. The recording in the past was seen as being part of the thought process and part of the decision making process was to write out what you felt, what you’d observed, what you’d seen.

**G208**

As it should be, but it often isn’t now, it’s a brief set of notes of what someone agrees with or doesn’t agree with. [Section redacted] But yeah this whole history…I think it would be really interesting if you could look at electronic records from the 90s and see how they progressed. I mean obviously 90s was a mixture of electronic and paper and gradually over time it changed to get to where we are today, but it’s really interesting. Look at OpenNotes. I mean they’ve even battled with how do you make mental health notes available, probably some of the most difficult ones you could ever think of.

**Victoria**

Absolutely, I will definitely look that up. I haven’t come across it but I will definitely look at that now.

**G208**

But for us we fundamentally think that the person should have access to the record. If we believed it was commercially viable we would actually make our systems available to every child that had a record in them, who was able to use it, or every carer.

**Victoria**

I mean this is something we can talk about next week, is what some of our care leavers have said they would want, in terms of what would a system look like if a system worked for them as well as practitioners.

**G208**

That would be really interesting.

**Victoria**

They say things like, well, it should be that when my case is closed I receive a point of access to that which I can return to at will whenever I want to and in my own time, without having pass through kind of a bureaucratic process of asking for it and then waiting while it’s being processed and redacted and then not knowing whether I’ve got the whole thing when it comes.

**G208**

Yeah, that’s the thing, and also if you look at it there has to be an incentive for the local authority. So we roughly worked out…there was one of them that told us the number of pages they’d done with a subject access request, it might have been the one that was 29 lever arch files for. We were just really interested. And we went through and the paper and print cost was phenomenal, but guess what they was dwarfed by? It was dwarfed by the need to secure courier it, because you can’t send it by post, and it weighs too much for most delivery firms to even contemplate, so you have to send it. And then you think, hang on a minute, if I’m a care leaver, whose maybe what 20? I’m living in a bedsit flat, that’s really small, where do I put the damn thing? Where do I keep it? It’s going to take up my bedsit. And you look at it and you think hang on a minute, if you could cut out that paper cost and cut out that delivery cost, why wouldn’t I provide somebody with simple and easy access to it? And keep it online? It seems to make sense to us, even if you’re not going to do it throughout the process of the case to do it at the very end.

**Victoria**

Yeah, so that’s definitely something we can talk about next time, because it is something that…these costs that go into processing subject access requests, you know, one of our participants she said ‘well if they didn’t have to spend all the money on that then they could spend some of the money on helping us when we’ve received the file and we’ve found things out that are really distressing and we don’t have anywhere to go or anyone to talk to.’

**G208**

Yeah, that’s the other thing.

**Victoria**

Support services and intermediary services, there’s just no investment in those because the moneys all been spent, probably in printing and couriering.

**G208**

My friend, when he went to find his mum, he got assigned a social worker and had several sessions with her, she had a session with him be begin with about what you might find and how it might be distressing and these are all things you need to think about before you even continue, whereas if you’re a care leaver you just make the request, you get it, and it’s like ‘oh my goodness, I didn’t realise that.’ And you know from just talking to kids in care and care leavers that often they have an idealised view of their parents and what their family was like, you know, Tracy Beaker the TV show portrays that really nicely, and you just wonder what happens when you suddenly realise that actually your mother was not this kind of wonderful person and the social workers didn’t take you away because they were horrible and they didn’t understand, but actually your mum was someone who was chronically abused, was an addict, etc etc etc. And who knows what other things you might find out? You might find out you’ve got numerous half-siblings and things.

**Victoria**

Exactly, some of these revelations can be very heavy for people and they can sometimes be accessing these records at times of their lives where, you know, they are not…

**G208**

In a great place to understand them.

**Victoria**

No, no. I mean one of the people that we work with on the research team from The Care Leavers’ Association supports people who are in prison to access their records, and of course we know that care leavers disproportionately make up the prison population, and a lot of people while they’re in prison they’re going through a lot of therapy and support work and thinking about themselves and their past and how they’ve arrived at the position that they’re in, and when they were in care they want to access those records but there are lots of unique challenges associated with that in terms of providing them with access, secure access, and privacy and all that, but also there’s the incredible psychological burden of having that material, and also the challenge of even just consuming it, because these records as we’ve observed are not written for the person.

**G208**

Ooooh yes. They’re not even written for carers either, I mean we get some horrific ones that we have to sit there and scratch our heads over. And that’s only the social work ones, medical ones can be even worse.

**Victoria**

Yeah, yeah, so lots to talk about next week. Thank you so much, that’s the end of my questions for now but I’m sure when I’ve gone back over our conversation there will be more things to talk about, and if it were possible as you suggested to look at the systems to get a sense of what’s going into them and how they work that would be really valuable in the future.

**G208**

Yep, ok, I will set that up.

**Victoria**

Brilliant, I’ll stop recording.

END OF INTERVIEW

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

Interview held 30th October 2018 between G209 and G210 and Victoria Hoyle, at [Place name] City Council.

Victoria

So we’re now recording. This is Victoria Hoyle at [Place name] City Council with…

G209

G210

Victoria

Thank you both very much. So if we could start by each of your in turn just briefly describing your job role and your responsibilities within your organisation.

G209

I work as a Disclosure Officer. I’m part of [Place name]. We usually deal with the subject access requests, which requires redaction of social care records. We also deal with other types of request such as NXCs, which is requests from the police, other requests from the social workers or any other professionals and we also deal with DBS checks as well and yeah.

Victoria

Do you have anything to add to that G210?

G210

Let’s see. No not really. Other local authorities request information to get a better picture on a particular family that’s moved to their area but used to be with our area. At the moment we also handle litigation matters for legal services, but well we might not be doing that for much longer, but yeah we give records to help them supplement the defence when people are suing the department. We get CCRC requests as well when a case has gone to appeal, they’ll sometimes come to us for more evidence but those are very very rare these days.

Victoria

Can you just expand the acronym, what does CCRC mean?

G210

Criminal Case Review Commission.

Victoria

Thank you very much. I’m familiar with lots of acronyms these days but still I’m coming across ones that I don’t know. If you don’t mind can I ask you what your kind of work backgrounds are? How did you come to do this kind of work?

G210

Coincidence really [laughs]. I was doing another job in the Council and I was transferred to doing admin on the Disclosure team, and yeah I have a legal background. I have three law degrees but I haven’t actually done any legal work and the job title is Paralegal. It doesn’t actually fit the job description but yes so…and also I liked the look of the job from where I was, and the opportunity came up and I applied and got it. It was four or five years ago now.

G209

I come from a legal background. I did my Masters last year actually, I completed my Masters in law. I did experience in like a legal advice centre and victim support so I was dealing with a lot of sensitive information and things like that. And then I came across this job opportunity and I liked the sound of it, so yeah I applied and now really enjoy working in the field of Data Protection, yeah.

Victoria

So you both have legal backgrounds? And does your team sit within kind of the legal area?

G210

It doesn’t, we come under safeguarding. We should sit under legal probably but at the moment we, yes, since the team’s inception really. Well initially the team was started because of abuse in social care homes, and various social workers were seconded from positions to go through the records for evidence for the police investigation, and once that was over they just kept the team around and they kept finding other jobs for it to do to sort of sustain its existence. And yeah, now it is what it is.

Victoria

So do you know how long the team’s been going, since this investigation?

G210

Erm, I’m not sure. I’m not sure when it ended. We got subject access requests in 2012 I believe it was. Yeah, probably about…I’m guessing the investigation ended about 2009 or something like that but that’s guesswork really. That was before my time.

Victoria

So about what proportion of the work that you do would you say is subject access requests from care leavers?

G209

Erm.

Victoria

It doesn’t have to be an exact figure.

G210

Erm, well, it’s a difficult question. People who are currently with actually care leaving teams, who are in the system, it’s currently none at the moment. The care leavers team deals with those. But as for people who’ve already left care and they’re adults its…well actually I got the statistics just a minute ago…I think it’s 80 this year.

Victoria

80 in this calendar year?

G210

Yeah, 80 this calendar year. Let me just turn over the page. That was handy! Oh, I didn’t write it down but yeah it was…I think it was 85.

Victoria

So it’s quite a significant proportion of the work that you do would you say?

G210

It’s actually a minority. Most of our work is NXCs which is the requests from the police, for social care records so that they can prosecute, and requests from other local authorities. But the subject access requests…they take the most time. That’s most of our day.

G209

A very long time.

Victoria

Ok, well I might come back to the police requests briefly later on but we’re particularly interested in the subject access requests from care leavers. It’s interesting that you say that current service users don’t come through your team and I might come back to that as well.

G210

Well they do come through the team, but just not the ones that are currently with the care leavers team, they’re a particular subset.

Victoria

Ok, so if they were currently in care…?

G210

If they were a bit younger, yeah.

Victoria

So if they were between, I don’t know, the ages of 12 and 16 their requests would still come to you?

G210

That’s right, yeah.

Victoria

But there’s that care leaver segment? That’s handled by them?

G210

Yeah, 16 to 18. Part of it’s politics, part of the it’s trying to make sure we don’t get totally deluged with work really.

Victoria

Fair enough, fair enough. So if we focus on those two groups, the older care leavers that you deal with and the young people in care. If we could walk through the subject access process and the way that you manage it. So, what happens when a subject access request first arrives?

G209

It usually comes into our disclosure inbox. It could be in any form, like a letter, it could be in an email. Usually then we need sufficient ID from them, to confirm that it’s them, then after that – once ID has been approved – then searches are done on that individual and through several databases. Once the information is then collated together, it’s put together, sometimes we have electronic and paper files. So if there’s paper files they’ve got to be scanned onto the system and then the case is allocated to one of ourselves. And then we review the request, we understand the request first, see if there’s anything that maybe we need further information on, sometimes we contact the data subject – which is the person requesting the information – and we get a bit more insight into what they want, what they’re looking for and also give them at the outset maybe what they’re allowed to have. Because sometimes people say ‘well we want this’ but they’re not actually entitled to it so, so we let them know at the offset to avoid confusion. And then yeah, we begin our redaction process on the records, yeah.

Victoria

You mentioned the ID for access. This might seem like a very detailed question, but do you know what ID is acceptable from people?

G209

It’s usually a passport or driver’s licence, like a bank statement or something for proof of address. Usually it has to be from with a three month period? I’m not too sure.

Victoria

Yeah, and generally everyone is fine with that? People don’t find it difficult to provide?

G210

Sometimes you do get difficulties. You get people who say they’re homeless, or they’re not in touch with social services anymore. The thing is I don’t think there’s actually any actual…I don’t know the GDPR so well at this stage… but there never used to be a legal standard for what ID was. So I think so long as you were satisfied that it was the person you were talking about you might not never need ID. There was a team like in the meeting I just came from where I mean they don’t do…well they do the subject access requests but not from people in care…I think they’d be satisfied with a signature because a signature has been on other documents and they know that person from the signature. So like a social worker can vouch. There’s all different ways that you can sort of get around not having actual ID.

Victoria

Is there any difference between requests that might come in from younger people who are still in care and older people? So any difference in the way you would process them?

G210

As far as I’m aware requests from children who are actually in care are very rare and they’ll usually come through a representative, there’ll usually be…sometimes it’s the foster carer, that kind of thing. A lot of the time the issue with younger children is proof of parental responsibility, because most of the time it’s not clear from the form whether it’s the child who wants it or the parent who wants it and most of the time it’s the parent who wants it for legal purposes. So sometimes if they child’s old enough to have an input into things you might need to try and talk to the child and get their input, get their consent and make sure everything is on the up and up. But yeah, that could be difficult based on the fact that they go to school and that kind of thing.

Victoria

Do you have specific policies or written documents about how you process subject access requests from care leavers?

G209

I don’t think we have anything specific. It’s more just the standard generic form, how we would deal with nearly all…yeah.

Victoria

And how to people find out that they can make subject access requests? Do you know?

G210

I know they’re informed about it while they’re actually in care. Sort of like…especially when they’re in the care leaving team, they’ll be told ‘ you can have these records’ and so a lot of people ask for them. Let’s see… it’s on the Trust website, and also because of the GDPR and you know the general publicity that’s been around it people have heard through that method. And also whenever a scandal breaks [laughs] when I started on the team doing admin the Jimmy Saville scandal wasn’t too far in the rear view mirror so everyone was thinking ‘what happened to me when I was in care’ kind of thing. So yeah scandals usually get people wanting to find out what happened to them.

Victoria

So we got to the point where you were about to begin redacting the file. Redaction is one of the areas of tension for both professionals and also for care leavers when they receive their files. So I wanted to talk a little bit more about that and how you approach the redaction process. Sort of what’s the philosophy of redaction here?

G209

Well firstly, obviously when we’re looking at the request…obviously all of the information relating to the data subject, the person requesting it, they can have. They’re entitled to have all of their personal data and any information relating to them, but what we look out for mainly is third party information. That has to be redacted. Any exemptions that are in line obviously with the Data Protection Act as well, such as legally privileged information, or it could be medical, things like that. And that’s how you begin really redacting, yeah.

Victoria

You said that they have the right to anything that is their information or about them.

G209

Yeah, personal to them.

Victoria

Personal to them. That seems like quite a difficult line to draw maybe in some of these cases. Could you give me some examples of information that you would and wouldn’t redact from a file?

G210

It does get very confusing. You mentioned a philosophy. I’m not sure there’s a specific philosophy, I think we all have our different approaches, like those of us with like a deeper legal background will tend to be, you know, tend to err on the side of…well we always err on the side of taking things out if we’re not sure. If in doubt take it out is the standard thing we give them, so we don’t end up getting into trouble. But yeah I try and give them as much as possible, but especially with GDPR and no one’s really sure where the lines are anymore, you have to be more cautious than we would have done. For example…because people’s lives end up being very intertwined, like you may have come into care because…like I’m doing a case now where the mother had mental health issues, and even though I know the people I’m sending the records to would have known this, because it’s actually the grandfather who is requesting, I don’t…you know I don’t want the department to be shown to say this person had this issue even though they already know it. So you know you try and sort of skirt around things and make it clear that you know perhaps it’s because of mum that you’re in care but I can’t give you the exact reason kind of thing. And try and convey as much as possible without crossing the line into breaching somebody else’s rights.

G209

I’m trying to think of an example. I had a subject access request that I was dealing with not long ago where one sibling was trying to get in contact with another one. In this sense I had to explain to the data subject ‘you’re entitled to any contact you may have had with your sibling but anything further such as any foster homes he went into, where he is now, we can’t disclose that.’ So yeah, it’s just things like that, you have to be very very careful of. And also you’ve got to look at the other side. Would that other person wish that person to know in the first place as well. So you’ve got to take a lot of things into account while redacting.

Victoria

So say for example somebody wanted to access their file particularly because they didn’t know why they had been taken into care, and the reason they’d been taken into care was that their mother was a prostitute.

G209

Ok.

Victoria

Would you consider disclosing something like that to them? Or not?

G209

No.

G210

Absolutely not. There’s usually…they’ll usually have certain wording, there’ll be a lot of documents and so somewhere along the line there’s going to be like ‘Mother’s lifestyle impacts on x’ whatever, so you can sort of skirt around so that they don’t find out that the gory details kind of thing, but they can still see that, you know, the situation that I grew up in was not suitable and so I was taken into care for that reason. Which for a lot of people that probably wouldn’t feel like enough, there’s going to be some holes in your past still, but yeah the law restricts us from that kind of thing.

Victoria

In your experience of talking to data subjects do you get a sense of what their motives are for requesting their records?

G209

Yeah, but sometimes it does change. At the offset they will say ‘oh it’s just for myself’ but then further along the line they’ll put another request in, so it’s like adding on to their initial request. Yeah but usually from the offset we do get an insight into what they’re looking for. It just depends on how we question them really, and once we get an insight into what they’re looking for it makes our job a little bit easier as well. Cos sometimes they might want one specific thing and we’ve got so much to get through, so we can cut down on our workload that way too. Yeah.

Victoria

So what kind of things do they say that they want, that’s motivating them?

G209

Erm, sometimes they want different time periods, so they might say from 2000 to 2005, so anything before or after that we don’t really need to disclose unless they ask.

G210

Usually it’s more often than not it’s just going to be ‘I want to know what happened to me when I was a child’ or ‘I have holes in my past or whatever’. Sometimes it is a specific incident that they’re looking for, like one person I did a request for back in 2014 I think…it was the person I managed to help the most I think… there was like a scar that she’d had on her chin from when she was a child and she just wanted to know how she got that scar. In the end I never managed to help her with that, but there were other things I managed to help her with that made it worthwhile I think. But yeah sometimes they’re just trying to find out certain things so they can sue the department, and that’s sometimes…or sometimes they’ll try and skirt around it as well, I think sometimes they thing we won’t give them the information if they think they’re going to end up suing us, but yeah that’s half of our job, to give them the ammunition to sue us in the first place.

Victoria

Do you receive requests also from solicitors and other legal professionals?

G209

Yeah, we do.

Victoria

Do you handle those any differently from those that are received from data subjects?

G210

No. Sometimes you’ll put like there’s a…sometimes you have to handle them somewhat differently because if it’s a bigger case usually solicitors…the person isn’t going to end up seeing the records half the time they’re just going to be suing so there isn’t the same personal investment I think in seeing the records. So I think if you’ve got two like deadlines that are competing sort of thing you’re probably going to go for the one that’s an actual person that wants to find out what happened in the past as opposed to a solicitor who isn’t at all concerned about when their next batch of records is and they’re just going to wait until it’s all together and they can use it for whatever action they’re taking.

Victoria

Do you ever consult with a social worker about whether or not to disclose information?

G209

Sometimes.

G210

Usually when it’s an open case, when it’s a parent asking for it, and a lot of the time it’s the parent whose alleged in the records to have you know been violent or whatever, and sometimes you’ll see nothing about anything happening to the child but still you can’t be sure, and the social worker has a better knowledge of the dynamics and what have you, so you’ll go…like I even sent a whole batch of records to the social worker once to say ‘can you have a look and see if there’s anything here that might cause any problems?’

Victoria

Yeah. There is an exemption from subject access requests for information that might cause the subject serious harm. Do you ever use that as the reason not to disclose information?

G209

Yes.

Victoria

Yeah? Are there specific circumstances where you would use that?

G210

Well, to be honest, maybe when I say that I’m thinking in terms of someone’s address and certain things that perhaps they’ve…like if the child said oh, ‘I hate my dad’ or something like that, and sometimes I’ll take that kind of thing out. But I can’t think of anything where I’ve looked at it and thought this person is actually going to come to serious harm if I disclose this information. It’s mostly erring on the side of caution from what I think.

Victoria

[To G209] Is that the same for you as well?

G209

Yeah.

Victoria

Did you receive any sort of specific training in providing subject access requests for care leavers as part of your job?

G210

No. We’ve developed over the years…G209’s had more training than the rest of us did when we started. When I and the person who started with me started we were just given some print outs with the statute and what have you, and certain guidelines from certain places off the internet, and we just went through those and got started, bounced questions off each other, asked people on the team who were more experienced and we just sort of built the knowledge that way. But since then…once Data Protection has become more important you know and the powers that be are thinking this could actually get us in trouble unless we throw some money at them, we’ve been able to get some better training in place. We had training just..was it last week?

G209

Yeah, last week, from a barrister, he was very very good, very informative.

Victoria

You mentioned having had a talk from [P100] at the Care Leavers’ Association. Was that part of the training, or something separate?

G210

I think we looked at it as training, I think we thought it was going to be training of sorts but it was a gathering of…this was back in 2014 I think, I have to guess [laughs] but it was people from various authorities who dealt with subject access requests and I think he [[P100]] was trying to put legislation together to bring to the…it eventually went to the House of Lords, there was a function as well but I think we missed the actual…we weren’t allowed to see the actual speech, it was just the after party that we came to. But yeah, they showed us a video that had certain care leavers who were interviewed about the experience that they’d had in applying for their documents and the difficulties that people go through and how they’ve been treated. Oh ‘I had to write three times in two years and I ended up with two sheets of paper’ that kind of thing. And then there was just this sort of roundtable where everyone bounced ideas off each other, how we deal with this and how we go about that, and I think it all just went together into that proposal.

Victoria

Yeah, I think it sounds like you took part in the roundtables that eventually became the report that’s called It’s My Journey, It’s my Life.

G210

That’s the one.

Victoria

Yeah, that was back in 2014. Yeah, yeah, you mentioned that you might have had a little bit more training. Is that because you’re relatively new?

G209

I’m new, yeah, a year now, just over a year now sorry.

Victoria

So how did you learn how to do this process?

G209

How did I learn? When I first started I was given a practice subject access request to do. So it was just for the person training me to get an idea of where I’m at and how I understand the process of redacting, and then once I’d done that the person training me looked at it and told me where I’d done really well and where I’d done wrong, and then from there I’ve really just built on my knowledge through asking people in the team. And it’s all about dealing with different situations and different types of requests. It’s only that way really that you learn how to, what to apply and what not to apply in the circumstances, yeah.

Victoria

When you do the redaction do you use software?

G209

Yeah, Adobe, yeah.

Victoria

Adobe, ok. So once the redactions complete and the record is ready to be sent to the data subject, what happens then? Is that done electronically or…by post?

G210

Usually we’ll send a paper copy. Usually it’s only they’ve asked for it electronically that we will…but I think that’s more habit than anything else. Usually we’ll give them a ring and…often they’ll just say can you send it. Usually we’ll send it by recorded delivery.

Victoria

And then do you have any further contact with that person after they receive their file?

G210

Sometimes they’ll get back to us.

Victoria

Why would they get back to you?

G209

Sometimes they ask us if there’s further information. Sometimes they’re not happy with what they’ve received and they’re asking us to maybe look if there’s any further information, yeah. That’s it really.

Victoria

Does anyone ever come back and say like ‘This is wrong, I want to you to change it.’?

G210

Yeah I’ve had a few like that. People who say ‘oh I’ve looked at this and I’ve shown it to my whole family and this doesn’t bear any resemblance to reality’ and actually that’s part of what the GDPR’s brought in, what is it…yeah the right to amend, but we can’t actually amend the records because yeah we’re not allowed to, so it just becomes a kind of he said, she said kind of thing, and a lot of the time the social worker has long left the department, we have quite a high turnover rate. But usually what we’ll do is have them send a request to the Assistant Director and just have them write what their version of events is and we’ll put that on the file, so it’s on the record that they dispute the version of events that we’ve recorded.

Victoria

Has anyone ever requested to have their records destroyed?

G210

Yeah, also again since GDPR the…I mean first of all we have retention policies. We have to keep foster records for 75 years, with adoption it’s 100, but I don’t think that’s what you’re here for…and also with the…I never remember what the inquiry is called, the one into abuse?

Victoria

IICSA? The independent inquiry?

G210

IICSA, that’s the one. It was the person’s name that I was trying to think of, but never mind. With that in place we’re not allowed to delete anything anyway.

Victoria

So is there any support provided at all to the requestor? So when they receive their files do they have access to any additional services as part of that?

G210

Not through official channels I’m afraid. When… that’s what…when someone’s getting their adoption records they’re entitled to..well they have to have records counselling. I don’t know if it’s statutory but they have to have records counselling, but when it comes to us there’s no such burden, and I think there should be but I’m assuming it’s going to take some more pressure from certain like lobby groups and things and people who have an interest in this kind of thing to get it put into place. I’ve known people who went to counsellors afterwards to get through certain things and I know some personally who did actually, who worked in the department who managed to stumble onto her files and she ended up going to a counsellor. But no not through official channels.

Victoria

[To G209] You mentioned somebody who was trying to trace a relative?

G209

Yeah.

Victoria

I think that’s quite a common reason why people want to get their records, and another thing that adoptees can do is intermediary services, but I assume you don’t offer contact services for care leavers?

G209

No.

G210

I did manage to put somebody on to lost relatives once, but that wasn’t through official channels, it just so happened that she said ‘oh is there anyone from my family you can put me in touch with’ and it just happened that her brother had applied for a blue badge, so I put her in touch with him. You know I had her consent to give her details to him and say ‘this person is trying to get in touch with you and can I give you her number’ and he said ‘yes’ and so I managed to put them back into touch, and I think they hadn’t talked for 20 odd years or something like that, and later she was telling me how she was talking to him and she said ‘oh you’ll have to take me to dad’s grave to put some flowers on it’ and he said ‘what are you talking about, our dad is still alive!’ Her mother just lied to her for years.

Victoria

Wow, ok.

G210

And so she ended up meeting her father who she didn’t even know was alive. That’s the greatest, well, that’s the best held I think I’ve been able to give someone.

Victoria

Yeah, do you ever find yourself being put in the position of a counsellor? Do people get upset or emotional when they’re talking to you about accessing their records?

G209

Sometimes.

G210

Yeah.

G209

I’m trying to think of one. I had one not long ago, recently, she was trying to understand why she was put into care, and unfortunately we didn’t actually find any information relating to her in our systems, it was very minimal and it wasn’t really answering her questions. And then yeah it was just a case of trying to find other avenues of where maybe information might be, whether she was known to any other authority, so we could maybe direct her there, but yeah usually they are quite upset sometimes and you do have to be quite understanding, and yeah.

Victoria

You mentioned there about not being able to find records, does that happen often, that you can’t find anything for somebody?

G209

Quite often, yeah.

G210

Quite often. Probably a low percentage, but you see it happen quite often yeah.

Victoria

Is there any pattern to it? You know does there seem to be big gaps in the records for some years, or places or…?

G210

Well there was no obligation to record anything before the mid-late 60s I think it was, so anything from before then at the very most you’re going to…you might have some microfiche but you’re then you’re probably lucky. So you see someone who is born in 1940, you just look at it and think well we’re probably not going to find anything. And also sometimes it is just strange, like somebody who has been in care for like 20 years or something like that…we had a litigation case who uh her solicitors requested…she was in care since she was a child but we don’t seem to have anything for her until after her children were born. We had things from then on but…and actually her siblings were in care but we don’t seem to have anything. So I don’t know if it’s just filing or what it is.

Victoria

You mentioned about having to search multiple systems to find the records that are relevant. Could you talk a bit more about that? What systems do you have to search?

G209

I think G210 would probably be more knowledgeable on that than me. [laughs]

G210

Yeah I used to do the admin. There are seven databases that we have to go through. One is the current care database we use, it’s going to be changed soon, it’s called CareFirst, and then there’s the old version of that that…I’m not sure when the cut off is, probably the late 1990s or so, it’s got court records. And then there’s two sub databases to the one we’re currently using, where they save various electronic records. Let’s see…that’s five, ok…no four…there’s the archiving place where we keep the paper records, they have their own archiving system and…let’s see there’s also a big spreadsheet that we’ve filled in – well we didn’t fill it in but various area officers filled in when their offices were being archived and those are also kept at the archiving place, but the spreadsheets for us to find things there that aren’t…because it was only after a certain time that they gave the facility to actually say you know this file is on this person, so before a certain time we need the spreadsheet to find out what these various reference numbers of this thing actually mean. Then there’s another spreadsheet that has all the microfiche that we hold, so yeah, you just search the name and you’ll get a six digit number of something like that and you go into the microfiche folder.

Victoria

So the microfiche, they are copies of records that have been…the paper copies have been destroyed?

G210

I think, yeah, for the most part, it’s usually just a summary of where they’ve been. You know it’ll just have, you know, ‘John Smith, mother deserted, these are the siblings that are also in care’ or you know ‘boarded out to this address, from this date, from this data fostered, at this time went to this care home, returned home’ kind of thing.

Victoria

So that’s a kind of summary record?

G210

Yeah.

Victoria

So if the records are paper and they’re held in offsite storage, do you request the paper file to come to you or do they scan it and send it to you?

G210

We request the paper file. The archiving people don’t actually do anything of the sort, their job is just to hold it.

Victoria

To hold it. So they would send it to you and you would scan it.

G210

Yeah, we put in an order and it comes the next day. And sometimes if it’s a family file then they’ll give it to us to have a look through and we’ll tag the file ‘this is relevant, this is relevant, this is just about sibling don’t worry about it’ and yeah then they’ll just scan those parts of it. And we’ve also…this isn’t actually a database but sometimes it will mention that boxes are kept at the area office that used to handle the case so we have to send emails around the various areas to say ‘do you have this file, is it in your store room?’ and they’ll send those too.

Victoria

Do you ever find anything that’s held in the City Archives?

G210

Occasionally, older things yeah. Usually when it’s just microfiche and all we have is ‘you were in care in this place or that place’ sometimes they’ll say ‘is there a bit more information?’ We have a contact at adoption who goes to the library every week or two and so yeah she’ll go to the library look things up for us, but that doesn’t happen that often these days, it used to be much more common. I’m not sure why.

Victoria

Maybe it’s just that the records of the people who are there have grown older and passed away.

G210

Yeah we are getting requests from more younger people nowadays, fewer older people.

Victoria

In terms of being able to search the digital systems, the current records systems, is it easy to then extract all of the records from those? Is there like a button that you can press that sucks all the relevant information out?

G210

No. [laughs] For some of them yes, for one of them it’s an old clunky thing that looks like it’s from the 80s and it’s fiddly you know, you have to click all the way through. So yeah, you click the document and you save it, and then it takes you back to the beginning and you have to click all the way back through, and then the next one has the same [file]name so you have to put a 2 on the end of it, and that one just take forever. The newer version? It’s better, I’m not sure everyone knows how to do it the quick way, but yeah, it’s just like a list of folders like Windows Explorer and you click this folder and you can click select all and do like a keyboard shortcut and save it to this folder, and then just click the next one kind of thing. It’s not as easy as press the button and everything goes, but maybe with the thing they’re developing now.

Victoria

You’ve mentioned GDPR and the new Data Protection Act a few times, can you talk a bit about the impact that that’s having on your work now?

G209

It’s quite hard to say really. I’m just trying to think of the changes…I think there’s only a slight change in say when a parent’s requesting data on their child, and we look at the age, but I’m not too sure how that’s changed.

G210

It’s gone from 12 to 13 I think.

G209

What else has changed? And obviously there’s the exemptions and there’s a new exemption

36.09