'Untangling myself from the file': human-centred recordkeeping

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Memory – Identity – Rights in Records – Access

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What are the mechanisms and processes currently in use? Do they serve people's needs? How could they be improved?

**Accessing records**

**Support and services**
What support is currently available in relation to social care records? What should support look like? How could it be provided?

**Redaction of third party information**
Who decides what can be disclosed? How are such decisions made and justified? Is it possible to better support care leavers' needs for this information?

**Language and content**
How can the difficult and hurtful contents of care files be shared? What is the role of contextual information?

**Memory and identity**
Why are care records valuable for memory and identity? How could this value be increased?

**Recordkeeping practices**
How has social care recording changed? How will the shift to digital systems impact on information rights in the future?
Needs and experiences of care leavers often not understood.

Inconsistent practices across England – ‘postcode lottery’.

Lack of support services.

Inadequate records management.

Poor contextual information about historic care provision.

No specific advice on how to apply generic legislation like the Data Protection Act.
Susan, on finally seeing her care records

“I went through them and I read them and I was crying to myself, I was crying. I thought, you know, I’ve waited for so long. For the first time in my life, I was free. And it was all because of those records. It was very emotional. It was so important to me. I can’t possibly explain or say how important those records were. And I think for anybody who’s in care, at that time and now, I think it’s equally important to have them. It can finish things for them, it can end things for them, you know, it can put things away so that you can carry on with the rest of your life. ...It’s not just paper. You see to them it’s just paper, words on paper, but to the person who’s reading it, who it’s about, it’s everything. It’s their life.”
Everyone has a story
Social care records have significant impacts on a care-experienced person throughout the life course, because they act as a ‘paper self’ long after they have become independent adults.
‘I think we have organisations that just don’t understand why older care leavers come back to access their files, they just don’t understand it, because there’s no culture of recognition of the life experiences of someone in the care system. ...there’s a cultural deficit... there’s a deficit in terms of the understandings of why an individual wants to access their file. We’re simply interested in people being able to access their history and reclaim some element of their past because it matters to them.’

Darren
Accessing social care records is often difficult, both practically and emotionally, and can be traumatic and dehumanising. Very little support is available.
‘What I wasn’t prepared for was the language. The absolutely terrible language, the way that I was written about. I just can't imagine myself writing like that about a distressed, traumatised child... any time you’re writing about a child always think that child could go back and read that, and really think about how you're writing stuff, because words are so powerful. The way you write about kids, that follows them... what they write could effect the rest of that person’s life.’

Linda
There’s other pieces of paper that are just blacked out, and there’s absolutely nothing on them and you just look and think ‘why have you given me that piece of paper?’ What’s it actually telling me? And then there’s other pieces of paper where there’s just a sentence in there. And I’m looking at it … and all it’s showing me is I’ve been rejected again.

Jackie
Social care records often fail to meet basic memory and identity needs.
‘There came a point where I wanted to know where I’d been, I wanted to know who’d fostered me, because there was little chunks of my life missing, like where I’d gone to school? Did I have any friends? How long was I there? And then somebody mentioned to me ‘Why don’t you get your files?’, ...that’s what spurred me on to do it, because I wanted to know, I wanted to fill in these bits that were missing in my life. That’s why I did it.’

Gina
The voices, experiences and feelings of children and young people are rarely heard in their records.
‘One of the most profound things for me about the file, and it screams the loudest, is my lack of voice. And I just appear, my scrawled out writing, on like page 52. My voice is totally stolen and words are put in your mouth, saying this is how you feel about certain occasions and certain people, and at times there’s conflict with what I believe.’

John-george
Records management across the public, private and voluntary care sectors is inconsistent, putting records at risk.
‘I feel like the file is built around the immediate, you know, keep them safe unfortunately. It should be more. It’s not ambitious enough, and you must get the voice of the child in there, you’ve got to. I know there’s all the legal stuff around care, but there’s a duty of care for our soul as well. It’s not just the duty of care for our wellbeing, as in keep them in school, keep them healthy. This is a long game – life - so there’s that duty of care to think about.’

John-george
The outsourcing of children’s service provision without clear contractual obligations for recordkeeping is problematic.
‘...all the residential schools. That was sort of bothering me because they keep changing the names and changing their use, some start looking after tiny children, then they go and look after teenagers suddenly and then they change their name, then they move location but they keep their name..... I needed to nail down what was going on at each establishment and what each establishment was actually called..., trying to establish which ones the County Council was responsible for and which ones they weren’t...
The legislative and regulatory landscape for recordkeeping in child social care is confused and fragmented.
‘I think local authorities need to be less fearful of being honest about what’s in the file, and be honest about what they’re redacting and be clear about why they’re redacting stuff, because I think it's a bit of a myth that all care leavers are trying to sue local authorities. Most people are probably quite heart broken when they read their files and so saddened, they haven’t got the energy. That wasn’t what I wanted at all, and most people don’t think like that.’

Rosie
Lack of understanding of provision for access to records for research purposes limits the public benefits of independent scrutiny of child social care.
I think sometimes archivists feel torn between a desire to sort of maintain records and provide appropriate access to those, and usually have some kind of genuine interest in historical understanding by virtue of doing that work, but at the same time operate in organisational structures where what they actually hold is perceived within the organisation potentially to constitute a significant reputational risk’

Gordon
Recommendation 1:

Records should be co-created by all those involved in a child’s care.
Recommendation 2:

All organisations with safeguarding responsibilities and guardianship of children’s memories should have Records Management Plans for child social care records.
Recommendation 3:

Best practice approaches to access to records for all care-experienced people, and for research in the public interest, should be developed.
Recommendation 4:

Guidance on the application of Data Protection legislation should be produced which supports organisations and practitioners to comply in reasonable, caring and considerate ways.
• Create guidance and resources that support care leavers to access records, working with The Care Leavers’ Association and Family Action on new web resource FamilyConnect.
• Contribute to public policy debates through research briefs on recordkeeping issues to decision-makers and influencers in government, and within the ICO, IICSA and Ofsted.
• Support the Access to Care Records Campaign Group.
Action:
Support practitioners and researchers in their recordkeeping responsibilities

- Caring Recordkeeping Framework and Principles
Principles for Caring Recordkeeping in Child Social Care

First principle

Care-experienced people (children, young people and adult care leavers of any age) should be able to participate in every stage of child social care recordkeeping, if they choose; including

• the creation of records while they’re in care
• management of records during the period of retention, and
• the provision of access to records at any stage of life.
Shifting Practices towards Human-Centred Recordkeeping

• Recordkeeping should support the wellbeing, identity and personal history of a child, young person or care leaver while they’re in care and throughout life.
• Systems and practices designed primarily to manage risk and performance, and to output statistics to government/regulators are a barrier to this.
• Participatory recordkeeping, which is child-centred, can be a key way of building trust and relationships with children, becoming part of therapeutic practice.
• Records management tasks are reoriented as serving and supporting the needs of those with emotional and personal connections to the record.
• Information governance is seen as a human rights function.
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