Children’s Records Conference – Gloucestershire County Council
This set of notes was taken following attendance at the Children’s Records Conference on 24th October 2017. I have also included some further information on the Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) as well as summarised additional steps organisations can take. The programme for the conference largely focused on how Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) has taken steps to prepare its records following the moratorium to not destroy any relevant records.

Context (https://www.iicsa.org.uk/)

- Investigation into whether organisations have taken seriously their responsibilities to protect children from sexual abuse and the Inquiry will make recommendations to prevent this going forwards. The focus is on the failure of organisations.
- IICSA is selecting case studies from a range of institutions to illustrate pattern of institutional failings. 13 investigations have been launched to date and will be investigating the nature and extent of institutional responses to sexual abuse and whether policies and practices adopted by organisations were adequate.
- The Truth Project element of the Inquiry allows victims and survivors to share their experiences and views on the Inquiry in a safe and confidential way. The Inquiry hopes to understand the scale, breadth and nature of child sexual abuse.
- In 2015, a moratorium on the destruction of records relevant to the Inquiry was sent to many organisations. It was not yet clear what sort of records would be required as part of the Inquiry but anything which would be potentially relevant should not be destroyed. These records could for example include allegations, development of policies for child protection and institutional failings. Organisations were to conduct a thorough search of their holding to find potentially relevant material.

Destroyed or indiscoverable: it’s all the same thing – Julia Jones. Head of Information Management, IICSA

- IICSA is a statutory inquiry meaning that it follows The Inquiry Rules 2006. By being a statutory inquiry, it can compel organisations to provide the records and information it requires to conduct its Inquiry. IICSA also has to comply with Data Protection Act and the Public Records Act.
- IICSA has a simplified retention model for determining how long it will maintain records. They have three retention periods – long for transfer to TNA, medium for disposal at the end of the Inquiry and short for disposal when staff member leaves organisation.
  - As part of the confidentiality victims and survivors offered when providing their testimony, the records of their experiences will be
destroyed at the end of the Inquiry. However, anonymised extracts have been placed on the IICSA website and datasets of the information collected will be retained for the long term.

- The Inquiry scope in regards to records is to determine whether records are still in existence, whether the records required can be identified and how do you store and make such records available.
- An interim report from the Inquiry should be published next year and should include recommendations on recordkeeping.
- IICSA uses the software Relativity to hold data and evidence and this software has full text search and is a secure means of transferring and sharing records. The Inquiry asks that if organisations hold records in hard copy, rather than scanning them they should be sent to the Inquiry who has funds to cover the cost of scanning. Several of the records that have been provided in digitised form have not been searchable and have been too large in file size or too poor in quality.
  - Organisations should review their records rather than sending everything they hold to IICSA as this places burden on the teams processing the information.
- IICSA cannot advise organisations on what to keep or destroy although if an organisation provides a summary of what they plan to keep and destroy (approach to retention) then solicitors from IICSA may be able to provide advice.
- It is an offence to knowingly destroy things that will be relevant to the Inquiry.
- Records may not always be available. They could have been destroyed legitimately in line with Policy, may have been destroyed by fire or flood, may have a lack of indexing which means that the records cannot be found, or may be in systems that cannot be searched.
- If records are not held, the organisation has to provide a formal declaration that they do not hold the records and provide details of what has been searched and the approach the organisation has taken to recover the required information.
- Some lessons have been learned from the victims and survivors regarding their experiences. Many have been unable to get records about their experiences and the time that they have spent in institutions. The average age of those coming forward has been in their 50s and records often have not survived for this length of time. There are questions about whether these sorts of records should be maintained for longer and whether records held in case files should be retained longer also. Case files are often not chosen for long term retention but with digital recordkeeping is it time to review how long these files are kept?
- Recommendations may also be made on providing easier access to care records and provide guidance on where to find them and who to contact to access records.
- IICSA is an opportunity for records management as the effective management of record needs resources. Demonstrates how important records are to members of the public who want to hold an organisation to account.
A question was asked following the presentation regarding those asking for special access to records such as survivors groups. These requests should be managed within the legal framework and organisations need to be aware of the difficulty of managing expectations.

Case Study of Gloucestershire County Council

The Task at Hand: GCC’s Historical Children’s Records Project, Imogen Watts, GCC

- The project was to identify children’s records and centralise these as well as improve listing of records already in the records centre. This presentation focused on the relisting.
- Issues identified with the quality of the listing of records in the database which would make it difficult to find records that may be relevant to the Inquiry. Risk assessment carried out to determine those which were the worst listed and also to identify which series would be most likely to contain the sorts of information that the Inquiry would need to look at.
- The initial phase of the project focused on records from children’s centres, residential homes and looked after children. The second phase focused on files relating to fostering and adoption.
- Project set up and team put in place to review and revise the accuracy of information in the database and to add additional metadata to include details of key people on each record and reflect these relationships. The idea being that then you could cross reference.
- The senior managers of the Council were aware of IICSA and the team demonstrated how poor a lot of the listing of records was. There had been an incident which had received a lot of attention in the local press regarding the Council initially saying that they could not find relevant material for an investigation into abuse when in actual fact they did hold the information. The team were able to receive the required funding to employ the staff to work on the project by demonstrating the importance of this work being done and used the crisis to greatly improve records management in the organisation. The team also used the emotional content of the files to demonstrate why it was important they were managed properly.
- Those employed to carry out the work were not from a recordkeeping background. Those working on the project were able to utilise their experiences in different fields and knowledge of the local area to improve the listing being done.
- There were some challenges for the records managers leading the project and they had to provide support to the project team:
  - Assist with making judgement calls on retention and information to be recorded
  - Ensuring consistency in the levels of details being recorded and ensure that the key information from each record was picked out
  - Instil in the team the importance of confidentiality with their work. This could be difficult where certain cases were in the public domain but not all information was known by the wider public.
  - Deciphering difficult handwriting
- Explaining why appropriate document handling and giving retention periods was important
- Coming into contact with inappropriate or archaic language from older files where historical attitudes would have been different.

- There were also risks that the team being from the local area would come into contact with files relating to people that they knew or would become distressed by some of the files they were listing. The records managers ensure that there is support in place for this. For particularly complex or high-profile cases, the records managers themselves rather than the project team completed the listing.
- The records managers ensured they had a good understanding of the files prior to giving them to the team to list identifying any potential problems and made sure that the team were given proper training.

Records of the Responsible: Delving into the Archives of GCC’s Social Care and Education Services, Karen Davidson, GCC

- Prior to the Inquiry, archivists decided upon complete relisting of whole collection – Corporate Archives Project. Decided upon a functional approach to managing records of the Council and two of the functions determined were Social Care and Education.
- Recognition by archives service that children would have come into contact with the local authority in many ways through school, social care, sports, youth workers, bus drivers.
- Visit in 2015 by Martin Ayres – independent UK based expert on child safeguarding and wellbeing – to look at the record keeping shortly after IICSA started. Special focus on historical inquiries. Visit occurred because there were many cases of abuse coming to light including prominent local cases and historical allegations are much harder to find the evidence for.
- Feedback from Martin Ayres was instrumental in getting funding for making the records held more accessible to individuals involved in allegations. Records have intrinsic value as well as ensuring the corporate record and accountability also demonstrate past conduct towards children. Able to justify archives involvement with the inquiry. The archivists were able to demonstrate that the systems in place for protecting children in the past had been robust and effective.
- The feedback from Martin Ayres also emphasised the necessity of having highly skilled staff for dealing with these sorts of records and this expertise needed to be secured.
- Corporate Safeguarding Project – cataloguing to high standard and high level of detail all the material within the archive covering children – particularly in the Social Care and Education functions. Established provenance of records, researched admin histories and identified gaps in collections. All boxes within these two functions were surveyed and appropriate closure periods for records identified.
- Following this project, archival material relating to safeguarding children was much easier to find, understand and use. It was now arranged in a clear, extendable structure. Now able to demonstrate that the staff generally cared
about the welfare of the children in their care. Could also show the changes in social behaviour and attitudes over time.

- As a result of the project, archivists also able to train staff in the council on how they can use the archive, particularly when they may be dealing with the Inquiry.

The Treasures Within: Centralising and Creating Access to Historical Children’s Records, Michelle Conway and Daniel Parker, GCC

- This presentation focused on the identification work by the records management team to locate and centralise records relating to safeguarding children. This would improve the control over the records, security and make the records more accessible.
- Identified properties needing to be surveyed for relevant records and worked with the Property and Asset Management Team to conduct surveys.
- Problems identified with the records was the lack of structure and original metadata. It was challenging to find the balance between listing more and listing in more detail. Some of the material identified did link to high profile, sensitive cases.
- This project raised awareness of records management within the organisation and also developed model for commissioning listing projects for records management in the organisation. (RM team manage and supervise staff to do listing work paid for by the relevant team in the Council.) The team are now a lot stricter when accepting files into the records centre requiring more detailed metadata.
- One of the major benefits of the identification and indexing work has been a positive impact on subject access requests as it is now easier to identify where relevant material is held.
- The Information Requests Officer provided details of his experience working with requesters of their records from social care.
  - Can take time for an individual to come forward to request their information and they may have concerns about getting in touch with the organisation.
  - The organisation has a ‘duty of care to remember’
  - Difficult to deal with requestors when the information they have requested is not accessible or it has been destroyed. Sometimes there are no reasons why some records may have survived whilst others have not.
  - Those who are making requests for these sorts of information have a real sense of ownership that the information is their information as it is about them.
  - Difficulties in determining how much information to release due to restrictions of releasing other people’s information without consent under DPA. The organisation knows more than it can provide the requestor.

Steps for Organisations to Take
• Do thorough search of records held which may have potential relevance. This may include staff records, complaint records, log books, case files. Ensure that these records are not destroyed.
• Keep a record of the searches/audits being done and keep documents which list which records have been destroyed. Ensure that all areas which may have relevant records are searched and ensure that records held are listed properly and can be found easily if required.
• Create a summary of how the organisation has addressed child protection over time.
• Utilise the Inquiry to raise profile of records management within the organisation.
• Remember the nature of the records that you are dealing with and how important these may be to individuals, particularly those who may have suffered as a result of the organisations actions.
• Ensure that staff working with potentially emotionally distressing and highly confidential records have the right support and are properly trained.
• Important to co-operate with other teams when doing this work, in particular ICT and those managing estates.
• Keep up to date with any developments from IICSA and read the report due out in 2018 which will likely include some recommendation on recordkeeping.

Laura Hynds, 10 November 2017