research article

Digital group archives in residential childcare: an investigation into memory responsibility

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This article discusses phase two of the ARCH project (Archiving Residential Children's Homes), and in particular, the development of a co-designed 'digital archive' that stores everyday, shared events and experiences for care experienced young people who live in residential children's homes. We present research with young people living in residential care, care workers and care experienced adults about the types of everyday information or records they would like to be able to store, share and access in the future. There was a desire for the digital archive to have a different feel and purpose to content recorded in individual case files, with easy access to the archive deemed important. There were mixed views about the representation of events and experiences and whether these should contain mainly 'light-hearted' events and experiences. Our research gives an insight into memory-keeping practices within a residential children's home and invites questions about whose responsibility it is for gathering, filtering and treasuring childhood experiences.

Introduction

This article draws on the Scottish data from phase two of the ARCH project (Archiving Residential Children's Homes), which sought to examine historical and contemporary approaches to record keeping in children's residential settings in Scotland and Germany. The first phase of the project examined the historical archives of orphanages in Scotland and Germany and the second phase involved research with

young people, care experienced adults and care workers to identify what types of everyday information or records they would like to be able to access, at what point in their lives, and why. The final phase tracks how the archive was used within the children's homes.

Technology is an integral part of the everyday lives of children and young people and offers novel ways to capture and record memories. We used an action research approach to co-design a way of digitally storing everyday, shared events and experiences; a type of 'digital archive' available to staff and young people.

The term 'care experience', although not perfect, is used in this article to refer to people who are or have been in the care of their local authority (Children (Scotland) Act 1995; Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014) and mirrors the terminology used in the ongoing review and transformation of the Scottish care system, The Promise (Scottish Government, 2020). In Scotland, local authorities are required to provide aftercare support until an individual turns 19, and to assess any eligible needs for aftercare support until the age of 26.

The article begins with an overview of residential childcare in Scotland and how records are maintained and experienced. We introduce the research site and present our methodological approach. We present findings from qualitative data arising from our research with young people living in residential care in Scotland, staff members and care experienced adults. The article is concerned with exploring how a digital archive could be used to store and share everyday experiences in a residential children's home. We argue that current record-keeping practices neglect group and everyday memory-keeping practices.

Residential childcare and record keeping

Residential childcare includes children's homes, respite services, secure settings and residential schools, which typically provide services to children and young people experiencing the most serious difficulties (Steckley and Smith, 2011). The term 'residential children's home' (RCH) is used to describe a range of institutional provision for children and young people who are unable to continue living with their family of origin (Ainsworth and Thorburn, 2014). In children's homes, children live with other, mostly unrelated, children away from home and are looked after by paid staff. Often children move into residential care having experienced many changes of care givers as well as painful and distressing experiences of family life and loss (Emond, 2003; Holland and Crowley, 2013). Children's homes in Scotland range in size and composition; in recent decades, they have moved towards smaller 'cottage' models where children are cared for in 'family-like' groups (Steckley and Smith, 2011). In 2022, of the 12,596 children who were looked after by the state in Scotland, 10 per cent were looked after in residential settings with the remainder being looked after in kinship care (34 per cent), foster care (33 per cent) or at home (21 per cent) (Scottish Government, 2023).

RCHs are regulated and managed by local governments, voluntary organisations, not-for-profit companies and religious organisations (Kendrick, 2012; Berridge, Biehal and Henry, 2012). There are differing views about the key function of these institutions. Some view their purpose as supporting children to recover from trauma and abuse; others, to prepare children as 'future adults' to live independently (Gharabaghi, 2019; Ainsworth and Thorburn, 2014).

Record keeping in residential childcare and other social work is a legal responsibility and Scottish public authorities, subject to the Public Records (Scotland) Act 2011, are required to demonstrate in the records management plan that they are managing their records effectively. Since the Shaw report (2007) found systemic failings in record keeping in RCHs, there has been increasing attention given to the style, content and accessibility of records for children and young people (see, for example, Muirhead, 2019).

Most often, research relating to care records has focused on 'case files'. This type of record is multi-functional, acting as a record of assessment, decision making and future planning (SCIE, 2021). For care experienced individuals, care records are often one of the few sources of information about their lives, and who they were as a child in an everyday sense.

Individualised care records can be a challenging source of information and people with care experience often have considerable difficulty finding and accessing records about themselves (Hoyle et al, 2020; Shepherd et al, 2020). Care experienced adults have criticised biased representations of events from their past by the creators of records; in addition to the absence of their voice and perspectives (Shepherd et al, 2020), items such as photos and important memorabilia are often missing (MacNeil et al, 2017; Shepherd et al, 2020). Where photos are retained on file, they often have no character identifiers or narrative to contextualise the image (Lane and Hill, 2012). In a study that examined the development of life story books, children and young people with care experience highlighted the need for good-quality, clear and accurately labelled photographs, as well as physical objects, records of milestones, happy memories, and accurate and honest facts and details, even if difficult (Hammond et al, 2020). In Larkin and colleagues' study (2023: 333), care experienced young people wanted to be able to virtually show others the places where they had 'lived or loved'.

There are further problems in accessing records that involve others (Data Protection Act 2018 and the General Data Protection Regulation), which is likely for children who have lived some of their childhood in a RCH, and information about other individuals may be redacted or removed. There are also reports of practitioners' limited technological knowledge, insufficient training, and criticism about poor storage and data protection oversight within organisations (El-Asam et al, 2023). However, these criticisms exist in a period when researchers are beginning to have promising conversations about ways to place individuals at the centre of record-keeping systems (Svard and Zimic, 2024).

Our project aligns with the spirit of The Promise (Scottish Government, 2020) in drawing attention to everyday childhood experiences and in finding better ways to understand the collective experiences of children and young people.

Young people and technology

Young people are assumed to be 'digital natives' in comparison to adults, with whom the starting point is assumed to be 'digital ignorance' (Livingstone et al, 2023). Increasingly, local authorities and care providers use digital technologies for the record keeping of care experienced children. This shift in the method of recording has occurred in parallel with the move to involving children in the creation of their records and of ensuring that their 'voice' is captured, as well as the rise in children's use of technology.

Technology is a central part of children and young people's everyday lives, used for communication, entertainment, education and socialising (Livingstone et al, 2017; Anderson and Swanton, 2019). An Ofcom survey found that 100 per cent of 16–17-year-olds owned their old mobile phone, and more than six in ten children aged 3–17 (62 per cent) had their profile on at least one social media app or site in 2021, rising to more than nine in ten (94 per cent) among 16–17-year-olds (Ofcom, 2022). Technology is critical for children and young people in care, as well as for individuals who have left care settings, to maintain connections and to participate in modern living, such as applying to colleges, seeking employment and claiming benefits (McGhee and Roesch-Marsh, 2020).

Identity and memories

Our sense of identity is based on the need and right to know about our past, home, and family circumstances, no matter what they were like (Shaw, 2007). Our 'sense of self' is not a fixed entity, and shifts and changes throughout life (Triseliotis et al, 2000). At different points in the life span, identity is revised as an individual psychologically, or physically, revisits the past and the memories, experiences and relationships that have been influential and significant.

Memories can be understood as a biological function, characterised by distinct emotions and 'a connection with the past' (Klein, 2015). Memories and 'remembering' can also be a social experience (Cree and MacKenzie, 2023), and may be created in the form of 're-memory': the memories of others, told by others, but not always a recall or reflection of actual experience. Thus, one's sense of self is evoked beyond a linear narrative of events, encounters and biographical experiences (Tolia-Kelly, 2004).

Arguably, adults who have spent parts of their childhood away from family have fewer opportunities to negotiate their past with those they shared it with, to explore and/or revise mutual memories. Moreover, they may lack the types of ephemera that are typically collected in families, such as photographs, letters and other objects that relate to the past. In the absence of these memories and opportunities to connect with people from the past, some people with care experience look to records kept by agencies such as social work, health or education as the main means of exploring their childhood experiences and making sense of the past.

Children's personal memory items may contain personal papers, items and records of value in analogue and digital form; some may exist in private spaces in which individuals create their own 'archive of experience'. Personal collections may be incomprehensible to adults and include the 'neglected stuff' of childhood worlds that adults may not seem to value (Philo, 2003).

The contextual nature of children's lived experience and the unique setting of the group home environment means that the experiences and records captured and created during the time children live in RCHs will straddle institutional and personal collections in digital and analogue formats. The hybrid nature of these materials and the drive to involve children more meaningfully in record keeping led the project team to examine how group experiences can be digitally collected and preserved in the form of a digital archive.

Methodology

The participatory research agenda provides a way of addressing power imbalances in research by repositioning participants as co-producers of knowledge (Kindon

et al, 2007). For children, this approach can be used to involve, recognise, value and reward their participation, choices and contribution (James and James, 2012), and bring benefits by innovating research design and evaluation processes (Surava and Kotilainen, 2022).

Involving children in research is not without its challenges, including the considerable time and resources required to do it well (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor, 2015) and the potential for researchers to further burden children with additional responsibilities. Despite respect for children's agency, according to Sutherland et al (2023), 'adultist' practices are often the default settings in intergenerational research in which children are unable to contribute constructively to, or design, research.

The participatory research on which this article is based was undertaken in an RCH in a large town in Scotland that had been operating for approximately ten years at the start of the project. Ethical approval was granted from the University of Stirling General Ethics Committee, with organisational approval given by the RCH organisation. Participant information was designed for children and young people, parents, care experienced adults and staff members, respectively, to support the consent processes. Informed consent was given by all adult participants. For children and young people under 18, the staff at the RCH sought consent from a person with parental responsibilities and rights; after that, the young people themselves were able to give or refuse assent to take part. Since this project spanned an extended period, ongoing consent and assent were sought as we checked that the young people and adults continued to wish to participate. To maintain confidentiality, all data were pseudonymised at the point of recording or transcription.

At the start of data collection for phase two, the young people living at the RCH were of mixed genders and aged 9, 14, 16, 18, 19 and 20; however, this profile changed over the course of the project as some young people moved on and others moved in. Two young people who used to live there, aged 19 and 20, were in regular contact with the RCH, and one agreed to be involved in some aspects of the project. The RCH was staffed by a team of residential workers, senior residential workers, a manager and a depute who operated a shift rota.

The data were collected over 12 months by one researcher in 2022–23 and included 23 site visits where observations, casual conversations and field notes were recorded. Four photo-elicitation exercises were undertaken, involving four young people and two adult staff members. Originally, the participants were asked to take photos and recordings of everyday life within the RCH but this was not achieved. Instead, the researcher presented photos of different parts of the RCH – rooms, people, objects and drawings on display – to participants and asked individuals to categorise the photos: what should not go in the archive, what should remain open to anyone with a login, and what types of content should be restricted.

Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted: two with young people who lived there, four with adults who worked there, two with adults who had lived in an RCH when they were children, and one with a senior manager from the organisation who ran the RCH research site. This activity was geared towards exploring memory and memory keeping in residential care and towards co-designing and co-producing a digital archive to capture everyday group life in the RCH in ways that would be meaningful to those who lived and worked there.

The data, which comprised field notes and verbatim transcripts, were analysed thematically in a three-stage process. The data were organised into initial themes

by one of the researchers, then discussed, developed and reshaped in a collaborative process involving the whole team (five researchers) over two analysis meetings. In the next section, we discuss findings, centring on young people, care experienced adults and practitioner views about the digital archive and their current recording practices.

Findings

Recording everyday experiences

It was important for us to learn about existing recording practices within the RCH and how these practices fit, mirrored and contrasted with the anticipated use of the digital archive.

RCH staff were contributing to individualised analogue materials, such as 'memory books', and digital content for the children and young people. Sometimes this was in collaboration with young people and sometimes adults did this for them if the young people appeared ambivalent or disinterested. The adults saw this as their responsibility even if the young people did not request it or refused to engage with the process. Staff members explained why they kept particular items for the young people: 'It's important and I know, when they get older, they will want or need it and that we have to do it. I value their memories – we have to value their memories' (field note, 9/11/22).

There was a sense from the adults that young people should not be penalised in the future for not contributing to their memory books. Similarly, in the context of the digital archive, there was a desire from the adults that even if the young people did not contribute to it, they could still potentially access a collection of memory objects in the future if they wanted to.

Young people seemed to view adults as being responsible for recording everyday experiences. During visits to the RCH, young people were often busy with friends or activities. They would chat with the researcher and stress how important they thought the archive was but encouraged the researcher to talk more to the adults about it.

Staff were required to complete a daily diary for each young person, described as follows:

> We took the opportunity to meet with the assistant manager to discuss the availability of the equipment for staff as well as young people, and to reflect on some of our learning about memory keeping here from last week. She showed us the [recording] system, which is web-based using Microsoft SharePoint. They record information in various sections of this including daily diaries, which are written as a letter to the child. She noted that they do not record the minutia of daily life but try to make sure that they record 'meaningful' information and events. They can also link photographs to recordings as well, so that there will be more than text available to the young person if/when they access the record in the future. Access is obtained via request. Details of others are recorded rather than anonymised/pseudonymised, including names of other young people and staff. (Field note, 15/11/22)

RCH staff talked of their attempts to balance organisation and staff needs with those of current residents and future care experienced adults. By addressing inputs to the child, we can see how these recording practices acknowledge a potential future audience

of care experienced adults. Aware of concerns about access and data protection, the researcher clarified that even though names of other young people and adults were recorded, there were no guarantees that these would not be redacted at the point of a subject access request in the future. Nonetheless, staff acknowledged their role in framing the daily diaries in terms of deciding what was meaningful and should be recorded and the ways in which stories are told.

Participants viewed the idea of a digital group archive as qualitatively different from other recording practices within the RCH, given that most of the recording was based on individual children and young people rather than everyday experiences. Most viewed the archive as standing outside formal record keeping, instead seeing it as similar to a family album or scrapbook. Importantly, they regarded it as having the potential for people to remember together through the sharing of stories, as detailed here by Melanie, during a photo elicitation exercise:

> Yeah, it would be great. Because I remember when I first moved back down here, erm, like, so [another young person], I had went out for his birthday one year and, erm, we had went to the safari park in [city] and it's totally something that is way back in my memory. I had totally forgotten about it … until we were sitting on the stairs one day and he said 'Oh, do you remember when I invited you to go, erm, to the safari park for my birthday because [name] had a crush on you and I was taking the mick out of him and said I was going to invite you so you ended up coming,'… and, like, that was just something that I was like 'Oh, yeah,' but then I never knew the other side of the story of why he invited me! (Melanie, young person, photo elicitation 2, 10/1/23)

In the process of discussing their different perspectives on a shared experience, hitherto hidden aspects of the event discussed are revealed and the young people create a new memory of shared time, sitting together on the stairs talking about lives lived.

It was not always easy for all the young people to talk about the future and how they might prefer to access and engage with childhood memories. However, Melanie seemed to have a clear view; her reference point was a personal Christmas tree ornament that a previous carer had given her. She talked about the future and when she will have her own Christmas tree to hang it on, and potentially children to pass the ornaments on to.

> Melanie: I'm a trinket-based person, I love my trinkets, I love my bits and my bobs, just everything. If someone gives me something, I'll keep it and I'll put it in the box or I'll use it as a decoration or something like that. In my bedroom, most of the items that I have, have a story behind them or they're from someone. Usually, I can tell you who they're all from, it's getting a bit obsessive now, but it's definitely something that's always been important to me. I think it's quite a common thing, young people in care, they don't often have a lot of things that belong to them, so when they do get things, that's their thing that reminds them of that person. I have Christmas ornaments for a Christmas tree that one of my carers went on holiday to Germany and brought me back from Germany, and I

have these beautiful little, and I've never had my own Christmas tree, but ever since I got them when I was younger, I thought I can't wait to get my own Christmas tree, I can't wait to get my own Christmas tree, and I've still got them. Hopefully I'll be able to put them on my Christmas tree, but then that's just something that I've been able to keep.

Andrew: Yes, that's interesting isn't it, so something you've got that you've kept that gives you a memory, but it's also related to the future.

Melanie: Yes, it's strange to think about it but I remember getting them and thinking, I'll be so excited to put them on my own Christmas tree.

Andrew: When you've got your own place.

Melanie: When I've got my own house or passing it down to my kids, being able to just have that and that's been from when I was about eight or nine, I've had them, so I've had them for a long time.

The sense of a 'family' album again featured in discussions with staff members. They felt that making sense of childhood required opportunities to focus on everyday experiences rather than recording being dominated by the legal and procedural details. For example, Lizzie saw a difference between the group archive and individual records in relation to this:

Lizzie: I think that's good. I think that's more light-hearted. It's less intense than asking a company to like look at your stuff and then it just being about you.

Andrew: Huh-huh, yes.

Lizzie: There might be other things that you maybe don't want to know, whereas this is just like … It's more like a happy thing. It's going to be where you think, 'Oh, I want to go and remember some really good times and remember these people.' They could go back, and they could see it as a nice memory. So, I think that's quite good. (Staff interview 3, 14/4/23)

Lizzie specifically highlighted the group aspect of the archive, suggesting that it would be populated with content that captured the everyday aspects of living together rather than an individualised case record. The more 'light-hearted' nature of the content was compared with more 'intense' information recorded in casefiles that you have to 'ask for' from a 'company'. The freedom to access materials without getting permission seemed to be a further key difference that staff and young people wanted from the archive. All were aware of the cumbersome and frustrating processes when accessing records and that such records were 'owned' by the agency rather than by the young people and staff themselves. In this respect, they wanted the group archive to have a different feel and purpose.

What should the archive contain?

Participants thought that different forms of digital content could be stored within the archive – photographs, videos, stories and audio files – which Lara, a manager, thought could be a powerful tool:

> I think that's really good, but I like the audio bit. It would be nice if the adults and the children could record a wee something, do you know, or even just sing a song together, or tell a story. I think that would be quite powerful. (Staff interview 2, 14/4/23)

In acknowledging the power of these types of media, Lara differentiates between the ways in which the archive might complement current recording practices given that case recording in social work is individualised and dominated by procedures and bureaucracy (Ruch, 2005). The prospect of recording together as a group of children and adults was positioned as a novel activity and positive.

Most young people and adults viewed the digital nature of the group archive as appropriate, given how ubiquitous technology was in their lives. For example, Melanie, age 19 stated:

> I think it's a good idea. Moving on in the current climate that we're in, everybody's online, everybody's got their phones, everybody's got some piece of technology or some sort of access to technology, and you don't see people with photo books anymore, or you do, but they're not from recent years. (Interview, 13/3/23)

The variety of devices available (smartphones, watches, tablets, wearable devices) and app developments mean that people can easily capture and store memories by recording sounds, photographs, videos and other creations. Further, with smartphones and tablets serving as content creation points as well as storage platforms, the increase of cloud storage and 'digital locker' subscriptions has proliferated (Schultz, 2018).

While Melanie talked positively about the archive and the ubiquity of technology, she also highlighted the importance of physical objects, giving the example of an analogue photograph of her with her parents when she was a baby, which she brought to the interview:

> [Y]ou could screenshot it a thousand times on your phone but is it really the same holding it and knowing how many people have held it, and that at one point my dad went to the shop to pick up the developed photo and was going through it and showing people and going, 'This is the day my daughter came home.' Is that the same as looking at a phone and going, 'How cute,' and then putting it in your pocket and not looking at it again? I don't think it is. (Melanie, interview, 13/3/23)

Melanie prioritises the tactile aspects of the photograph and the associated stories that can be drawn from photographs to help individuals understand themselves in relation to places and others (Roberts, 2012). The emotional attachment to the object and the stories inherited are key forms of knowledge which can evoke enhanced self-esteem and social connectedness (Green et al, 2023).

Participants across the different groups discussed the importance of physical objects. Often it was about their sensory experiences and how these related to their memory, as with Lara (interview, 14/4/23): 'So aye, it was just the feel of it, it reminds me of their soft skin. I always do that [rubs fingers together] when I talk about it. It's weird.' The look, feel, smell, taste and sound of objects have important implications for memory (re)construction (Green et al, 2023).

There was a general view that the archive would be used to capture 'nice' items and that it would be different from existing recording practices, typically undertaken by staff. In this way, the archive began to take the form of a family album where those involved valued the opportunity to curate the content, highlighting happy or positive times:

> Donald: No, I would only maybe say photos, like silly ones, or like nice photos can go in open access but maybe, like, I don't know, we were doing something that has private stuff on it. So, say maybe, like, I don't know, maybe there's like a photo of us doing work or something, maybe that could go in the other one … but anything where you're taking nice photos you can see with your login. (Young person photo elicitation 1, 13/12/22)

Donald suggests that the group archive should be for 'nice' or 'silly' photographs rather than more serious content which should be recorded elsewhere. This was particularly interesting in phase one of the ARCH project when care participants with lived experience of the orphanage commented on the 'whitewashed', sanitised version of daily life presented in the outward-facing monthly magazine produced by the organisation. Knowing this, the researcher probed Donald's thoughts on the potential one-sidedness of this approach:

> Andrew: and so, sometimes, in archives like this, particularly for, like, children's homes and things like that, they could, some people might argue 'oh you're sugar-coating it; you're making it look like it was a lovely, nice place, that it was always great and actually, you know, I had quite a hard time there' […]
>
> Donald: Stories, aye. I wouldn't like have, like, bad events. But maybe, like, obviously, stories and that but nothing like, because, like, you'd never be able to see that. So, like if somebody had a bad event and they didn't want to be in it, they'd never be able to see it whereas, I don't think people would want them in, like, in open access ones, eh? (Young person photo elicitation 1, 13/12/22)

In contrast to Donald's view, another young person, Melanie, noted that it may be impossible to avoid negative memories because of the ways in which memories are triggered. She gave the example of a picture of a particular event leading to memories of what happened in the days that preceded or followed it and argued that: 'I think it is important to recognise that. And I don't think you can necessarily, erm, completely avoid it [negative memories or reactions] but you could definitely put it across in more of a way that it's, erm, *factual* than negative' (Melanie, photo elicitation, 10/1/23).

Melanie suggests a more neutral or 'factual' rendering of content could help to address differing experiences and how these are captured in the archive. These views can be contrasted with the those of a care experienced adult, Andrea, who felt that difficult experiences could be captured if done sensitively: 'And I think somebody else writing in a sensitive manner about happy and maybe not so happy events is a different way of seeing things or can help to process stuff '(Care Experienced Adult Interview 1, 2/6/23).

This view perhaps highlights the difficulties in anticipating future memory needs because our relationship to the past may change over time (Josselson, 2009). While those currently living and working in the RCH saw the archive as a repository for positive memories, Andrea was able to reflect on her experiences in care and after care and identify a possible role for the archive in helping people to 'process' a range of experiences. Her desire for a sensitively written account of another's perspective may be analogous to the opportunity to sit on the stairs and reconstruct a memory with someone who shared these experiences.

Recording and retaining: roles and responsibilities?

While children and young people may be active on social media and in curating their memories and histories on their personal devices, there was a mixture of opinions on the responsibility of curating and moderating the archive. During a photo elicitation exercise one young person, Donald, said that he thought that staff should probably be responsible while other young people felt there should be more shared responsibility. Melanie thought staff should have an important role in uploading and moderating content, but she wanted this to be done in conjunction with young people and to have a say over content that related to her.

> So I would obviously like to be asked, at the start, if it was a website or whatever, this is your sign-in details, do you consent to blah, blah, blah, do you consent to photos, would you like to get notifications when photos are posted, and you've been tagged in them? If so, would you like to have the ability to remove a tag? Would you like to be able to say, actually no, I want my face blurred out, this is the person who I am in this photo, or this is where I am in the photo, take a marker tip, blur me out, I don't want to be in that photo, I don't want anyone to see that. I don't want to be able to be contacted or my messages seen by these specific people because I've had really bad experiences with them and be having just something that makes people feel like actually this isn't just a tick box, you're not just accepting consent, we want to make sure that you're getting the most out of this memory keeping. (Melanie, interview, 13/3/23)

There was more consensus among staff that, where young people wanted to be involved then they should; however, they felt that adults should take overall responsibility for the archive. Kelly explained:

> It should be a two-way thing. It should be, but I think adults would need to do it and moderate it. Obviously, kids can comment on stuff and see things and that, but I feel like the adults would need to take ownership of that. The kids can come to them and go, 'Oh, go and put that photo on,' you know what I mean, but they would have control of what goes on, like the last say on what goes on the site. Then that's … It's my job as a parent to capture my kid's memories, and now I'm putting it to them to go and get your own photos and put your own memories on there. (Staff interview, 28/04/23)

Here, Kelly argues that adults have specific responsibilities when it comes to keeping memory objects for children and young people. Interestingly, the adults argued the importance of keeping materials when young people appear disinterested or want materials or photographs destroyed. At such times, they believed that they should override the wishes of young people as they 'knew best'. Staff recounted experiences of those about to leave their care being grateful to them for keeping hold of such materials. Staff members recognised that young people might want these materials in the future despite appearing ambivalent in the present, an experience often recounted by parents in relation to caring for their children's belongings (Owen and Boyer, 2022). Care experienced adults were far more ambivalent than staff and young people about giving others access to their photos and memories, for example commenting that it depended on who it was and the nature of the relationship.

Thinking about imagined futures and the anticipated use of the archive resulted in different responses and impies that relationships between record creators and recordkeepers or custodians are complex and fluid (Farrell et al, 2023).

Discussion

While the idea of the digital archive was welcomed as something different and useful, future technological needs are hard to predict. In the spirit of reclaiming technology, users of the digital archive (staff, young people and care experienced adults) need to be clear about the boundaries of the tool and how it fits with the existing use of technological platforms and memory-keeping practices; see, for example, Trove, a digitally enhanced memory storage box for children's precious objects (Watson et al, 2018).

Technology is often experienced as a monitoring or managerial tool rather than a practice-oriented aid to the social work task (Parrott and Madoc-Jones, 2008) and as such, there is concern about how staff will manage to fulfil existing record-keeping responsibilities with the addition of the digital archive. We caution that the digital archive could become an institutional burden that dominates day-to-day caregiving prioritising recording experiences, rather than 'being' and participating in experiences.

Digital technologies offer novel and potentially more accessible means for 'those who have experienced the care system to access their pasts and the people who have played a key role in their lives' (Cree and MacKenzie, 2023: 322) and the places they have lived (Larkins et al, 2023). However, it remains to be seen how and if the archive will be used by young people in and among their use of preferred apps of the time, the rapid development of artificial intelligence (Su and Yang, 2022) and conversely, digital detox interventions (Radtke et al, 2022).

The digital archive has some similarities with other social media platforms in its 'photo-book' storage function and capacity to 'tag' people. All the young people were active on various social media sites, especially Instagram. Some of them were quite closely connected on this but others were not. One young person had access to a group online photo archive. Some young people had personal paper memory books that they made with staff and personal analogue photo albums; one young person shared that they had a sentimental physical item from a parent. This leads us to assert that some young people's personal and collective methods of memory keeping will remain exclusive to the gaze of adults, the organisation and the digital archive. Barclay and Koefoed (2021) propose that people can benefit from ephemeral traces, the secrets

and silences in the absence of information in records to interpret events and make sense of self, collective memory and group identity. According to Roued et al (2023), there is value in the experience and/or journey of searching for and making sense of personal and group history, which becomes a lifelong activity for many people. During this journey, people seek information about their lives and secure, retain and preserve new knowledge while emotionally supporting others.

During fieldwork, young people were asked to imagine and consider their future selves when they are older and what types of records and memories they might wish to access. The relationship between past and future was a sticky part of the research and has also been tricky for other researchers (Michaelian and Sutton, 2019). Imagining the future has been raised in previous research studies (National Child Development Study, British Cohort Study and Millennium Cohort Study), in terms of asking children to describe their aspirations for the future. However, we reflected that this type of 'mental time travel' requested of the young people was problematic in numerous ways; first, by way of attempting to conceptualise future need, which could be ontological territory difficult or impossible to access and answer. Young people have found discussing future needs difficult, uncertain and difficult to plan for (Shirani and Henwood, 2011). As such, there were limitations on the elicitation of temporal data in asking young people to conceptualise their future needs. Second, we reflected that a question about future needs would not routinely be asked of children who live with their families. Despite these difficulties, we determined it was important to ask the young people in our participatory approach to involve them in shaping the creation of their future record.

Conclusion

Developing the digital archive with care experienced people, young people and staff enabled us to identify clarity on the types of media that were deemed suitable to upload to the archive. There was consensus that the digital archive would help to overcome absent representations of children and young people's collective experiences and offer possibilities for future connections. There was hope that the digital archive would complement personal and institutional records, to not overlook the function of reports, minutes and other records. There were divergent views about whether the digital archive should exclusively contain 'nice' things, rather than difficult or sensitive events and less clarity on who should be responsible for selecting, filtering and uploading information.

To some extent the requirements of the digital archive are congruent with the Promise (Scottish Government, 2020), by enabling care experienced young people to exercise their rights and voice in deciding what is recorded and how their permission is sought. This is important since there is a lack of opportunities for young people in the care system to have their views heard (Priestley, 2020) and for young people to contribute to their own records (Svard and Zimic, 2024). However, we theorise that memory-keeping and record-keeping responsibilities are not routinely required of children and young people living with families and that this contributes to an extra layer of 'othering' for care experienced young people. This reflects the stigmatising experience that some children and young people in the care system experience (Stein, 2006). It remains to be seen whether this positioning is a disadvantage or advantage for people with care experience.

There is a further tension in staff retaining control of the memory items that are uploaded to an archive. If young people do not fulfil the responsibility of recordkeeping or misjudge the importance of the memory to be recorded, and hence, to avoid omission, adults do it for them, the archive becomes hedged in by an adultist outlook. It could be that adults have a more acute ability to recognise future needs of children and young people because they can reflect on their own and others' experiences, but for children and young people themselves, it is difficult to anticipate what they might want or need in the future. Further research would be valuable to examine this predicament, by enabling adults to return to their earlier childhood perspectives on memory keeping to see how they relate with views and needs in adulthood.

Conflict of interest
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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