UCL

MIRRA

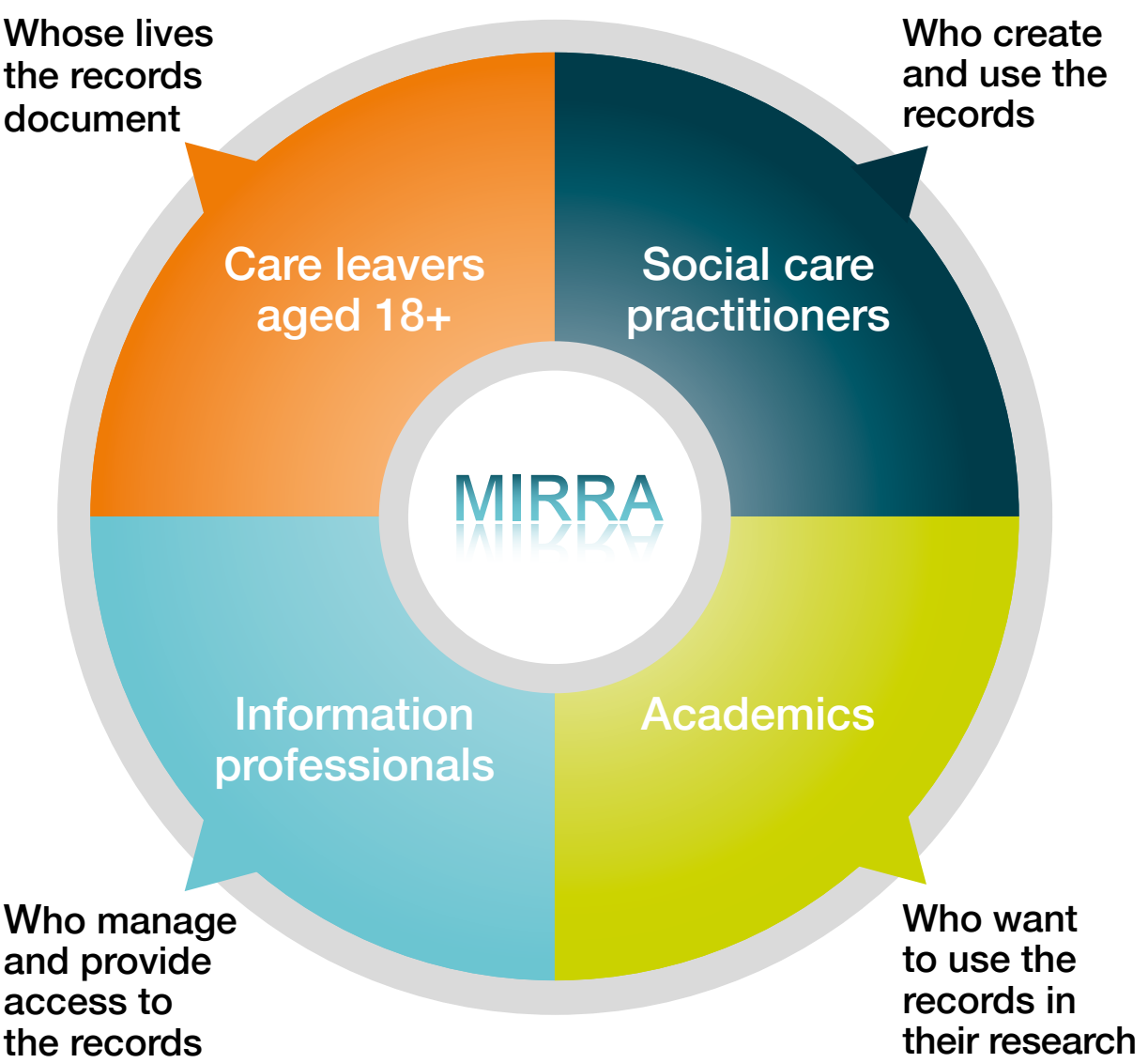## Memory – Identity – Rights in Records – Access

Background

Many people who grew up in out-of-home care have gaps in their childhood memories and unanswered questions about their early lives. In family settings written records and photographs document significant events and milestones. Shared stories help create a sense of belonging and identity. In the absence of these family archives care leavers often turn to records held by the state authorities and voluntary organisations that looked after them. These organisational records are their personal histories, helping to create and reconstruct narratives about themselves in the past.

However, requests to access personal records are often fraught with difficulty. They may be heavily redacted prior to disclosure or lost in confused management systems. Some are authored by abusers; others have been accidentally or purposefully lost or destroyed. Where they do survive they may be fragmentary, contradictory and contrast sharply with a person's existing memories. They often conceal or obscure as much as they reveal. Care-experienced people report feelings of powerlessness, frustration, anger and trauma in trying to recover their childhoods from their care files.
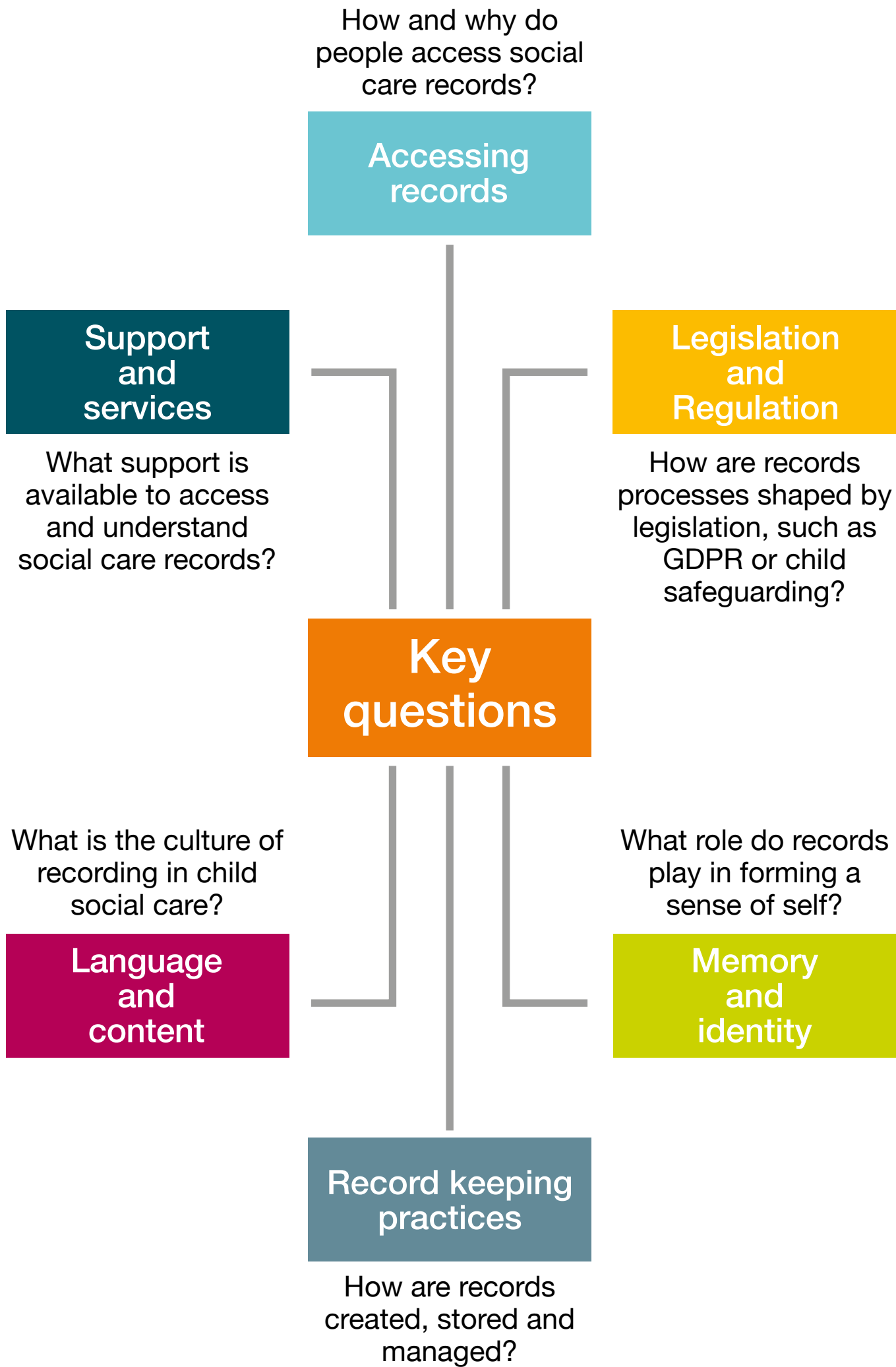
The MIRRA Project

MIRRA: Memory – Identity – Rights in Records – Access is a participatory research project at University College London, co-produced with The Care Leavers' Association. A research team of academics and care-experienced adults are working together to better understand how social work recordkeeping impacts on children, young people and care leavers throughout their lives. We are exploring how records are created, managed, preserved and accessed in England, since 1970 to the present day. Our aim is to understand how to better balance social care recordkeeping between regulatory compliance, safeguarding and a child-centred, human perspective. This will help to support children, young people and care leavers to know and exercise their information rights, while also providing social care and information practitioners with best practice guidance on their information responsibilities.

Research structure

We have conducted over 50 interviews and discussion sessions with four stakeholder groups: **care leavers** whose lives the records document; **social care practitioners** who create records as part of their work; **information professionals** who manage and provide access to records; and **academics** who use care records in their research, e.g. into health and educational outcomes of care leavers. Six care-experienced peer researchers have co-produced every step from developing the research questions and methodological design, to collection and analysis of data and dissemination.

Whose lives the records document

Who create and use the records

Care leavers aged 18+

Social care practitioners

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Information professionals

Academics

Who manage and provide access to the records

Who want to use the records in their research

Research themes

How and why do people access social care records?

Accessing records

Support and services
What support is available to access and understand social care records?

Legislation and Regulation
How are records processes shaped by legislation, such as GDPR or child safeguarding?

Key questions

What is the culture of recording in child social care?

What role do records play in forming a sense of self?

Language and content

Memory and identity

Record keeping practices
How are records created, stored and managed?

KEY FINDINGS

1. Records play a central role in shaping care-experienced people's sense of self and belonging throughout the life course. This can be both negative and positive, as records come to represent a 'paper self'.

2. Social care recording practices focus on risk management, compliance and outcomes reporting rather than on the personal and emotional narrative of a child or young person. As a result they often fail to meet the 'life story' needs of care leavers, especially where life story work is lacking.

3. Records management is highly inconsistent and variable, and many records are at risk of loss or destruction. This includes digital records which are often created and managed in proprietary systems that are in use for short periods of time.

4. The legislative and regulatory landscape is fragmented, confusing and inadequate to the needs of care leavers. This is particularly the case in terms of access under the General Data Protection Regulation, which does not account for the unique role that social care records have on an individual's sense of identity and belonging.

Making an Impact

Support care leavers' rights to information, memory and identity

WHY? From our research we know that navigating social care records is confusing and time-consuming; that documents can be difficult to understand; that language and jargon lack context and that support can be hard to find.

WHAT? As a result we are working with our co-researchers and the charity **Family Action** to create a website called **Family Connect**, which will share practical information about social care records and how to access them. This will include a historical context, sample documents, FAQs, advice from peers and information about support services.

Influence public policy debates about social care records

WHY? Social care and information governance practice is driven by legislation and currently the legislative framework for social care recordkeeping is very fragmented. This makes it difficult for care leavers to navigate their rights and hard for practitioners to understand and properly carry out their responsibilities.

WHAT? MIRRA will produce a policy brief that offers a short and straightforward summary of the issues and provides evidence of need to the people who have influence over policy and strategy development. It will be used locally, regionally and nationally, and will be shared through our partners to increase the leverage for regulatory change.

Support practitioners and researchers in their recordkeeping responsibilities

WHY? Interviews with social care and information practitioners suggest that there is a strong desire to improve services to looked after children, young people and care leavers. When the needs of care-experienced people are discussed there is recognition of some of the shortfalls and problems at present.

WHAT? A recordkeeping framework produced in workshops that bring together care leavers and practitioners will provide a basis on which to build change. The framework will take into account all the stages in a record's life from creation through to disposal and will set out the needs and rights of stakeholders through time. We are working with the **British Association of Social Workers** and the **Archives and Records Association** to ensure it is relevant, appropriate and usable.

Research Team

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