

# Lambeth Life Story Work Policy

2021



## Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Introduction .....  | 4  |
| Purpose of life story work .....                                  | 4  |
| Definition .....  | 5  |
| Direct work .....   | 5  |
| Life story work .....   | 5  |
| Life story book .....   | 5  |
| Our Principles.....   | 5  |
| Why should we carry out life story work? .....                    | 5  |
| When should we undertake life story work? .....                   | 6  |
| Life story work at different stages .....                         | 6  |
| How we can support the young person .....                         | 7  |
| Who can contribute to life story work? .....                      | 8  |
| What may life story material consist of? .....                    | 8  |
| Life Story Work Practice.....                                     | 9  |
| Role of the Independent Reviewing Officer .....                   | 10 |
| Adoption .....  | 10 |
| Court decision that the child should be placed for adoption ..... | 11 |
| Later life letter .....   | 11 |
| Further Reading .....   | 11 |
| Practical Guides for Life Story and Direct Work: .....            | 11 |
| Practical Resources: .....  | 12 |
| Research into Outcomes/Children’s Views: .....                    | 12 |

# About this document

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| <b>Title</b>                       | <b>Life Story Work Policy</b>   |
| <b><u>Purpose</u></b>              | To outline expectations regarding the completion of life story work for Lambeth's children looked after for social workers, independent reviewing officers (IRO's) and carers |
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## Introduction

*“My life story book means a lot to me, family photos, helps me understand me and where I was from”*

The purpose of the policy is to outline expectations regarding the completion of life story work for Lambeth’s children looked after for social workers, independent reviewing officers (IRO’s) and carers

Children and young people who are in the care of the local authority or who have been adopted will have experienced trauma and loss and may have little understanding of why they do not live with their birth parents, the reasons for them entering care and events that took place in their early lives. This can have a negative impact on their emotional well-being and self-esteem. Life story work aims to help children and young people in care to begin to understand what has happened to them and understand their family history which is so important when developing and understanding your own identity.

Our ambition is for all Lambeth’s children looked after to have the opportunity to be able to know and understand why they have not been able to live with their birth mother or father and to begin to understand their own identity. This will result in a life story record, which is both meaningful, positive and honest. All children looked after should have the opportunity and the right support to engage in this work wherever possible.

All officers undertaking life story work with children looked after should achieve a consistent standard of work, but it is recognised that there are many different tools and resources to support life story work and will need to be carefully chosen according to the individual needs and age of the child.

## Purpose of life story work

Life story work is an integral part of working with all children and young people who is looked after by Lambeth local authority so that they may:

- Understand the background and history of their birth family
- Know where they came from and develop a sense of identity
- Understand why they are separated from their birth family, know who has cared for them and put their past into perspective
- Build self-esteem
- Be supported in the expression of wishes and feeling and in understanding and articulating feelings
- Be helped in exploring feelings about their past and future, together with understanding any wishes or worries. Life story work should assist the work to understand who and what is important to the child or young person they are working with

## Definition

Although there are many definitions of what is meant by life story work, Lambeth's agreed definitions are:

### Direct work

This describes face-to-face work with a child or young person using a variety of age-appropriate methods. This may include play, story books, worksheets, family trees and timelines as an example

### Life story work

This means telling the story of a child or young person's life history to enable them to understand their past and to construct, understand and re-construct a positive but honest narrative of their life and identity.

### Life story book

This is the means of recording information about the child/young person's past in an accessible way for them to understand and keep. It will include both photographs and narrative. This can also include a memory box that can be kept to house physical keepsakes for life story work.

## Our Principles

All Lambeth's children looked after are entitled to and should have life story records. Our principles to support good life story work are:

- Children and young people should be engaged as fully as possible in their life story work, which is done in a way that makes sense to the child
- Life story work should be meaningful, realistic with honesty and sensitivity in giving an account of the young person's circumstances, their family and identity
- Life story work should be age and developmentally appropriate
- It should follow the child/young person and be continually updated and added to throughout the time the child/young person is looked after
- Information will be stored in a secure way to protect the child/young person's confidentiality
- The child or young person should have access to this, but a copy of the life story book should also be kept on file

## Why should we carry out life story work?

Children and young people who live with their birth families have many opportunities to know their past and to clarify past and present events. However, children and young people separated from their birth families are often denied these opportunities, they may change families, social workers, schools, homes and moved away from familiar neighbourhoods and communities. Children and young people who lose track of their past and who are confused about their present, are more likely to find it difficult to develop emotionally and socially. They may also see all their past as negative which will have a detrimental impact on them.

## When should we undertake life story work?

Children as young as 2 or 3 can be given simple explanations which are truthful, and which may help them to prepare should the child return to their birth family. Through best intentions, it may be perceived that young children should not be exposed to the reality of their birth family's situation, although they will have experienced this first-hand and in a far more intrusive way than we may be able to imagine. With young children, we should consider how much of the life story work is undertaken with them and how much is done for them in the early stages. The focus should be on supporting the child to make sense of what is happening and to gain their wishes and feelings.

If children are helped to have a basic understanding of their situation at this stage, the transition into life story work forms a logical next step at the point where it becomes clear that the child is unlikely to return home. This should make the beginning of first phase of the life story work, which helps the child or young person understand the reasons why they may not be able to return home and to express their feelings about this.

Responsibility for ensuring that accurate information is gathered, and life story work is undertaken should be identified in the child's initial care plan and addressed at the first review. The gathering of information should begin at this point whether the child or young person is returning home or not.

Foster carers or residential staff are often in the best position to gather information about the child's daily life and significant events. They should provide a memory box for children they care for and this is really the start of the life story work. It is the responsibility of the carers, their supervising social workers and registered managers to ensure that these boxes are provided, and the material is being collected.

### Life story work at different stages

|                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| Under 5's       | <p>Need to have a very basic understanding of what has happened to them. This needs to be sensitive and in a simple format, usually through creative play, to give the child a sense of identity and why they are in a placement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A chronology</li> <li>• Information on health</li> <li>• Family background</li> <li>• Significant objects / photographs</li> <li>• Pictures of creative play</li> </ul>  |
| 5-11 year-olds  | <p>Children will have more of an awareness of what has happened to them and may need more in-depth work<br/>In addition to the above, consideration should be given to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Timelines to explore what has happened to them</li> <li>• Explore positive and negative events</li> <li>• Given the opportunity to explore their past if they are ready, but not forced to if not</li> <li>• This work should be revisited regularly with the young person</li> </ul> |
| 11-17 year-olds | <p>Young people will have a better understanding at this stage and may start to ask specific questions about their circumstances.<br/>In addition to the above.</p>  |

|                  |  |
|------------------|--|
|                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More regular sessions for them to lead some of the work and explore their feelings</li> <li>• Young people should be informed of their right to request access to their records prior to them turning 18</li> </ul> |
| 18+ leaving care | At this stage, life story work should be complete. Young people may also request to see their full file, which may prompt more questions for them. Personal advisors can support them with these questions   |

## How we can support the young person

When working with the child or young person to undertake their life story work is it important to create an environment where they feel comfortable to help the young person express their feelings, the good and the bad. This work has to be underpinned by stability and consistency, and consideration should be taken as to who is best to support the child to help them make sense of their history and story; this may not be the social worker. The social worker's role maybe to collate the materials.

This includes:

- **emotional safety and strengthening support networks** - helping the young person consider how they can access people or things that make them feel safe when they need to
- **emotional regulation** – helping the young person manage difficult feelings
- **emotional literacy** – helping the young person recognise, reflect on and express feelings
- **strengths-based work** – helping the young person to develop and build resilience and a positive sense of self
- **Information sharing and integration** – helping the young person to consider which parts of their life story they wish to share with others, and which to keep private

There may be occasions where the child or young person will not feel ready or able to contribute and engage in this work, and it is crucial to accept this and go at the child or young person's own pace; this should not prevent the collation of materials that will be used at a later date in their life story work.

It is important that if a child or young person's case is transferred to another team or social worker and at the end of a period within local authority care, a check is made about who has life story records and where they are. A note must be recorded on the child's noted outlining this.

## Who can contribute to life story work?

People who can help in this work include:

- The child is the best author of their own story
- The child's birth family with sensitivity and support, including parents, siblings, grandparents and extended family members
- All carers who have been part of the child's life, carers should ensure that all school photographs, holiday photographs and other memorable material is collated
- The child's guardian should explain the court process and visit the child before and after each court hearing to inform them of decisions being made
- Contact supervisors – to take pictures of parents and children over the course of contact
- Early years and educational professionals to ensure that the school contribute – providing certificates of achievements, photographs, information on educational achievement and anecdotes from teachers
- Use of social care documentary / permanency and other reports. This information should be drawn from the documents rather than the documents themselves
- IRO's should ensure their written reviews demonstrate how decisions were made about care plans so that they can be used within the life story work
- Fun and fond memories of whoever has been involved in the child's life experiences, including other children/foster children
- Positive feedback from professionals about the child's parents

## What may life story material consist of?

For the purposes of this policy, life story work is considered as both the therapeutic work regarding issues relating to significant trauma, which should be undertaken by a suitably skilled practitioner, and the life story book, which is one of many tools to assist in the overarching life story work.

Below is a non-exhaustive list of items and/or information that should be collected in the book, (see Appendix A for guidance "Help record my life"):

- Birth certificate - full copy.
- Photo of the hospital where the child was born - if possible, the wrist band and any cot tags. Record weight and time born. Please email the Lead Midwife to obtain any of these items/confirm information
- Decisions from permanence/adoption panel and when they were made
- The child should have a clear understanding about why they are in care, which should include decisions made by Court and could include relevant panel decisions.
- Chronology of who lived with the child including the name of carers and others in household at the time. Consider foster siblings and important extended family members.
- Family Tree - photos of family members. Full names and dates of birth of parents and where they were born.
- Developmental milestones.
- Health records, illness, injuries, accidents.



- Favourite activities and achievements.
- Birthdays and religious celebrations.
- Holidays.
- Special friends.
- Pets.
- Funny moments caught on photograph.
- Photos, anecdotes, stories about birth family contact.
- School reports.
- Special activities at school, e.g. sports day.
- Educational achievements e.g. certificates.
- Special interests e.g. scouts, sports or leisure activities (certificates, photos).
- Church, religious activities and significant events
- Digital records including films, digital recordings and voice recordings

## Life Story Work Practice

In order to undertake life story work, the child needs to be in a stable placement and this could include being in a bridging placement if the future plan is clear. If still in parallel planning, where there is a possibility of returning home, then it may be difficult to start the work in any detail, although basics can be addressed, for example reasons why they are being looked after.

When children are in a state of anxiety or distressed, they cannot process their thoughts and their care plan must be in place before the work starts.

However, information should be gathered from the start of the placement, where photographs can be taken at a variety of situations, such as birthday parties, in contact visits, of all family members and carers and foster siblings. The child can be encouraged to draw pictures of themselves and family members at contact visits. If these are signed and dated, then a memory and story can inform future work. These should be held in one place and the social worker must keep on the agenda for future use.

Children being looked after often have only a vague understanding why they have been looked after, but this needs to be explained as the child gets older and is able to understand more fully. A child may be able to say how they would like to hear and talk about difficult issues and what would be enough to hear at any one time. However, workers need to be aware that if a child does not get a full age-appropriate explanation, they may begin to blame themselves, or others, including siblings.

The key to undertaking this work and the timing is dependent on the relationship between the child and worker. If there is trust and understanding between them, they can progress at the child's pace. The worker needs to be confident and enthusiastic about taking this journey with a child. Social workers, or suitably experienced and skilled workers, need to be empowered to have the time and ability to prioritise this work and coordinate information from all sources.

In general, the sooner the life story work starts with a child the better. Children need to be engaged in the life work process and be able to emotionally process their life history in depth. However, as highlighted above, some children may not be ready for life story work and this needs to be considered and to move at the pace of the child or young person.

When coming into care, the idea of a life story book can be introduced from the start, with a folder being provided to the child who can then start to gather information. This makes undertaking life story work less of an event, but something that progresses to be more in depth over time. The purpose of the life story work can develop with age and therefore a dynamic process that can continually be built on is encouraged. Life story work can be a legacy that every child being looked after is able to possess and may be developed, and progressed, as they move into adulthood.

Older young people may want to progress from undertaking life story work to an appropriate therapy. Life story work can assist them in talking about their past and therefore empower them to deal with complex emotions and difficulties.

Asylum seeking young people are a very vulnerable group, and uncertainty about their future plans can impact on them emotionally. They may also be suffering from post-traumatic stress, which makes any life story work difficult to undertake.

## Role of the Independent Reviewing Officer

As part of their responsibility to monitor care plans, the IRO should ensure that they are reviewed in accordance with the relevant Regulations.

All children looked after should have a clear plan of how and whom is to undertake their life story work, or clearly record the decisions to not undertake this work. When this involves therapeutic intervention regarding difficult or traumatic experiences, which need to be carefully planned and timed, this decision must be clearly recorded on their record outlining why life story work is on hold. If social work or clinical advice is that it is not in the child's best interest to undertake such work, the collation of life story material should still be undertaken by adults and recorded in their care plan.

In cases where the IRO identifies deficiencies in the quality of the care plan, or where actions are not being carried out, the IRO must bring the deficiencies to the attention of the appropriate level of management within the local authority, using the dispute resolution process if necessary. IROs should ensure that children looked after are involved at every care plan review stage and wherever appropriate within their life story work.

Review decisions should include timescales for the completion of:

- Life story work.
- Later life letter.
- The post adoption/special guardianship order.

## Adoption

Where there is an adoption plan for a looked after child, life story work should be part of the preparation of the child for the adoptive placement. The life story book will usually be handed to the adoptive parents, together with Later Life Letters, within 10 working days of the adoption ceremony.

## Court decision that the child should be placed for adoption

Where the Court supports the local authority plan for adoption, the child should be helped to understand what this decision means. At the point where adoption is introduced to the child, they should be given copies of the 'Children's Guide to Adoption' appropriate to the child's age.

The dilemma when explaining about a child not returning to their birth family is the child's concern about what will happen to them. The child may have an initial sense of relief, without questioning the future. They may assume they are remaining with their foster carer. This may not be said directly but be evident in the child asking questions about the future in an indirect manner.

Life story work must continue throughout this time. It is the point at which the early part of the child's history should be incorporated into a visual history for the child-in a life story book/memory box. At this stage there should be a plan of how the child will be prepared for a new family. This part of the work could begin if the indications are that an adoptive family is close to being identified.

## Later life letter

A social worker who knows the child, preferably the child's social worker, should prepare the later life letter for the child. The letter should explain the child's history from birth and be sufficiently detailed, so that in the future the adolescent child, or young adult, will have factual details about their birth family and their life before adoption. This aims to help the child being able to understand why they could not live with their birth family, and why they were adopted. The letter should be given to the prospective adopter within ten working days of the adoption ceremony, i.e. the ceremony to celebrate the making of the adoption order. The child's birth family could be asked by the agency to write either their own letters to the child, or contributions to the agency's letter, should the agency consider either of these steps appropriate.

## Further Reading

Life story work website – great resources, templates, and ideas -

[http://www.lifestoryworks.org/Life\\_Story\\_Works/HOME.html](http://www.lifestoryworks.org/Life_Story_Works/HOME.html)

Direct Work Website with great life story materials link - <http://www.socialworkerstoolbox.com/life-story-book-templates-examples/>

## Practical Guides for Life Story and Direct Work:

- 'Life Story Work: Why, What, How and When' by Tony Ryan and Rodger Walker (2016).
- 'Life Story Work: A Practical Guide to Helping children Understand their Past' by Tony Ryan and Rodger Walker.
- 'The New Life Work Model: Practice Guide' by Edith A. Nicholls.
- 'Life Story Books for Adopted Children. A Family Friendly Approach' by Joy Rees (2009).

- 'A Child's Journey through Placement' by Vera Fehlberg.
- 'A Child's Own Story. Life Story Work with Traumatized Children' by Richard Rose and Terry Philpot (2005).
- 'My Memory Book for Babies and Toddlers' by Edith A. Nicholls.
- 'Preparing Children for Permanence' by Mary Romaine with Tricia Turley and Non Tuckey.
- 'Communicating Through Play: Techniques for assessing and preparing children for adoption' by Bernie Stringer.
- 'Life Story Work with children who are Fostered or Adopted: Creative Ideas and Activities' by Katie Wrench and Lesley Naylor (2013).

#### Practical Resources:

- 'Chester and Daisy Move On' by Angela Lidster.
- 'Finding a Family for Tommy' by Rebecca Daniels.
- 'Nutmeg gets Adopted' by Judith Foxen.
- 'Elfa & the Box of Memories' by Michelle Bell.
- 'The Anti-Colouring Book' by Susan Striker and Edward Kimmel.
- 'A is for adoption' - Manchester's City Council Children's Guide to Adoption for Young Children.
- 'Everything you need to know about being adopted' - Manchester's City Council Children's Guide to Adoption for Older Children.
- 'Life Story Work What it is and what it means' by Shaila Shah and Hedi Argent;
- 'My Life Story CD-ROM - Bridget Betts and Afshan Ahmad.

#### Research into Outcomes/Children's Views:

- 'Adopted Children Speaking' by Caroline Thomas and Verna Beckford with Nigel Lowe and Mervyn Murch.
- 'Direct Work. Social work with children and young people in care' edited by Barry Luckock and Michelle Lefevre.
- 'Life Story Work. Reflections on the experience by looked after children and young people' (Adoption & Fostering Journal) by Rachel Willis and Sally Holland.

**Insert weblinks for the above**