Life Story Work Guidance

**SCOPE OF THIS CHAPTER**

This guidance can be used for anyone who is thinking of making a Life Story Book with/for any Looked After Child, however it is specifically written for workers in Tower Hamlets who are putting together a Life Story Book for children placed with permanent families. It should be read in conjunction with the [**Life Story Adoption/Permanence Flowchart**](https://www.proceduresonline.com/towerhamlets/cs/g_life_story_book.html).

Children's Independent Reviewing Officers (CIRO's) play a key role in supporting life story work across the child's journey through care. See [**Life story information and a checklist for CIRO's**](https://www.proceduresonline.com/towerhamlets/cs/g_life_story_book.html).

**1. Why Life Story?**

Children who live with their birth families often have the opportunity to know about their past and to clarify past events in terms of their present situation. Care experienced children and young people are often denied this opportunity because they may have changed families, social workers, homes, and neighbourhoods. Their past may be lost, much of it even forgotten.

When children lose track of their past, they may well find it difficult to develop emotionally and socially. If adults cannot or do not discuss the past with children, they may leave them confused with the assumption that the reason is because it is too bad to talk about. As corporate parents, we need to ensure the children we care for are supported to understand their life story.

**2. What is Life Story Work?**

Life Story Work is an attempt to give care experienced children and young people information about the reasons for their separation from their families of origin. Most children gain a great deal from talking about their past and with the help of a sympathetic adult Life Story Work can provide a great structure for talking.

By gathering together information and facts about the child or young person’s life and the significant people in it, we can help children develop a sense of their identity; their past and present situation and support them in going forward into their future with this knowledge.

In Tower Hamlets we consider Life Story Work to be an accumulation of different things such as photos, videos, letters, memory boxes, a life story book. Information can be gathered from various people and sources, for example, children’s files, birth family members, foster carers, teachers, social workers.

The child's social worker needs to begin to planthe child's life story as soon as possible - see **life story work flow chart**. Whether or not the plan later becomes adoption, the child will benefit from the information being gathered during their care journey.

**3. What is a Life Story Book?**

All care experienced children can benefit from some form of Life Story Work. This may include **direct work activities** that encourages them to express their thoughts and feelings. This work can be collated, made into a book in its own right or included as part of their life story book.

All children with a plan for adoption must have a life story book. Where the child is not ready or is too young to be involved in the creation of a book, information must still be gathered for the child and a life story book created. This will allow permanent carers to use the book as a tool to assist in their child’s understanding of their life history.

Making a life story book is more than creating a photograph album with identifying sentences giving dates, places and names. It is an account of a child's life in words, pictures and documents, and an opportunity to explore emotions through play, conversation and can be used in counselling. Adequate information should be included as missed or inadequate information can lead to disruptions or gaps for the child later in life. If it is felt that certain bits of information are not appropriate for a child’s age or stage of development, a **later life letter** should be written to supplement the life story book. Most importantly, the information contained in the life story book needs to be meaningful to the child and their family.

A Life Story Book should:

* Keep as full a chronological record as possible of a child's life
* Integrate the past into the future so that childhood makes sense
* Provide a basis on which a continuing Life Story can be added to
* Be something the child can return to when they need to deal with old feelings and clarify and/or accept the past
* Increase a child's sense of self and self-worth
* Provide a structure for talking to children about painful issues
* Be checked by someone other than the author to ensure that it is easily understood

***Life Story Books and children living with Permanent Carers***

Tower Hamlets life story books are influenced by the Joy Rees (2009) model. The aim of this model is to reinforce the child's sense of self, belonging and security within their permanent family. With this in mind, it is important that permanent carers feel comfortable with the contents of the book and confident in sharing it with their child. To achieve this, it is essential to work together with permanent carers. Whilst helping children to develop a meaningful narrative of their life journey this also helps enhance the book's capacity to build attachments.

Tower Hamlets Life Story Books are written in three parts:

* **Part 1** focuses on the PRESENT - the child in their permanent home
* **Part 2** focuses on the PAST - the child's birth; the story of the reason the child became looked after and how the permanent carers came to be
* **Part 3**revisits the PRESENT & moves to the FUTURE.

A digital PowerPoint **template life story book** with guidance can be used for those writing a life story book. This template can be adapted for all care experienced children and young people. If you need support with this, speak with the life story social worker.

**4. Who Should Write the Life Story Book?**

The process should be initiated, driven, and coordinated by the child's allocated social worker. Although it is the responsibility of the child's social worker to ensure the life story book is done, if requested, the life story social worker can assist in creating the book. To request this support, complete a **referral form** and send it to the life story social worker. Even with the input of a life story social worker, the child's social worker will have overall responsibility for ensuring this work is completed.

A Life Story Book must always be created by a competent person who has time to plan and complete the work. The decision as to who should carry out this work is the responsibility of the children's team manager. If delegated, for example, to a student social worker, all aspects of the work should be closely supervised by the child's allocated social worker.

**4. Resources for Life Story Books**

Gathering information for Life Story Books can be the most time consuming task of putting a Life Story Book together. See [**Local Resources**](https://www.proceduresonline.com/towerhamlets/cs/g_life_story_book.html) for some helpful resources that can be used to help you gather information for life story books.

**5. Where can I get Life Story Support?**

* **Team support**  
  Children's Team Managers will offer support to social workers during supervision.
* **Life story social work support**  
  The Life Story social worker is experienced in creating Life Story Books and working together with a range of people to achieve this. For consultation, advice and support on any life story work issue complete a **referral form** and return it to the life story social worker and manager.
* **Training & support**  
  The life story social worker offers internal training and support sessions around life story work and direct work which is related to this. Life story support sessions can be offered to individuals, groups, or teams. Contact the life story social worker to discuss this.

**7. Children who are Adopted**

Where there is an adoption plan for a Child Looked After, life story work should be part of the preparation of the child for the adoptive placement. Further details are set out in the [**Placement for Adoption Procedure, Preparation of Child for Adoption**](https://www.proceduresonline.com/towerhamlets/cs/p_place_adop.html#prep_adop).

It is good practice to hand the Life Story Book to the adoptive parent/s, together with the \*[**Later Life Letter**](https://www.proceduresonline.com/towerhamlets/cs/g_later_life_lett.html), within 10 working days of the adoption ceremony, i.e. the ceremony to celebrate the making of the adoption order.

*\*NOTE: The child's social worker is responsible for writing the Later Life Letter and can get further support around this from their team manager or the life story social worker.*

**8. Where do I record and store Life Story information and books?**

When recording life story related work (including direct work), do so in ***Case Notes*** on Mosaic where you should use the drop-down menu ***Life Story*** or in the case of adoption, ***Life Story (adoption file)***.For direct work related to life story work, write ‘direct work’ in your sub-heading. This way it will be easier for any life story related work to be found.

Upload photos, digital photos of direct work activities, drawings, artwork etc related to life story work on Mosaic under **documents (Attachments)** and also write a case note stating what information can be found and where.

Adoption files: When an **Adoption Order** is granted, the child’s allocated social worker is responsible for creating an adoption file in the child’s adopted name. All life story related information must then be written or uploaded in this file. For guidance on this please speak with your team manager or the life story social worker.

When you have finished your child's life story book save each section (part 1, 2 & 3) as a PDF and then upload these on Mosaic in **Documents** using the sub-heading ‘Life Story Work’. Also write a case note stating where you have saved the book.

**9. Quality Assurance**

We want the children we care for to receive meaningful Life Story Books as they will remain important to them years beyond our roles in Tower Hamlets. In order to achieve this, particularly for children who are too young to be involved in this process, it is good practice to ask the life story social worker and permanent carers to proof-read drafts of the book before it is printed. This allows for amendments to be made to make the book even better and essentially helps to ensure you have pitched the language and content at the right level before sharing the final book with the child.

**10. How do I Print the Life Story Book?**

Please contact the life story social worker who will prepare your book for printing and send it to Tower Hamlets assigned printers.

*References:*

*Life Story Books for Adopted Children: A Family Friendly Approach – Joy Rees (2009)*

A Child's Journey Through Placement – Vera Fahlberg (2008)