

**Life Work**

**Guidance**

Document

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**Initiating Life Work**

Life Work should support the child’s understanding of their life from the time they make contact with Children’s Services.

Even children as young as 2 or 3 can be given simple explanations which will help to prepare the child should reunification not be possible. Children younger than this will still require life work to be carried out, so they have information for when they are older. There is a need to collect this information prior to children coming into care, service areas such as SAAT and Early Help are best placed to collate this, as parents/family are then often reluctant to share information after this point. It will also help prepare the child for their future care plan.

Through Direct Work children are helped to have a basic understanding of why they came into care and the decisions made in respect of them, thus the transition into life work forms a logical progression at the point where it becomes clear that the child is unlikely to return home. This marks the beginning of the first phase of life work, which helps the child to understand the reasons why they are unable to return home and to express their feelings about this.

At the point the Care Plan indicates that the child will become Looked After beyond the 1st review, the Social Worker should outline plans for the ongoing development of life work and **Life Books**. Gathering information of why the child is in care and fully understand their family genogram. The social worker will be asked, at the point of opening the Placement Plan on LCS, to answer the Life Book question, once yes is selected, the social worker will be required to add a case note following the case note link [Life Book Initiated].

The pace, progress and timing of life work must be consistent with other processes that are underway, particularly the Court and Adoption Panel processes. However, even if direct work with the child is not possible at certain times, it will still be possible to plan the next phase of work and gather the information that will be needed. **Understanding and Telling** provides useful guidance on telling the child about the past and the child’s understanding, both related to the child’s age and stage of development.

**Who Should Undertake Life Work**

Life work is based on a relationship and should not be simply completing a task.

“*Children in foster care and adoption are on a journey and many parts of it are difficult. They need to feel that someone is with them on that journey and they need a framework to help them think about it and feel safe*” (Schofield, G. and Beek, M. 2006).

The Child’s Social Workeris responsible for ensuring the work is done, and in most cases will be the person who has the quality of relationship with the child which makes them the appropriate person to do that work. However, there may be circumstances in which the work can be usefully delegated to or shared with a colleague or other worker who is trusted by the child. Overall, the child’s social worker remains responsible for coordinating the life work. This should be discussed in supervision sessions, where it should be afforded some priority given its importance in supporting the child to move on and documented in the LCS supervision record. Detailed discussion should also form part of the [Looked After Review.](https://www.proceduresonline.com/sandwell/cs/p_look_aft_rev.html)

Workers undertaking life work should be skilled in working directly with children. Their role is to create a secure base for the child to explore their past, present and future. If the child’s worker is taking the lead, this will be part of the continuum of ongoing work with the child. If another worker is to be involved, this will be a discrete piece of work which will need to be managed and supervised throughout.

In addition to practitioners, other professionals are also a valuable resource in working in conjunction with the lead practitioner in contributing to life work such as Student Social Workers, Family Centre Workers, Nurseries, Foster Carers, contact centre etc. by providing information, photographs they have taken, memorabilia through activities conducted with the child, etc. For a table of examples of information that can be provided by various professionals, see **Life Work Checklist**.

**Collecting Memorabilia**

From the time a child has contact with Sandwell Children’s Trust, the collection of information (e.g. genograms, photos, family background, etc.) through the assessment and planning process should support the child’s understanding of their life so far, and this information would contribute to any life work taking place in the future. If this information and memorabilia is lost, it may never be regained for the child. Birth families, all workers involved in the child’s journey should take responsibility and have a role in collecting memorabilia of all significant events/achievements for the child. This information should be recorded for the child, and any memorabilia given to the child (or held in safekeeping by the carers according to the child’s age and understanding).

Foster carers are often in the best position to gather information about the child’s daily life and significant events. For example:

* Hospital birth tags etc. (newborn babies);
* Developmental milestones;
* Health records, illness, injuries, accidents;
* Favourite activities and achievements;
* Birthdays and religious celebrations;
* Holidays;
* Special friends;
* Pets;
* Photos of significant people e.g. birth family, friends from their community, foster carers and their homes;
* ‘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 etc.);
* Church, religious activities and significant events.

Best practice would be to give the child a memory box and ask that the carer and child/young person if appropriate, add to the box during the care placement.

**Involvement of Other Agencies**

Looked after children may have many adults and professionals involved in their lives and before beginning life work it is essential to be aware of any other agency that is currently working with the child to both support the child and contribute to the child’s life work.

Careful and sensitive consideration must be given to the impact on the child (and the child’s carers) of beginning life work.

It is vital to understand the focus of the work being undertaken by the other agency/organisation, the basis and timescale for their involvement, and how appropriately this sits alongside the proposed life work. Therefore, it is important that contributions from other agencies are agreed upon and incorporated in to the care plan and discussed as part of the LAC Review process.

**Identity and Diversity Issues**

Life work is fundamental to the formation of a positive sense of identity. Fostered and adopted children may have several difficulties in accepting and valuing themselves, and this can be compounded by the sense of difference some children will feel as a result of their ethnicity, religion, disability etc. It is therefore essential that the work that is done acknowledges difference and values this as fundamental to who the child is. The social worker should consider the most appropriate way to achieve this. Look at ideas of how to engage children with disabilities with Life Work.

The starting point for exploring the child’s identity should be what the child knows and understands about their origins, and how they perceive themselves.

After this, comes the way in which the child is perceived by others, particularly by their carer and any siblings.

The way in which the child is perceived and treated by other adults and children in different settings, especially school, should also be explored.

It is important to acknowledge that many children still experience stigmatisation because of being looked after, which can be compounded by responses to their “difference”, whether covert or overt.

Where there is uncertainty about the racial heritage of a child which cannot be resolved, it is important to acknowledge this in the work that is done. Workers should provide information to the child about the various possibilities.

A child’s racial heritage may be quite complex. A key message that has emerged in practice is that workers should never presume a child is of white British origin. A child may have a black father, but present as white, for example. It is also noted that greater numbers of children from Eastern European backgrounds are present in the general population and may come to be represented in the looked after population.

Where the child has some level of learning disability, careful thought will need to be given to the implications this will have on undertaking life work, considering in particular the most effective methods of communication. This will be based on a clear and informed assessment of the child’s level of understanding and ability. It is almost inevitable that this will involve others who know the child well and can support the work. Practitioners should make efforts to communicate with children utilising a variety of methods appropriate for their needs to ensure inclusion (e.g. Makaton, sign language, pictures, iPad, etc…).

Consideration must also be given for life work with unaccompanied minors and asylum seeking children They may become looked after with minimal to no ties with their birth family. Practitioners need to consider contacting the Embassy of the young person’s country of origin in order to gather information about the young person and their family to help to understand their life history.

The use of interpreting services should also be considered to ensure effective communication.