

Life Story Work Guidance

Policy Statement

All children who are placed in the care of West Sussex County Council are entitled to, should have, and should be engaged in building life story records which represent a realistic and honest account of their circumstances, their family, identity and an age appropriate understanding of their journey into and through care, and beyond.

A quote from a child in our care in West Sussex: "lifestory work helps a child in care understand why they are in care and what happened along the way.. sometimes memories can get confused and stuff and it's like putting together the puzzle pieces to make the full picture".

Life story documentation should follow the child and be continually updated and added to throughout the time the child is in care.

Information gathered to develop and/or add to a child or young person's life story work will be stored in a secure way where appropriate in a safe lockable place, to protect the child or young person's confidentiality. As this work is so critical for young people copies of key information must be kept – one in hard copy with the child and another electronically in case records.

These records remain the property of the child.

2. Purpose of the Policy

Life story work is an integral part of managing the child's journey into and through care, and beyond.

Life story work is intended to help children in care make sense of their situation; it should attempt to answer the following questions:

- Who am I?
- Who are my birth family?
- Who is important to me?
- How did I get here?
- Where have I been?

As well as ensuring the child or young person:

- Has an increased sense of self-worth;
- Develops security and a sense of future/permanency;
- Has positive relationships that are promoted and supported.

Consideration needs to be given regarding how the child or young person's life story will be managed and which approach is considered the most appropriate, this could include collecting memorabilia in a special memory box, using direct work tools, creating a life story book or writing letters. This will clearly depend on the child's age and stage of emotional development, individual circumstances, and the child's ability to engage with the process, specific factors including religious and cultural background, gender, disability or specific educational needs but usually a combination of all approaches is likely to be most appropriate.

There will be occasions when the child or young person may not, for a variety of reasons, be able to participate or engage with the life story process. The child's social worker will need to ensure that information is gathered for future use with the child / young person.

Life story work requires social workers, foster carers, and support staff to agree a plan about who will contribute what. This plan should be started at the placement planning meeting where clear tasks and expectations are agreed; progressed and co-ordinated by the child's social worker and kept under review at the statutory review meeting by the Independent Chair.

A child or young person may have a completely different understanding of what has taken place in relation to the actual facts. The purpose of life story work is to try and ensure that the child or young person ultimately has an accurate understanding of what has happened to them; how this is achieved will need to be agreed and reviewed. A child or young person may not be ready or capable of understanding or accepting of past events, hence the need for an assessment of timeliness, risk and impact on such information being given/ received by the child or young person.

Life story work is relevant for all Looked After Children and is an on-going process which requires revisiting and reviewing throughout the time the child is in care

The Benefits of Life Story Work according to children

Work was undertaken with the West Sussex Children in Care Council in 2020. The children involved in this work told us that when done well Life Story work helped them to

- 'Find out and understand why you're in care'
- Know what went well and what didn't in your life, so it makes sense'
- 'Understand what's happened in your life'
- 'Get to know your family more'
- 'understanding what's happened and why you are where you are'
- 'Know who is there to support you'
- 'Prepare for the future'
- 'Know who you've had contact with'
- 'To understand your parent's past and figuring out why they didn't bring you up'
- 'Fill in the gaps'

Children also talked about how Life Story work made them feel

- 'Knowing you are not the only one in the family who has gone through something difficult'
- 'Feel sorry for other people with bad pasts'
- 'Like their emotions make sense'
- 'That I felt calmer that I understood why I couldn't live at home'

3. What is a Life Story Book?

Good preparation for adoption and good life story work contribute towards a successful adoptive placement. Although life story work is not a therapy, it may be therapeutic and can be used during transitions when a child may not be able to cope with therapeutic interventions. Life story work can

help a child in very difficult circumstances to understand what is happening to them, to express their feelings and contribute to decision making and share their story with their new family.

The Life Story Book provides an accessible and child-friendly explanation for the child of how they have come to be where they are today.

This guidance explains the importance of the Life Story Book for adoptive children and provides guidance on for social workers on what to include in the life story book. All children with a plan for adoption must have a Life Story Book.

The development of a life story book should be part of the outcome of life story work, to enable the child to refresh his or her memory of past events and people.

All children with a plan for adoption must have a Life Story Book. 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 provides an opportunity for the child to explore and understand their early history and life before their adoption.

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.

4. Collating information and memories for Life Story work: Mosaic Step

It is really important to start thinking about life story work when a child enters care, if not before. If it is left to the author of the lifestory book/person doing lifestory work, it will often be too late and important opportunities to gather vital information for children will be missed.

To help make this possible there is a mosaic step which should be started when a child becomes accommodated (*add link to mosaic guidance when available*). This provides everyone with access to the child's record a place to store relevant documents and photos relevant to a child's life story as well as capturing important memories.

You should use the mosaic step to assist with collating the following:

- Relevant documents
- Photos (there is a log to add details about uploaded photos)
- Capturing memories from children's parents and families; this should include information that might not be recorded elsewhere such as family traditions, talents and dreams
- Capturing memories about children's time in utero and birth experiences
- Capturing memories from people who have looked after the child
- Capturing memories from workers and other significant professionals; there is a place professional can add their memories about working with the child before they move on and are encouraged to upload a photo of themselves to the step.

The step also provides a way for the local authority to identify which children have lifestory work underway. It provides a place for social worker and managers to be accountable about when lifestory work and later life letters have been completed ahead of case closure due to a child leaving care or becoming adopted.

The IRO will have a role in checking the progress of the lifestory work step at CLA Reviews. They must also ensure they record their memories of their input with the child including a photo where possible.

5. Who Should Write the Life Story Book?

The process should be initiated, driven and coordinated by the child's social worker and carried out in coordination with the other people who know the child, including carer(s), parents and other relatives.

Time and care should be given to:

- Planning carefully how to undertake the work;
- Reading the information about the child carefully and thoroughly;
- Collating the information in chronological order;
- Noting reasons for decisions;
- Noting gaps in the records and attempting to fill them;
- Counselling children, parents, friends, relatives and carers etc. as necessary.

6. What materials are Needed?

Presentation is very important in terms of validating the importance of the life story and motivating the child to want to read it and show it to others.

- Use a loose-leaf folder;
- Always work on clean paper;
- Drawings and photos should be mounted;
- Use neat headings and legible clear font;
- If the child is unable/reluctant to write themselves, let them dictate what they want to say;
- Use good quality copies/photocopies of treasured photos, documents etc. and not the original;
- Get a balance of words and pictures;
- A responsible adult should keep hold of the book until it is finished;
- Keep a copy of it on disc and on the child's electronic record.

7. What Goes into the Life Story Book?

- Family tree - back three generations if possible;
- Photos of maternity hospital (and, for younger children, a clock showing the time);
- Weight, length, head circumference at birth;
- Birth certificate, if possible;
- Any items from the hospital (e.g. identity tag);
- Dates of first smile, sounds, words, tooth, steps etc;
- Photos of parents;
- Photos and maps of places where the child lived;
- Photos of relatives;
- Photos of friends;

- A truthful life history - which is age appropriate. More detailed and potentially distressing information about the reasons why a child was adopted should be included in the **Later Life Letter** which is given to them when they are older and better able to cope and understand such information;
- Parents' stories;
- Pictures of nursery/school capturing memories;
- Details of siblings;
- The child's views and memories;
- Photos of workers and their roles;
- Story of the court process;
- Photos of carers;
- Story of family finding;
- Details of ceremonies (e.g. baptism);
- Anecdotes;
- Favourite foods like and dislikes.

Where appropriate, these memorabilia should be stored safely in a suitable box – a “memory box”

8. Foster Carers

Foster families should be encouraged to record the story of the child's stay with them as fully as possible, including:

- Descriptions of what the child was like when they arrived, what they liked and disliked;
- Details of development (e.g. learning to ride a bike);
- Their own special memories of the child;
- Birthdays, Christmases and other family celebrations/outings/holidays etc. - photos, favourite places etc;
- Details and photos of the foster family (including extended family), home, pets etc., who they got on with and who they did not;
- If appropriate, times when they had arguments, sulks etc;
- Special rituals the child liked;
- Souvenirs of school - photos, certificates, reports, photos of and stories from teachers;
- Contact visits;
- Illnesses;
- Photos of birth family with foster family;
- Crafts/pictures completed in the foster home/school/playgroup;
- Anecdotes.

9. Using the Life Story Book

Children need truthful and honest explanations that they can understand - that means using language they know.

It is important that:

- Questions are answered as honestly as possible;
- Adults admit when they do not know the answer and offer to try and find out (rather than making something up);
- Children are helped to accept that not everything can be explained or understood;

- Information is given sensitively and honestly - protection and evasion leads to confusion and fear;
- Adults help children to realise which feelings are healthy and acceptable by discussing their own feelings frankly. If feelings are ignored, children get the message that to express them is wrong - bottling them up can lead to negative behaviour like aggression or withdrawal;
- Adults never pretend abusive/bad relationships did not exist.

10. Children who are Adopted

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 and "memory box" should be co-ordinated by one person, preferably the child's social worker, and given to the child and prospective adopter in stages. The first stage is at the second statutory review of the child's placement with the prospective adopter. The completed Life Story Book should be handed to the adoptive parents, together with **Later Life Letters**, within 10 working days of the adoption ceremony, i.e. the ceremony to celebrate the making of the adoption order.

11. Service Standards

Life Story work is direct work with the child about their history which may culminate with the production of a life story book and or **Later Life Letters**.

It is incredibly important that children receive an effective and efficient intervention and understand the history of their birth family, the context and reasons for their entry into care and the subsequent decisions made about their care plan.

Below sets out clear expectations of each member of staff in respect to tasks required around life story work.

Operational Principles

1. Life Story work begins when a child is referred to Children's Social Care. It is captured by the detailed recording of the child's social history and the decision making;
2. Life Story work will be augmented by the undertaking of a Family Group Conference in which the child's extended family and friendship network is detailed and a record is kept of what the family proposed as a plan;
3. Permanence Planning commences at the point a decision is made for a child to become looked after. Plans for permanence for the child are required for the first looked after review following the child's entry into care with identifiable milestones to execute a plan by the point of the second looked after review. As such the second Looked After Review will be the point at which discussions on the undertaking of Life Story work will be held and a plan endorsed;
4. Four questions re Life Story work will be asked by the IRO for every child at their review.
 - Does the child have or access to a family tree with relevant details?
 - Does the child have or access to a child friendly record of pre-care history including significant events along with decision making by Children's Social Care with reference to the reasons for becoming looked after?
 - Does the child have or access to a child friendly placement / care history including decisions in respect to Permanence Plan?
 - Does the child have or access to a collection of photos, memorabilia, keeps sakes and certificates that would provide information in respect to the above?

At each review the IRO will consider these questions and allocate tasks to ensure this is available to each child.

Children with a Plan of Adoption

It is requirement that each child who is adopted is provided with a Life Story Book produced with the assistance of their adopters and a **Later Life Letter** by the Child's allocated social worker.

This is to be delivered to the adoptive parent(s) within 10 working days of the Adoption Order.

Children and a Plan of Special Guardianship

It is a requirement that children with placed with a Special Guardian(s) are provided with keep sakes and photos of their time in care and their Guardians are provided with an overview of the child's placement history and report from the most recent foster carers by the Child's allocated social worker.

This should be provided within 10 days of the order being made.

The children's allocated social worker should confirm with the Special Guardian that they understand the reasons for the children being looked after and have access the birth family details and history.

Children with a Plan of Permanence Fostering

It is a requirement that children with this plan will have:

- A family tree with relevant details;
- A placement history with details of all placements;
- A with collection of photos with details and keepsakes;
- An invitation made every review to and support create a Life Story Book with a nominated member of staff.

Young people with Plan for Independence

It is requirement that young people will receive detailed summary of their health history within 10 days of the young person turning 18.

It is a requirement that there will be a similar letter outlining their placement history and their education history within one month of young person turning 18 or a timescale is agreed with the young person.

Expectations

The allocated social worker / permanence social worker will ensure the following:

1. Details from birth family members for the completion of a family tree;
2. Details from birth family of child's pre care history with focus on securing birth and early history for children who are not likely to have ongoing direct face to face contact with birth parents;
3. Undertaking of work with prospective adopters and or children around production of Life Story Book and **Later Life Letter**.

Allocated Personal Advisor

1. The co-ordination of health and education history letters to young people;
2. The production of a placement history letter to the young person.

Key Worker / Foster Carer

1. The taking and printing of photos at key significant events and occasions;
2. The recording of the dates of key developmental milestones;
3. The collection with explanatory documentation and safe keeping of all memorabilia, mementos and other keepsakes for the period of the placement.

Supervising Social Worker

1. Oversight of the tasks undertaken by the foster carers;
2. The drafting of a placement report which includes detailed summary over the course of the placement of the children's likes and dislikes, favourite toys and past times and interests and key relationships.

Personal Advisor

1. The drafting of a comprehensive placement history;
2. The co-ordination of education and health histories letters to the child's plan.

Contact Centre

1. The taking of regular photos of contact with birth family and provision of copies to birth families and allocated social worker;
2. The production of the observation report for each contact.

Given the importance of historical information it is critical that the task of gathering and recording information and starts as soon as child becomes looked after.

The compilation of a finished Life Story Book for children who will be adopted will be however undertaken by the Permanence Social Worker with the prospective adopted.

The compiling and maintenance of Life Story Books for children who are placed with Permanence Foster Carers will be undertaken with the child and the person nominated by the child. This could be foster carer, key worker, supervising social worker etc.

Review / Contacts / References	
Document title:	Life Story Book Guidance
Date approved:	4 May 2020
Approving body:	Policy and Practice Steering Group
Last review date:	24 July 2020
Revision history:	
Next review date:	May 2022
Related internal policies, procedures, guidance:	Later Life Letter guidance
Document owner:	Deputy Director
Lead contact: Author:	Adrian Dyka, Service Lead Marisa de Jager (Policy and Practice Lead)