**Life Story Work Policy and Procedure**

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**1.** **Policy Statement
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Life story work is an intervention with children and young people designed to recognise their past, present, and future. It is vital in helping children understand why decisions were made in order to support their emotional wellbeing throughout their lives. This is particularly important if they are removed from the care of their birth or adoptive family.

All children who are in the care of Somerset County Council are entitled to **life story work** and a **life story book** which will provide them with a realistic and honest account of their circumstances, their family history, identity, and an age-appropriate understanding of the reasons why they are in care.

Life story documentation will follow the child and be continually updated and added to throughout the time the child is in care. Along with a life story book, other documentation could include an annotated memory box, letters, photograph albums and video clips.

Information gathered to develop or create a child or young person’s life story will be stored in a safe place to protect the child or young person’s confidentiality.

**2. Purpose of the Policy**

**­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­**Life story work is an integral part of the child’s journey.

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

* Who am I?
* Who is my birth family?
* How and why am I living where I am?
* Where am I going?
* How to I view the people around me and from my past ?

Life story work also aims to:

* Increase an understanding of identity and promote a sense of self worth
* Seeks to ensure memories are retained
* Provides an explanation as to why they live where they live (particularly if this is not with their family)

Consideration needs to be given to how the child or young person’s life story will be completed, and which approach is considered the most appropriate; this could include collecting memorabilia in a memory box, creating a life journey map or book, a photo book, or writing letters. Additional needs, gender, religion and cultural identity will be considered to ensure that resources are matched in an age and developmentally appropriate manner which will be unique to each child, this will be in line with the child’s wishes and feelings.

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 and recorded on the system to allow other professionals to access this for the child. There is a casenote on LCS specifically for life story work and a heading in documents

Life story work requires social workers, family, foster carers, support staff and other professionals to agree a plan about who will contribute with which aspects. This will be co-ordinated by the child’s social worker and plans reviewed and agreed on a regular basis, for example within children looked after reviews and permanency planning meetings and could also be reviewed in specific life story review meetings with key individuals. It is anticipated that a foster carer’s supervising social worker will take a key role in ensuring that appropriate materials are being collected and created and ensuring this information is shared if the child moves on.

A child or young person may have a different understanding of what has taken place to that held by professionals or other family members. Life story work needs to be factual and accurate, but can also capture the child’s version of events. The child may not be ready or able to understand or accept past events, hence the need for ongoing discussion and reviews of the appropriateness of direct life story work at any time. There should be consideration as to who is the most appropriate person to undertake this work with the child. This should be clearly recorded on the system, preferably in the case summary~~.~~

Life story work is an ongoing process which requires revisiting and reviewing. Life story work will be considered in permanency planning meetings and at each child’s review. In addition, life story work will be discussed monthly with foster carers during supervision sessions and this information will be shared with the child’s social worker to ensure joined up working.

**3. Who Should Write/Compile the Life Story Work?**

The overall responsibility for co-ordinating life story work sits with the child’s social worker. This will be discussed in supervision with their line manager and reviewed through quality assurance activity.

It is expected that families, foster carer/residential home staff and all professionals working with a child (including nurseries and schools) will be encouraged to contribute to life story work

Carers, including foster carers and residential care staff, are key to the work and need to create and keep annotated memory boxes and photo albums for each child. Ideally these need to be created with the child’s input and should be handed over to the appropriate person if the child moves. Carers should provide electronic copies to the child’s social worker so that these can be saved onto the system for the child to access at a later date.

The supervising social worker is responsible for ensuring that the foster carer is taking a proactive role in the life story work process. The supervising social worker should also be sharing appropriate information, such as updated information gathered during supervision with the foster carer, with the child’s social worker.

At the annual foster carer review the fostering reviewing officer will ask the foster carers what information and documentation, including photographs, certificates etc, that they have collated for the child or young person. They will also ask what progress they have made in working with the child or young person on their life story and whether they need any further support, training, or materials to maintain it. These discussions will be shared with the child’s social worker to ensure continuous information sharing about life story work progress.

Changes to where the child lives, education provision, or social worker will be included in records and incorporated into a child’s life story work.

At the pre-review consultation the Independent Reviewing Officer will seek an update from the social worker as to progress in collating information on life story work.

Carers and any other key staff supporting a child with life story work will be encouraged to attend training provided on life story work.

Education staff have a valuable role contributing information to a child or young person’s life story and should be asked to supply appropriate information.

External, independent fostering agencies, foster carers, and residential providers for children in care are required to adhere to this policy and procedures document.

The social worker for the child must ensure that foster carers and residential care staff have a full understanding of the child’s history and are able to support and advise the child or young person as appropriate.

The child or young person’s own contribution to their life story is essential and must be encouraged and facilitated wherever appropriate.

**4. How life story work will be undertaken
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Rather than working chronologically from the child’s birth, Somerset have adopted an approach informed by Joy Rees (social worker and author) which starts working with a child or young person to understand their present, reviews their past, and looks forward to the future. This is believed to be a help children and young people engage with life story work. The training provided by Somerset County Council is universal for all foster carers and staff members and focusses on this approach.

Each time a social worker has significant involvement with a child and their family, the social worker will complete an appropriate piece of work to capture this involvement.

On coming into care, or moving between homes, any work completed with the child or young person should be shared with all involved persons, including carers, and used as the basis for the ongoing life story work. This topic should be discussed at the initial planning meeting so that appropriate related tasks can be agreed between the carer, social worker, and supervising social worker. At the first child looked after pre-review consultation life story work will be viewed and reviewed in discussion with the social worker.

The direct work with the child or young person in relation to their life story should be carried out in a safe and secure environment where the child feels content. It should be completed with the person with whom the child feels most comfortable. This will be led by the child or young person where appropriate, with resources sourced to meet their age and developmental needs. There may also be times when important discussions about their life story take place with a child spontaneously. These conversations can be very valuable and should be recorded as life story work.

There may be occasions when the child or young person will not be receptive to making a contribution (usually because the children have more complex therapeutic needs). Work should be postponed until a more appropriate time and consideration given to a consultation with the Emotional, Health and Wellbeing Team. There will be ongoing discussions in supervision and pre-review consultations with regards to progress of life story work. Whether or not the child is ready to be involved in their life story work, there should be ongoing collation of memorabilia which should be uploaded to the system to be used at a later date.

All information obtained should be kept in a safe, confidential, and lockable place. Sensitive information and important documents should be stored safely by the child's social worker and/or foster carer or residential home. Electronic copies of documents/photographs/life story materials should be securely stored on the child’s electronic file.

When the plan is for a child or young person to be adopted, the social worker must also complete a later life letter. The letter needs to be realistic and sufficiently detailed that the young adult fully understands their life before adoption, why they could not remain with their birth parents, and why they were adopted. A draft letter should be shared with the prospective adopters for their feedback and input. The prospective adopters must be given the final version of the letter within ten working days of the adoption ceremony. The letter should be saved on the child’s electronic file prior to it becoming subject to restricted access protocols.

Children who return home should also have a life story book which should be shared with them and stored in their electronic file in case they wish to access their records at a later date.

**Young people leaving care:**

Their social worker should confirm with a young person approaching 18 that they have a copy of any life story work they have done and provide it if they do not. Life story work should not stop just because a young person has turned 18. Additional resources and guidance are available for staff and foster carers working with care leavers.

**5**. **What is a life story book?**

**(See Appendix 1 for what to include)**

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 counselling.

In creating a life story book with/for a child Somerset recommend considering the approach of Joy Rees (social worker and author) which starts with the child’s current situation and work back from there to explore their past. Having a consistent approach throughout the county creates a clearer understanding of the tasks involved from all the people in a child’s life, including foster carers, social workers, support workers and independent reviewing officers.

**A life story book should:**

* Present a chronological record of a child’s life
* Integrate the past into the future so that childhood events and experiences can aim to be understood
* Be an open, ongoing document to which information can be added
* Be available for the child to return to when they need to deal with existing or emerging emotions and/or clarify past events
* Increase a child’s sense of identity, self-worth, and promote self esteem
* Provide a structure for talking to children about complex issues

It may be appropriate for a child to have several life books, which could address various parts of their lives or may provide updating information depending on the age and stage of development of the child.

**6. Types of Placements and Responsibilities
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There is an expectation that all information pertaining to a child’s life story (e.g. photographs, memory boxes, etc.) is shared with the child’s social worker to be uploaded to the system. In addition, these items will be given to the appropriate person when the child moves on**.**

**Internal foster homes**

Somerset County Council foster carers are responsible for ensuring the child’s life story information (annotated memory box, memorabilia, photographs) are kept up to date whilst the child is in their care and for evidencing this at review meetings and within ongoing supervision sessions. Foster carers are expected to contribute to all life story materials and to share or create work with the child or young person as agreed with the child’s social worker and supervising social worker.

**Connected persons / Kinship care**

As above. By virtue of the relationship and/or connection, family and friends carers may have valuable knowledge held about a child but it is important to ensure all information the social worker has about a child/young person is shared with the carer so that they have a full and accurate picture.

**External providers**

The contracts with independent external fostering and residential providers include the expectation that life story work will be undertaken. As part of their quality assurance process for external providers, the commissioning team will obtain evidence from providers that the life story policy is being complied with and this will be evidenced at reviews or as required by the child’s social worker.

**Residential homes**

Agreement needs to be obtained at the initial planning meeting and at the first Child Looked After Review as to who, within the residential home, will have key responsibility for gathering information, documentation, photographs, and materials to inform a child’s life story.

**Secure homes**

There may be specific limitations in engaging some young people in secure units. A discussion in the first planning meeting needs to take place between the care staff at the secure unit and the child’s social worker detailing what information is collated and if/when this should be shared with the young person.

**Short break and Link carers**

Some children receive short break care from foster carers, specialist settings, or their parents. It is anticipated that the carers who provide short breaks will also contribute information concerning the child or young person, for example photographs of significant events, or memorabilia during stays, and provide this to the child or young person’s social worker or family.

**Adoption**

**All children who are adopted will need a life story book and a later life letter; this is a statutory requirement.**

The life story book should be started prior to the child moving to their adopted family and shared with the prospective adopters in stages so that they can contribute to the creation of the life story book. Ideally, social workers should encourage/support family members to contribute to the creation of the life story book. A creative approach to how families contribute, and who supports them with this, should be explored. All additional information (memory boxes, photograph albums, annotated personal items) should be passed to adoptive parents during the introductory period. The life story book should be completed and given to the adopters within ten days of the celebration hearing.

Once the life story book and later life letter are completed, a copy should be made and placed on the child’s adoption file in case the original is lost or destroyed. The hard copy should be printed to a high quality and bound.

**7. Basics for completing life story work
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* Be reliable (if you say you’ll bring stickers – bring the stickers!)
* Be flexible
* Adapt your techniques to the child’s developmental stage, interests and abilities
* Utilise all medias
* Hear the unique experience of the child
* Ask a child what they think is the reason that they had to leave home, and why they have made other moves. Provide an honest explanation of the reasons that they cannot live at home, however painful, this should be appropriate to the child’s current circumstances and ability to process the information. But remember the child/young person lived the experience and their memory and their knowledge should be valued and recorded.
* Remember to be balanced and include what went well and what was good
* Recognise positive influences from birth families
* Use words and ideas that the child is familiar with and check they have understood
* Celebrate the child’s life; life story work should not only record factual reasons for being in local authority, Joy should be evident!
* Record the child’s current achievements and talents, as well as their hopes and dreams for the future.
* If you are creating a life story book be clear the book is a work in progress – give permission for the child to add items, decorate and ‘own’ it.
* Life story work is never finished - children need to return to and re-evaluate difficult events as they progress developmentally and at important transitions.
* Make sure all the adults involved with the child understand the explanatory method when talking to the child about forthcoming moves/court hearings etc.
* Give clear and consistent titles to everyone involved, ‘tummy mummy/Mummy Lisa’ etc.
* Proceed at the child’s pace
* Liaise with the other adults who are involved with this child.
* Be honest –about confidentiality, your role, and for how long you plan to be involved
* Ask the child what questions they have and commit to trying to find them answers. If you can’t find the answers let them know that.

**8. Aim of the process at different ages and stages
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* To build a sense of identity.
* To enhance self-esteem of children
* To give details and an understanding of a child’s history.
* To share a child’s past/future with others.
* To give a realistic account of early experiences and to dispel any fantasies about birth families in a safe planned way.
* To help resolve issues of separation and loss.
* To link the past to the present and to help children and parents/carers to understand how earlier life events continue to impact on behaviour.
* To help parents/carers understand the child/young person’s past and use this knowledge to develop empathy.
* To develop a sense of security and permanency
* An integral part of our work. One part of our responsibilities to children and young people.

**Young people leaving care**

Young people often make a request to see their records when they leave care to gain an understanding of why they did not always live with their birth parents. These records will need to be prepared to ensure that the information meets the requirements of the Data Protection Act and young people should be supported to understand these records. However, it is hoped that with effective life story work, they will already have a good understanding of what led to them coming into care.

**9. Using the life story book
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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 don't know the answer and offer to try and find out.
* 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.
* Adults support children to recognise and understand positive and negative relationships and behaviour.

It is worth noting the distinction between life story work which makes the facts of a child’s story and the decisions that were made, available to them, and that which also allows for exploration of their feelings about this; and children fully accepting this story. The acceptance is part of a bigger emotional and psychological process which sits outside of the purpose and goals of life story work, although it is anticipated that life story work will contribute to this process

**Appendix 1: What is required in the life story book?
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All teams have access to the *Life Story Books for Fostered and Adopted Children* by J Rees and example copies are available on Sharepoint.

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.

The life story book needs to be shared with parents (where appropriate) carers, residential staff and potential adopters.

The child's carer, residential staff and/or adopters should keep the life story book and the child’s social worker should have an electronic copy of the book on file.

All life story books should have the following sections: (Please see example books)

* Family Tree or Genogram of family members (Ecomap if appropriate)
* Picture and description of family members with dates of birth and relationship to the child
* Details of birth, including weight, length, location with photograph of hospital, child and list of those present. If possible, include information from birth parents regarding the birth and hospital stay
* Chronology of key milestones and life events in age-appropriate phrasing (baptism, first word, first steps, any house moves, illnesses etc.)
* Details of everywhere the child has lived, the names of carers, home information, pets and the reason why the child left.
* Names of the education settings the child has attended, photograph of the buildings and teachers if possible. Children should be encouraged throughout to add their own memories of this time.
* Information regarding the social workers, reviewing officers, family time workers and the role they had in the child's life. Letters from the social worker when they left and the reason why.
* Information on any other significant people who are in the child's life that the child wishes to put in their life story book
* Summary of why the child cannot live with their families, written in an age-appropriate manner. To be updated as the child matures, and gains increased understanding.
* Health of the birth family
* Story of the court process and family finding
* Information from the child’s birth family. If possible, photographs of when the child was young, memories the birth family has of the child.
* The child's likes and dislikes, hobbies, significant toys
* First day at school, any other school information and memorabilia, names of teachers, classmates etc.
* Photographs should be taken of the child throughout their time in care, kept in an album and updated on a regular basis with anecdotal information.

**Appendix 2: Memory boxes**

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Every child's memory box will be unique. Significant memorabilia will vary hugely but a welcoming variety of tools could be included at the very beginning to aid future activities or discussions:

* A teddy bear/ soft toy
* A doll - reflecting the child’s ethnicity
* A photograph album – caption with names, place and date of each photograph
* Little bags or boxes for small treasures
* Story books
* Activity books or sheets
* Coloured pens or crayons
* Folder, notebook or diaries
* Labels/tape/ribbon
* **Other memorabilia can be added over time, remembering that dates and labels are important:**
* A toy/items the child had when they arrived
* Gifts/trinkets from birth relatives
* For babies/ toddlers first shoe, lock of hair and record of milestones
* Little box for milk teeth
* Nursery paintings, art and crafts
* Certificates/school reports/prizes
* Birthday/Christmas cards bound in ribbon and dated
* Tickets/programmes from concerts, films, trips, etc.
* Post cards and souvenirs
* Dated records of weight, height, shoe size, foot and hand prints
* CD of favourite music, nursery rhymes etc or A compilation of any video clips of the child
* Photograph of previous people the child has lived with (if appropriate) to includes names and dates

**10. References
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Rees, J., (2009) *Life Story Books for Adopted Children: A Family Friendly Approach*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

CoramBAAF published guidance:

* [Life story work: what it is and what it means](https://corambaaf.org.uk/books/life-story-work-what-it-and-what-it-means), a guide designed for an adult to read to a child, that explains what life story work is and why every child's life story is important.
* [Digital Life Story Work](https://corambaaf.org.uk/books/digital-life-story-work) is a resource for young people and adolescents.
* [Life story work](https://corambaaf.org.uk/books/life-story-work) provides a range of useful techniques and exercises for adults working with children in different settings.