Life Journey Letters for Children in Long-Term Care and Care Leavers

**Version 1.2 Approved by Corporate Parenting Monthly PLT**

**Date: 05.04.24**

# About this document

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| **Title** | **Life Journey Letters for Children in Long-Term Care and Care Leavers** |
| **Purpose** | **For practitioners to understand the process of Life Journey Letters, and the difference between them and later life letters for children adopted. Practitioners will understand the importance of the letters which provide children with the reasons they came into Care, the chronology of their journey through Care, who made decisions, why decisions were made, and who cared for and supported them throughout.** |
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#### Intended Audience

This document has been issued to the following people for Review (R) Information (I) and Review and Sign off (S). The Looked after Children procedure is mandatory and must be shared with all staff and partners working with Looked after Children and their families.

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## Introduction

Surrey Children’s Service aims to provide all young people in Care with a life journey letter available to them by the age of 18yrs or before if they leave care prior to that time. The letter will provide them with an understanding of their life before and through Care. Research indicates a child’s welfare and future relationships are promoted when children have a good understanding of why they entered Care, and any moves that followed. Much information can be lost when social workers move on and whilst the records should give a good account of a child’s journey and decision making, this is often not shared with young people, and the nuances and personal touches can be lost.

The letter should be personalised for each child/ young person considering their age, age of coming into Care and leaving care, cognitive ability and what they have been through. The letter is to help them make sense of why decisions were made for them, what their views were at the time, and the views of their social workers, carers and others working with them, along with where they lived as a child in care. The template letter at the end of the document [appendix 1] is flexible so you can use your professional judgement on what works best for each child/ young person.

The idea for life journey letters derives from later life letters for children being adopted and so there are many parallels. It was decided to call them ‘life journey letters’ as opposed to ‘later life letters’ as later life letters are a statutory requirement for children being adopted, the life journey letter is not a statutory requirement but forms part of life story work and is best practice.

The child’s IRO will ask about life journey letters in the reviews and look for information of the stage the letter is at in the care plan. If life journey letters are not being progressed the IRO will raise alerts to managers.

Note that the process and templates in *appendix 1* have been developed with input from Care experienced young people in Surrey and the User Voice and Participation Team.

## Difference between Life Story Books and Life Journey Letters

## The main difference between a life story book [which are completed when a child is adopted, and should be completed for all children in care] and a life journey letter is in the depth of the detail being shared with the child. More detailed and sensitive information is included in the life journey letter as the letter will be shared with the child at an age when they are emotionally able to understand and deal with the emotions it can elicit. Life story books tend to deal with themes around reasons for coming into Care, have lots of photos, mementos and capture children’s memories, whereas the life journey letter would include detail of the child’s experiences that led them to come into care. Coram Baaf [Writing a Later Life Letter 2020] explains the difference with reference to later life letters for children who are adopted; the letter is an addition to a child’s life story book/ life story work. The letter is not a substitute for life story work or a book, but compliments it.

## The difference between Later Life Letters for Adoption and those for children in long-term Care

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## Children who are adopted have one later life letter written by their social workers and passed to their adoptive parents who share the letter with the child when they believe the child is mature enough to understand it. It is started by the social worker involved in the child coming into care and completed by the last social worker involved prior to an adoption order being granted.

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## For children in long-term Care, there will be one letter, but there is likely to be a number of social workers who contribute, this is known as the Life Journey Letter. It will be started by the social worker involved when the child enters Care, and will be added to by every allocated social worker who works with them up until they leave care. Every social worker has a part to play in explaining their own involvement and their understanding of the child’s life at that time, including the child’s, parent’s and carer’s views as appropriate. The life journey letter is likely to be much longer than a later life letter.

## Some children in Care may not always live with the same carers or in the same placement and it is important that the letter brings all of that history together for the child to aid their understanding of their Care experiences. Carers and key workers can write their own letters which would be held on file for when the child is ready to read them.

1. Pointers for completing the letter

Soft information is valuable in helping a child/ young person understand their experience and feel they were cared for to develop their sense of belonging and identity: such as likes, dislikes, the first time they did something and last time, what school they went to, what they enjoyed doing and so on.

The life journey letter should complement life story work and could include their family tree, and/or a genogram created with the child. A genogram could help them reference the names that will be provided in the letter to help them remember who each person is who is being spoken about.

It is important that the child/ young person can contribute to their letter, such as asking them what information they would like to be included: do they have any specific questions that they would like answered? If a child/ young person does not have a view or wish to talk about what they would like in their life journey letter, that is okay. The social worker would create it with important information from the child’s life. Many children won’t know what questions they will have later in life and so it is important that we put ourselves in their shoes and consider what they will need to help them make sense of their childhood. Think of it as a chronology of events and homes with added detail on reasons, outcomes and feelings around the events.

## Parents, carers or extended family members may also write a letter to the child for later in life. Families often have a different perspective than the social worker and so this needs to be explained by the social worker in the life journey letter so that the young person can understand the different views and how they arose.

1. Sharing Life Journey Letters

The social worker should consider with the child, the carer and personal advisor when they want to see their letter. They can see it at any time with support of those closest to them – their carer and social worker should assess what they already know of their journey, and what is in the letter. Have they completed life story work, and/or do they have a life story book, does that need to happen first or are they ready for the life journey letter. Include the planning around sharing of the letter in the child’s care plan and pathway plan [16yrs plus] for the IRO to review.

By providing life journey letters it is hoped that children and young people will have an ongoing understanding of their circumstances as they get older and the local authority meets its responsibilities in ensuring this understanding is shared in a sensitive manner.

1. Tracking of Letters

The need to commence the letter will be discussed in Permanency Planning Meetings for those children in care proceedings and it will be recorded in the minutes and frequently reviewed as per permanency planning meeting policy.

For children in the Looked after Children Teams, the social work teams will hold a tracker listing all children and the status of the life journey letter and life story work. Managers will track this during 3 monthly Permanency Planning Review meetings held with the Permanency Planning Manager.

## Storage of Life Journey Letters

All life journey letters must be held on WISDOM under Direct Work/Life Story work. The allocated worker must ensure that the letter is saved in WISDOM as a draft at every stage, and not on their own hard drive or elsewhere on the system to ensure appropriate access. The life journey letters should be saved with a version number with the highest number being the most recent.

## Steps for Completing Life Journey Letters

Best practice is for one letter to be completed with a contribution from each social worker working with the child/ young person and the final social worker brings it together to ensure it makes sense, has all information and is presentable to the child; see *appendix 1* *for the template*.

* **Safeguarding Team or Assessment Team who brought the child into care:** The social worker completes part 1 of the life journey letter, and includes specific information of why the child came into care, their work with the family to try to prevent them coming into care, the experiences of the child on coming into care and significant events in care to the child and or parent/sibling. Some of the content of the letter may be shared at that time through life story work with the child as deemed appropriate. In most instances the letter won’t be seen by the child at that point. The letter should also include where the child was born and any illnesses significant events known prior to coming into care as these can become lost if the parent does not maintain contact with the child.
* There is an expectation that the first draft of the life journey letter is created by the time of the child’s **Second Looked after Review**.
* All placement moves, changes of social worker or members of the professional network, alongside significant events should be recorded with personal messages from workers, parents, carers, other professionals, or significant family/network, who had a significant relationship with the child. Family Support Workers often play a significant role in a child’s life, and a section from them could be very meaningful for the child later in life. It is each social worker’s responsibility to add the details of moves and significant events into the letter and to refer to any other letters being provided by carers or other workers.
* **Looked After Children’s Team**: The social worker completes part 2 of the life journey letter whilst the child is in Care for every Looked after Child Review meeting [6 monthly]. It is an ongoing piece of work describing significant events, education, home life, birthdays, changes to family time [contact], and reasons for any changes. The letter should include all placement moves with reasons why they were necessary. The letter should be written by the social worker with sensitivity, whilst also providing facts.
* **Final Social worker:** At 17 years old, the social worker is responsible for ensuring the life journey letter is ready to share, discuss the fact there is such a letter with the young person if they are not already aware. The life journey letter can be shared later if the young person is not ready to read it aged 17yrs. The purpose is for the young person to be given the letter at a time they are ready to have the more detailed information about their life journey that wouldn’t be appropriate to share as a younger child. The letter can be provided to them earlier than 18yrs, however it would be a decision for the child to make with advice from their Social Worker, PA, IRO and/ or carer. Handover discussions between Social Worker and PA need to include whether the life journey letter has been shared with the young person. If not, the PA should discuss with the young person, who will now be 18 years old, and share the life journey letter. The status of the life journey letter and views of the young person on receiving should be recorded in their Pathway Plan and chronology. The young person may have questions about the content and either the Social Worker or PA will need to respond and work through the queries with them.
* **The Life Journey Letter should be quality assured by the Team Manager prior to being shared with the young person.**

## **Appendices**

**Appendix 1**

**Template with example information for letter that must include reasons for being in care.**

**The parts in blue are prompts and need to be removed before the letter is finalised**

**Family tree/genogram as cover of letter**

Can be taken from life story work or from direct work with the child, can be hand drawn and can use of pictures/ photos to make it as child friendly as possible.

**Photos:**

Include photos of carers and social workers, it enriches the child’s memories; include dates of photos and name who is in the photo.

**PART 1 – To be completed by Safeguarding Team or Assessment Team Social Worker**

**Dear CHILD’S NAME,**

**Now** that a decision has been made about where you are going to live and you are settled with **NAMES OF CARERS OR PLACEMENT IF RESIDENTIAL,** I would like to tell you how this came to be. Parts of the story you will know already, some of it you might just be able to remember, and other parts you will be hearing for the first time. It is a story that is both happy and sad.

**I knew you** from the time you were…

In this section, explain how long you have known the child, how you know them and something about your memories of them.

**You were born**…

In this section, if you have the information or can get the information briefly bring in about their birth such as when they were born, where they were born and something that happened on that day.

Explain who looked after them and the beginning of their life story. To include within this any health needs or additional needs they have and what this means for them. You may need to gather this info from their parents, or someone close who was around when they were born.

**MOTHER’S NAME [or significant carer such as step mother or father’s partner]…**

**FATHER’S NAME [or significant carer such as step father or mothers partner]**

In this section, give information about the child’s parents such as their identity, age, what do they look like, what do they enjoy doing, do they have any tattoos and any other soft information.

Explain what the parents say and feel about the child (ensuring this is child-friendly and appropriate).

**BROTHERS AND SISTERS/STEP BROTHERS OR SISTERS/ADOPTED SIBLINGS NAMES…**

In this section, give information about the child’s siblings such as their age, what do they look like, what do they enjoy doing and any other soft information.

Explain if the siblings are living with the child or if they are not, why not and include family time they have. If the siblings are still with parents, sensitively explain why there is a different care plan to them.

**You** also have other people in your family, such as…

In this section, give information about the wider family such as any significant aunts/ uncles/ grandparents etc

**We** were worried…

In this section, this is where you are explaining why we were worried, why they became known to and involved with children’s services and what age this happened. It is a story of worries and what happened during our involvement and to be completed using sensitive and age-appropriate language/ not blaming the parent or child but also being honest,

**As time went on,** we made the decision to go to court as we wanted to make sure the best decisions were made for you. The Judge listened to our worries and listened to what your parents and others said then made the decision…

In this section, explain why our worries meant you applied to court, explain what decision the court made at the interim stage of care proceedings and what that meant. Also explain whether a decision was made for them to live somewhere different, for assessments of their parents to take place and so on.

If the court decisions made were different to what the child wanted, explain why this was and that although they were really listened to, adults had to make safe decisions for them.

During this **time**…

In this section, explain how the process worked and what went on, e.g. parents tried really hard to change, and what work did they do/ what support were they offered.

Explain how the child behaved at this time and what were their views and what did others observe in them. To also include a section on family time with parents and family members if they came into care at this point. What was this like and what did they do together?

**After…**

In this section explain why you made your final care plan for them to be in long term care and not to be with their parents or family members sensitively; bring in some strengths of parents for this time as well as the worries. Explain whether parents agreed with this plan or not.

**The Judge** listened to what everyone said and looked at the evidence.

In this section, explain about the decision the court made and what that meant for the child. Explain why the decision was made that they cannot live with wider family members or friends and instead be in care.

If the Judge’s decisions were different to what the child wanted, explain why this was and that although they were really listened to, adults had to make safe decisions for them.

**You** have lived with different people from your mum and dad (OR MUM/ DAD/ MUM AND MUM/ DAD AND DAD) and they have played a big part in your life.

This section is where you bring in information about foster carers/ kinship carers/ residential placements etc that the child has been with since coming into care. This may be multiple placements or just one. Use first names not full names; include key worker/ people the child was close to if it’s a residential placement.

What were the carers like, how long was the child with them, did they have pets and other people at the home and carers views of the child (sensitive and appropriate)? Include soft information such as; what did the child do during this time and their likes/ dislikes/ what school did they go to at this time/ who were their friends at their time etc.

If the placement broke down, explain why they had to move and use sensitive and non-blaming language.

If they are going to be with a different long-term carer to who they are with currently now that a decision has been made, explain about this and what is the new carer like.

**Your new social worker is** NAME OF SOCIAL WORKER is now making sure that you are looked after well and will help ensure you have everything you and your carers need and to help your parents to understand the decision made.

In this section, put in the new social workers details and anything else relevant about them.

Put in space for the child’s views and wishes.

Put in space for any specific information the child wants (if appropriate).

**Wishing** you lots of good things for the future

**YOUR NAME (below is a picture of me so you know what I look like)**

**PART 2 – To be completed by Looked After Children’s Team Social Worker**

## **Final Social worker**

**Dear CHILD’S NAME,**

I am your new social worker…..[name of social worker]….. and will continue writing your life journey letter detailing your journey in care with events, difficulties, and celebrations. There may be some parts of your story you don’t fully remember or may not have wanted to read when you were younger.

**I** became your social worker…

In this section, explain when you became their social worker. If there has been changes in social workers and not having separate letters from each one, they put in each social worker’s information of their time with the child and why they changed worker/ why changes happen. For example - I really enjoyed working with you but I am leaving Surrey which is why I won’t be working with you moving forward….

In this section put in about the social workers time with the child, memories of the child, when you first met and what you did together such as talking, going for a milkshake etc.

**You** have family time with….

In this section, explain what family time they have with birth family/ friends. What is this like and what did they do together?

If there is no contact, then to explain why not and if there is a plan for contact.

**During** this time, you were living with…

This section is for foster carers or residential placement information. This may be multiple placements or just one. To use first names and not full names and to include key worker/ people the child was close to if it’s a residential placement.

What were the carers like, how long was the child with them, did they have pets and other people at the home and carers views of the child (sensitive and appropriate)? Include soft information such as; what did the child do during this time and their likes/ dislikes/ what school did they go to at this time/ who were their friends at that time etc.

If the placement broke down, explain why they had to move and use sensitive and non-blaming language.

**Since** being in care (OR SINCE YOUR LAST LETTER) …

This section is for any other updated information since court/ the last letter and to explain the child’s journey since then if not covered above.

To include in this section if decisions being made are different to the child’s wishes and why that it is.

Put in space for the child’s views and wishes.

Put in space for any specific information the child wants (if appropriate).

**Wishing** you lots of good things for the future

**YOUR NAME (below is a picture of me so you know what I look like)**

**PART 3 – To be completed by the final Social Worker if different from Social Worker in Part 2, and/or Personal Advisor**

**Dear CHILD’S NAME,**

**I** became your social worker

In this section, explain when you became their social worker/ personal advisor. If there has been changes in social workers and not having separate letters from each one, then include each social worker’s information of their time with the child and why they changed worker/ why changes happen. For example - I really enjoyed working with you but I am leaving Surrey which is why I won’t be working with you moving forward….

In this section put in about the social workers/ personal advisors time with the child, memories of the child, when you first met and what you did together in visits.

**You** are currently living with…

This section is for foster carers or residential placement/ supported accommodation information. This may be multiple placements or just one. To use first names and not full names and to include key worker/ people the young person was close to if it’s residential or accommodation.

What were the carers like, how long was the young person with them, did they have pets and other people at the home and carers views of the young person (sensitive and appropriate)? Include soft information such as; what did the young person do during this time and their likes/ dislikes/ what school/ who were their friends at their time etc.

If the placement broke down, explain why they had to move and use sensitive and non-blaming language.

Are they still having contact with their family and what does this look like?

**Now** that you are an adult (OR NOW THAT YOU ARE LEAVING CARE) …

In this section, explain about what their future plan is, e.g. education and university, employment, becoming a parent themselves, what they want from their future and who do they want to be with etc.

Put in space to explain about the child’s journey or why we were worried about them if it wasn’t appropriate to give when they were younger.

Put in space for the young person’s views and wishes.

Put in space for any specific information the young person wants.

**Wishing** you lots of good things for the future

**YOUR NAME (below is a picture of me so you know what I look like)**