Life Story Policy for Children in Long Term Care and Placed for Adoption

**About this document**

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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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This policy should be read alongside the policy for [Life Journey letters for Children in Long-Term Care](https://proceduresonline.com/trixcms2/surreycs/doc-library/#collapse4).

# Life Story Work overview

Every Looked After Child who has a permanency plan aside from a return to residing with their birth parents, should have Life Story work undertaken.

For children who are being placed for adoption, Life Story work should culminate in a book to be provided to the adoptive parents within 10 days of the Adoption Celebration Hearing, alongside the Later Life letter and memory box. Not all adoptive parents choose to have a celebration hearing, therefore the book should be at completion stage after the final Adoption Hearing. If there is a plan for a Celebration Hearing, the photos and memories of the day are to be added in immediately once this happens as the final stage before this being provided to the adoptive parents.

For long term Looked After Children, this work may take place over a period of months and years, and the book may be updated several times across their journey, as they get older, have more questions or if they move on from one home to their next.

For children who have been in foster care, but whose care plans change to Special Guardianship, Life Story work should be taking place while they remain in their foster placements, and at the point of the Special Guardianship Order being granted, a Life Story book and a Life Journey letter should be provided.

Not all children will benefit from the Life Story work being amalgamated in to a ‘book’ - this may not be appropriate for teenagers who have come in to care under homeless legislation for example, and who know and understand their background and why they are in care The process may also differ for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children, who may have also come into care later in their teens and who may be reluctant to share details about their journey to the UK and family history.

Ultimately, Life Story work should help children to make sense of why they are in care, and children will have varying understanding of their story depending on why and how they came in to care – the approach should not be prescriptive but should be tailored to the child.

Many Looked After Children have had profound experiences of loss, separation, abuse or neglect and changes in their care arrangements. Children who live with their birth families have many opportunities to clarify past and present events. However, children separated from their birth families are often denied these opportunities; they may have changed families, social workers, schools, homes, and moved away from familiar neighbourhoods and communities. They might not have regular contact with grandparents and extended family members and family friends who can answer their questions about their early life, or their parents and sibling’s lives. Children who lose track of their past and who are confused about the present are likely to find it difficult to develop emotionally and socially. They will struggle to develop a secure understanding of who they are, have difficulty in developing secure attachments to other adults, and may get ‘stuck’ in unhelpful fantasies they form to make sense of their confusion.

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 the Life Story work being done with or by the child provides an opportunity for the child to explore and understand their early history and life before and during their journey through care, as well as explore their hopes, worries and dreams for the future.

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.

# Terminology

There are lots of different terminologies around Life Story Work, and much of the originating language comes from the work undertaken to provide children who are being placed for adoption with the means by which to understand their life pre-adoption. However, it is now widely accepted that almost all children in care will benefit from Life Story work, and therefore this is something that should be completed for all of our Looked After Children, where possible and appropriate.

Some clarification is as follows:

**“Direct work”** - this describes working face-to-face with a child using a variety of methods, according to the age, level of understanding and preference of the child. The focus can be on any subject. Methods include play, role play, story books, workbooks, family trees, eco maps, timelines, apps on mobile devices etc.

“**Life Story work”** means telling the story of a child’s life history to enable the child to understand their past. In the majority of cases this will involve direct work with the child, since even very young children can be involved in an age-appropriate way, however not all ‘direct work’ is Life Story Work.

The **“Life Story book”** is the means of recording information about the child’s past in an accessible way for the child. It will include both photos and narrative. For the majority of children this will be the tangible outcome of Life Story work. For those children who cannot be engaged in direct work (mainly the under 2s) the book will be prepared on their behalf for the future.

**“Later Life Letters”** are a statutory requirement for children being adopted, please see policy on [adoption](https://www.proceduresonline.com/surrey/cs/p_place_adop.html?zoom_highlight=adoption) and are intended to complement the Life Story Book provided to adoptive parents, usually shared later in the child’s life when they are able to process its contents.

The idea for **“Life Journey Letters”** derives from later life letters for children being adopted and so there are many parallels. The life journey letter is not a statutory requirement but forms part of Life Story work and is best practice.

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.

# Who should complete the Life Story Work

The child’s social worker is responsible for ensuring the work is completed, 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. The child’s social worker remains responsible for Life Story work.

This should be discussed in each formal supervision session, and detailed discussion should also form part of the Looked After Review.

Those undertaking Life Story work should have enthusiasm, experience and skills in working directly with children, combined with the sensitivity to work intensively with a child in areas that may be painful and confusing. Their role is to create a secure base for the child to explore their past, present and future. If the child’s social 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.

One aspect of the Life Story work will be to prepare and compile the Life Story book. Time and care should be given to:

* Planning carefully how to undertake the work;
* Thinking very specifically how to share difficult information in line with the child's age and stage of development;
* 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;
* Contacting schools the child has previously attended to help fill gaps, linking with staff who know / have known the child well during their childhood. School transfer records or ‘passports’ may also provide valuable information.

**Student social workers** may be able to compile information and produce a Life Story book for children under 2, where the task is mainly gathering and recording information and does not involve direct work with the child. Otherwise, the brevity of students’ placements, combined with the need to form a relationship with an older child before beginning Life Story work means that it is not generally appropriate for students to undertake this work.

**Family Support Workers** often have an ongoing relationship with the child and may be able to contribute to the Life Story Work and compilation of the book. If the intention is for the Family Support Worker to be involved in a child’s Life Story work, there should be a meeting to plan this, and the plan should be recorded on LCS. This should be co-ordinated with the Social Worker and overseen by the Team Manager, with regular reviews of the work being undertaken in supervision.

**Foster carers and adopters** should not generally take the lead in Life Story work, but should work alongside the lead person so that they are fully aware of the work being undertaken. This will enable them to support the child between visits. The foster carers/adopters need to be engaged at the earliest opportunity and a shared ownership developed. The collating of items for memory boxes is an ongoing need throughout the child’s time with them, however the sharing of memories, developmental milestones and other important pieces of information to be included in Life Story work should be shared in line with Looked After Review meetings.

It is important to remember that processing of information for children does not just happen within the sessions, it happens throughout. Dependant on the work, carers/adopters may need to be involved in direct work sessions and the sharing of information therefore need to be supported in this. It is helpful for social workers to alert schools when life story work is taking place as pastoral staff or an ELSA will then be well placed to provide any additional support the child may need to navigate the wide range of emotions they may feel.

Many foster carers prepare a photo album of the time that the child has been with them, which makes a valuable personal contribution to the child’s history. This does not by itself constitute a Life Story book, even if the child has been placed with the carers from birth.

Foster carers 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, other religious festivals 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 didn't;
* 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;
* Family Time visits;
* Illnesses;
* Photos of birth family with foster family;
* School photos, books and pictures which may help to anchor memories to a particular time
* Crafts/pictures completed in the foster home/school/playgroup;
* Anecdotes.

# Involvement of Birth Parents, Extended Family and others

Life Story work can have a profound impact on parents/carers, just as it does on the child. The empathy and understanding that can emerge throughout the journey cannot be underestimated. Parents should be engaged in the work, enabled to understand the process and importance, and contribute fully to the work. Parents and family members of the child will have invaluable knowledge and contributions to Life Story work that may not be accessible from elsewhere – things like why they chose the child’s name, what their pregnancy was like, details of the extended family and other important people for the family tree.

They may also be able to provide memorabilia significant to the child such as the child's hospital birth wristband; soft toys, letters and celebration cards; first drawings and paintings and photographs of birth parents, siblings, family members and other people who are important to the child.

It is imperative that family are involved from the beginning because it can become very difficult and emotive for parents to be involved after the decision is made that their child is not coming home to them, and they may choose to withdraw from working with services while they come to terms with that decision. In this context all practitioners involved with the child from the point of first contact with a family should be mindful of information that could usefully contribute to Life Story Work and ensure this is collated on the child’s file. No matter how small a piece of information may seem it could have great significance for a child in the future based on that practitioner’s involvement with the child at that moment in time. Information relating to Life Story Work should be recorded on LCS under the Life Story Work drop down heading, this quickly enables all practitioners to understand the work that has been undertaken to date, information to inform this and areas that have not yet been explored. It also serves as a useful record for children accessing their files in the future about the work that took place with them in their younger years.

# What should Life Story work include?

Life Story work should in the main be child directed and planned with the child. Tools which can be used with children can be accessed on SharePoint, under “Countywide Care Leavers and Looked After Children”, [here](https://orbispartnerships.sharepoint.com/sites/countywide_care_leavers/Documents/Forms/AllItems.aspx?id=%2Fsites%2Fcountywide%5Fcare%5Fleavers%2FDocuments%2FCountywide%20CLA%20Folder%2FDirect%20Work%20Tools&viewid=3296c27e%2D50f2%2D482e%2D9baa%2D674e488c4177).

Older children in particular may have specific questions which need to be addressed through skilled direct work and which will then feed into the Life Story work or book itself. Life Story work should cover the past, the present and the future, and clear messages of love, trust, permanency and belonging should be threaded through the book, whilst not seeking to undermine the significance of the difficulties a child has experienced.

This work should feed into the book, which should then cover at a child appropriate level:

* 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;
* 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;
* School photos, school books and pictures
* A truthful life history which is age appropriate. More detailed and potentially distressing information should be included in the Later Life or Life Journey Letter which is given to them when they are older and better able to cope and understand such information;
* Parents' stories;
* Teachers’ memories of the child in their school setting
* Personal Education Plans over time which provide an enduring record of the child’s education journey and may also have examples of their work uploaded.
* 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;

The child's Life Story Book helps them to explore and understand their early history and life. It is important therefore for it to be written in a simple and age appropriate style and that the language and terms used are agreed with the prospective adopter before the book is handed over when it is forming part of the adoption process - for example, some prospective adopters use the term 'tummy mummy' as a way of explaining to the child who their birth mother is, whereas other prospective adopters use different terms.

The explanation of why the child was taken into care should not include explicit or distressing details. This information needs to be given to the child at a time when they are emotionally able to cope with and understand the information. Consideration should be given on whether the surname of the birth parents, family and others should be included in the Life Story Book.

A memory box should also be kept for the child, to include memorabilia such as:

* Any items from their first hours and days in hospital (e.g. identity tag)
* Baby clothes
* School certificates, badges, medals etc
* First pair of shoes
* Pieces of artwork
* Class photos from different years at school
* Birthday and Christmas cards from significant people
* Handprints and footprints
* Lock of hair from first haircut
* Mementos from holidays
* Physical photos

Given the importance of the child's Life Story, it is not appropriate to use a scrapbook format for Life Story books. This not only gives the wrong message about how we value a child's past experience, but it is also less durable. Life Story Books should be produced into a physical book, in a format that can be added to as needed – for example using a large ‘slip in’ hardback photo album.

# Storage of the Life Story work, book and memorabilia

Physical memorabilia should be stored safely in a suitable box - a “memory box”, which should be held by the carers for safe keeping. All items within the box should also be photographed so that in the event items are unavoidably damaged or lost, there is a record of them to provide to the child.

The child should be provided with a physical copy of their book once this is completed – either directly to the child if they are of an age where this is appropriate, or to their key worker/carer at their home for safe keeping.

The child’s Social Worker and the Foster Carer’s Supervising Social Worker should ensure that the Life Story Book and Memory Box moves with the child if they have a change in their care arrangements or to their adoptive home. The whereabouts of these items should be recorded as part of the Placement Planning Meeting.

The electronic version of Life Story work, the Life Story book and photos of the items in the memory box should be stored on Wisdom, with a case note on LCS directing as to where they can be located. Ongoing Life Story work should be referenced in Statutory Visit casenotes with the detail being captured under the Life Story Work drop down heading on LCS, or for physical pieces of direct work undertaken such as worksheets, on Wisdom. Casenotes should make clear whether the Life Story work is in a casenote or on Wisdom, and should also be referenced in Looked After Review reports. Draft Life Story books held on Wisdom should be marked clearly as such. They must be stored where accessible by those working with the child and not on system or individual drives.

# Identity and diversity

Looked After and adopted children may have 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, age, 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.

Workers should make every effort to avoid assumptions and generalisations which deny the individuality and specific experience of children, and fail to appreciate the ways in which children have responded to or dealt with these experiences.

A child’s racial heritage may be quite complex. 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, rather than ignore it because no absolutes can be given.

Where the child has some form of learning disability, careful thought will need to be given to the implications this will have on undertaking Life Story 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. This may include teachers and key adults within the child’s education setting who see the child on a daily basis.

Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children can present with different needs in terms of their Life Story work. Often, Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children come in to care much later into their teens, and at times they may also be reticent to talk about their experiences on the journey to the UK, as well as their life history prior to leaving their home country, because of fears and anxieties about how that information may be used. Sensitivity needs to therefore be applied to how Life Story work is undertaken with Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children and how we produce a meaningful Later Life letter. The later life letter should explain in clear terms the decisions made for the child around any age assessments, care arrangements and other decisions made, and why; and should be translated to the child’s heritage language. For children and young people who are not literate in their heritage language, sound files can also be considered and requested from the translation and interpreting company being used.

# Timescales

The Life Story work and compilation of the book should be completed at the pace of the child. Timescales should be clearly identified and monitored closely by the allocated worker, manager and independent reviewing officer. Life journey work should be reviewed in each Looked After Child review and its progression recorded. However, in principle, the information gathering and discussions with other people around the child should be taking place throughout the time a child is in care, starting at the very beginning. This means that the Life Story work and book will likely be started while the child is still held within the Family Safeguarding Service, Adolescence Service and Assessment teams if this is where they first became Looked After. Life Story work for many children will be an ongoing process, and will not necessarily end after a book is compiled – the book can be added to and further Life Story work completed as needed.

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, as this is a statutory requirement. Completion of the Life Story book and “memory box” should be co-ordinated by the child's social worker, and given to the child and prospective adopter. The allocated Child and Family Worker will share the draft book with the adopters and talk through how they will use this to help the child understand their story. The latest the completed Life Story Book must be handed to the adoptive parents, together with Later Life Letters, is within 10 working days of the adoption ceremony, i.e. the ceremony to celebrate the making of the Adoption Order (often known as the Celebration hearing). However, it is useful for the adopters to have the book as soon as possible after placement, so they and the child can ensure it is read, looked at and familiar. The parts about the making of the Adoption Order can be added later by the Social Worker and adopter. The Adoption Planning meeting and reviews will always check on the provision of the Life Story Book.

# 9. Training

For support in completing life story work please speak with your team manager in the first instance. All practitioners involved in completing life story work should have completed the relevant training, there are also best practice examples available on the Sharepoint Practitioner Hub to support practice as well as subscriptions to a variety of research platforms in Surrey, Care Knowledge, Research In Practice, Community Care Inform.