

Life Story Work Practice Guidance

This guidance is intended to ensure that all the children and young people we work with in Bradford, or who have had involvement with us and who cannot live with their parent/s have access to good quality life story work, a life story book, a memory box and a later life letter that will give them a realistic and honest account of their circumstances, their family history, identity and an age appropriate understanding of how decisions have been made about them and the reasons they cannot live with their parents.

The guidance supports the updated Life Story Policy 2021 which can be accessed in Tri-x. It is your responsibility to understand our commitment to completing life work and life story work which our policy outlines.

What is Life Work?

It is important that children's workers understand the importance of life work so that it is meaningful and given priority in a busy workload. This work is going to have a lasting impact on the child/young person and will be instrumental in them having a link to the past while securing a safe and permanent future. The work should be completed by the people the child knows best who can answer questions specific to them.

Bradford has made a commitment to our children and young people that they will be provided with good quality life work which will include access to direct work sessions, a life story book, a memory box and a later life letter.

Life work is an essential step in helping the child/young person to understand their personal history and circumstances so that they have a good understanding of why they cannot live with their parent/s; what this means for them i.e. adoption, long term care, living with family and friends.

For some of our children this will help them to understand why they are in the care of the local authority, who makes important decisions for them, but they still live with their parent/s.

There are lots of different circumstances when it is appropriate to undertake life work. Care Leavers may find this useful for preparing to move to independence, placement moves, returning home e.tc.

Life work is not a one off piece of work that you do at the end when permanence is achieved but part of an on-going process that is dynamic and continual.

For children with a plan for adoption, life work will be completed and available for the child before the adoptive placement starts.

How do you do Life Work?

Life story work is often mistakenly thought of as an end product and a one off task that is completed when permanence is achieved; this is not the case and it should be seen and part of an on-going process that is dynamic and continual, added to as the

child/young person develops and changes happen so that they always have a good understanding of what is happening for them. This strengthens their emotional well-being, self-esteem and identity. It also helps them to consider which parts of their life story they wish to share with others, and which to keep private.

Life work can be categorised into different stages:

- Life work or direct work.
- Life Story Book
- Memory Box
- Later Life Letter.

For life work to be successful it needs to be planned carefully, ensuring that all the relevant information is available at the right stages of the work.

Consider whether the timing is right for the child/young person to undertake direct work – this could have a negative impact if they are not prepared for this. One of the purposes of life work is to help the child/young person to develop resilience. Go at their pace.

Think carefully about the venue for the work; it is important that the child/young person feels safe so it needs to be somewhere comfortable where the child/young person is not observed by others so that they can get upset if they need to. They need to be able to express their feelings, good and bad to help them to recognise, reflect on and express feelings.

Think about who will be around to support the child/young person after the session; help the child/young person to think about who makes them feel safe. Make sure that the session finishes with positive things, a game, a different conversation.

Life Story Book

As the title suggest this is a book that belongs to the child/young person and will go with them wherever they are for them to read as and when they want. The life story book is written for the child/young person to access immediately and this should be available whenever they want it.

The life story book is a physical culmination of the work you will have completed directly with the child or young person (unless this is for a baby or very young child, or a child/young person with severe disabilities which prevents them being able to be involved in direct life work).

It is important that the book is well planned so that all the relevant information has already been gathered and is available.

It is important that the book reflects the child/young person's journey. Think about what you know about your family, their past history and some things that are important to you; what if that was taken away and you had no memory to help you explain what has happened in your life or you don't have anything from your past? This will help you to get a feel of the importance of the book and will help you think about the things that need to be in it.

There is a helpful life story checklist in **Appendix A** that you can use to help you with your planning, giving suggestions of information and things to check and allow you to track your progress.

As with Life Work a Life Story Book is the child/young person's link to their past.

Its purpose is to assist them to.

- Access information and memories as and when the child/young person wants to – this is their book and they should have access to it at all times.
- Understand the background history of their parent's/birth family (if adopted) and enable the child/young person to have information about their family that they may want to share with others; therefore, keep as full a chronological record as possible of a child's life; inclusive of details of the child's birth family but not to be written as a chronology.
- Give a realistic account of early events and to dispel fantasies or fears about the birth family.
- Know where they came from and develop a strong sense of identity, including religious, cultural and ethnic identity and any other identity issues for them.
- Understand why they are separated from their parent/s, know who has cared for them and put their past into perspective and to acknowledge feelings of separation and loss.
- Provide an understanding of the child/young person's journey and the decisions that have been made about them to enable them to look towards their future.
- Link the past to the present and to help both the child/young person and the carer or parent to understand how earlier life events continue to impact on behaviour.
- Be something the child/young person can return to when he/she needs to deal with their feelings and clarify and/or accept the past;
- Increase a child's sense of self and self-worth leading to a more positive self-image and confidence.
- Help the child/young person develop a sense of security and permanence and to promote attachment.

Examples of what to put in a 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);

- Ask parents to share why they chose their name.
- Any information from parents/carers on what the child/young person was like as a baby/young child; dates of key milestones such as first smile, words, tooth, steps etc.;
- Special family events that the child/young person was part of i.e. birthday parties, weddings etc.
- Any health issues for the child.
- Photos of parents and brother and sisters; details of siblings – names, dates of birth and if appropriate, why the children do not live together
- Photos and maps of places where the child lived;
- Photos of relatives;
- Photos of friends;
- A timeline of key events that explains why the child does not live at home with their parent/s (not in chronology format).
- Parents' stories (also parents' likes and dislikes, hobbies, interests and traits – characteristics etc.);
- Messages from birth parents
- Details of siblings – names, dates of birth and if appropriate, why the children do not live together:
- The child's views and memories;
- Photos of workers and their roles;
- Photos of carers and their family;
- Details of ceremonies and traditions.
- Anecdotes;
- Details, mementos and photos of holidays or other events.

There should be 3 copies of a life story book – one for the child/young person. One for the carer and one stored electronically.

What is a Memory Box?

Memory boxes are important for children and young people who are unable to live with their parents as it gives them a physical link with their past. The memory box should include important sentimental items which are important to the child/young person no matter what it is. The box should be continually updated and passed on to any other placements that the child or young person goes to. For very young children the carer will put the memory box together but for slightly older children they will be able to say some of the things they want in the box. The memory box should be available for the child/young person whenever they ask for it.

All items in the memory box should be photographed so if anything should happen to the item a copy of it is always available.

Examples of what to put in a memory box:

- Hand prints / foot prints;
- Lock of hair;
- Medical Red book;
- Both parents hand prints if possible;
- Baby book;
- Newspaper from the day baby born;
- Photos of memories (that have not gone into the Life Story Book)
- Holiday photos;
- First pair shoes / clothes;
- Favourite toy;

This is not an exhaustive list.

What is a Later Life Letter?

The aim of the Later Life Letter is to give an explanation to the child/young person about how the decisions that were made about them happened; including who made them and why. For example, why they cannot live with their parents or other extended family members (if this is the case); reasons for them being separated from brothers and sisters etc.

The letter needs to be accurate, detailed and balanced. Much of the content is likely to be sensitive and may be hard for the young person to read. Without trivialising the serious content, the letter should also contain lighter notes with anecdotes and details about everyday things such as food or music the young person enjoyed.

We tend to make one Later Life Letter available but letters can be written by an array of different people who have worked with the child/young person and contribute to their memories.

Who is responsible for Life Work?

The child's social worker has overall responsibility for the completion of the life work including, the life story book and the later life letter and memory boxes. The child's parents and carers and other people may have a significant role in contributing to this but the co-ordination of the completion and roles will be the social worker's function. Therefore, it is the child's social worker's responsibility to ensure that relevant information regarding the child/young person's life is collated and put into a format that the child/young person can access and understand.

Think about everyone who has had involvement with the child/young person – what can they contribute to the life work?

The birth family – do they have photographs or memorabilia – do they want to write anything? Why did they give that name to their child? Was there a favourite toy?

The foster carer/carer – there will be a wealth of information that they can contribute. Photographs and memorabilia of holidays, outings, parties etc.

Think creatively about who has had involvement with the child/young person – what do they know about the child

Most importantly The child/young person's own contribution to their life story is crucial and must be encouraged and facilitated taking into consideration their age. For example, they may want to contribute pictures and drawings. They are the best author of their own story.

Appendix 1

Appendix 1: Life Story Work Checklist

Action required:	Date Task Completed.	Outstanding Action – who has the information?
Ensure child has access to photograph of parents and siblings.		
Request contact supervisors to take photographs in contact		
Order child/young person's birth certificate – if fathers name is not on this please make on note to add with the certificate		
Get information about birth – where/when/weight. Get wrist straps and a picture of the hospital		
Information from parent/s and extended family members re any memories of child/young person as a baby and get photographs.		
Ask parents to share why they chose the name and if after a family member so information about them.		
Information about family events/traditions – again any photographs		
Reason why the child/young person was removed from parent/s care		
Who made the decision		
Information about issues that impacted on the parents care.		
Special information about the family, race, culture, religion etc.		
Information about the birth mother		
Information about birth father		
How parents met		
Information about brothers and sisters.		
Information about extended family members		
Birth family tree		
Life path		
What is foster care; information about carers and their family.		

Special time and celebrations with carers		
Contact with parents current and future plans		
Where relevant what is adoption		
Adoptive family		
Memory box information		
Later Life Letter		
Anecdotes from carers.		
Any pictures or drawings that the child has done.		
Leaflets/tickets from trips out or holidays		
Birthday cards from parents and family members etc.		
First hair cut		
First day at nursery/school.		
Any other memories in foster care – pictures of pets etc.		
Events child involved in such as musical events, plays etc.		
Childs likes and dislikes and how it changed over time		
Schools and nurseries attended		
School reports and certificates and any picture		
Where is the life story work going to be stored – 3 copies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 for child • 1 for carer • 1 to keep electronically. 		