

1. Introduction

Trafford Council is committed to promoting the longer term resilience and emotional wellbeing of all children in our care. Life story work has a purposeful role in children understanding their life journey, including significant events, relationship networks, and achievements that have occurred in their life. This guidance sets out the minimum standard of practice for all children who are not placed at home with their birth families.

Young people have told us that life story work is important to them and offers reassurance and understanding. All cared for children in Trafford 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.

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

Trafford Council EPIC values sets out the importance of effective participation, which includes listening to the views, wishes, and feelings of children and young people when progressing their personal life story work. This is achieved by giving the child or young person ownership of the life story work and encouraging them to participate as much as possible. This process of involvement promotes their sense of identity, which in turn builds their sense of resilience and self-esteem, and equips them for a healthier future.

2. What is Life Story Work?

Most Cared for Children have had profound experiences of loss, separation, abuse or neglect and placement changes. Life story work can help them understand and integrate their past, make sense of their present and develop a clear sense of identity for their future. It is an invaluable tool in helping them make sense of what has happened, and is happening to them.

There are three core elements to life story work.

- The creation of a written story that explains the reasons for the child's moves from their birth family;
- The gathering of treasured objects from the past, which includes photographs and mementos, of childhood;
- Providing information about their birth family and other significant relationships in their past and present life.

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.

Life Story Work should:

- Keep as full a chronological record as possible of a child's life;
- Include a genogram or family tree including those who were important in the 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 challenging issues.

3. Why is Life Story Work Important?

Children who live with their birth families have many opportunities to know their past and 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. 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. If adults cannot or do not discuss this with them, it is reasonable for children to suppose that it may be bad, (Ryan & Walker 2016).

Life Story Work is imperative for all Cared for Children and specifically in preparation for adoption (Rees, 2009):

- To give details and understanding of the child's history;
- To build the child's sense of identity;
- To enable the child to share his past with adopters/carers;
- To give a realistic account of early events to dispel fantasies;
- To link past with present and help the carer and child understand how early life events impact on behaviour;
- To acknowledge issues of separation and loss;
- To enable adopters/carers to understand and develop empathy for the child;
- To enhance the child's self-esteem and resilience;
- To help the child develop a sense of security and permanence;
- To promote attachment to carers/adopters.

4. When should Life Story Work Begin?

There is a significant precursor to life story work which forms the foundation on which it is built; that foundation is the child's awareness of the reasons why they are not able to remain living at home and what changes would need to take place to enable this to happen. Even children as young as 2 or 3 can be given simple explanations which are truthful, and which will help to prepare the child should reunification not be possible. There may be a tendency, arising from the best of intentions, to be over-protective and to feel that young children, should not be exposed to the harsh reality of their birth family's situation, although they have experienced this first hand and in a far more intrusive way than we might be able to imagine.

If children are helped to have a basic understanding of their situation at this stage, the transition into life story work forms a logical progression at the point where it becomes clear that the child is unlikely to remain at home. This marks the beginning of the first phase of life story work, which helps the child to understand the reasons why they are unable to remain home and to express their feelings about this.

All Cared for Children

When a child is removed from the care of their birth family, they must be supported to understand the reasons for this in an age appropriate way, taking account of their level of emotional development. Indeed, information about court and care planning processes can be built into the work being undertaken with the child to help them understand what is happening. Children will need to have an explanation of why certain decisions were made. These explanations should be clearly recorded on the child's file so that subsequent social workers are easily able to find what children have previously been told and build on these explanations. Workers from Social Care and Safeguarding Teams have a crucial part to play in ensuring the foundations are laid for future explanations.

The pace, progress and timing of life story work must be consistent with other processes that are underway, particularly the Court and Adoption Panel processes. However, even if direct work with the child is not possible at certain times, it will still be possible to plan the next phase of work and gather the information that will be needed.

Life Story Work is an on-going process which requires revisiting and reviewing throughout the time the child is in our care.

When the Child's Plan is Adoption

As soon as a review agrees that the child's permanence plan should be adoption, the practice manager should clarify with the social worker the stage of life story work that has been reached, and ensure that the worker is in a position to take this forward in preparing the child for adoption. The social worker should be able to identify clearly the key themes which need to be addressed in life story work.

When the plan is for a child or young person to be adopted or live away from birth parents, the social worker who knows the child must write a later life letter. The letter needs to be

realistic and sufficiently detailed so that when the child becomes a young adult they can fully understand their life with birth family, why they could not remain with their birth parents, and why they were adopted or fostered. Prospective adopters must be given the letter within ten working days of the adoption order being granted, foster carers should be given a copy of the letter when the permanence match is agreed. ([Link to later life letter guidance](#))

5. Who Needs Life Story Work?

- Children living with foster carers or connected persons carers;
- Children living in Childrens Homes;
- Children placed for adoption;
- Children who are placed on SGO's

For some Cared for Children this story of their life never happens or is very disjointed. It is therefore important that carers try and keep a record of their time with them. If a child only stays a few nights this will not always be possible. But if a child stays for weeks or months carers will begin to hold an important part of their life history.

For children who are adopted, the life story will usually be handed to the adoptive parents, together with later life letters, on or before the adoption order being granted.

6. Life Story Work with the Child or Young Person

A life story book is part of the process and is a tool to help the child make sense what has happened to them and what is happening.

'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 2) the book will be prepared on their behalf for the future. It is important to recognise that the child's life story book can be produced through different mediums in line with the child's age and preferences.

It is important to know the child and understand their ways of communication. It should begin with trying to establish what the child knows and understands and their state of mind emotionally. Some children will have a clear view of what happened to them but may not know why. Others will be very confused.

The life story work and book should not be merely a photo album but include the active contribution of the child's input of the way they viewed their past, present and their hopes for the future. The person leading the work should offer the child a safe, supportive environment to sensitively explore their feelings of the past and what will happen next.

By knowing the child or young person, it is possible to consider **"with them"** the safe and appropriate medium to sensitively facilitate communication.

The use a range of creative and abstract approaches along with story-telling techniques, genograms and life mapping can facilitate the process.

It is not unusual for children to seek out consistent explanations of what happened to them on a regular basis. This is part of their healing process of coming to terms with not returning back to their birth family.

Children need to be involved in the decision to start life story work and it is important to give them a choice at the time that is right for them to begin the process. There will be times that the child may not wish to consider elements of their life narrative and it is important that practitioners respect the child's boundaries and promotes a child led journey. Work can still take place in collecting suitable materials by the child's social worker, foster carer and parents, so as not to lose valuable memories, and information of the past.

7. Who Does Life Story Work?

It is usually the responsibility of the child's social worker to undertake the life story work with the child. It is however the judgement of the Practice Manager whether this is delegated to a skilled family support worker, foster carer or residential worker who is well known to the child and has regular contact with them. If life story work is delegated this should be closely supervised by the child's social worker or their line manager to monitor its suitability. It is crucial that the completion of life story work is prioritised and adequate time allowed to complete the work, and that appropriate training and supervision are available.

On some occasions there may be compelling reasons why painful past issues are not dealt with by the child's carer and in those situations the child's social worker may be best placed to carry that element of the life story work. Occasionally it may be desirable to bring in an independent person to work with the child; someone who the child does not associate with responsibility for removing them from their birth family and home.

Foster and residential carers do not have access to, or responsibility for, the child's history before placement with them and are reliant on the social worker for their contribution of an accurate chronology of events, and support during the process. This should be shared proactively so as they can support the child to understand their identity and emotional responses.

Foster carers who do not lead on this work should be supported to provide the child with their own visual record of the time spent with them and contribute to the child's life journey and story wherever possible.

The role of the child's social worker in life story work is to:

- Gather full and accurate information on the child's history and reasons for he or she being in care;
- Develop an on-going chronology of significant events, significant relationships with family and friends, moves of placements and schools in the child/young person's life;

- Record all decisions made on behalf of the child about their future. Children's Guardians could be approached to write a letter to the child to explain their role, events and decisions made for the child in the court arena;
- Record the child's views wishes and feelings about the plans and decisions made or endorsed at their reviews;
- Collect photographs, certificates and documents to support the life story work. Young people have told us that photographs are really important to them and it is really important to have a photograph from all their placements;
- Ensure the child's contribution is included as far as it is practicable in the gathering of information based on their developmental understanding;
- Where there are gaps in important information make it clear to the child that the information is not fact and cannot be confirmed. Record this uncertainty clearly within the child's file;
- Maintain a copy of the life story book on the child/young person's file.

If there is a change of social worker it is crucial that the transfer of case management responsibility between social workers is undertaken thoughtfully, with good communication between current and perspective social worker, and with due consideration to the plan for life story work.

Our young people have told us that the role of the carer is most important to them in life story work, including residential workers who have supported them. It is of particular importance for children and young people to understand why they have moved placements.

8. Timescales

There are no set timescales for the life story work as it is an on-going process whilst the child/young person is in care. However, if the plan is to place a child in a permanent placement the work should be completed and the child enabled to make sense of their permanent move to their new family.

9. Ownership of the Life Story Book

Our young people have told us they want to have a book of memories with photographs and mementoes, to help them understand their life story.

The child should always have ownership of their life story book as it is their history and their life. Further the ownership of their life story affords value to the child and young person. However, good practice is for the child's social worker to also keep a copy on the child's file. This is a key responsibility of the practitioner undertaking the work with the child/young person.

It is important to consider how the book is handed over. Although the child will be aware of what is covered in the book, seeing it in front and reading it for the first time could still be a traumatic experience. To this end, the decision as to how and when this is given to the child should be a collective one and should involve the team around the child.

10. Role of the IRO and Looked After Reviews

There is an important role for the IRO in ensuring this work is progressed continuously and considered as part of the child's statutory reviews. This should form part of their advocating role for the child's identity and lifelong needs, the child's involvement in the process should also be considered.

The decision to commence life story work, including who is responsible to progress this work, should be considered in statutory review; this should have commenced by the 2nd review where permanency plans are considered.

The consequent Cared for Childrens reviews will ensure that all relevant professionals and carers are clear about the nature and purpose of the work being undertaken and ensure a common explanation is shared by all in order that consistent messages are given to the child or young person involved. The team around the child will monitor the progress of this work and share relevant information to enable appropriate and consistent support throughout the process.

References and Further Reading

Practical Guides for Life Story and Direct Work:

- 'Life Story Work: Why, What, How and When' by Tony Ryan and Rodger Walker (2016);
- Life Story Books for Adopted and Fostered Children, Second Edition: A Family Friendly Approach by Joy Rees. Foreword by Alan Burnell (2017);
- 'Life Story Work: A Practical Guide to Helping children Understand their Past' by Tony Ryan and Rodger Walker;
- 'The New Life Work Model: Practice Guide' by Edith A. Nicholls;
- 'Life Story Books for Adopted Children. A Family Friendly Approach' by Joy Rees (2009);
- 'A Child's Journey through Placement' by Vera Fahlberg;
- 'A Child's Own Story. Life Story Work with Traumatized Children' by Richard Rose and Terry Philpot (2005);
- 'My Memory Book for Babies and Toddlers' by Edith A. Nicholls;
- 'Preparing Children for Permanence' by Mary Romaine with Tricia Turley and Non Tuckey;
- 'Communicating Through Play: Techniques for assessing and preparing children for adoption' by Bernie Stringer;

- 'Life Story Work with children who are Fostered or Adopted: Creative Ideas and Activities' by Katie Wrench and Lesley Naylor (2013);
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- Let's Talk About Where Babies Come From: A Book about Eggs, Sperm, Birth, Babies, and Families by Robie H. Harris and Michael Emberley;
- 'Adopted Children Speaking' by Caroline Thomas and Verna Beckford with Nigel Lowe and Mervyn Murch;
- 'Direct Work. Social work with children and young people in care' edited by Barry Luckock and Michelle Lefevre;
- 'Life Story Work. Reflections on the experience by looked after children and young people' (Adoption & Fostering Journal) by Rachel Willis and Sally Holland.

Practical Resources:

- 'Chester and Daisy Move On' by Angela Lidster;
- 'Finding a Family for Tommy' by Rebecca Daniels;
- 'Nutmeg gets Adopted' by Judith Foxon;
- 'Elfa & the Box of Memories' by Michelle Bell;
- 'The Anti-Colouring Book' by Susan Striker and Edward Kimmel;
- 'A is for adoption' - Manchester's City Council Children's Guide to Adoption for Young Children;
- 'Everything you need to know about being adopted' - Manchester's City Council Children's Guide to Adoption for Older Children;
- 'Life Story Work What it is and what it means' by Shaila Shah and Hedi Argent;
- 'My Life Story CD-ROM - Bridget Betts and Afshan Ahmad.