

Lancashire County Council

Life Story Work Procedure

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1. Introduction

Lancashire County Council is committed to promoting the resilience and emotional wellbeing of all children and young people who are Looked After. Life Story Work forms an integral role in mapping out the life journey for a child, including significant events, relationship networks, and achievements that have occurred in their life. This procedure and its guidance set out the minimum standard of practice for all children and young people who do not live at home with their birth families.

Our legal responsibility as set out in the Children Acts of 1989 and 2004 is to ensure that children and young people are at the heart of any process that affects their lives, and their active involvement is sought in this work, based on their developmental stage and understanding.

Lancashire's core values set out the importance of effective participation, which includes listening to the views, wishes, and feelings of children and young people. This is most crucial 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. Through this process of involvement, their sense of identity is established, which in turn promotes their sense of resilience and self-esteem, and equips them for a healthier future.

2. What is Life Story work?

Most Looked After children have had profound experiences of loss, separation, abuse or neglect, and changes of home and carers. Life Story Work is the process of helping children separated from their birth families to remember and make sense of their lives and decisions made. Life Story Work can help children to accept 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 to understand what has happened and is happening to them.

The process can purposefully assist a child to answer the questions:

- Who am I?
- How did I get here and who are my networks of support from the past and present?
- Where am I going?
- Life Story Work can help identify strengths to achieving future goals.

(Michael Rutter, Resilience 1997)

There are three core elements to Life Story Work:

1. The creation of a story that explains the reasons for the child's moves from their birth family as well as a record of important people, events, memories, achievements, and facts.
2. The gathering of treasured objects from the past, which includes photographs and mementos of childhood.
3. On-going, regular, and consistent direct work with children and young people, providing information about their birth family and other significant relationships in their past and present life. This should be done through conversations with the child, including the use of direct work tools and resources where appropriate.

It is important to recognise that direct work is a process and should not be viewed as a product or a one-off event. A Life Story Book should not be focussed on at the expense of the other core elements.

It is essential to be able to assess and recognise what the right approach is for the child or young person at any given point in time. Different children and young people need different information at different times in their lives. Their needs for Life Story Work will evolve and change with their age, development, and sense of self.

3. When do you begin Life Story Work?

The gathering of information for Life Story Work should begin with children and young people as soon as there is a plan for them to become cared for by Lancashire County Council. It is essential that all professionals working with children and young people who are Looked After, recognise their responsibility for ensuring that they receive effective Life Story Work from the outset of being moved from the care of their birth parents.

The move of a child from their parent's care is the most important and significant event that can occur and is often the start of their journey as a Looked After child. It is essential that detailed and accurate records are kept, reflecting decision making about why a child has become Looked After, but also detailing key moments that the child would be likely to want to know about this event. It is important that memories are kept, and photographs are taken of significant events.

It is vital that children enter care with as many of their personal possessions as possible. Parents should be encouraged at this point to provide photos and any special items the child might value in their possession.

Children and young people through the process of this intervention must be given an explanation that is truthful, yet compassionate, and pitched at their level of developmental understanding. The explanation should be one that is agreed by all professionals and consistently used by those involved in the child or young person's care.

Growing up in a substitute family where it is okay to be open and curious about birth family is an important factor in positive outcomes for children. Research of outcomes for children shows us that there is a direct connection between children who are settled in a home and those with a direct explanation about why they are Looked After, Baynes, P. (2020) *Supporting life story work: the role of managers, IROs and strategic leads: Webinar*. Dartington: Research in Practice.

The child or young person's allocated social worker should ensure that their care plan reflects the child's views about why they are Looked After and include details about how this affects their identity needs and impacts on their well-being as well as what current support is required regarding their Life Story.

Life Story Work is an integral part of working with Looked After children and should not be a separate process that is progressed when time permits. The progression of Life Story Work should be closely monitored by the multi-agency group through multi-agency meetings, by the Independent Reviewing Officer and by the Team Manager.

Some children with disabilities become Looked After due to them receiving short breaks but they remain primarily in the care of their parents who continue to exercise full parental responsibility for them, even when accessing their short break. These children may not require the same level of Life Story Work that other Looked After children require, however, it is important that they are supported to understand why they have become Looked After and to understand their care plan.

4. Who needs Life Story Work?

All children who become Looked After need Life Story Work.

- Children living with foster carers including connected carers
- Children and young people living with independent fostering agencies
- Children living in residential homes
- Children living in supported or semi-independent accommodation
- Children placed for adoption
- Children who become looked after through receiving short breaks
- Children on Care Orders placed at home – these children should still have Life Story Work however it must be noted that the child's experiences and needs should be reflected in how this is approached. Some of these children may never have been separated from their birth family and therefore whilst they still need support to understand the Local Authority's intervention with them and their family, they are not likely to require the same extent of support in understanding their life story. Tailoring support to need is essential.

For children who are adopted, the Life Story book will usually be handed to the adoptive parents in advance of the final adoption hearing. The contents of the book should be agreed with the adoptive parents.

5. Life Story Work with the child or young person

It is essential to recognise that effective Life Story Work will only be possible if those supporting the child or young person have developed close and meaningful relationships with them. Building trusting relationships with children and young people through spending time with them, playing, talking, drawing, and having fun is a fundamental part of relationship building and will provide the necessary foundation for sensitive and painful conversations about a child's life story.

For children and young people who can understand, Life Story Work should be done with them. For babies, this should be done for them by way of a life story book, until they are able to be involved in this. For children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities a creative and individualised approach should be taken. It is important to know the child or young person and understand their ways of communication and their learning needs. It should begin with trying to establish what they know and how they feel. Some children and young people will have a clear view of what happened to them but may not know why. Others will be very confused or angry. Some may still be grieving; recognising that separation and loss can take a long time to heal, their sadness must be acknowledged and not suppressed.

A child who does not wish to talk about their past still needs the same level of explanation at the appropriate time in their life about what happened, and to be informed about their plans for their present and future on an on-going basis. In these situations, the opportunity should be taken whenever there is the potential, to listen to and/or share their views, wishes and feelings.

Children need clear, honest explanations about their Life Story. Answers to questions should be carefully and sensitively delivered. Language should be jargon free and presented in a way the child or young person will be able to understand. It is important that children know what happened to them and why certain decisions were made, but also what support their parents and extended family were given.

It is essential to be aware that because something has been explained once to a child, this does not mean the child has understood or taken the explanation on board. Some things can be too painful to hear, and children may not be able to process the information they have been given. There can be significant challenges in conveying information that a child does not want to hear. Therefore, whilst respecting the child's boundaries and promoting a child led journey, it is important to promote persistence through re-visiting stories and checking what and how information has been received. Professionals must ask '*Where are they at now?... How do we need to update this story?... What is needed next?*'

The Life Story Book is part of the process and is a tool to help the child make sense of what has happened to them and what is happening. The Life Story Work and book should 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 or young person a safe, supportive environment to sensitively explore their feelings of the past and what will happen next. For children with special education needs and/or disabilities the Life Story Book may need to take a different form.

The use of a range of creative and abstract approaches, direct work tools and resources, 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 to their birth family. It is also part of child development for children to ask questions and be curious.

6. Life Story Books

A Life Story Book is an account of a Looked After child's life in words, pictures and documents that enables a child to explore and understand their history before and during being a Looked After child. Each book is bespoke and should be written according to the level of understanding of the child or young person. The book should be personalised, so whilst templates are available, these should be adapted and used as an example only. Life Story Work activities and direct work undertaken should be included in the book to support their ownership of this. When a child or young person first becomes Looked After, their allocated Social Worker, regardless of which function they work in, is responsible for starting their Life Story Book.

A Life Story Book should:

- Keep as full of a chronological record as possible of a 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 he/she needs 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 painful issues;
- Be jargon free using clear language that cares

The allocated Social Worker for the child or young person is responsible for writing the book. Time and care should be given to planning how to undertake the work. This requires the Social Worker to:

- Read information about the child or young person carefully and thoroughly
- Collate information in chronological order
- Note reasons for decisions
- Note gaps in the records and attempt to fill them
- Involve children, parents, friends, relatives and carers etc. as necessary
- Photos of birth family should be included, but beware of making the book a photo album. A separate album can be created to include photos from family time and of birth family.
- The book should be completed electronically, using Word, PowerPoint or Publisher, and saved electronically in an agreed, accessible file.
- The book should be printed for the child, in colour, with attention paid to how it is formatted and overall presentation. The book should continue to be updated and added to as the child grows up.
- Carers should safely store the Life Story Book as a hard copy (*where the child can access it, and also as an electronic version*).
- Children who have a plan of adoption should receive their Life Story Book at the point the Adoption Order is made.
- Children who are to remain Looked After should receive a hard copy of their first Life Story Book upon finalisation of their care proceedings. This includes for those children and young people whose care plan is one of Special Guardianship Order. Children who have a plan to remain in the care of the Local Authority who have not been subject to Care Proceedings should be provided with a Life Story Book at the point at which it has been determined they need to continue to be Looked After. This is a crucial time in the child or young person's life, where the decision making of the court/Local Authority should have been appropriately shared with the child or young person and their carers.

Providing the Life Story Book at this point should support the child or young person to process events leading to this point and assist the carers to confidently continue with the Life Story Work undertaken, using the book as a tool. The Social Worker should add to the electronic version of the book periodically, using direct work with the child or young person to do so, and consider appropriate future points to provide the new sections to the child or young person. Children and young people should be given their Life Story Book directly, 'in person' by their Social Worker and they should have the opportunity to look through their Life Story Book with their Social Worker and carer present to support them.

For children with special educational needs and/or disabilities, their Life Story Book may need to take another form. There are many different examples of this, such as talking books, craft projects, braille books, games, jigsaw puzzles. The format of the "book" should be one that is accessible to the child or young person depending on their development needs and level of understanding. For some children with profound disabilities a Life Story Book might not be appropriate at all. In these circumstances the Allocated Social Worker should discuss this with their Team Manager in supervision.

7. Later Life Letters

Later Life Letters are written by the child's Social Worker to a child or young person, with the aim of helping them to understand their past, increase their self-esteem and strengthen their resilience. The letter is in addition to the Life Story Book and should not be a substitute for the book, unless it is deemed to be more appropriate than a book, which may be the case for young people who became Looked After in their later teenage years.

A Later Life Letter can be used to help explain why the child or young person was removed from the care of their parents, and subsequent decision making and events. The child or young person is the focus of the letter and it must be remembered when writing the letter that they need to know why they were not able to return to their parent's care.

A key difference between the Later Life Letter and the Life Story Book lies in the depth of the detail being shared. Thus, more detailed sensitive information should be included in the Later Life Letter as the letter will be shared with the child at a later age when they are emotionally able to understand and deal with the information.

In addition to the one provided by the social worker, Later Life letters can also be written to children by significant people in their life, explaining their relationship and their memories and experiences with the child. For example:

- From a carer when a child is moving on
- From a Social Worker when their role is ending
- From other key professionals in a child's life such as Guardians, Family Support Workers and Independent Reviewing Officers.

Young people should not be sent their Later Life Letter, or any documents relating to their Life Story, or to their files and records, in the post. All information should be given 'in person' and support offered to the young person to read through their letter or information and ask questions with their Social Worker or Personal Advisor present. If the young person chooses not to read their letter with the worker present this is their choice, but this support must be offered as a minimum.

Later Life Letters should be provided for our all children and young people, unless to do so would not be meaningful, for example, if a young person has significant learning disabilities and would not be able to understand their letter.

8. Who does Life Story Work?

It is the responsibility of the child or young person's Social Worker to undertake Life Story Work. Life Story Work for children or young people who are Looked After is a core Social Work task and central to the role of the allocated Social Worker. Social Workers form the bridge between the decision making that has occurred for a child or young person and their actual life. Children and young people will often identify Life Story Work as being one of the main things they believe Social Workers are there for.

On rare occasions there may be compelling reasons why painful past issues are not dealt with by the child's Social Worker and in those situations/occasionally it may be desirable to involve an independent person to support the child; someone who the child does not associate with responsibility for removing them from their birth family and home. It is the judgement of the Children's Team Manager whether some elements of the work or story are 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 undertaken by a Family Support Worker, foster carer or residential carer this should be closely supervised by the child's Social Worker and their Line Manager to monitor its suitability.

The role of the child's Social Worker in Life Story Work is to:

- Gather full and accurate information on the child or young person's history and reasons for being in care
- Develop an on-going chronology of significant events, significant relationships with family and friends, moves of homes and schools in the child or young person's life
- Record all decisions made on behalf of the child or young person about their future. Children's Guardians could be approached to write a letter to the child or young person to explain their role, events and decisions made in the court arena
- Record the child or young person's views wishes and feelings about the plans and decisions made or endorsed at their reviews
- Record important events, milestones, achievements and details a child or young person might like to know about their younger selves
- Collect photographs, certificates and documents to support the Life Story Work
- Ensure that the child or young person's carers have a memory box, containing childhood mementos, photographs and treasured objects for safe keeping. The Social Worker must have seen this
- Ensure the child or young person'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 or young person that the information is not fact and cannot be confirmed. Record this uncertainty clearly within the child's file

It is crucial that everyone in the child or young person's life provides the same explanation to them as to why they are Looked After. Clear and consistent information from their whole network will reduce the likelihood for a child or young person to feel confused or worried about their history or identity.

Foster and residential carers do not have access to, or responsibility for, the child's history before living with them and are reliant on the Social Worker for their contribution of an accurate chronology of events, and support during the process. Carers 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.

It is important to involve the child's birth family in Life Story Work. Agreeing an appropriate but honest narrative with birth parents about why their child became Looked After can be incredibly useful in supporting a child or young person to hear one consistent story. Family members such as grandparents often have knowledge and information that is not known to others, which could provide a child or young person with key information about their history or that of their parents or brothers and sisters. Likewise, there are likely to be key professionals such as teachers or midwives who through their involvement hold important information about a child's life story.

Independent Reviewing Officers should review the progress of Life Story Work and its impact on the child or young person. Child Looked After Reviews should record specific detail about these enquiries. Independent Reviewing Officers should be sent an electronic copy of the Life Story Book, or evidence of work if this is not in book form, one week prior to the Review. Updates on the progress and impact of on-going Life Story Work should be detailed within the review report.

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9. Therapeutic Life Story Work

Therapeutic Life Story Work is more specialised work for children and young people who have suffered significant trauma, are struggling emotionally, and are confused, angry and distressed. Therapeutic Life Story Work could be considered for children and young people who are preoccupied by their past and where this is getting in the way of everyday life.

Therapeutic Life Story Work can only be undertaken by someone with a specific professional qualification/diploma in Therapeutic Life Story Work. Recommendations for Therapeutic Life Story Work should only be made based on an updated assessment of the child's needs. Following this, a discussion should take place with the Team Manager, if the Social Worker and multi-agency network considers this support to be necessary for a child or young person. Therapeutic Life Story Work can then be commissioned for individual children and young people if required.

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10. Timescales

There are no set timescales for completing Life Story Work because it is an on-going process whilst the child/young person is Looked After. A Life Story Book should be started as soon as a child becomes Looked After.

The gathering of information for a child's life story should commence once accommodation is being considered as an option, and Life Story Work should commence at the outset of a child or young person becoming Looked After, with the first Child Looked After Review clearly recording what Life Story Work has begun. In preparation for the first Looked After Review meeting the Social Worker should ensure there is:

1. A clear recording of the narrative provided to the child or young person regarding why they have become Looked After—the case file should record who discussed this with them, when and what exactly was said.
2. Details recorded on file of which possessions the child or young person had with them when they were moved from their parent's care.
3. Confirmation the child's carer has been provided with key information about their history and why they became Looked After.
4. Confirmation the child's carer has a memory box for the child and will begin collecting and saving important items for the child which they will ensure go with the child if they ever move on from their care.

11. Oversight, recording and Quality Assurance

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

The multi-agency group should 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 multi-agency group should monitor the progress of Life Story Work and share relevant information to enable appropriate and consistent support throughout the process.

The allocated Social Worker's Line Manager should ensure that Life Story Work and the impact of this on the child or young person is regularly reflected upon in supervision with them. The Line Manager should quality assure Life Story Books and Later Life Letters to ensure these have been produced to a satisfactory standard.

Case file audits should be undertaken periodically to quality assure the areas of the child or young person's file that can evidence effective progression of Life Story Work. Life Story Work should be reflected in the following areas of a child's file:

- The child or young person's care plan, reflecting their current needs regarding Life Story Work
- The child or young person's case summary where it should clearly reflect why the child is Looked After and what the child understands in respect of this
- The child or young person's most recent C&F assessment should detail their identify needs specifically in relation to being Looked After. There should be detail about why the child thinks they are Looked After, the impact of this on their emotional well-being and sense of self, how well they understand their life story and what impact Life Story Work has had on them.

In addition to the above, Child Looked After reviews should reflect the allocated Social Worker, Independent Reviewing Officer's, child or young person, carers and parents' views in regard to the progress of Life Story Work and its impact and whether a child or young person has received a hard copy of their Life Story Book.

Supervision between the allocated Social Worker and their line manager should regularly refer to the progress of Life Story Work.

Statutory visits and direct work recordings should often evidence that Life Story Work is taking place with children and young people.

12. Changes of Social Worker

When a transfer occurs between Social Workers, which often means a change of team too, a transfer summary should be completed which explicitly includes the nature, purpose and stage of the Life Story Work.

It is crucial that the transfer of case management responsibility between Social Workers is undertaken thoughtfully, with good communication between the current and prospective Social Worker, and with due consideration to the plan for Life Story Work.

The electronic version of the Life Story book should be up to date at the point of transfer and handed over.

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13. Access to Records

Children and young people have a right to access the information that we hold about them, this includes their Children's Social Care records. Adults can request their records at any time. There is no minimum age for a records access request from a child, instead the Social Worker or Local Authority should make a judgment about whether the child understands the nature of their request, and if appropriate, their parent or carer should confirm the child's understanding. No assumptions should be made about children's capacity or level of understanding; this should be assessed on an individual basis and information should be presented in a way the child can understand it.

We should routinely share information with our children, young people and their families, and provide written copies of assessments, care plans, reviews, and meetings. Documents should be written ready to be shared, using appropriate language that cares. If a child or young person wishes to view their full records they can put in a formal request. There is information on this process on the intranet and on the Local Offer web pages. It is important for Social Workers and Personal Advisors to advise their children and young people of this process and their rights, and to support them with accessing and reading their records, if they wish to do so.

For some of our young people, viewing their records with the support of the Social Worker could be much more beneficial and meaningful to them than completing a Life Story Book. Care must be taken to offer appropriate preparation and support to any of our children with accessing their records, as this could be overwhelming for them at times. Nether-the-less, it is essential that we do not shy away from difficult conversations.

14. Outcomes for our children and young people

To ensure Life Story Work is embedded as part of a core service delivery in respect of every child or young person in the care of Lancashire County Council.

The purpose and aim of Life Story Work is understood by all frontline practitioners delivering the service.

To effectively achieve a systematic approach and qualitative outcome of service delivery for every 'Looked After child' and care experienced young person in Lancashire.