

Life Story Work for Looked After Children Guidance

1. Introduction

Stockport Council is committed to promoting the identity, belonging and emotional wellbeing of all children in the care of the local authority. Life story work has a purposeful role in supporting children to understand their care experiences and 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.

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.

Stockport Council's (or Family) core 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 involving the child in the 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 confidence and self-esteem and equips them for a healthier future.

2. What is Life Story Work?

Looked After children can have profound experiences of loss, separation, abuse or neglect and placement change. 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.

- A factual narrative and often written story that explains the reasons for the child's moves from their birth family; ongoing story and needs to be revisited and rewritten as the child develops
- The gathering of treasured objects from the past, which includes photographs and mementos, of childhood memories and experiences;
- Providing information and supporting the child's to have clarity of their memories about their birth family and other significant relationships in their past and present life at a time when they are ready.

Life story work can help a child in very difficult circumstances to understand what is happening to them, to identify and express their feelings and contribute to decision making and share their story with their new family.

The development of a life story book should be part of the outcome of life story work, to enable the child to refresh his or her memory of past events and people.

3. When do you Begin Life Story Work?

The new into care admission pack should be provided for all children entering care at point of admission which includes a life story box (*at least by the placement Planning meeting*).

Life story work is an integral part of working with Looked After children. Life story work with children will be considered at the initial and subsequent Looked After Statutory Reviews and recommendations made appropriate to the needs of the child.

Children must be given an explanation that is truthful, yet compassionate and is 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 and young person's care. The progression of life story work should be closely monitored by the Independent Reviewing officer.

4. Who Needs Life Story Work?

All looked after children can benefit from life story work and improving their understanding about their history, care experience and life journey; these include:

- Children living with foster carers;
- Children and young people living with independent fostering agencies;
- Children living in residential units;
- Children placed for adoption;

Effective life story work can assist the child or young person to answer the questions:

- Who am I?
- How did I get here and who are my trusted adults of support from the past and present?
- Where am I going and help identify strengths to achieving their future goals.

It is important that you try and keep a record of their time with you, as you will begin to hold an important part of their life history.

For children who are adopted, the life story book will usually be handed to the adoptive parents, together with later life letters, within 10 working days of the adoption ceremony, i.e., the ceremony to celebrate the making of the adoption order.

5. Life Story Work with the Child or Young Person

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. It is important to know the child, their needs and understand their ways of communication. Life story work 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 others may not.

Some children may be grieving and recognising that the separation and loss can take a long time to heal, their sadness should be acknowledged and not suppressed. At times children may act out their fears and experiences e.g., aggression. It is important that those working with and caring for the child listen and accept what they have experienced offering reassurance that they are safe.

A child who does not wish to face up to their past still needs the same level of explanation about what has happened and to be informed about their plans for their present and future. In these situations, the opportunity should be taken when the child opens a window to listen and share their views, wishes and feelings.

By knowing the child or young person, it is possible to consider with them the safe and appropriate medium to sensitively facilitate communication. Life story work is integral to help the child make sense what has happened to them and what is happening. 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 and experiences of the past and what will happen next.

The use of 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.

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 boundary of considerations 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.

6. Who Does Life Story Work?

It is usual practice that the child's social worker coordinates the delivery of the child's care plan including the life story work with the child. 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 is 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;

- 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 work on the child/young person's file.

All professionals supporting the child will have a role in supporting life story work. It is the judgement of the social worker with the child, parents/carers and professionals involved to determine any specific activities or work and who is best placed to support the child, for example their foster carer, residential support worker or family support worker. 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. 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 carers and residential support workers do not have 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. 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 social worker will have overall responsibility for the life story work with the child and progress will be monitored within statutory review meetings by the Independent Reviewing Officer.

7. Timescales

There are no set timescales for the life story work as it is an on-going process whilst the child is in care. However, if the plan is to place a child in a permanent placement the work should be undertaken by the time of the second statutory review to enable the child to make sense of their permanent move to their new family.

Ownership of the Life Story Box/ Book

The child should always have ownership of their life story box/ book as it is their history and their life. However, good practice is for the child's social worker to be the guardian of their memories and keep a copy on the child's file.

It is important to consider how the box/ book is handed over to the child leaves care or at 18 years. Although the child will be aware of what is in the box/ book, reading it for the first time as an adult could still be a traumatic experience. To this end, the decision as to how and when this is given to the child should be planned and a collective decision involving the child, parents/ carers and professionals involved and the independent Reviewing Officer.

8. Role of the LAC Review and Quality Assurance that Promotes Continual Improvement

There is an important role for the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) in ensuring the life story involves the child and that the work is progressed continuously and considered as part of the child's statutory reviews. This role forms part of the IRO's advocating role for the child's identity and lifelong needs.

The decision to commence life story work, including who is responsible to progress this work, will be reviewed at the first and subsequent statutory review meetings. This 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.

This quality assurance role promotes and monitors the qualitative outcomes of service delivery for looked after children in Stockport.