

## Guidance for using the Life Story Book template

### What is Life Story work?

Our life experiences shape us as individuals and this helps others to understand who we are as a person. People with dementia sometimes need help to communicate important aspects of their identity – like background, interests, who and what is important to them – due to problems with memory loss and communication.

Life Story work is an activity whereby family members or staff work with the person with dementia to help them gather and review their past life events and support them in building a personal biography.

It is used to help the person understand their past experiences and how they have coped with events in their life.

### What are the benefits of Life Story work?

It can help people with dementia share their stories and enhance their sense of identity. This is especially useful when they are having difficulty in sharing this information themselves.

Life story work can help encourage better communication and an understanding of the person's needs and wishes. This can inform their care and ensure that it is provided in a positive and person-centred way.

It can help the person develop closer relationships with family carers and staff through sharing stories.

### What does Life Story work look like?

Life story work can take a number of different formats including:

- **Life story books** – many care settings have their own formats so you can easily transfer relevant information into their versions.
- **Collages** – these are more static and less adaptable but work well when using lots of images to encourage reminiscence and be useful for people in later stages of dementia.
- **DVDs** – this is a good way to record visual information, use family films and add messages from the person with dementia. It is also adaptable which is good as life isn't static!
- **Reminiscence or memory boxes** – these are useful for people with sensory impairments.
- **Apps** – there are a number of Apps now to help save and share memories of special places by uploading photos, marking them on a map, adding messages and even audio. They are simple to use and suitable for people in earlier stages of dementia.
- **Other electronic formats** – these can be useful for keeping the Life Story safe and also allow for ongoing changes as our lives are changing all the time.
- **Personal profile documents** – these are short versions often used in hospitals. They include brief information about the person, designed to help staff understand the person's needs. Examples include 'This is Me', 'All About Me' and 'Forget Me Not'. These can be used in addition to more detailed life story work examples.

### Tips for doing Life Story work

Here are some tips on how you can create a 'My Life Story' book to support individuals living with dementia:

- Don't assume that everyone will want to engage in life story work. Discuss it carefully with the person, and if they are unable to give consent discuss with their family carers, what their wishes might be.
- If possible, discuss with them the format for doing their life story work. Bear in mind that different formats are more suitable for different individuals and their situation.
- Agree with them how the information will be collected; maybe they would like to describe events to a family carer or staff member using an agreed template or maybe they would like to visit special places with you and record images and messages onto a film or App.
- Involve the person with dementia as much as possible in the process so that they feel a sense of ownership. When life stories are created collaboratively they are more likely to reflect the person's wishes and preferences.
- Talk together to learn more about the person's history, help them where needed, and add the information together so they can see their story forming.
- If someone finds it difficult to communicate their life story, the people who know them best may be able to provide the key information. You can also try to prompt by using familiar photos of people or places.
- Reflecting on our lives can be emotional, so sensitivity is needed. Avoid unhappy or disturbing events such as past trauma and failed relationships, which might cause distress. Think carefully about what information the person would want to be shared in their life story.
- Go with the flow and let the person talk about an aspect of their life they're most comfortable with – you don't have to start at the beginning!
- Don't ask people directly to remember or recall events as this may be upsetting if they can't remember.
- Take breaks so it doesn't become exhausting and complete the story at your own pace; it might take days, weeks or months. Remember you can always add to it – a person's life story is never finished!
- Take one topic at a time so it doesn't become overwhelming. Topics we suggest focusing on are: their childhood, family and friends, their working life, significant places and events, hobbies/activities, preferences with their appearance, food, routines and music/TV and general likes and dislikes.

## Using the Life Story template

This document offers a template for the development of a life story book. Here are some practical guidelines on how to use it:

- The Life Story template offers a format to help collect information about different stages/events in people's lives. However, it is not necessary to include all of the topics if it is felt not appropriate or information is not available.
- The text under each heading is included to provide ideas or prompts. This can be deleted once you have added personal information into the boxes.
- The template allows for sections to be completed according to individual preference and can be re-ordered or taken out as desired.
- Do not worry about being too factual when recording events; it is more meaningful to provide a 'snapshot'. The use of images/pictures or objects that the person is familiar with can be more useful in encouraging reminiscence.
- Involve the person in the selection of photos, pictures or materials/objects that they would like to include.
- Photocopy or scan photographs so that the originals can be returned to the family.
- Use clear, large text and vocabulary that reflects the person's individual style within the written material. Use contrasting colours to make headings and text stand out but avoid multi colours and patterns as these can be confusing for people with dementia.
- Laminate the final copy of the Life Story book so that it can be easily wiped and is less likely to be damaged.
- The Life Story book belongs to the person him or herself, and therefore it is essential that it is meaningful for them and their family.
- Keep the Life Story book easily accessible and use it regularly to prompt memories and to support reminiscence work.
- Life story work is never finished; it is an ongoing process which can always be added to as events change.