

Life Journey Work Newsletter





Introduction





Continuing the work of the National Adoption Service Life Journey Work Framework

The first issue of the Life Journey Work newsletter gave an overview of this area of work, the NAS Life Journey Work Framework and focussed on the delivery of Life Journey Work in a timely manner. The progress made in achieving this was reflected in the 2021 Adoption Barometer for Wales, which reported:

'Welsh adopters significantly more likely to receive life journey materials in a timely manner'.

As well as providing Life Journey materials in a timely manner, we need to ensure that they are of good quality and that direct work is undertaken to help children to understand and process their experiences. The Life Journey Work coordinators are there to support and advise professionals, adoptive parents and others. The Life Journey Work Tool Kit, which was featured in the first newsletter, remains a key resource and this issue builds on it.



Meet the Regional Life Journey Coordinators



Mid and West Wales

Sian Gibbon

Hello, I'm Sian (She/Her), I work part time as the service's Life Journey Work Co-ordinator, providing preplacement support and training to adopters, foster carers and. I also provide post adoption support to adoptive families around Life Journey Work, including Therapeutic Life Story Work. I am also responsible for organising and managing training events for adopters and professionals in the region. I enjoy working with families and helping adopted children to explore and understand their life history.

Away from work, I am a farmer's wife and you will most likely find me and our little boy out on the farm with all the animals. I am a creative person who enjoys arts and crafts as well as baking cakes. My speciality is my Chocolate Melt Cake. I also love hiking and exploring different places with my family and friends as well as my dogs. I am a music and film fan and my favourite genre is the 80s. Rydw i yn gallu siarad Gymraeg yn rhugl.







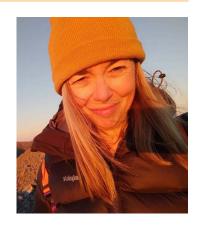
North Wales

Sarah Ryan

My name is Sarah, I live in North West Wales in the beautiful mountains of Snowdonia. When I am not wandering the Carneddau mountain range or cycling up Pen y pass I work for the regional service as the Life Journey social worker.

My primary aim is to support social workers to produce good quality life journey materials. I also work with adopters to support them with Life Journey Work and provide therapeutic life story work for children, young people and their families.

My original background is in science, but I retrained and qualified as a social worker in 2004 and have extensive experience working in a number of settings. I enjoy working directly with children and families and have developed a passion for trauma recovery work. Most recently, I have undertaken training with Life Story work author, Katie Wrench and I am about to complete the diploma in Therapeutic Life Journey Work with Richard Rose.



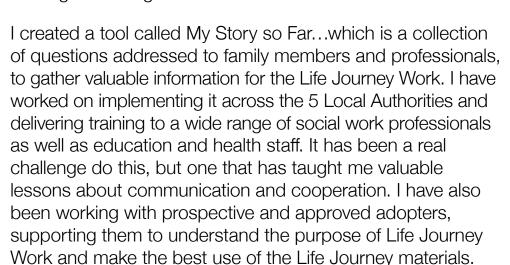




South East Wales

Raluca Miklovits

Hi, my name is Raluca (She/Her), I started my social work career in Romania but have lived in the UK for the last 16 years. I have a background in fostering and childcare social work and am also a qualified primary school teacher. I love running, walking and skiing!



I am passionate about Life Journey Work and see it as "everyone's business". I encourage professionals and families on a daily basis to bear it in mind when interacting with children and young people.







Vale, Valleys and Cardiff (VVC)

Tina James and Sara Jones

We are Sara (She/Her) and Tina (She/Her) and each work part time as the Life Journey Coordinators for VVC. We have been in post since January 2022. Tina also works part time as a Family Finder. She worked in safeguarding for a number of years and has worked in Adoption for the past ten years. Tina is also an adoptive parent. Sara has worked extensively with children living outside of their birth families and is passionate about working creatively with children, their families and carers to support Life Journey Work.

Between us we have over thirty years of social work experience with expertise in adoption, care experienced children and young people. We have innovative plans for promoting Life Journey Work across VVC and the Local Authorities, delivering training, developing accessible resources, and providing support to adopters and professional networks. We have a brilliant team of Life Journey Workers in VVC who we meet with regularly to discuss practice and share ideas.

Sara loves music and art and goes to gigs and galleries as often as she can. She is an animal lover (which explains the owl!) and is planning a trip to Argentina to see the wildlife. Sara recently moved back to South Wales after spending twenty years in London, and is brushing up on her very rusty Welsh.

Tina loves family time, travelling, socialising, walking her dog and 'trying' to keep fit! She enjoys cooking and when time permits trying new recipes, which the family are never as enthusiastic about as she is!



Tina James



Sara Jones





Western Bay

Sarah Vaughan

Hi, my name is Sarah (She/Her). I am the Life Journey Co-Ordinator for the Western Bay Adoption Service. My role involves supporting Social Workers & Practice Support Workers in collating life journey materials and in undertaking Life Journey Work with children and their families. I then support adoptive parents in how to use these materials and give guidance on how to share their child's journey to adoption with them. In order to do this, I am involved in providing workshops, training and one-to-one sessions for professionals and adopters. From my experience in working with adoptive families and adopted adults for over 12 years, I am aware of how important it is for an adopted person to understand where they have come from and why they have been adopted and so working in this area has become a passion of mine.

Outside of work, my other passions are my two children, spending time with my family & friends, walking, the beach and visiting new places.







The importance of Life Journey Work over time

The NAS Life Journey Framework and Practice outline 5 stages during a child's journey from entering the care system, when we need to particularly focus on Life Journey Work. It emphasises that this work needs to start as early as possible and is an ongoing process, which needs to continue after a child is adopted, throughout their childhood into adulthood.



Life Journey Work Framework

Stage 1: Child becomes Looked After

Life Journey Work needs to be on the agenda as soon as a child is accommodated and part of the plan for permanence, whatever form that takes.

Stage 2: Placement Order granted

At the point where the court makes a Placement Order it is absolutely critical that the child's history is captured as well as possible and that their adoptive parents are provided with the tools to help the child to make sense of their dual identity.

Stage 3: Linking and matching

At matching the child's life history is part and parcel of what we are asking the adoptive parents to take on and work with.

Stage 4: Transition

The introductions are an opportunity for adopters to learn the child as they are now, and crucially to learn how they manage transitions of care, remembering that this will not be the first time that the child has experienced such a transition.

Stage 5: Placement and ongoing (Post Adoption Order)

In some ways, the placement is the beginning of further work that needs to continue into adulthood for the child to build up a coherent sense of who they are, where they have come from and what that means to them.



A reminder of our commitment to provide good quality Life Journey Work in a timely manner

Performance measures 20a and 20, which count the number of children for whom Life Journey material has been provided by matching panel and 2nd adoption review. There is still significant variability, with the exception of a slight dip last year, we have seen a steady improvement in the proportion receiving draft Life Journey materials by the matching panel and 2nd review. At matching, it has increased from 30% in 2018/2019 to 76% in 2021/2022 and at 2nd review from 56% to 70%.

Children who had their life journey materials by matching panels

Children who have received their life journey materials by 2nd adoption review







2018/19 - 2021/22



Linking Life Journey Work to Children's Development

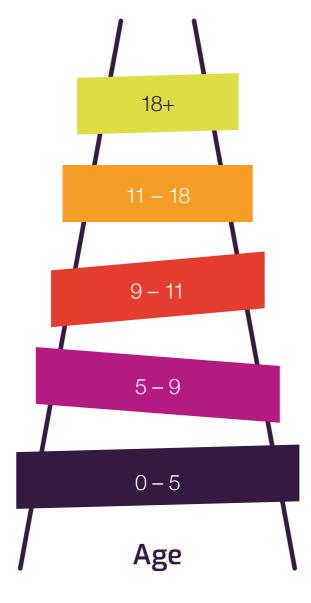
In parallel with the stages of the Life Journey Work Framework children are changing and developing and the work needs to adapt to meet their changing needs and abilities. Sarah Ryan has provided a timeline in the form of a ladder, giving an overview of 3 broad stages of development and the Life Journey Work that needs to happen, together with examples of appropriate approaches and resources. A looked after child's development does not proceed smoothly and the rungs of the ladder are not evenly spaced to reflect this. An individual child may not correspond exactly with these stages. It is a broad guide, giving an indication of what is typical for many children.



Life Journey Work ladder

How to use the Life Journey materials to talk to your child (Brodzinsky, 2011). Every child's age and development is different. This is a broad guide.

Sarah Ryan Life Journey Social Worker March 2022



Sarah has also produced a <u>detailed guide</u> giving examples of books and other materials that can support Life Journey Work at different ages and stages of development.

Later Life Letter: 11 – 18 plus

At this stage, a child should be aware of their story through conversations at home, their Life Story book, Memory box, photo album, letter box service or direct contact. Nothing should be a surprise for the child. Life Journey Work is a process over many years and not an event. In adolescence there is a natural search for self and a young person must find a way to integrate aspects of both families into their emerging identities. Therefore, it is important that the young person's birth family is not spoken about

in a derogatory way. This doesn't mean that you should shy away from the difficult aspects, but keep the information neutral, balanced and factual. And remember to have patience. Validate and support your young person throughout. A good understanding of age-appropriate therapeutic parenting is important at this stage to keep the communication flowing. At 18 years old a child can access their records although the adopter will have a copy of the Child's Adoption Report, original Birth certificate and other information given to them at the time of the adoption.

Life Story book and Later Life Letter: Age 9 - 11

At this stage, an adoptive parent should make themselves familiar with the child's later life later. So, if a child asks any questions the parent can answer this in an age-appropriate way. By the time the child reads their later life letter NOTHING should come as a surprise for them as the adoptive parents have answered questions and talked about some of the difficult themes within

the book and letter. The most important thing is that these conversations happen, and the child is validated. The child's birth family needs to be talked about in a neutral way, so a child does not feel blame or shame for the things that have happened to them. A good understanding of age-appropriate therapeutic parenting is important at this stage to keep

Life Story book and Parallel stories: Age 0 - 11

A child younger than 5 can look at the photographs and adoptive parents can begin to introduce through everyday conversations the language of adoption such as what is adoption and what are birth parents. An age-appropriate understanding of sex education is important at this stage for the understanding of this. For example, 'a birth mother and birth father make a baby. The baby is carried in the birth mother's uterus or tummy.' Parallel/Metaphorical stories which are simplified stories of your child's life are also helpful at this stage. A well written life story book should contain the different perspectives and explanations, so the book ages with the child. A child aged approximately 5 – 8 will be

in the egocentric stage of development and will be looking at the book in terms of 'Where am I?' So, pictures and photos are important. They also begin to understand that by gaining one family they have lost another family. At the age of 6 – 8 an understanding of biological connectedness begins so how they are related to the people around them. If required Therapeutic Life Journey Work can begin from around the age of 7 years old onwards. Prior to this age it is the child's carers who are key to the child understanding their adoption story. Around 9 years a child begins to understand different perspectives and logic develops so they will be able to begin to understand the problems that their birth parents experienced.

June 2022



Later Life Letters

A great deal of attention is rightly paid to Life Journey Books, but the same is needed for Later Life Letters as well. Coram BAAF recently updated a comprehensive Good Practice Guide on Later Life Letters, so we will briefly highlight some of the key messages and direct practitioners to that publication for more in-depth information.



The role and purpose of Later Life Letters

The later life letter is written by a child's social worker at a particular point in time, giving that child information which will help them to understand and make sense of their life up to that point. The intention is that the letter will be given to the child by their parent(s) at a stage where they are able to read it for themselves, with appropriate support. It should build on the account in their Life Journey Book, any direct work done with them pre-adoption, and ongoing support from parents to learn about and understand their own story. It should provide explanations of the decisions made by others and help the child to understand that they were not responsible for the bad things that happened to them.



The Legal Basis

There is relatively little specific legislation or statutory guidance regarding Later Life Letters in Wales.

'the Adoption Agency must provide a placement plan at least 7 days before placement, covering matters in Schedule 6, including: The date on which the life story book and later life letter is to be passed to the prospective adopter of the child.' *The Adoption Agencies Regulations (Wales) 2005 (AAR) S36(2) Schedule 6(8)*

More detailed guidance is provided in England.

A social worker who knows the child, preferably the child's social worker, should prepare the later life letter for the child. The letter should explain the child's history from birth and be sufficiently detailed so that in the future the adolescent child, or young adult, will have factual details about their birth family and their life before adoption, and so be able to understand why they could not live with their birth family, and why they were adopted. The letter should be given to the prospective adopter within ten working days of the adoption ceremony, i.e., the ceremony to celebrate the making of the adoption order. *English Statutory Guidance on Adoption (2013) S5.51*



Sharing personal information about birth parents, family members and foster carers

This is an area of concern to many practitioners and there is a great deal of confusion about what can and cannot be shared, especially in relation to the advance consent agreements. Although these agreements are currently attached to the CAR/B they do not actually relate to the information contained in the CAR/B itself. Consent from birth parents is NOT required for the sharing of information from the CAR/B with the adoptive parents and child or any information received up to the 18th birthday of that child. They only apply to information received after the adopted person is 18.

- As with the Life Journey Book, the underlying principle must be that adopted people have the right to access all their information as adults and by the time they get to that point, there should not be any surprises awaiting them. Information in the Later Life Letter and Life Story book should be consistent with each other.
- 'Such an agreement is not intended to override or limit the sharing of information as part of the life story work for the adopted child. Every child has a right to full information in their life story book, and this will include identifying information about a range of people in their life prior to their adoption'
- The English statutory guidance on adoption 2013, for which there is no direct Welsh equivalent, links advance agreements for disclosure of adoption information under post-commencement regulations to Life Journey Work:
- Adoption Agencies have very broad discretion under the Adoption Agencies (Wales)
 Regulations 2005, s43(2), which states that 'the adoption agency may provide such access to its case records and disclose such information in its possession as it thinks fit for the purposes of carrying out its functions as an adoption agency.'



The content of the Later Life Letter

The Later Life Letter is written by the social worker directly to a young, adopted person. Each letter should be personal and individual to that child. It will have more detail than the Life Journey Book and assumes a greater level of emotional maturity, life experience and understanding. Support will still be needed from parents and others with processing the information and the emotional impact.

The checklist in last year's newsletter provides a very useful structure and some prompts to consider when preparing the Later Life Letter. The Coram BAAF Good Practice guide provides detailed guidance, with examples, on how to address difficult topics such as, physical, and sexual abuse, conception as a result of rape, a child born from an incestuous relationship, relinquished babies, a child abandoned as a baby, fostering for adoption (Early Permanence), disruption of a foster placement and disruption of an adoptive placement.



General points to consider when writing a later life letter

Who will write the letter?

Almost always it will be the child's social worker or the adoption social worker who became involved once the child's plan became adoption. If a worker takes over at a later stage, they should invite contributions from others who have known the child longer. Careful consideration should be given to obtaining contributions from birth family, foster carers, adoptive parents and others.

Making it individual

It is always tempting to use an existing example as a template, but this is likely to lead to each one being similar to others and thus impersonal. The prompts in the checklist can ensure that all the important elements are included and aid clarity but should not be followed slavishly as this can result in the letter being too formal and impersonal.

Language

Avoid jargon and legalistic terminology, but the language must not be babyish or patronising. As with the Life Journey Book, consider the type of language, which is likely to be used by the adoptive parents and is therefore most familiar to the child. More detailed guidance on matters such as style of writing and length, as well as meeting particular needs, can be found in the Coram BAAF Good Practice guide.



Supporting adopters to use the later life letter with their children

A well written Later Life Letter plays a part in helping an adopted child to understand, process and integrate their history into a positive sense of their personal identity. The adoptive parents should familiarise themselves with this letter so they can answer any questions that the child has. They need to be supported to understand the importance of the letter, prepare the child for what it contains and choose the most appropriate time to share it with them. Agencies will need to offer training and support at various points. It is not enough to rely on adoption preparation training, 10 or more years later. As with the Life Journey Book, involve adoptive parents in the preparation of the Later Life Letter, so that they have a sense of ownership from the start. Allowing parents to explore their hopes, fears and expectations will help them to be more confident in supporting their child in accessing the Later Life Letter at the appropriate time.



Social Networking sites, contact and security

Professionals and adoptive parents may be concerned about enabling unplanned and unsupported contact between adopted young people and birth family via social media. However, withholding information that could aid the young person in searching, may stoke a desire to fill in gaps in their knowledge. It is important that the fear of contact does not discourage parents from sharing the letter at an earlier stage. One solution is to prepare more than one version of the letter to be shared at different stages. Over protection can be counterproductive if it generates a lack of trust between the adopted young person and their parents. We need to help young people learn to assess and manage risk, rather than try to shield them entirely from it. A Later Life Letter which does not shy away from the difficult and distressing aspects of a child's history, but also embodies compassion and empathy, can encourage the young person to talk to their parents or other trusted adults about their feelings and concerns.



The Trauma Nurture Timeline and Understanding the Child Days

All children who become looked after and those who are adopted will have experienced trauma and disruptions in the care they receive. The more we understand about what happened, when it happened and how the child responded, the better we can predict what his or her care needs might be now and in the future. In 2021, NAS commissioned AFA Cymru to produce a Good Practice Guide on the Trauma Nurture Timeline and Understanding the Child Days and to deliver training in how to use these tools.

Understanding the Child Day

The Understanding the Child model is rooted in research-based practice of developmental trauma, child development and attachment. The premise of the model is that if we can understand what may have been happening for the child during their early life, we can begin to consider and try to understand the impact this may have had on their understanding of the world and their physiological and psychological responses.

The child's inner working model influences their emotional and behavioural development and potential for the future.

By trying to understand a child's early experiences and behaviours, practitioners, foster carers and prospective adopters can begin to "wonder" about what might be happening for the child in their inner world. This process of "wondering" is the one of the first steps towards parenting therapeutically and is the aim of the Understanding the Child Day.



Trauma Nurture Timeline

The professionals involved with the child meet with the prospective adopters to give them a sense of who the child is and what the child's lived experience has been.

A Trauma Nurture Timeline provides a detailed chronology and analysis of a child's history from before birth until the present time. Information about a child's experiences which may include traumatic and nurturing experiences as well as genetic factors is presented. Consideration is then given to how these will have impacted upon the child's physical, neurological, behavioural, emotional and social development, as well as how these experiences have impacted the child's view of themselves, others and the world around them. Further consideration is then given to what needs the child has and will likely have in the future and what parenting this child could look like.

Guidance will be given to the prospective adopters as to parenting approaches to support the child's needs. The prospective adopters will receive a written report of the Trauma Nurture Timeline after the meeting.



How does this fit in with Life Journey Work?

The principles and outcomes for both the Understanding the Child Day and Trauma Nurture timeline are very similar to that of Life Journey Work.

The process of planning towards the Understanding the Child Day, Trauma Nurture Timeline and Life Journey Work should occur around the same time. The information gathered for all three should amalgamate with one another to provide adopters with a clear narrative of the child's early life so they can understand not only what life was like for the child but the impact this may have had upon their understanding of the world.

Early preparation and planning are essential and should involve collaboration with people that know the child well. The Life Journey Work Good Practice Guide advises that information gathering should start once the child becomes Looked After. By doing this the information that will be gathered will contribute greatly towards the Understanding the Child Day and the Trauma Nurture Timeline.

A child's behaviour is their response to circumstances they find themselves in and is their language of communication with the adults around them; the dictionary of that language is their history. (AFA Cymru, 2019, NAS Good Practice Guide on Transitions and Early Support p3)



Summary of Katie Wrench workshop

Katie Wrench, highly regarded social worker/ art psychotherapist, author and trainer was commissioned last year to deliver a series of half day workshops on, Best practice in LIFE JOURNEY WORK and the NAS Life Journey Work Framework. These were aimed at a wide range of people with a stake in Life Journey Work, such as Heads of Service, Team Managers, IROs, social workers, foster carers and adoptive parents. The aim was to raise awareness of the importance of Life Journey Work at all levels across Wales.



The workshops which were very wellattended, were inspirational as well as thought-provoking provided a number of key messages for everyone working with children:

- Life Journey Work must not only be done within timescales, but it must also be of high quality.
- Life Journey Work is everybody's business not just those who are not directly involved in delivering it. We all have a role in supporting the work and removing barriers.
- We need to help the child to build a sense of safety before sharing difficult information,
- Helping children to develop emotional literacy and their ability to regulate emotions is an essential aspect of Life Journey Work.
- Good Life Journey Work can build resilience, self-esteem, and a positive sense of personal identity
- Only once this psychological scaffolding has been provided, will the child be ready to receive difficult information and integrate it with their sense of who they are now
- Life Journey Work is an ongoing process, not an event, and we need to support and equip parents to continue the work throughout childhood into adulthood



The workshop linked some core principles of best practice in Life Journey Work to the NAS Life Journey Framework and Good Practice Guide and also drew on the messages from the 2020/2021 Adoption UK Adoption Barometer.

A summary of the areas covered in the workshop can be found via this **link**.



Thank you to Katie and all the staff who attended and made these sessions a huge success.

Follow up resources from Katie Wrench workshops

PowerPoint Introduction, Main Session and Reading List



A selection of resources for Life Journey Work for professionals, foster carers and adoptive parents



Articles

<u>Life story work for children and young people with care experience</u> – A scoping review (Simon P. Hammond, Julie Young, and Claire Duddy, 2021, Developmental Child Welfare2)

Telling a child's story: creating a words and pictures story book to tell children why they are in care by Jill Devlin

<u>Life story work: Reflections on the experience by looked after young</u> <u>people</u> – Rachel Willis and Sally Holland, Adoption and Fostering 2009

<u>Children's Understanding of Adoption:Developmental and Clinical</u> <u>Implications</u> – David Brodzinsky, 2011 – exploring how children's ability to understand what adoption means changes as they develop.

Guidance

West Berkshire guidance on Later Life Letters and Life Story Books.

Life Story Work: first steps from first4adoption.org.uk

Talking about origins to your adopted child – advice note (revised 2015) available from CoramBAAF



Useful websites

<u>Adopt Cymru</u> – website for the National Adoption Service for Wales with a Life Journey Work section, LJW toolkit and adopter training module.

Adoption UK Wales – information about services for adopters, adopted people and professionals. The training section has a wide range of courses for adoptive parents, kinship carers and professionals working in adoption in Wales, including Life Journey Work.

<u>AFA Cymru</u> – Association for Adoption and Fostering: resources for learning and development, training and consultancy to professionals and members of the public.

Connect Cymru – a website created by and for adopted young people – 'Find information, hear our stories, get involved.'

<u>CoramBAAF</u> – support for agencies and professionals who work with children and young people in adoption and fostering.



Videos

<u>Does a lack of truth telling destabilise a child's life journey?</u> – Helen Oakwater, an adoptive parent and trainer, paints a vivid picture of the enduring impact of neglect and abuse in infancy, through unconscious sensory memories. (13m 26s). *Trigger warning:* In this video Helen imagines and describes in vivid detail the subjective experience of an infant who is subject to extreme neglect, emotional abuse and domestic abuse.

<u>Peace to Shark music</u> – illustrating how differently the world may be experienced by children who have experienced early trauma and those who have not. (1m 09s)

<u>The Still Face Experiment</u> – showing how an infant responds to an parent with a blank, unresponsive face and quickly becomes acutely distressed.

Empathy vs Sympathy – Brené Brown explores how to help and how not to help someone experiencing distress.

<u>The Window of Tolerance</u> — a Beacon House animation, which describes the fight, freeze response of a traumatised child.

<u>Inside Out: Sadness comforts Bing Bong</u> – a clip from the Pixar movie Inside Out, which shows that rather than immediately try to distract or problem solve for a child who is distressed, acknowledging and 'sitting with' the distress can help them to re-regulate.

<u>ReMoved</u> – an award winning, powerful short film showing the long-lasting impact of domestic abuse on a child (12m 47s). *Trigger warning:* In this video, actors depict scenes of domestic abuse, emotional abuse and physical abuse of young children. Access may be restricted by some local authority ICT systems.

Supporting Life Story Work: the role of managers, IROs and strategic leads — a webinar by Polly Baines on the Research in Practice website. To view this, you will need to register with RiP.



Useful Contacts

Below is a list of the Life Journey Work co-ordinators who are in post across Wales currently. It would be useful to know who to contact in your area if you need guidance, advice or have access to any training opportunities.

Mid and West Wales Adoption Service

Sian E Gibbon | SEGibbon@carmarthenshire.gov.uk

North Wales Adoption Service

Sarah Ryan | Sarah.Ryan@wrexham.gov.uk

South East Wales Adoption Service

Raluca Miklovits | Raluca.Miklovits@blaenau-gwent.gov.uk

Vale Valleys and Cardiff Adoption Service

Tina James | tjames@valeofglamorgan.gov.uk Sara Jones | sarajones@valeofglamorgan.gov.uk

Western Bay Adoption Service

Sarah Vaughan | s.vaughan1@westernbayadoption.org

If you have developed anything new to help with good practice or know of any information on delivering life journey work please contact your adoption service representative above or the National Adoption Service Central Team on contact@adoptcymru.com