



What Works for
**Children's
Social Care**

Evaluation of Creative Life Story Work

Summary Report

December 2022





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Acknowledgments

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About What Works for Children's Social Care

What Works for Children's Social Care seeks better outcomes for children, young people and families by bringing the best available evidence to practitioners and other decision makers across the children's social care sector. We generate, collate and make accessible the best evidence for practitioners, policy makers and practice leaders to improve children's social care and the outcomes it generates for children and families.

About Coram

Coram is a UK children's charity that has been supporting vulnerable children for nearly three centuries, and is still finding new ways to help children. Coram's Impact & Evaluation Team carries out research and evaluation projects in partnership with public sector and third sector organisations, and also works across the Coram group of charities to help teams to evaluate their effectiveness.

About IPSOS MORI

Ipsos MORI is a market research company based in London.

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Introduction

Coram and Ipsos MORI evaluated the Creative Life Story Work programme delivered to looked after children in North East England between April 2021 and March 2022. This evaluation was a randomised controlled trial (RCT) of the impact of All About Me creative experiences on child outcomes ('did it work?'), a process evaluation ('if so, why did it work?') to understand the experiences of those taking part through interviews and a survey, and a cost analysis ('how much did it cost?').

We believe this was the first ever randomised controlled trial of a Life Story Work intervention in the UK.

Definitions

Life Story Work is a social work intervention that aims to help care experienced children and young people to understand and accept their personal history, present and future. It is statutory in England for adopted children but not looked after children.

Creative Life Story Work is a model of Life Story Work developed by Blue Cabin, based on Professor Richard Rose's model of Therapeutic Life Story Work. It takes a needs-based three tiered approach.

The model of Life Story Work evaluated in this case was called All About Me creative experiences, which is Tier 1 of the Creative Life Story Work model. It involved children and young people aged 5 to 17 receiving up to six 90-minute sessions, delivered weekly in small groups of up to six children or young people, accompanied by a trusted adult. The sessions were facilitated by artists working with local authority pastoral support workers.

Randomised controlled trials are a type of evaluation. Done well, they are more able than other kinds of evaluation to say whether programmes rather than other factors cause outcomes. This is because people are randomly assigned to programmes or business-as-usual care or services. Other differences are averaged out, so we can attribute any differences in outcomes to programmes.

Aims

All About Me creative experiences aimed to improve home and school stability, optimism about the future, and improve relationships, through increased wellbeing and family stability. The trial aimed to establish their impact on child outcomes: wellbeing, stability at home and in school.

The programme

The programme was delivered in three local authorities, Darlington, Gateshead and South Tyneside, by the charity Blue Cabin, informed by the work of Professor Richard Rose of Therapeutic Life Story Work International. Most looked after children and young people in



these authorities were eligible to take part in All About Me. All About Me was designed for in-person delivery, but due to Covid-19, the majority of sessions in this programme were delivered virtually. Other parts of the programme were beyond the scope of this evaluation. This was more intensive work for a small number with higher level needs; training and support to staff and supporting adults; and materials on an online platform used by 504 users by April 2022.

One third of the intended number of children and young people received All About Me creative experiences (90 against a target of 270). The aim was 80%. In our interviews various reasons were suggested for this low uptake, including practical and logistical barriers for foster carers. Randomisation was cited by some as a reason for the lower than expected take-up by the half of children and young people offered it.

Methods and data

We received data on three outcomes for children and young people from the local authorities:

1. Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire scores. This is a widely-used brief set of questions covering emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity or inattention, peer relationship problems, and prosocial behaviour. We received scores gathered from January to March 2022, after All About Me creative experiences. Dates of completion and informants differed across local authorities
2. The number of placement moves between April 2021 to March 2022, for example, moving from one foster family to another
3. The number of school moves between April 2021 to March 2022, excluding moves such as the transition from primary to secondary school.

We compared these three outcomes for two groups of the 629 randomised children and young people:

- Those who we had randomly assigned to be offered All About Me
- Those who we had randomly assigned to not be offered All About Me

We analysed these data on up to 551 of these, in 353 families. Local authorities did not give us complete outcomes data. We also lost children and young people from analysis because they were no longer looked after and so were ineligible, or were too young or old.

We interviewed 28 people between October 2021 and March 2022: eight children and young people, nine carers (foster and kinship), 10 social workers, and a focus group with Blue Cabin staff. We intentionally interviewed children and young people who did not have a significantly negative experience to avoid any risk of further distress. We surveyed 168 staff in March 2022 across the three local authorities. To support the process evaluation, a co-production project was delivered in partnership by Ipsos MORI and Blue Cabin, funded by the three participating local authorities. This involved 12 care experienced young people in the local authorities, who supported us with developing our interview questions and how we analysed and reported findings.



Our process evaluation questions were:

1. What is usual practice and how does the programme differentiate itself from this?
2. What changes are made by introducing the programme relative to usual practice, and what are the core elements, and how (if at all) do they vary across sites?
3. What are the barriers and enablers to successful implementation?
4. What are the views of children and young people, families and professionals on the programme, including perceived financial and non-financial benefits, costs, and unintended consequences?

The cost evaluation question was: how much does it cost to introduce the programme? We answered this by gathering cost information from Blue Cabin and the local authorities.

Findings of the randomised controlled trial

We cannot say with confidence that All About Me creative experiences make a difference to the three outcomes we analysed. The findings of our impact analysis did not reach statistical significance for the impact of All About Me creative experiences on wellbeing, placement changes, and school moves.

Owing to recruitment challenges, just 90 of 282 children and young people received All About Me creative experiences. Our 'intention to treat' design compared all those we randomised to be offered the creative experiences to all those randomised to not be offered this. This meant the 90 recipients would have needed to gain enormous benefits for this to show up in the data. It is not surprising, therefore, that our quantitative findings did not reach statistical significance.

Our findings are inconclusive: we cannot say whether they are due to low statistical power or the sessions themselves not making a difference to the children and young people. So we recommend that a larger randomised controlled trial is carried out. An alternative evaluation design which randomises after an initial expression of interest could increase how many attend creative experiences, and measures tailored to the life story work context could potentially detect positive changes. To address concerns about randomisation, a wait-list trial design should be considered. In these trials, some children receive a programme after a delay, during which time outcomes are measured for those who go first.

Findings of the cost evaluation

We calculated the cost of the whole one-year programme at £80,195 per local authority, including costs that were incurred by Blue Cabin. The cost of All About Me creative experiences was calculated at £2,673 per child who attended sessions. This unit cost is likely to have been inflated by the delivery of this programme, given that randomisation meant only a maximum of half of children could receive All About Me creative experiences.



Therefore the set-up costs were split between fewer children and full economies of scale could not be reached.

Findings of the process evaluation

Those who did attend engaged with the sessions, and almost all attended all six sessions. Our interviews found some perceived benefits for child anxiety, confidence, decisions around contact, and clearer life plans. For professionals, changes in local authority practice were viewed as beneficial.

Our survey of 168 local authority staff found the majority perceived the new Creative Life Story Work model as more effective than traditional Life Story Work. Social workers reported changes to their usual Life Story Work practice, and/or their local authorities. Of those directly involved in delivery, there was a perception it improved relationships between carers and children and young people, and improved wellbeing and the stability of placements. A better understanding of care experience and identity were most often cited among the benefits. Various barriers to participation were seen as important, including the child not being ready, and clashes with other commitments.

We interpreted two barriers and four enablers to implementation and take-up of the programme:

Barriers:

1. Apprehension and nerves from carers and young people, which was quickly overcome once the young people engaged in sessions
2. Low levels of programme take-up from children and young people and their carers meant less opportunity to develop learning.

Enablers:

1. High-levels of carer engagement and time were essential
2. Carers and children and young people talked about the online format being more convenient and some children and young people felt more comfortable sharing their experiences online
3. Local authority and Blue Cabin staff support to carers - carers appreciated the practical support provided to help set up the sessions technologically
4. Buy-in from local authority staff at all levels, to help embed the new approach across teams and to help with its sustainability.

Children, young people and carers we interviewed greatly enjoyed the sessions, and said they would recommend the project to others. They praised the care and effort put into session preparation and the artists' approaches. The Associate Artists created a fun, inclusive, respectful, and non-judgemental space where children and young people felt able to contribute if they wanted to. Children and young people also enjoyed meeting other care-experienced peers.



Importantly, most children and young people talked about significant changes in their lives that they linked to taking part in the All About Me creative experiences, such as improved mental health, improved relationships with people, and a better understanding of their identity and experience of being in care. Some made big life decisions as a result of the sessions such as changing contact arrangements with birth parents and rethinking career plans.

We identified a couple of unintended consequences from our interviews:

- Young people and their carers expressed that they found the end of the block of sessions difficult and wanted more
- Some professionals felt as though the randomised controlled trial design hindered project implementation.

Additionally, the risk of re-traumatisation was raised as a concern from carers, therefore we explored this in interviews. However, there were no reports of children and young people experiencing distress in sessions.

We conclude that All About Me creative experiences is different to usual practice because it was higher-quality and relied on the presence and full engagement of the carer alongside the child. It was a more collaborative approach which addressed traditional power imbalances in Life Story Work.

In this way All About Me creative experiences were felt to help develop and strengthen relationships between the carer and child or young person. It was a more gentle and indirect way of speaking about life histories continuously (compared to being given a one-off life story book).

A lot of effort from Associate Artists, Blue Cabin, Therapeutic Life Story Work International and the local authorities went into preparing the high-quality creative packages and preparing and running sessions. There was enthusiastic praise from children and young people, carers and professionals for the creative packages.

Directions for future research

A set of questions more tailored to the Life Story Work context, rather than the generic Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, would be preferable for future evaluations. These could explore the themes in our interviews, including sense of identity, understanding of life story, and experience of care. Any future research using Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires should gather scoring sheets, not just total scores, to explore any differences in more depth. Who completed the measure should be gathered, so that scores can be standardised according to who the informant was.

A larger future evaluation would enable analysis across different groups, such as by age group, family type, in-person versus online delivery, and nature of creative practice. We note that Blue Cabin intend the programme to be repeated once every six months: any future evaluation of this extended model could usefully follow-up the longer-term impacts. Future



research could explore gathering outcome measures directly from foster carers, given how heavily involved they were in the programme.

We recommend future mixed-methods process evaluation should: focus on understanding the experiences of those who have business-as-usual Life Story Work; include any young people who do not have a good experience of All About Me creative experiences; include observation of sessions across sites to help assess quality and consistency of delivery; and not rely on convenience sampling to recruit carers for interview.

Recommendations for future creative Life Story Work practice:

- **Fun activities should be balanced with linking the meaning of activities with life histories and self-identity.** From some adult perspectives the link between the activities and understanding life histories was too subtle
- **Children and young people should have a routine check-in following the final session.** This would be a chance to discuss their learning and areas for further attention or referral and be encouraged to continue using the creative props in supporting life story discussions with carers and others
- **Continue with the offer of an online format.** The online format improved accessibility, was more convenient to fit around busy schedules and some young people felt more confident and comfortable joining the session virtually
- **Reassure carers and children and young people about initial nerves.** These nerves quickly dissipated after the first session. We recommend that carers and children and young people are provided with a taster session to alleviate anxieties.

A full report on our methods, findings and recommendations is available at <https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/>



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