Q&A with an Adoption Professional: Lynn Applegarth, ARC NE

Lynn Applegarth, Adoption Support Worker at ARC NE, has worked directly with children and families for 30 years, both within a supportive role, undertaking parenting assessments and working individually with children. Lynn talks us through what her job involves, and provides us with an update on ARC's digitalising life story project which was presented at CVAA's first practice excellence event in April 2017.

Could you give a summary of your project to date?

Back in April 2017 ARC Adoption NE gave a presentation at CVAA's April practice sharing event about the Digital Life Story project it was developing with Shoo Fly Publishing Ltd as part of the Practice Improvement Fund programme.

At that time Shoofly were in the early stages of building the foundations of the program, having held meetings with ARC and a consultation with adoptive parents, Local Authorities and senior management. Since that time the project has moved on dramatically to the point that we are currently preparing to begin an internal trial within the ARC staff team, which will take place at the beginning of October. Following this we will be looking to prepare for a controlled pilot that will involve adopters, children, the three local authorities who have been involved in the process and a potential partner from the sector.

Preparation for the internal trial involves the whole ARC staff team dedicating time to the project, aside from their busy daily tasks. As a Life Story worker, I have been looking at the roles staff will play and what preparation will need to be in place to input information, reports, photographs, audio and video recordings. We plan to use a real Life Story Book to input into the system that will give us an accurate view into how it will work, what difficulties we may have and the time it will take staff to undertake the work in varying roles. This is where we begin to iron out the difficulties and issues.

It has become apparent that this digital system could make it much easier for all looked after children to have life story work produced and not just those with a

August 2017

plan of adoption. It could also provide an alternative medium for housing 'post-box contact' arrangements.

The sky's the limit so, onward, upward and watch this space!!!!!

What does an average day look like in your role?

Working in adoption support, our role is extremely varied and so it is difficult to define an average day. Our passion for life story work has driven us to develop a system which fits with today's digital world. Given our digital life story project is coming to testing, a typical day currently involves preparations for the trial. Along the way we have been given access to the online system and so getting familiar with the processes, the roles and the workings of the system as it develops has been a feature. Trying out the links and getting a feel for the program, whilst feeding back and meeting with Shoofly when we weren't sure if we were both looking at things in the same way, for example checking out confidentiality and how access can be restricted or permission given. Shoofly have been with us the whole way listening and explaining the technical jargon in a way we understand. I have been gathering information to input into the system both from parents, schools and other sources, which is key to making the system integrate successfully. Anyone using the system will need training and this is something I am beginning to draft out.

How do you think about using evidence in your everyday work with the project?

The Digital Life Story has an inbuilt system that captures statistical evidence in a variety of ways. It also has facilities for help, suggestions, reporting, feedback, and private messaging. Some of this information will be used to develop the system further, support users, and address user issues, whilst some will be private between the parent and child. We have now carried out a further consultation between ARC Adoption, Shoofly, adoptive parents and the three the local authorities involved in developing the project with us. This input has been crucial in telling us what they want and how it should look, the type of access needed by different roles and what they would or would not use.

August 2017

We are also busy planning a consultation with children and young people to gain their views about the system and what they want from it. Shoofly have previous experience in the development, launch and maintenance of a program called 'School 360' in Northumberland that is used very successfully and safely by many schools (teachers, pupils and parents) in the area. (School360 is a self-managed, one-stop school community. It supports teachers in managing the school day and delivering the timetable. Children can play games and access both school work and homework, whilst parents can access reports and messages between themselves and teachers. With this experience under their belt they have already tried and tested a similar system, worked through its strengths and weaknesses and scrutinised the safety elements, which is probably the biggest worry for adopters and professionals alike.

Tell us about your approach to life story books and what you think their role is?

Life Story books (LSB's) are but a tool for children and their adopters to begin to look at the child's past, present and future. There are many different models of LSB's but the digital life story system is what our parents have told us they want and would find most useful. We take our approach to Life Story Work very seriously and aim to capture information from all those involved in the child's life at the time they are involved, which can be held securely and released to the child when the time is right by the person who has overall control, i.e. the social worker, life story worker, adopter or parent figure.

We run two yearly workshops for adopters to look at 'Telling and Life story books' which they can attend when the time is right for them, in the future this will include working with the digital format. We also offer individual consultation and support to adopters and their children in sharing their Life Story Books, as well as Therapeutic life story work (developed by Richard Rose) with children and young people and their parents.

What have you learnt through developing this project?

Through developing the project, we have learned many things. Within the consultation meetings what was important for one person was not necessarily a priority for another, what one person envisages about the design can be viewed

August 2017

entirely different by others. Then there's the worries, the challenges, the reassurances (for all stakeholders involved in this design phase), the understanding, the technical issues, and making it easy to use. We've experienced a huge learning curve about the stuff behind the scenes like copyright, graphics, costs, limitations, prioritising, logo's, etc. Whilst Shoofly have been fantastic and so easy to work with, we learnt that regular meetings, consultations and lots of questions and answers were necessary for us to understand what they are doing and for them to understand what we need.

What advice would you give to another agency thinking of developing something similar?

Consultation with the local authorities, sector partner, children and young people, adopters and all other professionals working with the child is the most important factor in developing a new project. It's important that the people who will use it believe it is fit for purpose and uncomplicated to ensure it is a success. This will be measured by the uptake of children using the system through the data captured and planned feedback from all involved in the pilot at various points.