Nothing About Us Without Us:

What peer-led life story work taught us about safeguarding, voice and power

Our Life Stories

United Response
support that changes with you

Our Life Stories

“It Gives Me Pleasure to Know That Somebody's Listening.”

Tess, Our Life Stories interviewee

A project that began as heritage and became something much bigger.



The project:

A National Lottery Heritage Fund project:

- Ran from 2023 - 2026
- £250,000 investment
- 59 life story interviews
- Peer interviewers with learning disabilities
- Archived by the British Library
- National touring exhibition
- Stories from across England



Why we started

For much of history people with learning disabilities have been:

- Written about
- Spoken for
- Recorded by others

We wanted people to be:

- Interviewers
- Researchers
- Storytellers
- Creators of historical record

Nothing About Us Without Us



Why Peer Interviewing?

People with learning disabilities interviewing their peers:

- Shared experience
- Greater trust
- More open conversations
- Reduced power imbalance
- A sense of being understood

The conversation wasn’t between a professional and someone in receipt of support.



What people's life stories are really about:

- Childhood
- Family
- Friendships & Relationships
- Hobbies
- Identity
- Work and Volunteering
- Belonging
- Aspirations

Safeguarding is not just about incidents. It's about people's whole lives.



Bullying, Discrimination and Exclusion

Interviewees spoke of:

Bullying at school

Discrimination

Social exclusion

Being underestimated

Hate and prejudice

These experiences often shaped confidence, relationships and opportunities throughout people's lives.



Protection and Choice

Life stories revealed tensions around:

- Relationships
- Independence
- Risk
- Decision making

Questions

Who decides what is safe?

Whose voice is prioritised?

How do we keep people safe without limiting choice and control?

United Response

National Life stories in partnership with British Library

Made possible with Heritage Fund

Our Life Stories: Participation Agreement

Talking to people about what life is like for people with a learning disability and autistic people

This booklet tells you about our project and asks if you want to take part



Safeguarding starts with listening

Often safeguarding begins when:

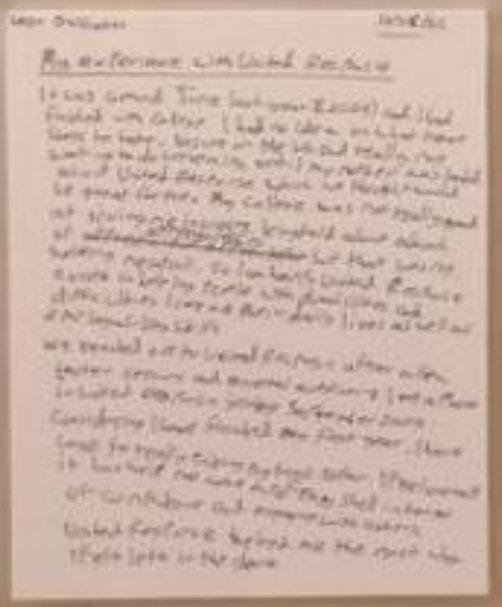
- A concern raised
- A report is made
- A process starts

But *Our Life Stories* asked:

What happens when people are listened to before something goes wrong?







Ethical tension: support or control?

Support staff helped with:

1. Communication
2. Confidence
3. Memory Prompts
4. Reassurance
5. Participation

But sometimes important questions emerged:

Who speaks?
Who redirects?
Who shapes the story?

At what point does support become gatekeeping?

Why these stories matter

The life story interviews preserve experiences that might otherwise be lost.

They ensure:

- People’s voices are heard
- History is told by those who lived it
- Future generations can learn
- People’s experiences are not forgotten

Voice is a safeguarding issue

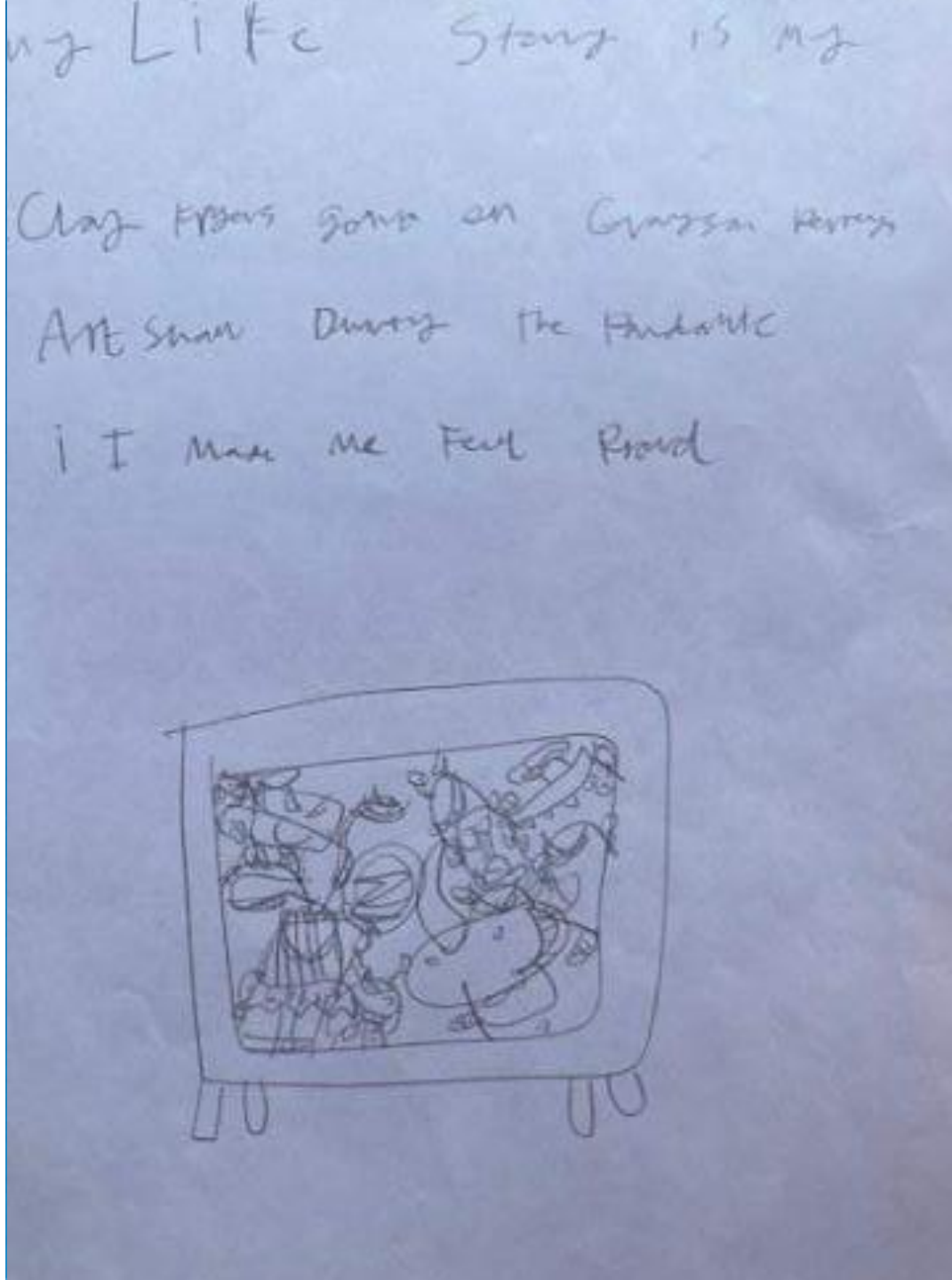


Institutional memory matters

Interviewees spoke about:

- Long-stay hospitals
- Segregation
- Restrictive care
- Over-medication
- Decisions made by others

Good safeguarding requires us to remember what happened when people weren't listened to.



Five safeguarding lessons

1. Listen before concerns arise
2. Difficult conversations matter
3. Support should amplify voices
4. Listening changes relationships
5. Life story work is safeguarding



“It Gives Me Pleasure to Know That Somebody's Listening.”

Tess, *Our Life Stories* interviewee

Safeguarding starts with making sure people’s stories are heard.







Questions?

Contact

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Project website:
https://www.unitedresponse.org.uk/our-life-stories/

Register interest for phase 2:
https://www.unitedresponse.org.uk/our-life-stories/about-our-life-stories/share-your-story/

Short film:
https://www.unitedresponse.org.uk/our-life-stories/about-our-life-stories/short-film/

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