

Supporting Birth Parents Fund

The Storytelling Approach



Introduction from The Village Storytelling Centre

In April 2025, Corra Foundation engaged The Village Storytelling Centre (VSC) to support and amplify the voices of birth parents whose child(ren) have been permanently removed from their care. Our team, led by Storyteller Lauren Bianchi, worked with partners who have received funding from the Birth Parents Fund and have been supporting birth parents since April 2022.

The aim of this project was to help Corra to share the stories that birth parents want to share. This ensures that birth parents have their voices heard, both for their own healing and also to influence public policy. This in turn may encourage policy makers to use more resources and create more services for those who have had their children removed from their care.

VSC collaborated with the organisations and parents to develop three short films and a book of stories.

Storytelling is compelling. It helps us to better understand challenge, hope and aspirations. It can be the enabler that supports positive change within organisations and across policy.

We all want to ensure people's voices are heard through storytelling, but this comes with the responsibility to ensure people who participate have choice and are supported.

The purpose of this resource is to offer guidance to accompany the stories from the work delivered by VSC, commissioned by Corra for the Supporting Birth Parents Fund.

We have deliberately created the stories to support deeper conversations on the themes that are highlighted across the outputs.

Within this resource we have reflected on our own experiences from this project. These insights have shaped critical questions we hope are helpful for any commissioner, policymaker, charity or individual considering this type of approach.

The Village Storytelling Centre

The Village Storytelling Centre (VSC) is an award-winning arts charity, built on the belief that stories change lives. Our vision is a world where people and communities are inspired, connected and heard, underpinned by our mission to improve and enrich lives across Scotland through the power of story.

We are a centre for contemporary storytelling and a European leader in **applied storytelling**. Based in Glasgow we deliver a range of projects, training and events which aim to:

- Increase access to storytelling and creative opportunities for communities
- Provide platforms for people to share their voices
- Develop and promote the art of contemporary oral storytelling across Scotland and beyond

The Applied Storytelling Approach

Applied Storytelling is the purposeful application of story as a tool for personal, community or organisational development, learning or information gathering and sharing. The ultimate goal is often to support and platform participants' expression in ways which feel safe, authentic and appropriate for them. These processes have the potential to be of benefit to participants' well-being and self-esteem, as well as to support people with lived experience to inform organisational and/or strategic change. It is:

- Person Centred which means the autonomy, needs and voices of the participants are of central importance and drive the direction of the work.
- Strengths Based, a concept which follows a belief that power, expertise and knowledge is innate and already exists in the participants.

Key Characteristics of Applied Storytelling:

- Both participants and facilitators share the storyteller role.
- It can potentially take place in any setting, making it more tailored to the participant.
- It draws from multiple fields including traditional arts and heritage, theatre, psychology, education and social sciences.
- Skilled Storytellers should be trauma informed, lead their projects with empathy and consider inclusion within all aspects of their work.
- It works well in collaboration with other artforms, ensuring that those with sensory needs, language barriers or low confidence can engage in a way that is suitable to their needs/interests. Applied Storytelling can include those rich affirming conversations which happen when you are immersed in a physical activity.



The 3 Story-led Approaches:

Not everyone can find it easy to immediately and comfortably reflect on their story, their community and what they want for the future. Many people can feel bound by the stories that they have been told about themselves or their situation. This can affect their ability to be objective or to consider solutions and imagine future narratives. Applied Storytellers use a blend of three different approaches which support people of all backgrounds, ages and confidence levels to be able to reflect on and share their stories, and to consider a hopeful and aspirational future.

Traditional tales, myths and legends

Often, by sharing a fictional or historical story, we find that people within groups can begin to relax and to connect to the story, its themes and reflect on the journey or characters. By carefully choosing stories which are relevant to the group or setting, our storytellers can create a space in which people can explore themes, find commonalities, discuss challenges and solutions with no judgement.

One-step removed

This approach involves the creation of new fictional narratives which resonate with the group and their life experiences. The stories are collaboratively created or developed by the group, the central characters and the issues and decisions they are facing are built up and discussed progressively through various exercises and techniques. A particular focus is given to identifying solutions and positive futures for the characters, a task which is much easier to do for an invented character than for oneself! This approach can also involve a process in which participants take hold of an existing story's narrative and actively explore and challenge it, reconstructing elements of the narrative, creating new fictional events and outcomes. The approach offers the distance and objectivity necessary for a group to consider themes and issues which directly affect them while regulating their level of personal disclosure, sharing only as much of their own story as feels comfortable for them.

Personal Stories

Personal stories can range from the small, seemingly insignificant stories of how we travelled to the sessions, the meaning behind our names or how we take our tea to the deep and powerful stories of personal challenges and trauma. Having a safe and accepting space in which to share personal stories can be an incredibly powerful applied storytelling process. Participants recognise that they are worthy of being heard and what they have to say is important and interesting, which itself may not be a narrative they are used to. Through the process of sharing, participants often find that stories are not set in stone and their relationship to the story can change through their telling and retelling.

The Ethics of Story Gathering and Sharing

Storytelling is a powerful tool for change. Since before recorded history, stories have been used to teach, to inspire, to warn and to bring people together. In recent years organisations across all sectors have been encouraged to tell their story and the stories of people with lived experience to gain support from funders, decision makers or to draw public attention. It is responsible to provide a platform for these stories to be shared and to do this well can ensure that people with lived experience really are at the heart of service and policy design and change. However, there are considerable ethical implications of story gathering and sharing.

The stories, we as charities and organisations tell, do not belong to us. They belong to real people who, as they grow and change, will look back on their stories differently at various points in their lives. People who are happy to share their story now may look back in the future wishing they had not done so. It can be hard to reframe personal narratives when they are bound in other people's perceptions so publicly. This can have lasting repercussions for the very people we are aiming to support.

When story gathering and sharing, it is vital we understand the issues of consent, power and authenticity that need to be considered when working with personal narratives. We must support partner organisations to think carefully about how they gather, keep and use other people's stories for their work. We should ensure that people share publicly only that which they are truly comfortable sharing and use a variety of creative means to ensure that people can remain anonymous wherever possible.

Ethical process:

1. Informed consent is gathered from participants at various stages of their involvement, from participation in group sessions to recording and sharing stories.
2. Participants are supported to understand the project, its aims, and how/where their stories are shared.
3. The techniques described above ensure participants can share their stories in a safe, supportive environment in which they can share at a level that is comfortable for them as individuals.
4. All projects and interactions are guided by the participants, ensuring their ownership of the process and any outputs.
5. Stories and any other artwork created during the process are included in final output only if informed consent is provided.
6. Completed outputs are shared with participants and their approval sought prior to finalisation.

Supporting Birth Parents Fund - Approach in Practice

How did we deliver the projects?

During this process there were two distinct sets of projects - one with the groups who created the films and the other with the groups who created the text and artwork for the book.

Creating the films

Working with the groups we used each of the three story led approaches for Applied Storytelling responding to the group at each specific section. The leading method for each group was the one step removed approach which allowed each group to create their own character as a container in which to share element of each of their personal stories. This was intentional. It allowed and encouraged participants to share their own stories for their own catharsis and to platform these stories to influence policy and create change.

Creating the books

Each group had one session with the storyteller and artist. These sessions were rooted much more in personal storytelling in collaboration with visual art as a medium of self-expression and self-regulation to share the parts of their story they chose to share. Each participant was given the option of using a pseudonym in the book which they varyingly chose as a form of self-protection and anonymisation.



What were the key factors that made the project a success?

Trauma-informed

There was clear sense of shared understanding and commitment to the work, trauma, and the support necessary ensure everyone's wellbeing. This was evident in the relational approach between parents and the funded organisations, Corra and funded organisations, and Corra and VSC.

Relationships between participants and the funded organisations

Trusted relationships built over time between the funded organisations and participants, helped people engage with the Storyteller and feel co-ownership of the approach.

Partnership working

It cannot be overstated how much the success of projects such as this hinge on partnership working. VSC was able visit and deliver sessions with every funded project and really 'hit the ground running' due to the partner organisations' belief in and commitment to the work.

Engaging with funded organisations and staff throughout the process

Providing an initial introduction and training day for staff about the approach ensured a clear understanding of our offering with the participants. This included specific work in hearing staff stories and valuing their expertise and experience in this area. These sessions were crucial in building relationships with the organisations which supported the project.

Role of Corra

The Corra team were committed to the project. They provided a detailed brief, with fixed dates and provided the necessary budget to ensure quality delivery of such a project. They already had excellent relationships with the funded organisations and an understanding of the needs and the challenges of both the organisations and the birth parents.

Regular meetings were held between Corra and VSC to discuss the development and progress of the project, ensuring any challenges and expectations were met.

It is important to recognise that the project timescale was short. Short timescales can often lead to disengagement or stories feeling tokenistic. The reason it didn't was the depth of relationships, commitment and other factors listed above.

Wellbeing of all involved

The project was delivered by two practitioners experienced in group work and their creative artforms. This co-delivery approach was important for the wellbeing of all involved as having two practitioners in the room at all times meant that there could be a focus on both creative expression and emotional wellbeing. Most of the groups also included a staff member in each session to ensure emotional distress cues could be picked up early while working with this challenging material.

Both the Lead Storyteller and Creative Practitioner are also qualified Dramatherapists. This is unusual for applied storytelling or creative projects. However, it ensured safety of everyone involved in the process, with each practitioner holding and containing these sessions while supporting participants to share what they felt able to. Each practitioner received their own personal clinical supervision sessions on a regular basis, as is the norm for all therapists. This further supported the wellbeing of practitioners during the project. In turn, this further enhanced the safety of participants.

Take Aways from the approach

We have worked with Corra to reflect on our learning from this work. This has included the questions we asked ourselves before proceeding. We hope these critical questions are a useful tool for anyone else considering this type of approach as part of their work.

What should funders consider if they wish to commission external practitioners/storytellers to share the story of grant programmes?

- **Aims & Intended Audience:** Why do you want to share the stories? Is it to purely celebrate the fund, do you wish to affect strategic change or is there another reason? Do you have a particular audience or multiple audiences in mind?
- **Funded Organisations & Participants:** Do you have strong links with your funded organisations? Are you aware of their capacity and barriers to participation? Are you aware of the challenges and barriers for their participants?
- **Creative Output:** Consider the anticipated creative output (i.e. film, podcast, book, posters etc.), a reasonable timeline for completion and appropriate budget. It is always important for projects like these to be participant-led, however, their level of involvement is dependent on the length of the project. Having a clearly desired output can ensure focus for all concerned and reduce any negative impact on organisational
- **Legacy & Informed Consent:** Have you considered how creative outputs will be shared both in the immediate and long term? Are participants aware that some creative outputs can and will be reshared in the future?

What should funded organisation and practitioners consider if you are invited to participate in a storytelling project like this?

- **Readiness Levels:** Are participants in a place where they are able to share their stories?
- **Staff Engagement:** Can you assign a staff member to lead the coordination and be present in each session? How will they be supported to do so? Is the funder/ commissioner willing to offer any resource to help with this?
- **Staff & Participant Wellbeing:** How will you ensure the wellbeing of staff (including your own) and participants involved in the project?
- **Legacy & Informed Consent:** Have you been informed how creative outputs will be shared in future? How will you support participants to understand how outputs will be shared and the potential impact for them? Participants should consider how things may change for them in the future and how to anonymise their stories to prevent potential future regret.
- **Championing Safety for All:** if the project feels uncomfortable or the external practitioners/ storytellers do not seem to be considering their ethical responsibilities please step in and express your concerns.



What can you do to ensure these stories support a deeper conversation?

A film or book of stories can be a powerful medium for opening deeper conversations because it brings lived experience into a space where the general public, practitioners, funders and policymakers can challenge and reflect on their own biases, feelings and practices. They can highlight complexity and offer nuance that statistics and abstract case reports cannot. We hope the films and book we have created can be used in multiple ways to challenge stereotypes and destigmatise the birth parents experience. We also hope that the films can be used in training of practitioners and by policy makers and other decision makers who can affect the birth parents experience.

What you can do next:

- Consider a facilitated viewing/screening/ sharing with colleagues and hold a question & answer session afterwards. The stories can be emotionally challenging to watch/hear, what questions are they bringing up in the audience/viewers? What actions might come from the questions/responses?
- Consider disseminating the book and/or films to a wider audience. Who is the audience you would like to share with? What is your hope for the impact of the work? In answering these questions you might consider small focus groups, working with policy makers considering expectations of what happens next both from an organisational and participant perspective.
- Consider additional information you wish to be shared alongside the films and book to further enhance knowledge and understanding i.e. links to laws/policies pertaining to fostering and adoption, statistics pertaining to the number of birth parents who are care experiences.
- Consider how the stories can be used to address stigma amongst the general population. How can these stories be shared widely but with care?
- Consider how viewers and readers can be supported to commit to action after hearing these stories. This could be something small like a pledge, or a bigger change in their practice or in policy development.

About Corra Foundation

Corra Foundation exists to make a difference to the lives of people and communities. It works with others to encourage positive change, opportunity, fairness and growth of aspirations which improve quality of life. Corra wants to see a society in which people create positive change and enjoy fulfilling lives.

In 2020 Corra launched a ten-year strategy. It is long term because making a difference on the big challenges will take time. At its heart is the strong belief that when people find their voice, they unlock the power to make change happen.

Our ways of working

At Corra we have a set of principles that we strive to put into practice across our roles as an employer, independent funder, charity and partner, as well as in our influencing activity. We will:

- Listen and respond to people, communities and organisations and amplify voices that are less well heard – their wisdom is at the heart of Corra's approach.
- Build relationships, always working alongside others on the basis of shared power, mutual trust and shared learning.
- Pursue diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), trying to challenge structural discrimination and contribute to radical shifts in the funding sector.
- Be an open, trusting and flexible grant maker.
- Ensure we contribute to tackling climate change, through our investments, operations and grant making and encouraging others to take action alongside us.
- Be bold, taking considered risks and supporting others to do the same.

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