Creating a meaningful explanation for looked-after children about why they are in care.

For children to understand the need for a safety plan and what it is about, they must understand what the problems and dangers were that meant their family needed a specific plan for their safety.

The Words and Pictures process informs children (who are typically very confused about why they’ve been taken into care) about serious child-protection concerns.

The most important aspect of the method is that the explanation is created with the parents, and they must be happy with the story before the children are given the explanation. This distinguishes the Words and Pictures process from Life Story Book work.

Placing parents in the middle of creating the explanation requires significant skill alongside appropriate use of authority, particularly when there is little or no prospect the child will be returned to them.

However, involving the parents is vital because children want an explanation from them; professional explanations – no matter how child-friendly and age-appropriate – will usually not be accepted by the child.

1. Begin by briefing social services and obtain their permission and endorsement to undertake the process and commitment to use the words and pictures within the looked-after system.

2. Check with the parent(s) about the problem (eg. mental health issue, severe illness, child-protection concerns, drug or alcohol misuse), asking them what would be most helpful for their children to understand about the situation.

3. Explore these same issues with the other parent, kinship system, and significant adults in the child’s life.

4. Explore with the child/children what they already know and what they are concerned about (depending on the circumstances, include the parents in this discussion if possible).

5. Draw the explanation using the family’s own language and ways of expressing concerns wherever possible, bearing in mind the family’s race, culture and religion. Link all the above to any worries/concerns about the children at home, at school, with peers, ie. the context in which the child might be expressing some of the worries or confusions.
The explanation should:

› Be balanced and not just focus on negatives
› Be framed with a neutral or affirmative beginning and a positive message at the end
› Be interspersed with meaningful positive events in the child's life that fit and add to the overall story
› Give age-appropriate explanations without trivialising or minimising the seriousness of the child-protection concerns.

6. Present the first draft to the parents. Develop and refine the words so that they are comfortable with it and the explanation reflects what they feel the child should know.

7. Once the parents take ownership of the explanation, ensure that it captures everything social services would want the child to know.

8. Provide the explanation for the child/children with their parents, extended family, carers and social service workers present.

9. Ensure that all other significant extended family members and adults in the child’s life have seen the explanation and will draw upon it if they need to talk to the child about the problems the parents face and the reasons the child is in care.

*Insert Manchester-specific example of Words and Pictures story*