

# adoption counts

## Good Practice Guidance

## LETTERBOX SERVICE

Adopted children benefit from having an understanding of their family history. Whilst their life story book is central to this, regular, up to date information about what is happening to their birth families can help with this. For Adopters the letterbox exchange, is a really helpful way of talking to the child about their past and giving them the opportunity to answer any questions the child has.

Birth families feel reassured from receiving updates about the child's progress and development, and have the opportunity to show their children they are still interested in them and care about them.

Adoption counts recognises the significance of promoting letterbox contact and outlines the practice guidance below.

This practice guidance needs to be read in conjunction with the procedure for contact on Tri.x and the statutory guidance.

- **Exchange month**

We do not allow exchanges to take place in the child's birthday month or at times of religious significance. This is because these times can be emotionally charged for all parties. Avoiding these months will promote the stability of the child's placement.

- **Frequency of exchange**

The purpose of a letterbox exchange is to promote the child's identity and enable an exchange of information relating to the child's life. Exchanges will therefore take place annually. Only in exceptional circumstances will it be agreed for twice a year. There is an expectation that each exchange is started by the adopter's letter, with the birth family replying.

- **Settling in letters**

These are valuable for birth families to help them deal with the loss of their child and can be positive and reassuring for families to receive. There is an expectation that a settling in letter will be exchanged 6 weeks – 3 months after the child being placed with adopters. In our experience the settling in letter enables birth families to better engage with the letterbox exchange, benefiting the child in the long term.

- **Christmas & Birthday Cards**

We do not advise the exchange of cards for significant events as the focus needs to be on enhancing the attachment with the adoptive family. These can be emotive times and children need to be given permission to form new attachments.

If an agreement has already been made to allow the exchange of cards, we would only forward them in the agreed month of the letter exchange.

If Birth families feel strongly about sending cards on special occasions, we recognise the importance of children knowing that their birth family have thought about them. In these circumstances whilst we cannot support the exchange, we would encourage the birth families to write cards and keep them in memory box. This way if the child makes contact as an adult, these can be shared. Sometimes birth families can be advised to post the letter, addressed to the child, to their own address, this way the card remains sealed for them to open in the future.

If adopters express a wish to receive special event cards, because this can sometimes place additional pressure on children, we would discuss this further with the adopter before making any arrangements.

- **Vouchers/ gifts/ money**

We do not allow exchanges of cash/ vouchers or gifts, as we cannot guarantee it will arrive securely or safely.

If an agreement is already in place, then it may continue, but NO cash will be handled by the letterbox service. In the event that vouchers are agreed, these must be for a set value and the person giving them will need to sign to say they have handed the vouchers over to the letterbox service. They will then be sent recorded delivery to ensure the recipient signs for their receipt.

- **Storing of personal items**

We cannot store any personal items as we cannot be held responsible for its security.

If we currently hold valuable items, their whereabouts needs to be recorded on the child's file and cross referenced with the adoption records.

- **Child Hand/footprints / drawings etc**

It can be really positive for birth families to receive items created by their child. We would wish to promote this in a balanced and reasonable way and will accept items no bigger than A4 size for ease of posting.

- **Photos**

There is a risk in sharing photos of children through the letterbox service, given the rise in use of social media. If this risk can be managed then photos can be considered as part of the exchange. We can undertake a risk assessment to assist with this decision (see separate template).

Ultimately the decision regarding the sending of photos is the adopters, and this decision can be reviewed over time.

We do not encourage an agreement that allows photos on a single view only arrangement, this can be both risky and distressing for the participants.

Any photos sent, need to be non-identifying e.g. no place names, no school photos and should not include other children other than adopted siblings. If photos have been printed, check that the back of the photo does not identify where it has been printed.

Photos should be of good quality as they are precious to families.

When sending photos include a reminder that they are not to be shared, as stated in the original agreement.

- **Social media**

No letterbox exchange will be done through social media.

If this becomes known to the adopters that their child is exchanging information with birth families using social media , they need to report this to CEOP/police and /Facebook . Whilst we can advise and signpost in these circumstances, it is the adopters responsibility to protect their family.

If any photos exchanged are found to be published using social media then adopters will be informed and exchange of photos will cease.

It is a risk for adopters to attempt to find details about birth families on Facebook or any social media and this is not encouraged.

- **Review of Letterbox arrangements**

The arrangements for each letterbox exchange will be reviewed every 2 years from the start date of the agreement. A review form will be sent to both birth families and adopters. The letterbox service will respond to any issues raised as appropriate.

- **Reminders**

If the adopter has opted for a reminder email, this will be sent at the beginning of the exchange month . ( proforma letter to be created here that is sensitive and encouraging). If we receive no response within 4-6 weeks , we will make contact again to remind them, appropriate to each adopter ( e.g. via telephone call, email, text, letter)

If birth families are contacting the service regularly then a further contact needs to be made with the adopters within 2-4 weeks.

If there is still no response from the adopters , then no further prompts will be made. The next reminder will be sent at the next year's exchange. If after 2 successive years there is still no response , a letter will be sent to seek confirmation that they no longer wish to participate in letterbox at this stage, making it clear that they can reconsider their decision at any time. These cases will not receive a review letter.

Birth families – the reminder to send a letter is prompted by the receipt of the letter from the adopters. A covering letter offering support to reply is included in the exchange. On an individual basis we may agree to further support or prompts for a particular birth family.

If a birth family misses an exchange month and replies outside the agreed month , we will contact the adopters to discuss whether or when they wish to accept it.

- **Sending letters**

We are happy to accept exchange letters via a secure email system ( egress ) and we will keep a copy on file . If the letter is posted to us we will scan and save a copy onto the file. When posting letters on, we will contact the recipient to ensure we have the correct details before forwarding it. As the original letters are sent to the families they need to be sent – recorded delivery, in line with the Managing Personal Information Policy. (*Non-electronic documents containing personal information must be posted in sealed envelopes which are properly addressed, clearly marked e.g. ‘private and confidential’ and sent via recorded delivery at all times. )*

The letter should not be identifiable externally as being sent by the Adoption Team, as this can present an issue of confidentiality for recipients. Each party is responsible for updating the service on their current details.

- **Encouraging a 2 way exchange**

There may be times when parties may find it difficult to engage in the letterbox exchange. If Birth families are unable to engage we expect adopters to continue writing annual letters and these will be held on file. If adopters do not engage we would also encourage birth families to continue to write the letters and they will be held on file. This ensures that when either party are ready to exchange, this can take place or that the child can access the information themselves when they are 18.

- **Content of the letters**

There is an expectation that the letters are initially written between the adults. Letters need to be positive, avoid being prescriptive and contain a balance of personal information. At the start of the agreement it is important to be clear by which names adopters, extended family and birth families wish to be referred and how they will sign off the letters.

We realise the need to be sensitive about how people are referred to from the start, so this can be consistent during the letterbox exchange and make it easier for individuals to participate.

It is positive for the adopters to include a pen picture of the child- height, shoe size, hair / style etc. and talk about the child’s achievements, personality, education, ongoing support they are receiving e.g.:- SALT, health. It can be helpful for both parties to ask and answer questions in their letters.

It is appropriate for adopters to talk about how their child’s birthdays are spent – birthday cake they had etc. and to mention how they look at the child’s Life story book and talk about the birth family.

Birth families can be encouraged to say that they “think about..., Love and miss ..... But this needs to be moderated so it is not too emotional and upsetting for the child. Adopters & birth relatives can say they look forward to hearing from each other and for their news updates.

Adopters can include children's drawing/painting/handprints (A4 size) and reference a child's cuddly toy - that may have been given by the birth parent. If the adopters and birth family have met it can feel really positive to refer to this in the letter.

Sample letters are available in the following format -

- Letter from Adopters to birth family
- Letter from Birth family to adopter
- Settling in letter
- Letter to siblings from adopters
- Letter where there is only a One way exchange

- **Sibling to Sibling exchanges**

On the whole these letters still need to be written adult to adult, but flexibility can be given depending on the nature of the sibling relationship. If one of the siblings is in long term foster care, it is important to check with the child's social worker before sending an exchange letter to ensure there have been no changes of placement. The letterbox administrator can also check on the Local Authorities child care system directly.

- **Settling in letter**

This will be the first letterbox exchange through the letterbox service, but it is important that a copy is sent to the child's SW , so they can keep a copy on the child's file.