



Post-Box Policy

Procedure and Guidance

‘Communication is important, so information should be accessible to everyone. People with sensory communication disabilities may need documents in easy read, large print, audio or Braille formats for example. Others may need face to face communication support through a British Sign Language Interpreter, deafblind interpreter, lip speaker or note taker (as recommended by the NHS Accessible Information Standard). If someone speaks (or reads) a language that is not English, they will need to have the appropriate language-spoken language interpreter and / or text translator’.



1.0 Purpose:

1.1 The purpose of this policy is to provide guidance to Together4Children staff regarding the post-box service. The service is for children who are placed for permanence through adoption and is a mechanism for providing indirect contact with the child's birth parents and/or relatives where it is appropriate and safe to do so. The service allows for the exchange of letters, cards and photographs if appropriate, but not any items of monetary value.

1.2 For the purpose of this policy the term 'post-box coordinator' will be used. However, throughout the region the job title of this function differs. For Example:

Staffordshire Locality Permanency Hub the function is called 'Permanency Support Practitioners'.

Stoke-on-Trent Locality Permanency Hub the function is called 'Permanency Support Practitioners'.

Shropshire & Telford & Wrekin Locality Permanency Hub the function is called 'Letterbox Administration Coordinator'.

2.0 Underpinning Legislation and Guidance:

- 2.1
- Data protection Act 1998
 - Adoption and Children Act 2002
 - Adoption and Children Act 2002 Guidance Chapter 2 & 7 and Annexes A & B
 - Adoption Agencies regulations 2005
 - Disclosure of adoption Information (Post-commencement adoptions) Regulations 2005
 - Children and Adoption Act 2006
 - Equality Act 2010
 - Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013
 - Statutory Guidance on adoption DfE July 2014

3.0 What do we mean by birth family and/or relatives?

3.1 The term birth family and/or relatives include the following:

- Birth parents / stepparents



- Full siblings / half siblings / step siblings
- Maternal / paternal grandparents
- Maternal / paternal relatives (aunts, uncles, cousins)
- Relatives by marriage / civil partnership
- Significant other(s) to the child

4.0 Siblings (full and half):

- 4.1 Contact between siblings should be viewed as positive unless there are clear reasons why it should not occur. Post-box contact is a good medium for maintaining links in many situations, e.g. between an adopted child and their birth sibling born after their adoption, where the arrangement provides the foundation for the possibility for a sibling relationship to be developed in the future.
- 4.2 Siblings in separate adoptive placements will often have direct contact. The frequency of this often depends on the distance between the families homes and the attempt of families to meet up. In this situation having an indirect arrangement through the post-box leaves the 'door open' for direct contact to be resumed at a future date – if required.
- 4.3 Adopted children may have indirect contact with siblings in residential care, foster placements or special guardianship placements. Consideration should be given to the ongoing support (practical and emotional) that will need to be provided to the looked after sibling to make this course of action successful.

5.0 What do we mean by the best interests of the child/ren?

- 5.1 Indirect contact should always be considered when it is in the best interests of the child and it is safe and appropriate to do so.
- 5.2 There are many positive aspects when post-box is considered:
- It can help to maintain sibling relationships.
 - It can confirm the child's sense of belonging in the adoptive family while not negating the relationship to the birth family.
 - It can help define personal identity and encourage positive reinforcement of cultural, religious and ethnic origins.
 - It is a useful means of information exchange, to inform life events, changes and developments in both families. It is a forum to check out memories, facts and history.

- It keeps doors open and provides re-assurance to the child that their birth family are not lost.
- It can enable the child/ren to develop a realistic understanding about why they were unable to remain with their birth family and can help separate fantasy and idealisation from fact.

5.3 Contact via post-box arrangements can also present challenges. For example:

- Birth parent(s) and/or family members may be irregular with sending their post-box which may result in the child feeling rejected and impact on their self-esteem.
- As the child gets older and becomes aware of the arrangements post-box exchanges may trigger memories and feelings that cause distress/anxiety.

Where these types of situations occur, it may be in the child's best interests for them not to actively partake in the post-box for a period of time. Where this is the case it is imperative that post-box continues on behalf of the child between adopters and birth family until the child is emotionally ready to partake in post-box again. It is important to continue to maintain post-box arrangements, and work to achieve the positive elements highlighted above for the child in the longer term.

5.4 Consider each child separately:

Just because children are placed together it does not necessarily follow that their contact needs are the same. They may not all share the same parents. In families with many siblings, it is necessary to identify the sibling relationships or natural groupings and not just be guided by their kin connection.

5.5 Change is intrinsic to the contact process:

Therefore; flexibility needs to be reflected in contact plans.

5.6 Take a realistic view of the birth family and/or relative's situation:

If individuals are known to be unreliable, question the wisdom of setting up post-box arrangements with them. Weigh up the good intentions of an exchange against the disappointment the child may feel when they or their adoptive parents don't receive the letter or card they expected and were promised. Query whether the child's needs are better met through the provision of a comprehensive life story book than organising indirect contact that is likely to fail. Consider also:

- Who in the birth family and/or relatives is to be party to the arrangement?

- Was there an established relationship with the child/ren?
- What was the quality of the relationship?
- What is the child's history?
- Age of child at removal from birth family and/or relatives?
- Are there cultural, religious or ethnic considerations?
- What, considering their chronological and development age, are the child's views?
- Consider the child's changing needs over time, especially when thinking about cards and photographs.
- What are the views of others? For instance, extended family members, foster carers, and the child's guardian ad litem etc.

5.7 All parties require preparation to contribute to indirect contact:

Adoptive parents may show reluctance or resistance to corresponding with someone who harmed or neglected their child. Similarly, birth family members and/or relatives, especially parents, can feel angry and resentful towards adoptive parents and might need help to overcome their negative feelings which can be reflected in their correspondence.

5.8 Conversely, new adopters can be very eager to please and unwittingly subscribe to arrangements that they later find unmanageable or difficult to undertake. Although the issue of contact is revisited at the time the placement is made, it can be difficult to deviate from the arrangement prescribed in court at the final hearing.

5.9 For birth family and/or relatives the post-box arrangement may become very significant as it is often the only tangible connection they have to the child. If an arrangement includes photographs, birth family and/or relatives may expect them at every exchange. It is important, therefore, to emphasise that life and circumstances can change in both the birth family and/or relatives and adoptive family and that this may influence the nature of the correspondence over time, necessitating changes in its content. This might include photographs being omitted by adopters due to concerns around social networking sites (usually in the child's teenage years).

5.10 Some families can manage quite complex arrangements, with exchanges taking place with different people at different times of the year. Others may cope better when the arrangements are straightforward and uncomplicated.

6.0 Assessment checklist when considering post box contact:



6.1 Child's views:

Have you obtained the child's views? If a child is of sufficient age and understanding establish their wishes and feelings with respect to contact. The closest attachments are not always the obvious ones. For example, in some families, the children may share the same biological parents but there may be a strong attachment between a child and a stepparent figure, or another child in the family who is not directly related. If the child is too young to express their views, make a list of who you think they would want ongoing contact with and why.

6.2 Number of exchanges:

Try not to be too inclusive. Setting up exchanges with various aunts and uncles may be unnecessary if the birth parents maintain contact and can take responsibility for passing on information about the child to their extended family. Consider the adopters; they may find it difficult to write to six people when two may be adequate to keep channels open for the child. Also, although the child needs to make sense of their birth family, post-box arrangements with less significant relatives may not be necessary; a photograph in the life story book may suffice. Always plan for the child's best interests and their benefit. Do not set up a post-box exchange to appease a birth relative.

6.3 Frequency:

In most cases an annual post box exchange is usually sufficient. Birth families and/or relatives will often request more but this can unsettle the child and adoptive parents. However, more frequent arrangements can prove too much for birth family and/or relatives, especially if there are few changes to their lives and they have little to say. If there are other children in the birth family who were adopted previously, check to see what post-box arrangement are in place for them. Birth relatives may become annoyed if they feel short-changed in anyway, so if the arrangement is to be less or more frequent or different in content, record how and why the decision was reached.

6.4 When: think about timing:

The timing of post-box exchanges can be very emotional especially those between adoptive parents and birth parents. The month of the child's birthday is best avoided as it may bring about emotions for all parties. Similarly, Christmas is best avoided and Mother and Father's Day. Take account of cultural sensitivities and

remember significant [religious festivals](#) such as Eid, when setting up arrangements.

6.5 Content: letters and /or cards:

The exchange should always be set up between the adult parties involved. Many birth families and/or relatives address their letters directly to the child, which some adopters are happy to accept. Older siblings like to write their own letters and cards to each other, and adopters are usually happy to accept these. Parents with learning disabilities may welcome a letter from adoptive parents but may feel happier to respond with birthday cards only, if writing a letter is difficult for them. However, think about cards from the child's perspective; will they be a personal touch or be potentially hurtful? Discourage birth parents from sending very large or emotional cards.

6.6 Photographs: what is the value or purpose of photographs:

Some adoptive parents are happy to include photographs in their exchange for birth family members and/or relatives, but do not always think of the consequences. For example, where do photographs go? Are they copied and passed to other people? Can they be used to trace children via the internet etc? Therefore, adopters may not always honour their original agreement that was discussed and agreed very early on in the planning stages once they have had time to reflect. Adoptive parents should select photographs carefully. The swimsuit pose on the beach may look cute but can be interpreted very differently by the recipient. Post-box coordinators have witnessed objections, particularly from adolescents, to their photograph being sent to birth relatives. What may seem appropriate at age three may not be suitable when the child is older.

6.7 In some circumstances it may be that the child's needs are best met by the exchange of photographs, but the risks are too great for the photographs to be forwarded to the birth family and/or relatives. These cases need to be individually assessed by workers using the **Risk Assessment for Consideration of Photographs to be viewed as part of the information exchange through the Post Box Service**

6.8 Signatures: Birth families/relatives must sign their post-box letters with their first name only and not birth mother/birth father etc:

A number of birth families and/or relatives persist in signing themselves birth mum/dad without understanding the confusion and mixed emotions it may evoke

in the child and the adoptive parents. They need to be helped to see the correspondence from the recipient's perspective.

6.9 Ability of participants to contribute: Have you taken account of individual support needs:

Some adoptive parents are critical of birth families and/or relatives if they do not keep to the arrangement. They interpret the absence of a letter as the birth family and/or relative no longer caring about the child. This is not necessarily the case. Often it is the lifestyle of the birth family and/or relative or a lack in their own abilities which disables them and prevents them from contributing e.g. chaotic drug use, imprisonment, mental health problems, learning or literacy disabilities. Sometimes it is simply too hard for birth family and/or relatives to write a letter. When setting up an arrangement take account of the individuals support needs and ensure they are in place.

6.10 Review and monitoring:

Indirect contact plans are made at various points during the care planning process. The Court care plan may be submitted some months before the final hearing. If, by then, circumstances have changed, the Court can be told that changes are necessary. Use the check list above to evidence your assessment. Ensure that the arrangement is recorded in the Adoption Support Plan but make it clear to all parties that the post-box arrangement can be reviewed in the future to suit the child's changing needs. If arrangements are in place for post-box with siblings in foster or residential care, ensure the arrangements are discussed at each statutory review. It is the responsibility of the Looked After Child's Social Worker to notify the post-box coordinator within the post-box service of changes of placement for children and young people in public care.

7.0 Setting up a post-box arrangement:

- 7.1 Post-box is coordinated and facilitated via the Local Permanency Hub's (LPH).
- 7.2 When a child is placed in their adoptive placement, the Family Finding Practitioner/Permanency Coordinator will update the Information Sharing Log (ISL) within the Central Permanency Hub with this information.
- 7.3 The ISL will then create an alert to the appropriate Locality Permanency Hub that is closest to birth family's geographical location, for post-box arrangements to be set up.



7.4 The post-box coordinator within the Locality Permanency Hub will create and generate the following post-box pack:

- post-box summary referral form
- prospective adopter(s) agreement x2 (1 copy for their retention - other copy to be signed and returned) and guidance booklet
- birth parents and relatives post-box agreements x2 (1 copy for their retention - other copy to be signed and returned) and guidance booklet
- risk Assessment- for viewing photographs x 1 for each birth relative

7.5 The post-box coordinator will complete a post-box summary referral form which will detail the proposed arrangements and details of the recipients in consultation with the Adoption Assessment & Support Social worker and the Child's Social Worker to ensure that information is in line with the child's final court care plan.

7.6 It is important that the basic details of the case and any **significant information** relevant to the running of post-box, is provided on the summary sheet and the agreements.

7.7 It is imperative that this information is solely stored within each Locality Permanency Hub's 'Post-Box IT System' and is not stored on the Locality Hub's General Case Management System. The reason for this is that information on Adopter(s) need to be kept separate from birth family details to ensure that data breaches do not occur.

7.8 The post-box agreement contains the details of what is expected and what has been agreed by all parties.

7.9 A separate agreement needs to be completed for each child as each child has their own post-box file; the arrangements may change over time based on the needs of the child.

7.10 In exceptional circumstances where serious risks are evidenced, the post-box service will facilitate the supervised viewing of photographs for birth families and/or relatives. There needs to be a clear rationale for not sending photographs so please consider the suitability of this in each case and undertake an appropriate risk assessment of each relative. The risks of posting on the internet is not sufficient as this will always be a risk and family members and/or relatives can be told that to do so will result in an immediate withdrawal of any agreed photograph exchange and in some instances the agreement may be terminated.

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- 7.11 The exchange of digital media via post-box is acceptable containing up to 8 photographs. The exchange of digital media containing music or voice recordings or DVDs containing videos is not permitted.
- 7.12 The post-box coordinator will provide adoptive families and birth relatives practical advice and emotional support in relation to post-box in the long-term future.
- 7.13 The agreements are made between the adults involved so that the adopters will write to the birth family and/or relatives. There is no expectation that the child will write to their birth family and/or relatives, although they may be encouraged or choose to be included.
- 7.14 It is for the judgement of the adoptive parents to decide when to share the post-box with the child, as in certain circumstances it may be very unsettling or unwelcome.
- 7.15 All correspondence will be sent directly to the adoptive parents until the young person is 18 at which point the service will be reviewed in consultation with the adopters and young adult.
- 7.16 All birth families and/or relatives will be required to write their post-box using their first names, **not** Mum or Dad. 'Son' and 'Daughter' cards are also **not** permitted. Discussion needs to take place with both birth families and/or relatives and the adopters at an early stage to ensure that expectations are clear.
- 7.17 Birth families and/or relatives should be encouraged to write to the adoptive parents separately about important changes, such as the birth of siblings, medical information and deaths in the family. Adoptive parents can then decide when to share the news with the child.
- 7.18 Birth families and/or relatives need to word their correspondence in a child focused manner suitable for the age of the child.
- 7.19 The above information is detailed in the guidance booklet for adopters and birth families.

8.0 Signing of the post-box agreement:

- 8.1 The post-box coordinator will arrange a meeting with adopter(s) to work through the agreement and for the agreement to be signed. During this meeting the post-box coordinator will offer advice and support about the importance of engaging in meaningful post-box to aid the child's sense of identity and security throughout their childhood.



- 8.2 The post-box agreement will then be saved to child's adoption record.
- 8.3 If a face to face meeting with adopter(s) is not achievable for this to be undertaken via telephone. Again, advice and support about the importance of engaging in meaningful post-box to aid the child's sense of identity and security throughout their childhood needs to be discussed. Agreements would then be posted out for adopter(s) to sign and return to appropriate locality office which then would be saved to the child's adoption record.
- 8.4 The next stage would be for the post-box coordinator to make contact with birth parent(s) and/or relatives to arrange a meeting at a locality office closest to their geographical location to discuss the post-box arrangements and to get the agreement signed.
- 8.5 Again, at this meeting the post-box coordinator will offer advice and support about the importance of engaging in meaningful post-box to aid the child's sense of identity and security throughout their childhood. A discussion would also be had to ascertain whether they would need any support in receiving future post-box, the writing of their post-box and what this would entail.
- 8.6 Once the post-box agreement has been signed this would be saved to child's adoption record.
- 8.7 Again, if a face to face is not achievable for this to be undertaken via telephone and agreements posted out to sign and returned to appropriate locality office. Advice and support about the importance of engaging in meaningful post-box to aid the child's sense of identity and security throughout their childhood needs to be discussed.
- 8.8 If the post-box coordinator cannot contact make successful contact with birth parent(s) and/or relatives, the post-box coordinator will attempt to make contact again at 4 weeks and then at 8 weeks.
- 8.9 If still no contact has been achieved the post-box coordinator will attempt to make contact again during the month when post-box exchange is due to commence.
- 8.10 The post-box coordinator will continue to attempt to make contact with birth parents and/or relatives on an annual basis during the proposed post-box month in an attempt to support and assist them to engage in post-box arrangements which is in the child's best interests.

- 8.11 The post-box agreements should be filled in during the first few weeks of the adoptive placement commencing and, in all cases, completed by the time of the Adoption Order.

9.0 Post-Box Exchanges:

- 9.1 One month before the post-box exchange is due to take place the post-box coordinator will send out a reminder letter out to adopter(s) reminding them that their post-box is due.
- 9.2 If post-box has still not been received by the end of the proposed month a 2nd reminder letter will be sent.
- 9.3 If there is still no contact after this the post-box coordinator will contact the adopter(s) to explore this further to ascertain if they need any advice and/or support in completing their post-box.

10.0 Receiving of post-box from adopter(s):

- 10.1 When the post-box coordinator receives the post-box from adopter(s) the content will be reviewed to ensure that information contained isn't insensitive or likely to offend and then this will be scanned, and a copy saved to the child's adoption file.
- 10.2 If post-box content is not appropriate the post-box coordinator will make contact with adopter(s) to offer advice and support to amend the post-box.

11.0 Sharing of post-box with birth parents and/or relatives:

- 11.1 Birth families and/or relatives should contact the post-box service each time their post box is due to request their correspondence.
- 11.2 The post-box coordinator will confirm their postal address to ensure post-box will be sent to the correct address and if they still wish to receive it. If birth parents and/or relatives do not need any support with receiving of the post-box it will then be posted.
- 11.3 If the birth parents and/or relatives do require support with the sharing of the post box and/or if they need to view a photograph of the child, the post-box coordinator will invite them into a locality office closest to their geographical location to undertake this task.

11.4 If we do not hear from birth family and/or relatives the post-box coordinator will write to them at their last known address to inform them that their post-box has arrived and asking them to make contact to confirm their address if they wish to receive it.

11.5 If individual birth family relatives do not request their post-box from adopters for a period of five consecutive years, the agreement(s) between them may be suspended if adopters request this.

12.0 Receiving of post-box from birth parents:

12.1 If birth parents and/or relatives require support in the writing of their post-box the post-box coordinator will invite them to a locality office within their geographical location. This task could be undertaken at the same time if the birth parents/and or relatives attend locality office requiring support when receiving the post-box from adopter(s).

12.2 If birth parents and/or relatives do not need support in writing their post-box they will then send this to the appropriate designated locality office stated within their agreement.

12.3 When the post-box coordinator receives the post-box, the post-box coordinator will review the content to ensure that information contained is not insensitive or likely to offend.

12.4 If post-box is not appropriate, the post-box coordinator will make contact with birth parent(s) and/or relatives to discuss the content and offer advice and support to amend the post-box.

13.0 Sharing of post-box with adopters:

13.1 If post-box is appropriate; the post-box coordinator will then scan and save to the child's adoption file and then send out the original post-box to adopter(s).

13.2 The post-box coordinator does not need to contact adopters to confirm their postal address is correct before posting as the responsibility is on adopters to update the designated locality office of any changes to their postal address.

14.0 Data Breaches relating to the sharing of post-box:

14.1 It is absolutely critical that post-box coordinators before sharing post-box with any birth family members that the following measures are adhered to, to ensure data breaches do not occur:

- To review the post-box agreement on each occasion when post-box is received by adopter(s) to ensure that what is being shared is in line with the signed agreement, risk assessment and shared with the correct person(s).
- To review the content of the post-box to ensure that there is no information that identifies the location and/or personal details of adopter(s) that could be used to trace adopter(s).
- If post-box is received in plastic wallets the wallets to be shredded prior to the post-box being forwarded on to ensure that there are no breaches of confidentiality caused by information being passed on in error by birth family members writing on the plastic wallets.
- If adopter(s) send in digital post-box to the post-box service i.e. PDF's and J-Peg photos for example for this information to be cut and pasted into a new document and then forwarded onto birth family members. The reason for this is that within the digital document's, information is present regarding the 'author' which would be the adopter(s) of this document that can be searched for by family members.
- It is imperative that post-box agreements, risk assessments, referral forms and post-box are solely stored within each Locality Permanency Hub's Post-Box IT System and are not stored on the Locality Hub's General Case Management System. The reason for this is that information on Adopter(s) need to be kept separate from birth family details to ensure that data breaches do not occur.

14.2 If a breach of security or confidentiality resulting in the compromise of any data occurs this must be reported to Information Governance Unit of the Local Authority affected as soon as the incident is discovered as well as T4C Head of Operations.

The affected Local Authority will investigate, report on and manage the incident in line with their local procedures, regulatory requirements, and responsibilities as a Data Controller.

Depending on the nature of the security incident, the affected Local Authority according to GDPR guidelines may need to notify where appropriate any data subject or the Information Commissioner's Office within 48 hours.

Contact Details for Information Governance Units:

Shropshire Council:
Tom Mullen



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15.0 Other Information relating to Post-Box:

- 15.1 The post-box record will eventually be sent to archives to be linked with the adoption records.
- 15.2 In situations where the adopter(s) have moved or ceased communication, the post-box service can make reasonable efforts to contact them but has no power to enforce an agreement. The birth family and/or relatives will be advised to seek legal advice.
- 15.3 The post-box coordinator will undertake any necessary mediation between adopter and birth family and/or relatives.

16.0 Reviewing:

- 16.1 The Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) will have a role in reviewing post-box agreements prior to the Adoption Order being granted, and this will be a key issue at the Child's Statutory Review.
- 16.2 The post-box arrangements will be reviewed **yearly** by the post-box coordinator in consultation with the adopters and birth families and/or relatives.
- 16.3 Recipients of post-box can request changes at any time and changes may be made as a result based on the needs of the child.
- 16.4 If there is an adoption break down the post-box agreement(s) will be reviewed, and any appropriate changes made

17.0 Post 18 Arrangements:

- 17.1 The post-box coordinator will send a letter to adopter(s) when the young person is 17 years old highlighting the closure process of post-box for when young person turns 18 years old and whether they would like to consider post-box continuing



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until the young person is 21 years old (25 years old in some circumstances which could be due to the adult's emotional and developmental functioning).

- 17.2 When the adopted adult turns 18 years old the post-box coordinator will send a further letter to the adopted adult advising that post-box will come to an end unless he/she contacts the post-box coordinator to advise that they wish for post-box to remain open as stated above.
- 17.3 The letter will also include information about how the adopted adult can access the contact register and their adoption records in the future.
- 17.4 If post-box closes; the post-box coordinator will send a letter to birth parent(s) and/or relatives advising that post-box has come to an end and also enclosing information from the [Government Website](#) about how they can access the Contact Register in the future.
- 17.5 If post-box continues, post-box will be managed as before via their adoptive parents or alternatively the adopted adult can sign a post-box agreement. That arrangement will be reviewed yearly as previously stated and could continue as described above until the age of 21 years of age (25 years of age in some circumstances).
- 17.6 If there is no ongoing communication in the case or a response from the adoptive family/ young person or on their request, the post-box record will be closed and sent to Archives.

18.0 Complaints:

- 18.1 The 'Post Box' service endeavours to treat all parties with respect; however, any adopter(s), birth parents or relatives, young person or adopted adult who are not satisfied with the way they have been treated can contact the Permanency Support Team Manager and/or make a complaint under the Complaints Procedure.

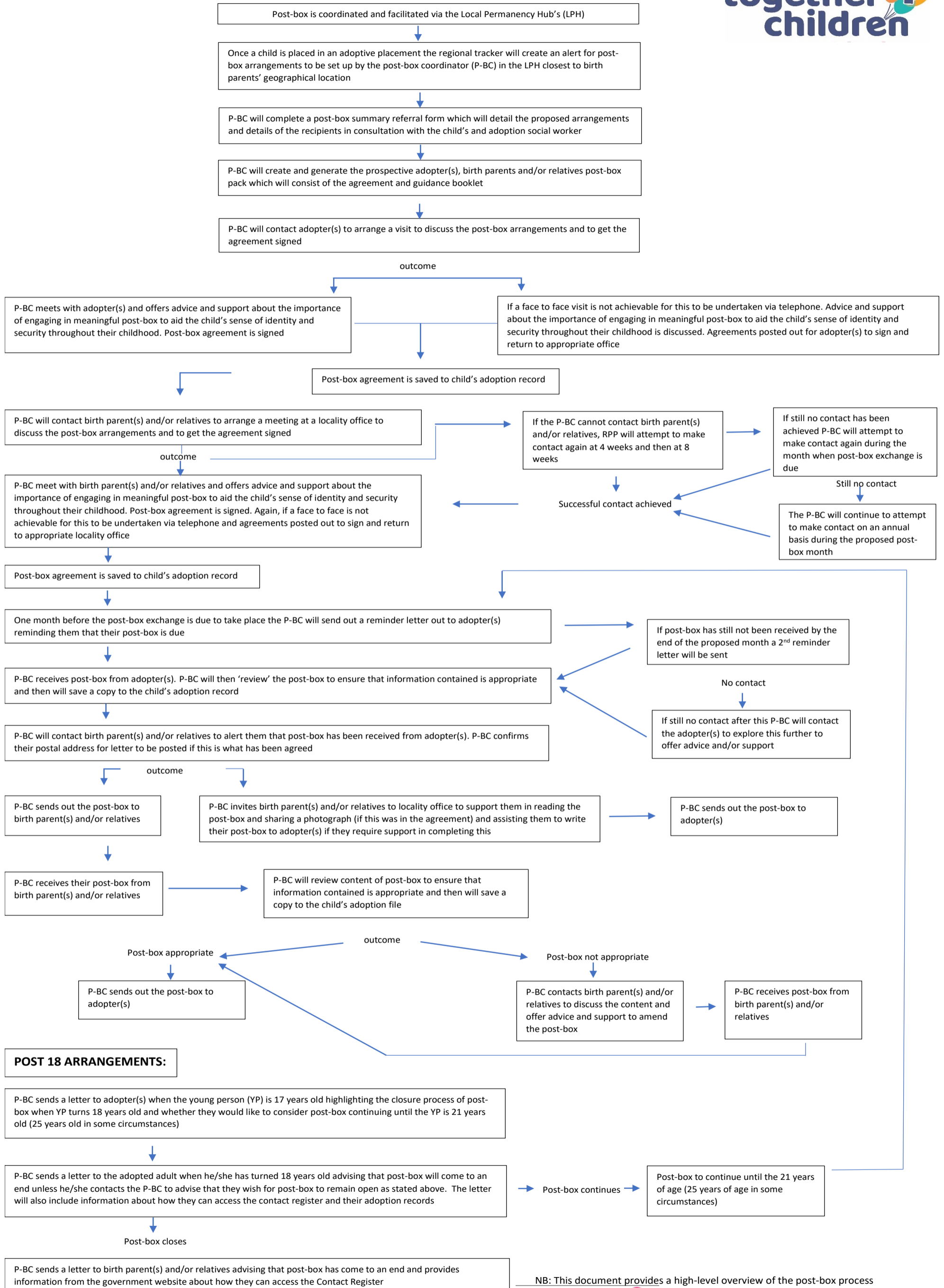
19.0 Roles and Responsibilities:

- 19.1
- All staff are responsible for following the guidance within this policy
 - Managers are responsible for enforcing this policy
- 19.2 See flowchart of a high-level process of post-box below:





Together4Children Post-Box Journey



NB: This document provides a high-level overview of the post-box process

