

## Later Life Letters

### 1. Introduction

The Later Life Letter is written by the child's social worker to a child who is being adopted, with the aim of helping the child understand their past, increase their self-esteem and strengthen their resilience. The letter is given to prospective adopters at the latest within 10 working days of the adoption ceremony and is intended to be read by/to the child, at an appropriate time in the future. If not already written, a draft of the letter should be presented at the pre order meeting.

The Later Life Letter will be given to a child when they are considered old enough by their adoptive parent(s). It is an expanded version of the **Life Story Book** and gives more detail of the child's history and the decision-making process.

Please use this guidance to help you enhance your skills in writing a Later Life Letter. The guidance covers matters that need to be addressed and includes advice on how to address the most difficult issues.

### 2. The Role and Purpose of the Later Life Letter

#### What is a Later Life Letter?

The Later Life Letter provides information on the child's life from their birth up to the time of their placement for adoption and explains the reasons and actions that led up to this decision being made, including why they could not live with their birth family.

The child is the focus of the letter and it must be remembered when writing the letter that the child has a need to know why they have been placed for adoption. This is important information and it must be a true account of the process. The letter should be able to give the child a personal sense of their own history and a sense of their value and worth, something that a court report or the Child's Permanence Report (CPR) cannot provide.

The letter should include, whenever possible, the views of the people involved in the process, including the birth family.

The letter is a good opportunity for the social worker to include personal anecdotes and comments about the child, from their own experience or/and from the experiences of other important people in the child's life (such as the foster carer). This personal touch can help the child to understand that they are important and valued.

Remember that every child will see the letter at a different age, and so the letter, whilst being truthful, must be written so that a child can understand it.

Our expectation would be that the child sees the letter around the ages of 10-12 years, but the final decision on timing is at the discretion of the adoptive parents. In very difficult situations (e.g. incest, mental health problems, abuse) it may be better to write 2 letters. The second one for when the child is in mid-teens, and better able to understand about their history.

## What is the Difference between the Later Life Letter and the Life Story Book?

The letter is in addition to the child's Life Story Book and should never be a substitute for the book - see **Life Story Books Guidance**. The main difference between the Later Life Letter and the Life Story Book lies in the depth of the detail being shared with the child. Thus, more detailed and sensitive information should be included in the Later Life letter as the letter will be shared with the child at a later age when they are emotionally able to understand and deal with the information.

## What is Important? Everything!

The information may be lost if not gathered together now. Experience shows that adult adoptees are eager for information collected at this time, even if it is painful.

The letter can be personalised by the social worker who knew the birth parents and the child at the time of the placement.

Be confident - don't be intimidated by the task. It is difficult but not impossible and so important for the child/young person in terms of their identity.

You have all the information you need. Think of yourself as an adopted person, what information would you want, what questions would you ask your birth parents? According to research, there are 4 main questions that adoptees ask when they think about their adoption:

- Why could my birth parents not care for me?
- Did their birth parents receive any help?
- Do the birth parents think about them now?

## 3. The Content of the Later Life Letter. What Information Should be Included?

There are different ways of compiling Later Life Letters, and in each case the written style of the social worker and the information available will be different.

Please avoid copying information from the social work documents; the letter needs to be personal to the child.

As stated earlier, in very difficult situations it is a good idea to have 2 letters. Below you can find some suggestions on what information you should include in the letter and how to do it.

### Beginning of the Letter

- Begin by introducing yourself;
- Acknowledge that some time will have passed before the letter is read and that the child may not remember you;
- Talk about your role in relation to the child, the length of your involvement, and the reason for writing the letter;
- Mention other previous significant social workers who were involved (if that is the case) - give their names, and when and why they were involved;

- Acknowledge that it might be difficult for your person to read the letter and that they can ask of help from their adoptive parents while reading it.

**Example:**

*Dear Zoe,*

*You might not remember me as you were very young when I met you. My name is Lucy – you can find a photo of me in your life story book, and I was your social worker when you were little. A social worker is someone who helps parents to look after their children and if they cannot do that, find new parents for those children.*

*I first met you when you were just 1 year old, and you were living with your foster carers John and Jane. I was the person who helped arrange for you to live with your mother and father.*

*I am writing this letter to you so that you can understand a bit about your past, the reasons why you were adopted and how you came to live with your mother and father and became Zoe Smith. I wrote this letter when you were little, and I have tried to think of the questions that you may have when you are older, and I hope I haven't left anything out.*

*Before going any further, I need to let you know that you might find some parts of this letter difficult or upsetting. You might want to ask someone to be with you or read it with you and remember you don't have to read this all in one go. You might want to stop and have a break or save some for another day and that is fine*

**Write About the Child's Birth and the Pregnancy**

It is important to include as much information possible about the mother's pregnancy and the child's birth. This is often the information that children would like to know.

**Include:**

- Date of birth;
- Time;
- Name of the hospital;
- Weight and length;
- Physical condition;
- Experience of pregnancy;
- Length of labour;
- Type of delivery;
- Time spend in the hospital with birth mother;
- Name given by the birth parents and why;
- Who was present;
- What happened next?
- Who cared for the child after their birth?

**Example:**

*'You were born in Worthing Hospital on Tuesday, 11 May 2001 at approximately 8.00 am. Your birth weight was 3.3 kilograms. When I visited the hospital later that same morning, I saw you beside your birth mother's bed in your own cot. You were a very alert baby already aware of what was going on around you, and with a plentiful head of mid-brown hair. Your birth mother, Mary, told me that your birth had been a straightforward delivery without any complications. She also told me that your birth father, John, had been with her in the delivery room when you were born.'*

**Include Information About the Child's Life Before and During Care**

It is important to include all facts related to:

- Where the child lived – include names of caregivers, addresses, dates, description of caregivers and their family and talk about why they had to move;
- Names and descriptions of each school the child attended and the reason for the moves – include names of the teachers, school friends and progress at school;
- The child's development milestones – such as when they said their first words, had their first tooth, took their first steps, learned to read;
- The child's characteristics, sayings, activities, interests at various stages;
- Details of any child's friends and pets.

**Example:**

*'When I knew you, you were a beautiful little baby girl with perfect skin and soft curly hair. You had big brown eyes and an infectious chuckle. You were always smiling, and you used to babble in time with conversations in the family which made everybody laugh. Everybody you saw you fell in love with you. You liked to be read to all the time and would cry when a book was finished always wanting to hear more. You also, loved to splash in the bath and play in your baby gym.'*

**Describe the Birth Family Members**

It is important to focus on those family members who have had the most significant relationships with the child and had an influence on the child's experience. Details of other family members who were not significant to the child's experience could be found in CPR or in the genogram and the letter can refer to these additional sources if necessary. Be mindful that the letter contains lot of information and unnecessary information can confuse and burden the child.

**What to focus on:**

- The birth family's situation at the time you became involved in the case – where the children were living (mention the house, surroundings, etc.) and the situation of the birth parents and siblings;
- Describe the family members:
  - First name;
  - Date and place of birth if known;
  - Their age when the child was born;
  - Ethnic origin;

- Physical description, appearance and personality.
- Include as much information possible about birth parents:
  - Their background and upbringing;
  - Academic and employment history;
  - Interests;
  - Health;
  - The parent's relationship;
  - As much information available about the putative father;
  - Sometimes information on the birth father is limited. Whatever is available should be provided. If the identity of the birth father is not confirmed by him, only non-identifying information about him should be included;
  - Use the term 'birth mother/father' to avoid confusion with adoptive parents.
- Include information about siblings if they were not placed together. Are they adopted? If they live with birth parents, explain why. The child needs to know what happened to their brothers and sisters, who care for them, and if relevant, why there is no contact. Be careful to give only first names for all birth relatives and do not use addresses or other identifying information. Be mindful about the amount of information you include, it should be long enough for the child to know what happened to their siblings but remember that the child is the focus of the letter.

**Examples for describing birth family members:**

*'Your birth mother, Mary, was 17 when I knew her. Mary is Polish and speaks polish and English. At the time when I met her, she was a beautiful young woman with long curly hair, big back eyes and a pale skin tone. She had a warm personality and everybody who knew her could not help liking her as she was always friendly and very honest.'*

or

*'Sue's mother couldn't take care of her and she often went hungry and run away from home and because of this she was taken into care. Sue spent next years of her life in different foster homes and children's homes and she felt very lonely as she didn't have any friends. Making friends was difficult for her because of her unsettled childhood experience she didn't think it would be safe for her to get too close to other people. During this time Sue felt very sad and felt that life was not good and the only way to relieve the pain was to hurt herself by scratching her arm and legs.'*

or

*'I've only met your birth father on several occasions, but I found him to be friendly with a good sense of humour, although at times he was forgetful, and I would have to remind him of contact and court dates'*

or

*'Your birth mother did not know your father very well. She told me that his name was John and that they lost touch before you were born so she couldn't tell him she had had a baby girl, so he did not know about you. I think it is a shame that your birth father doesn't know what a lovely girl he has.'*

### Talk About Reasons for Adoption

There will already be enough information to help the social worker to structure the events that led the child to be placed for adoption. However, the key thing about the later life letter is that it gives the opportunity to explain these events in a more personal way so it could give the child an overview of their early life experiences.

The following explanations are found to be the most common for why the birth parents could not care for their children:

- Their parents were struggling with problems or troubles of their own;
- Their parents have never learnt how to look after and care for others;
- Their parents might be too ill;
- Their parents may have been shown the wrong way to look after their children.

It is important to include clear explanations of when and why the big decisions were made, and who made them. The children need to know the reason behind these decisions and need to have a confirmation that the decision was in their interest and the best option for them.

You should also specify the date the Adoption Order was granted, the name of the court, and the names and office bases of all the social workers and family placement/adoption social workers involved prior to and after the placement.

The letter should also include, wherever possible the birth parent's attitude for adoption and their hope for the child's future.

### Examples:

*'Very small babies need a lot of attention in order to be able to grow up well and be happy and healthy. They need food and warmth; clean nappies and they need to feel that their mother or carer is sensitive to what they are feeling and what they need. Babies need a lot of attention and smiles. When a birth mother is tired and stressed and worried about a violent partner or under the influence of drugs and alcohol it is difficult for her to give attention to the baby.'*

or

*'We had been told that the house was cold and dark and very dirty. When Mary and John invited me in, I could see this was true. There were also many dangerous things lying around such as broken glass and dog's poo (it was a bit smelly) and other things that weren't safe and could harm you. I realised that Mary was very young and seemed sad and John seemed quite helpless. Being a mother and father is a hard job, and children need to be fed, kept warm and safe.'*

### Explain How the Family was Chosen

Write about:

- Some details of the adoptive family, including the process of choosing and the reasons for choosing the current family;
- The child's introduction to the adoptive family – the process of introductions, reactions, etc.

- Date of moving to the new family;
- Final visits with birth parents or other birth family members – mention who was involved, where the visit/s took place, what happened, positive comments made, and any gifts given.

## Contact

Whilst contact may prove to be a significant aspect of the child's experience following placement for adoption, there are difficulties in describing arrangements which are proposed at the time the letter is written, but which may have changed considerably by the time it is read. For this reason, it is better to deal with contact in a more general way.

### For example:

*'As your social worker, I felt it would be helpful if (birth mother's name) and your mother and father wrote to each other once a year through the Letterbox. It is sometimes difficult for people to do this, but your mother and father will be able to tell you if this has worked out'.*

Or

*'Mary said she would like to write to you once you were adopted, but I wasn't sure she would be able to keep this up. She had not always kept her appointments to see you before and although she meant well, couldn't always do what she said she would do. Because of this I thought it would be better for her not to write to you. When you are older you may want to know more about your birth mother or father, talk to your mother and father about this and they might be able to help you'.*

## Ending the Letter

Convey your best wishes for the child's future and comment on your own pleasure at being part of the child's life in a simple and balanced way. As far as possible your final greetings should be consistent with the tone of the letter generally. Terms such as "lots of love" or "have a great life" should be avoided.

## 4. What to Consider when Writing the Later Life Letter?

### Structure

- Consider using headings to divide the information into sections for a better clarity – the headings set out in point 3 above could be used as guidance for how to divide information;
- Use the guidance to write the letter, but make sure to tailor it to suit the child;
- Brothers and sisters must have separate letters even when placed together, and this includes twins;
- The letter needs to be concise, but it should include all relevant information.

### Language

- Language should be informal as much as possible and when official terminology is used in needs to be explained, i.e. what is a placement order? or what is an adoption panel and its function?

- Use 'birth mother/father' rather than 'natural mother', 'tummy mummy' or 'real mother' when referring to birth family, and when referring to the adoptive family check out with them how they refer to each other, i.e. mummy and daddy, or pops and dad, and use those words.

**Length**

- The length will differ on each case and will depend on the relevant information;
- It has been suggested for the letter to be between 4-8 A4pages.

**Considering specific needs**

- When writing the letter consider the child's needs, bearing in mind any developmental delays and learning needs;
- There may be cases in which the young person cannot communicate or read and in these cases, it might be best to make an audio or video recording.

**Other things to consider**

- Date and sign the letter. Keep a copy on file and send the letter to the adopters' social worker who will give it to the adopters with guidance on how to use it;
- You may want to send the letters electronically – DVD or secure email (Mail express);
- Upload the letters on the child's electronic case record.

**5. References**

For further information or examples, please consult 'Writing later life letter', by [Fran Moffat](#)

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