

**Letterbox Exchange Practice Guidance 2021**

The Adoption Act 1976 established the principle of openness in adoption in England and Wales. The implementation of the legislation set foundations for changing a practice of secrecy and denial which had existed for many of those affected by adoption and lead to the increase of contact between birth and adoptive families, which is changing the face of adoption.

 Modern adoption incorporates the acknowledgement that contact is largely beneficial and even central to the child’s wellbeing and this is supported within Northamptonshire Children’s Trust Voluntary Adoption Agency (NCC VAA).

Where direct contact is *not considered to be safe* between adoptive and birth families, letterbox is a positive option for promoting indirect contact.

Letterbox contact is the confidential sharing of information and updates, about an adopted child, between the birth family and the adoptive family, on behalf of the child and eventually potentially involving the child.

Where there is a plan of adoption, contact arrangements will have been agreed within Care Proceedings and decisions arrived at will then have been detailed within the Child’s Permanence Report and Adoption Placement Report at the point that a match with adopters is presented to the adoption panel. Contact plans are always agreed with the needs of the child as the paramount consideration, in relation to contact in adoption plans will need to allow for a level of flexibility to allow for adjustments in line with the child’s wishes and feelings as their understanding of their family history develops over time.

NCT VAA support adoptive families and birth families to share a mediated relationship which promotes the identity of the child in order that they feel able to develop a holistic sense of their identity as they understand their story differently at different stages in their development.

The aim of contact, including the exchange of letters, is to give the child permission to talk about their birth family, with their adoptive family which enables them to share discussions about the reasons for their adoption and supports them and their birth families to be reassured about one another and know that they are held in mind.

 It is possible that letters from the adopters to the birth family alleviate some of the distress that birth families experience and are likely to support those families to make a move forwards in their own lives.

Research demonstrates that positive communication between the adoptive and birth family members can build a solid foundation for the success of an adoption by enabling a relationship with the birth and adoptive families and if circumstances change and adopted children are able to meet birth families, this foundation may make that easier for all concerned.

NCT VAA recognise the need for practice which acknowledges the different stages of the adoption journey and as such have practice guidance for correspondence between birth and adoptive families before and after the adoption order.

Letterbox Exchange for Children Placed for Adoption Pre Adoption Order

This relates to the period of time between a child moving in with their adoptive family and the adoption order being granted. During this period the child continues to be a Child Looked After by Northamptonshire Children’s Trust and as such the trust are the corporate parents who delegate day to day parental responsibility to the adoptive parent/s (as detailed in the APR)

**Settling In Letter**

During this period the adoptive family are expected to write a brief *settling in letter* to the birth family approximately four weeks after the children are placed with them. Support and guidance is available to the adopter/s to complete this. The *settling in letter* will be passed to the child’s social worker for checking prior to sharing with the birth family and a copy saved on the child’s adoption file.

If birth family members wish to send a response to the *settling in letter* they should be supported to do so by the child’s SW. As with the settling in letter from the adoptive family the correspondence should be checked prior to sharing with the adoptive family and a copy saved on the child’s adoption file.

If the birth family wish to send other letters/cards during the period between the child being placed and the adoption order being granted the same process of checking, saving and sharing should be followed.

Any concerns in relation to the content of correspondence from either the adoptive or birth family should be discussed with the Social worker’s line manager and support offered to the author to make any changes as appropriate. These discussions and agreed actions should be recorded on the child’s adoption file.

There is no legal option to dispose of any communication from birth family but in the instance that it is not appropriate and the author is not in agreement to change it, the correspondence will be stored on the child’s file and clearly noted that it has not been appropriate to share this with the adoptive family or child.

**Post Adoption Order Letterbox Process**

In line with the child’s care plan, details within the CPR and Adoption Placement report in relation to post adoption contact a formal letterbox agreement will need to be completed and sent to the letterbox coordinator, along with the brief referral form **no later than the first adoption order directions hearing.**

The child’s social worker will be responsible for completing the letterbox agreement with birth family and the adoption social worker will be responsible for completing the agreement with the adoptive family.

Post adoption contact should be discussed with adopters on an ongoing basis, from the outset of their adoption journey. Discussions should focus on the lifelong implications of adoption and the important role contact plays in supporting adopted children’s sense of self and identity as well as providing a forum for the exchange of information between adopters and birth family members.

It is important to note and to ensure that birth families appreciate that in the absence of a Contact Order being granted alongside the Adoption Order the contact *arrangements* are at the discretion of the adoptive family who will become the legal parents for the children when an adoption order is granted. NCT VAA will work with adopters throughout their adoption journey to support them to understand the importance and significance of the ongoing role the birth family have in relation to their child’s wellbeing in order to support them to maintain, and be flexible in facilitating, contact in the best interests of the child. NCT VAA will make it clear to adoptive families that it an expectation that contact arrangements are maintained in line with their child’s care plan and that advice and guidance are available to them, their child and birth family members to support this throughout the child’s minority.

**Format of letterbox communication exchanges.**

It will be the expectation that the adoptive parent/s will take a positive lead on writing and sharing letter box exchanges with their children at the appropriate time and their responsibility to make their children aware that they ***can*** be part of the exchange if they choose to do so, alongside their parents.

 Adoptive Parents will have been made aware during the preparation and training process that at times and often in the early stages of placements, birth parents may find it difficult to engage in the exchange as they come to terms with the outcome of the plans for their child and should therefore be aware that sometimes it is not manageable for birth families to maintain contact and that their commitment to the exchange should not be affected by this.

We are able to accept letterbox exchanges via post and email: ***letters sent via email should be sent as an attachment to the email and not within the email body.***

Families often choose to send exchanges in the form of cards or postcards and may also want to send audio or video snippets or creative artwork. Individual letterbox agreements should reflect what is acceptable but adopters and birth family members must be prepared for agreements to be flexible and updated in line with the changing needs of the child. This may include the consideration of introducing direct contact, in these situations the adoption support team can work with all parties to explore and support this.

**Process Flowchart**

**The Process for post order exchange of communication via letterbox co ordinator.**

 **Adoption social worker** to ensure that the adoptive parents have read the Letterbox information sheets and the Letterbox fact sheet and fully understand the expectations. This is to be considered in the selection meeting in order to be clear that adopters identified for the child/ren are able to meet the assessed needs of the child/ren in respect of post adoption contact as detailed in their care plan.

**Adoption social worker** to ensure that the adoptive parent/s sign the Adoptive Parent Letterbox Agreement form (AP1) and fill in the Letterbox referral form (adopters)

**Adoption social worker** sends Adopters Letterbox Agreement and Letterbox referral form (adopters) to the Child’s SW and cc to the letterbox co ordinator. Frequency and timing of the letterbox exchanges will be based on the child’s care plan and shared with all parties and will include discussions around the inclusion of photographs, audio snippets, artwork etc. All of which should be recorded within the agreement.

**Child’s social worker** will liaise with birth family members to complete the letter box agreement in line with the child’s care planand advise them of the support available to them.

 **Child’s social worker** completes the Birth Parent referral form and the birth family Letterbox Agreement Form (BR1).

**Child’s social worker** and **adoption social worker** to coordinate and ensure that all forms from both families are sent to the letterbox coordinator with the referral at the time of the first adoption hearing. It is the **child’s social worker**’s responsibility to coordinate that this is completed. If there is any additional information which may support effective letterbox contact exchange, this could also be sent to the Letterbox Coordinator.

Upon receipt of the Letterbox Referral forms, the **letterbox coordinator** checks that they have all the necessary information and check whether or not a contact order has been issued.

The **Letterbox co ordinator** will liaise with the **child’s social worker** is to ascertain whether it would be helpful to meet with birth family members to clarify their understanding of the arrangement and the supports available to them.

The **Letterbox coordinator** will liaise with the **adoption social worker** is to ascertain whether it would be helpful to meet with the adopters to clarify their understanding of the arrangement and the supports available to them.

**Letterbox exchange will become the responsibility of the co ordinator once the adoption order is granted and the child’s social worker must notify the coordinator at the pint the adoption order is granted.**