

# Letterbox Team

## Information for Birth Relatives



## **What is the Letterbox Scheme?**

The Letterbox scheme is a simple means for people to stay in touch. The contact is between the adoptive family and significant people that had a role in the adopted child's life; for example the birth family, the siblings living outside the birth family, or siblings living elsewhere within permanent placements etc.

All Letterbox Agreements are voluntary arrangements and will be at the discretion of the adopters unless Court Ordered at the time an Adoption Order has been made.

## **Who can it benefit?**

### **The person being adopted:**

A child's life does not begin the day they are adopted. Keeping in touch with birth relatives can help children understand about their family history. It sometimes make it easier to come to terms with or understand their personal history. It can also provide a sense of continuity in their lives and help the child to attach to their adoptive family.

Research has shown that where contact works well, the child grows up having a more realistic view and understanding of their birth relatives and it encourages greater openness about adoption.

### **The Adopters:**

For the adopting family, it may be useful to know about a child's background and heritage. By keeping in touch, they may be able to help their adopted child deal with issues that arise relating to their adoption.

### **The Birth family:**

For birth relatives (for example; parents, grandparents, siblings etc), giving up a child for adoption is very hard. You do not forget that the child exists.

We now know that being able to send a card, or an occasional letter, can sometimes help to keep those memories in a good place and ensure that a child's general progress through their childhood years is shared.

## **How does the Letterbox scheme work?**

When an adoptive placement is agreed, those directly involved (the adoptive family and the birth relatives) sign a Letterbox Agreement, which clearly sets out their agreed contact arrangement.

The Letterbox Agreement is set up between adults, these being the adoptive parents and birth parents (or guardians of siblings for example) and not between an adult and a child.

Agreements will contain the following information:

- Who the agreement is between
- The type of contact items to be sent
- The frequency/times of year contact will take place
- The names to be used within contact items

The child's social worker is responsible for ensuring that Letterbox Agreements are discussed, set up and signed by both parties. Once the Agreement and contact information is received from the Child in Care Social Worker, the Letterbox team will make sure that both parties receive a copy of the final agreement, and Letterbox code (e.g. LB001) which will be used by everyone who is posting the contact items. The team will store the agreement in a file and keep personal contact information confidential.

Once the agreement is ready to start, all contact items will need to be posted to the Letterbox Team, where they are checked for appropriate content, and a copy kept on file, before being forwarded on to the intended recipient.

Items that contain inappropriate content or disclosing identifying information (surnames, addresses, school names etc) may be returned to the sender to be amended.

No contact items can be sent on unless the agreement form has been completed, signed by both parties and the Adoption Order has been granted.

## **Who can use the Letterbox Scheme?**

Any birth relative or significant person to the child's life prior to their adoption can be considered for a Letterbox Agreement. This should be discussed with relevant individuals by the child's social worker at the time an Adoption Order is being made.

Once an agreement is in place, any person named on that agreement may use the Letterbox scheme. If there are further members of the birth family who would like to keep in contact in this way, then this should be discussed with the child's social worker, or with a member of the Letterbox Team. We will always ensure that any contact arrangements are in the child's best interests and protect them from harm.

## **What can be sent?**

Contact items usually exchanged within Letterbox are at the discretion of the adopters.

## **What can't be sent?**

Items not accepted by the team are:

- Cash
- Cheques
- Gifts/Presents

Any items of this nature received by the team will be returned to the sender.

## **Setting up Agreements**

The child's social worker is responsible for completing and sending signed agreement forms to the Letterbox team for processing.

## **Who decides?**

The adoptive family will decide what contact they are happy to send and to receive however, this contact should always be in line with professional risk assessments surrounding post-order contacts.

In the event that your contact is Court Ordered, the Letterbox Agreement will be set up to reflect the orders of the court. Most Letterbox agreements are not Court Ordered. Should you believe that your agreement was made as a part of a Court Order, you will need to provide evidence of this Contact Order to the Letterbox Team.

## **What names do we use?**

Within letterbox, only first names should be used, both in agreements and within contact items. We would recommend that agreements are set up for birth relatives to sign their items in first name only.

Letterbox Agreements are between adults and as such, all letters should be addressed from adult to adult, and should not be written directly to the child, unless there is agreement to do so.

Contact letters which use incorrect names or identifying information such as surnames, may be returned to you.

## **Will the child write back to me?**

As Letterbox Agreements are between adults, the contact should be written by the adults involved. Whilst some adopters may support the child to write themselves, this is not the usual process for Letterbox and would be at the discretion of the adopters and the child themselves.

## **When do we send our items?**

When setting up an Agreement, this should be completed to inform the team of how often both parties will write (once a year, twice a year etc) and which month have been chosen to write in.

We recommend agreements are set up for adopters to write first, and the birth relative can then respond the following month. For example; the adopters write in February, and the birth relative would respond in March.

We suggest that agreement months should avoid particularly stressful or emotive times of year.

The Letterbox Team allows the whole calendar month agreed for items to be received in, this will then be checked and copied by the team to send them on. If items are being sent for a specific date, such as a birthday or Christmas, we recommend sending these to the Letterbox Team at least three weeks in advance of the date to allow sufficient time for these to be checked and forwarded on.

## **Where do we send our items?**

Once an agreement is set up and both parties have received a Letterbox code, all contact items should be sent to the Letterbox Team either by post or secure email for checking and forwarding (all contact details are at the back of this guidance).

Please be aware that Letterbox is a 'post-order service' meaning that it will be set up for after an Adoption Order has been granted. Any contact prior to this should be discussed with and sent via the child's social worker.

## **How will I know you have received our contact item?**

Once an item is received by the Letterbox Team, we will send you either an acknowledgement letter or acknowledgment email to confirm we have safely received your items.

## **What happens next?**

A Letterbox practitioner will check all items for any inappropriate content. All contact items are forwarded to the recipient using Royal Mail Recorded delivery so we can try to ensure they reach their destination safely, or are returned to the team. The Letterbox Team will hold a copy of all items sent through the team in the event that these are ever needed.

## **Identifying information within letters**

All information received by the Letterbox Team is treated as confidential and will only be read by a member of the team. If an item is received that contains any identifying information, a practitioner within the team will contact the sender to make sure this is taken out before the item is sent on. If we are unable to contact you on the details held, a decision will be made by practitioners in the team and the item may be returned to you in the mail, explaining the reasons for us doing so.

## **Inappropriate Content in letters**

If an item is received that contains content that is considered inappropriate by practitioners in the team (further guidance on letter writing is on the following pages), we will contact the sender to discuss this in the first instance to offer support and to recommend changes to the item. Sometimes, there is a small amount of emotive content or news within a contact item that practitioners may decide to forward on to you for your consideration. We would advise you of this within the accompanying cover letter should this be the case.

Every Letterbox Agreement is different and content that may be happily accepted by some families, could be upsetting for others. Should there be any topics or wording that would be upsetting for your circumstances, please discuss this with the team in the first instance.

## Writing a Letter

Writing a letter to the child's adopters can be difficult, particularly for the first time. Remember that any letter you write should only include information you feel comfortable sharing.

You will help the child a lot by writing to their adopters to advise about what you are doing, and asking about the things the child likes. The child will know you are interested in them by taking the time to send a letter which should be focused on them and their interests.

By now, the child will be settling into their adoptive family. Whilst you may want to write about how you feel in terms of missing them and wanting them to come home to you, this would not be helpful to the child and items of this nature would be returned to you.

We encourage adopters to write first so that you have something to respond to. Remember, every child is different and so, every letter will be different. Some are long, some are short but, this is a list of possible topics that may help you to write to them.

- It's a good idea to let them know what you're doing with your time.
- You could talk about things you know the child enjoys, and the things you may have enjoyed at their age (e.g, "It's nice to hear 'X' loves swimming, when I was their age, I was always in the water")
- Try to avoid talking too much about feelings which may be upsetting for both you and the child
- Try to respond to questions the adopters may have asked you in their letters
- Try to stay focused on the child's development and achievements
- It is appropriate to ask some questions about the child's interests (e.g. "What is x's favourite food/sport/TV/music")
  - Remember to avoid identifying information such as surnames, locations or information that would indicate where you are living.

Should you need any further support or guidance around writing a letter, please contact a member of the team who would be happy to help.

## First Letter Example

Dear [First names of adopters]

I hope this letter finds you and your family well. Thank you for your letter and the news of how [Child's name] is doing. I can't believe how big he/she is getting already and I'm pleased to hear they are happy.

It was nice to hear that [Child] still likes the blue fluffy elephant I got him/her, they never used to go anywhere without it. Do they have any other favourite new toys or games?

It doesn't surprise me to hear how much [child] is eating, or that their favourite food is chocolate biscuits...is the best one still a twix? My favourite foods are strawberries, coffee cake and a good chicken curry!

I'm pleased to hear that [child] is learning to swim and was proud to hear from you how good he/she is! It's a really useful skill to know. I was always in the water when I was a child, and was even a part of the local swimming team. Do they have any other favourite sports or clubs yet?

It sounds like it's been busy year for you all with trips to the beach and the zoo. My favourite animals are the monkeys too! Although I prefer the little spider monkeys to the big apes! I hope [child] enjoyed their ice creams, I'm lucky enough to live near the seaside so I get to do that a lot!

This year I have been working in a local shop and have just moved into a new house. I've been spending time walking my pet dog and enjoying the seaside.

I look forward to hearing all of your news next year,

Best wishes

(First Name)

## **Significant News in an item**

As Letterbox is often the only way of news being shared between a child's birth and adoptive families, we sometimes may receive significant news or information within a contact letter (such as births and bereavements).

When information of this nature is received in a contact item, we will always attempt to contact you to discuss this by telephone before forwarding a contact item.

Should we be unable to contact you by any other means, and depending on the news contained, we may make a decision to either send you a covering letter with the contact item; or to send you a letter asking you to contact us to discuss the news we have received.

The Letterbox Team relies on those engaging in the agreements to provide us with information they wish to be shared with the other party and unless this news is of significance to a child's health or wellbeing, we will protect their wishes around what we can disclose.

## **Births**

When there is a new birth of a significant relative to the child, such as a sibling, it would be appropriate to inform the letterbox team if you would like this news passed on to the child's adopters.

It is important to remember that it can be confusing for an adopted child to understand why they may have siblings who are not adopted when they are. We recommend that you write a separate letter to the adopters to inform them of such news, and you may offer to send a photo of the sibling for the child's life story book. This way, the adopters can share this news at a time that is appropriate for the child.

Should you ever need advice and support in managing sharing news around a new birth please do not hesitate to contact a member of the team.

## **Bereavement within Adoptive Family**

Where a child dies, it is the policy of Suffolk Adoption Agency that the birth parents are informed. In all Letterbox Agreements, we request that adoptive families sign their agreement and consent to this policy.

## **Bereavement within birth family**

When there is a bereavement within the birth family, it is often appropriate to pass this news on to the adoptive family through the Letterbox Team. When we receive information that a birth relative has passed away within a contact item, we may contact you to ask if you feel able to provide a copy of death certificate, some brief information about the circumstances of death and burial, and a copy of any funeral order of service where possible.

We would usually recommend writing a separate letter to the adopters containing the information, and a practitioner within the team would then contact them to advise of this and offer support.

Letterbox contacts are usually the main way that any significant bereavements in either adoptive or birth families can be shared with one another, should you wish to. However, remember that information relating to your family is shared at your discretion and with your consent.

Should you wish for further advice and support around how to share any news with adopters, please contact a member of the Letterbox team who would be happy to help you.

## **Medical Information from birth relatives**

When medical information is received from birth relatives, the Letterbox Team may be able to support in this matter.

It is our practice that should information relating to medical conditions be received into the team, Letterbox practitioners **would consult as to if there is any genetic element** that would be relevant to the child.

Should this be the case, we would inform the Adoption medical advisor, gain consent from you for checks to be carried out and following this process, any medical information relevant to the child would be sensitively shared with the adopters and their health providers.

Only relevant information would be shared with the adopters, meaning that any health conditions of birth relatives that do not have a genetic element to them would not be shared by the Agency. Whilst adopters may be able to ask further questions of birth relatives in respect of any other health conditions through your Letterbox contact, this will be at your discretion to share with them.

## **Medical information about the child**

Similarly, the sharing of information relating to any health conditions the child may get diagnosed with is shared with you at the adopter's discretion.

However, Suffolk Adoption Agency politely asks that if any child is diagnosed with a condition that may have further health implications for wider birth relatives, including any current or future birth siblings, that this is passed to the Letterbox team, or the Permanence Support Team, who can further share this information with necessary people where possible.

If you are unsure if a health condition is relevant to be shared, please discuss this with your GP or diagnosing medical clinician for their guidance on this matter.

## **Sharing Photos**

The child's social worker should have discussed with you if photos will be a part of your Letterbox Agreement. Some adopters are happy to send photos, some are only happy to receive photos, and some people do not wish to exchange any photos at all.

If sending photos is a part of your agreement, please ensure these are appropriate and do not contain any identifying information such as locations.

Additionally, if photos are received of any children who you do not have the parental consent to share for, these will be returned to you.

## **Photos on Social Media**

It is written within all Letterbox Agreements that photos sent through the letterbox scheme are not to be placed on any social media or networking sites online.

If you do post online the photos that are sent to you, it may place your letterbox agreement at risk and the adopters may not feel able to send any photos in the future, or may decide they do not wish to continue with the Letterbox Agreement as a result of this.

We request that you do not try to seek out the adoptive family or child online, and we request that equally, they do not search for you either; and use the Letterbox Agreement to support both parties in gaining further information if this is wanted.

## **The Child has contacted me on Social Media**

If the child attempts to contact you on social media in the future, please try to remain calm and contact the Letterbox Team in the first instance to advise of this. Whilst it may be exciting to know they are thinking of you, we would want to encourage the child and the adopters to use the Letterbox Agreement to gain further information so we can ensure everyone has the support they need.

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### **Can I change my Letterbox Agreement?**

It is Letterbox Policy that agreements be in place for two years before any changes are made. After this point, you could request a review of the agreement and a practitioner will consider if it is appropriate to ask the adopters for a change or increase to the contact, such as a request to include photos.

We would advise that whilst we can ask these questions, it may not always be a positive response and many adopters set up the agreements to include everything they wish to send or receive already.

### **Why haven't I heard from them?**

Sometimes there may be reasons that the adopters have not written yet and we appreciate this can be distressing and make you anxious.

We allow the whole of the allocated month for letters to be received. If you have not received any during this period, you would then be able to contact the team and enquire if anything has been received for you. If it has not, the team may be able to send a reminder letter to the adopters to encourage them to write. Whilst it can be hard to write a letter and not receive anything in return, please try to continue the contact wherever possible as this will demonstrate your interest in the child.

### **Can you help me write my letter?**

Yes, you are able to contact the Letterbox Team to request letter writing support. If you live within Suffolk, you may be offered an appointment in either Lowestoft, Bury St. Edmunds or Ipswich offices. Alternatively, we are able to offer advice and guidance over the phone, or through email correspondence where needed.

### **I need help coping with the contact?**

If you are struggling to cope with the contact following the adoption of a child, please contact the Letterbox Team who will offer advice and may be able to access some counselling support for you.

## **Contact Us**

For all enquiries, sending items or for further advice, please contact us at:-

Letterbox Team  
5th Floor Lime Block  
Endeavour House  
Russell Road  
Ipswich  
IP1 2BX

Tel: - 01473 265700

Email: - [cypadoptionletterbox@suffolk.gov.uk](mailto:cypadoptionletterbox@suffolk.gov.uk)

## **Additional Support in Letterbox**

Should any individual with additional needs require support in order to engage with a Letterbox Agreement, please contact a member of the team to discuss the support we can offer.