

## **Oxfordshire County Council Letterbox Service**

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#### **1. What is the letterbox service?**

1.1 The Oxfordshire County Council Letterbox Service facilitates indirect letterbox contact between the adopted or special guardianship family and the child's birth family or other significant people (could include family friends or foster carers, etc.). The Letterbox Service also provides support to adopters and special guardians, in order to help them support the child or young person regarding the letterbox exchange, and to the birth family or other significant people.

1.2 The Letterbox Service supports adoptive parents or special guardians and the birth family/significant person to exchange non-identifying information about themselves' through letter-box contact to meet the needs of the child or young person. This is normally a two-way exchange; although in exceptional circumstances letterbox exchanges can be one-way.

1.3 The Letterbox Service is organised and maintained by the Letterbox Coordinator and Letterbox Administrator who sit within the Adoption & Permanence Support Team.

#### **2. Relevant legislation and guidance**

- Adoption and Children Act 2002, Sections 1, 26 and 27;

- Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, Regulations 45(2) and 46;
- Adoption and Children Act 2002 Guidance (2011), Chapters 7;
- Adoption National Minimum Standards (2011) Standard 8
- Children and Families Act 2014, Section 51A;

### **3. Principles and Boundaries of the Letterbox Service**

- 3.1 The confidentiality of the Letterbox Service is vital. The system must be administered by staff working within an adoption setting. Records must be stored securely according to the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 and Adoption National Minimum Standards.
- 3.2 Letterbox contact is complex and often challenging for adoptive, special guardianship and birth families alike. For Oxfordshire's adopted children, Letterbox arrangements must be facilitated via the Letterbox Service. **No informal arrangements should be operated by the child's or the adopters' social worker once the Adoption Order has been made.** For special guardianship children the Letterbox Service is available where this meets the child's needs.
- 3.3 All arrangements must accord with the Department's policy on contact.
- 3.4 All Letterbox arrangements are the responsibility of the adults involved. In the case of an adopted or special guardianship child the responsible adult will be the adoptive parent/s or special guardian/s. In the case of a birth sibling under the age of 18 who is not adopted, a named adult will need to take responsibility for the Letterbox on their behalf. This may be the child's birth parent or other adult carer. If the child is looked after, consideration will need to be given as to whether the foster carer, residential worker or social worker will be responsible for the exchange. **Information is never sent direct to children.**

Once an order has been granted it will be for the adopters and special guardians to determine, the time and manner in which information, cards and any other communications received via the Letterbox are passed on to the child. Flexibility is essential as children's needs and capacity in relation to contact will change according to their age and understanding.

3.5 Communication through the Letterbox Service for adopted and special guardianship children is adult-to-adult. In exceptional circumstances, the responsible adult/s may agree that child-to-child communication is to be included in the exchange, where this meets the child's needs for example, the exchange of birthday and Christmas cards. Prior to the making of the Adoption Order, any plan for child to child communication must be confirmed by the child's social worker and the adopter's link worker, and detailed in the Adoption Placement Plan and the Letterbox referral form. For special guardianship children, letterbox contact between children must be agreed as part of the Special Guardianship Support Plan in relation to contact and specified on the Letterbox referral form.

3.6 **Children and young people's involvement in the Letterbox Service:** the involvement of children in the exchange may be planned from the outset (e.g. separated siblings), or it may occur as the exchange develops over time. As with any parenting issue, the assumption is an increasing involvement of the child as his or her age and understanding grows. Adopters and special guardians should not enter into Letterbox arrangements with a view to maintaining secrecy until the child is 18, and the child's views on the contact (its existence and its conduct) must be considered as time goes on. How, and at what stage, the child is to be involved in the exchange is for the adopters or special guardians to decide. There are similar issues for the birth family, especially if the Letterbox involves a parent who is bringing up another sibling.

3.7 The child's social worker and the adopter's or special guardian's social worker should prepare the relevant participants for the task of Letterbox contact. Research is clear that Letterbox exchange should not be seen as an easy contact option - it is a complex and sensitive task. Consultation

and advice for workers is available from the Letterbox Coordinator via e-mail at [letterbox@oxfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:letterbox@oxfordshire.gov.uk), or via telephone on 01865 323114.

- 3.8 Letterbox arrangements normally cease when the child reaches the age of 18 but there is provision within the Service, for arrangements to continue until the young person is 21 years old as appropriate.
- 3.9 Where a Letterbox arrangement is being proposed, where possible, letterbox contact should be established, supported and monitored well in advance of the Adoption Order or Special Guardianship Order.

Exceptionally, a retrospective agreement (i.e. post-order) can be agreed by the Letterbox Coordinator, but only if:

- It is considered to be in the child's best interests;
- The Letterbox Coordinator has checked the child's files and there has been a clear change of circumstances from any previous decision not to promote contact;
- The birth relative and adopters or special guardians understand and agree the purpose of the Letterbox, and are supported to use the exchange appropriately;
- The circumstances and decisions are recorded on the child's files for the child's information in the future and for monitoring purposes.

- 3.10 There is normally only **one** annual exchange with an adult birth relative. Practice experience suggests that this is the most appropriate frequency for most adoptive or special guardianship families and children, and that families struggle to maintain more frequent Letterbox contacts. The maximum offered by the Letterbox Service is two exchanges per year. It may be appropriate to consider two exchanges between birth siblings, for example. These requests will be dealt with on a case-by-case basis by the Letterbox Coordinator.

3.11 Oxfordshire is a photo-sharing local authority. Due to the increased risks of unplanned and/or unmediated contact via social networking and the possible misuse of photographs on such media, careful consideration should be given as to whether photographs are part of a Letterbox exchange. Any decision to exclude photographs needs to be based on a thorough risk assessment completed by the child's social worker, providing clear evidence of risk. Photo-viewing is available in exceptional circumstances where it is in the child's best interests to share photographs with the birth relatives, but where the risk assessment has identified significant risks in relation to the birth relative having possession of a photograph.

#### **RISK ASSESSMENT FOR THE EXCLUSION OF PHOTOS IN LETTERBOX ARRANGEMENTS**

### **4. Setting up a Letterbox Arrangement**

- 4.1 Information about the Letterbox Service is available for social workers (including information which they can use when working with birth relatives and prospective adopters) directly from the Letterbox Administrator and Coordinator (01865 323114 or [letterbox@oxfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:letterbox@oxfordshire.gov.uk)).
- 4.2 Post-placement contact arrangements (including Letterbox) between the child and his or her birth relatives, and/or the foster carers are discussed at the Adoption Placement Planning Meeting and at subsequent Adoption Reviews (see **Section 9, The Placement**). Social workers should consult the Placement Planning Meeting minutes regarding timescales and decision-making for all contact arrangements, including Letterbox.
- 4.3 The Adopter's Link Social Worker is responsible for making the Letterbox referral using the Letterbox Referral episode on the child's Fwi. This is the means by which the Letterbox Service is notified of the need to set up a Letterbox arrangement.
- 4.4 It is essential that there is clarity about the content, method and timescales of

the Letterbox arrangement and that all parties are aware of these. On very rare occasions, it may be possible to use audio or video as well as written communications (particularly to make the Letterbox service more accessible), but these methods need careful consideration with regard to both resources and confidentiality. Early consultation with the Letterbox Coordinator is essential, and such arrangements should not be proposed without consultation.

- 4.5 It may not be helpful to either the children, adopters, or special guardians if birthdays or Christmas are chosen for exchanges, as these can be emotionally charged times. It is not possible for the Letterbox staff to guarantee that Letterbox exchanges received during December will be processed and delivered by 25th December. Note also that the Letterbox Service cannot handle the exchange of gifts, vouchers or money. If photos are to be part of the exchange, participants will be asked to limit these to a maximum of four per child or sibling group.
- 4.6 Adopters/special guardians should be supported by their social worker to write a "settling in letter" to let birth relatives know the child is safe and well, and to be a platform for the first letterbox exchange. This is an important part of preparing all parties.
- 4.7 Letterbox contact arrangements can be facilitated prior to the Adoption Order being granted, and advice and consultation is available at all stages from the Letterbox Coordinator. Once the Letterbox referral is received by the Letterbox Service, the Letterbox Administrator and Coordinator will then contact the parties involved to confirm the arrangement and to help them understand and engage in Letterbox contact. The Letterbox Arrangement form is drawn up, explaining the letterbox contact arrangements, and needs to be signed by all parties before letters can be exchanged.
- 4.8 Adoptive parents are sent a written Letterbox Arrangement form by post. The Letterbox Coordinator meets with birth relatives where possible, to

increase the chances of birth relatives signing the Letterbox Arrangement form and engaging in letterbox contact.

4.9 Copies of all letters, cards, photos etc. exchanged between the adoptive/special guardianship and birth families must be recorded on the child's electronic birth case record to guard against loss or damage, and to pass on information to a child who may subsequently come back for adoption counselling. The Letterbox Service records information on the child's birth case record, not on the child's adoptive case record. Care must be taken that the names and address of the adoptive family is not included for reasons of confidentiality. The Letterbox Service records information such as dates of receipt, and if and when information is forwarded between the parties.

Each child will also have a paper Letterbox file, which is held and stored securely by the Letterbox Service. The child's paper Letterbox file will contain original copies of all correspondence that could not be forwarded to the parties and this is also scanned and uploaded to Fwi. These records will be archived with the child's adoption records when the Letterbox ends at 18 or 21 years old. Adoption confidentiality requirements apply.

The Letterbox Service address is a PO Box number which safeguards against departmental moves/reorganisation. It is also possible to contact the Letterbox Service by secure email and to send exchanges this way if parties consent to this method of communication.

## **5. Maintaining a Letterbox Arrangement**

5.1 Telephone and email advice and support is routinely available to all parties from the Letterbox Coordinator and Administrator. The Letterbox Coordinator can offer office appointments and, in exceptional circumstances, a home visit to provide more detailed advice and support.

- 5.4 Contact arrangements can be reviewed in order to accommodate the changing needs and wishes of the adopted/special guardianship child over time. The adoptive parents/special guardians are responsible for decisions in this regard until the child reaches 18 years old.

Letterbox arrangements are almost always the outcome of a voluntary agreement between the parties, rather than a court order. Whilst every reasonable effort will be made by the Letterbox Service to encourage and support all parties to honour the arrangement, it is not possible to compel them to do so. Adoptive parents/special guardians need to be aware of the possible consequences of ceasing involvement in a Letterbox arrangement. For example, a consequence of not continuing letterbox is that a child/young person does not get up to date information about their birth family. This can be unhelpful in their understanding of adoption/special guardianship. Children/young people also worry about birth family and need to know they are alive and well. Ceasing Letterbox can also be a risk if they are wishing to make contact in the future.

- 5.5 In relation to adoption, under section 51 A of the Children and Families Act 2014, when making an Adoption Order, or at any time afterwards, the court may make an order for contact (or an order prohibiting contact). Orders for contact and orders prohibiting contact are likely to be relatively rare at the Adoption Order stage. Such orders have effect until the child's 18th birthday, unless revoked sooner.

The circumstances in which a birth parent, relative or other person are most likely to seek the court's leave to apply for an order for contact after adoption are where an agreement for some form of continuing contact had been made, but was not adhered to.



## **6. Evaluation**

- 6.1 The Letterbox Service will be periodically monitored and reviewed by the Adoption Service Manager in conjunction with the Adoption & Permanence Support Team Manager and the Letterbox staff. Research may also be undertaken to evaluate the Service. Review and research results will be communicated to participants and changes to the Service may be made as a result.
- 6.2 Feedback from participants will be welcomed and taken into account in operating and developing the Letterbox Service.