



Adoption
East Midlands

DERBY NOTTINGHAM DERBYSHIRE NOTTINGHAMSHIRE

LETTERBOX SCHEME



**A guide to contact between
birth families and adoptive
families**

What is Letterbox?

Letterbox is a confidential letter exchange service set up by the child's social worker, which allows information to be sent between the adoptive parents and birth relatives.

Letterbox exchanges are between the adults. Your information will always be sent to the adopters/carers, not to the adopted child. However, some adopters like to involve the children as they become older. It is the adopters decision when and how to share information with the child.

Adopted children have said that Letterbox contact often meets their need for up-to-date information and reassures them about the well-being of their birth family. It provides information which will be very important in helping them to understand their origins and know who they are in later years.

Please note Letterbox is a voluntary agreement between the people concerned. Although Letterbox will have been discussed in court it is **not** a court order.

Why have Letterbox scheme?

If a decision is made for indirect Letterbox contact after adoption, there are benefits for everyone:

If you are an adopted child, exchanging information can help you to:

- Keep in touch with significant birth relatives.
- Understand more about your background.
- Know about changes and events in your birth family.
- Accept what has happened and deal with fantasies or myths about the birth family
- Prepare you for contact if you should want this in the future.

If you are an adopter, exchanging information can help you to:

- Find out information not available at the time of the adoption (e.g. about a medical condition which has occurred after your child's adoption and which may be hereditary).
- Give answers to your child's questions and share up to date information.
- Have a chance to share your own thoughts and feelings with birth relatives. This may make any future contact easier for you and others involved.
- Be reminded to talk about issues of adoption openly with their child and to build up a pattern of communication.
- Have an even better understanding of your position as adoptive parents.

If you are a birth parent or other birth relative, exchanging information can help you to:

- Find out important information about your child, their health and progress.
- Be reassured the child is safe, well and loved.
- Inform the child about changes in your own life.
- Keep in touch with your child and their adoptive family
- Remember that the child is growing and developing.
- Prepare for the possibility of contact in case your child wants this when they become an adult.

How it works

Letterbox acts as a go-between, so that the child's adopters and birth family can write to each other without knowing each other's personal details.

The scheme allows for news to be sent once a year at a time agreed between adopters and birth family. You may feel that the month of your child's adoption day would be a good choice. Sometimes it is best to avoid birthdays and Christmas as these events can be too emotional. We also would prefer not to choose Christmas as this may result in too much Letterbox post in December for the team to cope with.

Each letterbox arrangement will be set up between adopters, birth relatives and the Social Care Department and the Letterbox in Adoption East Midlands (AEM). There could be one or more birth relatives involved in the scheme, including birth parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters remaining in the birth family, or other relatives. Where news is to be sent between brothers and sisters placed in different adoptive families, this can usually be done directly between both sets of adoptive parents. The Letterbox arrangement can also be just one-way. For example, information may be sent from adopters to birth family only, or from the birth family to the adopters only.

Each letter is screened. If we think the information is inappropriate in anyway, such as in the way a letter is written, we will contact the sender to talk it through to see if the issue can be resolved. It is most important that the letters from birth family members support the child in their adoptive home and accept the adopters as the child's legal parents. It is also important that letters from both adopters and birth family are written with respect and good will towards each other. Some information may not be seen as suitable to pass on by the Letterbox social worker, or you may be unsure yourself whether it should be included and how. In these cases a social worker from Letterbox will discuss with you what to do.

Due to the high number of exchanges, exchanges outside the agreed month will not be prioritised.

We are sorry but the Letterbox scheme cannot be used for sending presents or money.

Usually photos are not allowed to be sent.

All information is treated in the strictest of confidence and with the same care as adoption records. Usually only the Letterbox Co-ordinator and post adoption social workers have access to Letterbox records.

What should I write about?

If you are an adoptive parent:

The information you send will depend on who you are sending to and their past relationship with your child and perhaps with yourselves. It may need to be different for each of several birth relatives.

You may like to send news about:

- Your child's health and development.
- Their progress at school and friendships.
- Their hobbies, interests and what they are good at
- Their looks and personality.
- Your child's daily life (for example their favourite food, TV programmes, things they say, etc.).
- How they get on with friends and family.
- Your feelings about being a parent to your child, your thoughts about the birth family's feelings, or your child's comments about their adoption or their past.
- Any changes in your family, for example new brothers or sisters, house moves **(Please note: a change of address should be notified separately to the Letterbox Scheme to keep it confidential).**

Birth relatives/significant others:

Please remember that your letter needs to be written to your child's adoptive parents and not directly to the child.

You could write about:

- Things that have been happening in your life, but if the news could be difficult for the child to hear, for example about health problems, birth of a new baby or the death of a family member, please could you write a separate letter to the adopters. They can then share this news with the child at an appropriate time.
- News in your family and details of how you spent the last year including any holidays.
- Important people, places or even pets the child knew in a positive way before the adoption.
- Yourself and your everyday life, your relationships, interests, job, health, achievements.
- Any important medical information relevant to the child. If this is of a sensitive nature please talk to an adoption support worker first.
- Reassurance that the birth family is ok.

Writing to the adopters may also help you to deal with some of your own feelings. You may still feel very sad or angry about the adoption, but adopted children say that it is important to them to know that their birth families are still thinking of them and are glad to hear of their progress. It is very helpful to children if their birth family can make positive comments in letters about the child being in their adoptive family.

Please remember it is not helpful for children to hear about adult problems or any difficulties you may be experiencing. This can leave them with lots of worries and fears that their adopters will not be able to reassure them about and adopters may not feel able to pass on letters like this to the child.

Ending the letter:

- The name you use when signing the letter will have been agreed with you when the Letterbox plan was set up.
- Adoptive parents normally sign with their first name or as (e.g.) Kerry's adoptive parents
- Birth relatives sign with their first names or birth mum, granny Jane, granddad Smith etc.

Some examples of how you might end the letter:

- I /we hope that you are all well and look forward to your next letter
- I/we enjoy getting a letter from you and hearing your news
- Please let us know if you have any questions or there's anything else you would like us to tell you in the next letter

If adopters/birth relatives do not send any information there may well be good reasons for this:

We know this will be disappointing and difficult for you, but there are many reasons why this may happen sometimes. We hope you will still continue to send your information every year at the agreed time. We will continue to encourage the exchange or to agree what we can tell you about the reasons for the delay. **So, if for any reason you do not feel able to send information as agreed, please try and let us know.**

Changes to Letterbox in the future

- As the years go by the letterbox arrangements may need to be changed. Some adopted children may not want news about them to be sent as they get older.
- It is important that the child's wishes are respected at every stage.
- The views and situation of birth relatives and adoptive parents may also change.
- There may be the arrival of other siblings who need to be included in the exchange.
- If Letterbox is not used for some time it may be suspended. Therefore, writing just a few lines is preferable to not writing at all.
- Once a child reaches 18 the Letterbox arrangement ends (although in special circumstances, such as where there are younger siblings in the family, continuation may be negotiated.). We will contact everyone involved a few months before the child's 18th birthday.

When the Letterbox ends the whole file will become part of your child's adoption records, which are kept for 100 years from the date of their Adoption Order.

Problems/queries

If you need any help have concerns with any aspect of the Letterbox scheme, then please contact a social worker or Letterbox Co-ordinator from the Post Adoption Team in your relevant Letterbox Scheme, who will be able to give you advice on what action to take.

For more information re help writing letters and our translation service, please contact your local office.

HOW TO CONTACT YOUR LETTERBOX SCHEME:

Derby City Council:

T: 0115 804 4080

E: LetterboxDerby@adoptioneastmidlands.nottscc.gov.uk

Derbyshire County Council:

T: 0115 804 4070

E: LetterboxDerbyshire@adoptioneastmidlands.nottscc.gov.uk

Nottingham City Council:

T: 0115 804 4090

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