



Western Bay
ADOPTION SERVICE
GWASANAETH MABWYSIADU
Bae'r Gorllewin

***Letterbox and the value
of keeping in touch
safely***

What is the Letterbox Service?

The Letterbox Service is a system that aids the exchange of written information between birth relatives and adoptive parents on behalf of an adopted child, to benefit the child whom you all care about.

Who can use the Letterbox Service?

The contact is between you, the adoptive family and the people who played a significant role in your adopted child's life:

- Birth parents
- The child's sisters or brothers living with birth family or elsewhere
- Grandparents
- Foster carers who looked after the child

Why do we have the Letterbox Service?

The lives of everyone personally involved in an adoption are linked. It has for some time been understood that keeping some form of contact generally benefits all involved and a sense of personal history and continuity is vital to a young person's emotional development.

Western Bay Adoption Service offers The Letterbox Contact Scheme, which very simply provides a positive and safe way for children/young people, their adoptive parents and birth families to stay in touch. This leaflet explains how the Letterbox scheme works. We have given general answers to the questions we are most frequently asked about the scheme, but individual arrangements will vary. You can discuss this in detail with your Social Worker or the named Letterbox Co-Ordinator.

What are the Benefits of Keeping in Touch with my adopted Child's birth family?

How will the letterbox service benefit me and my adopted child?

Benefits for the child:

- As you will be well aware a child's life does not begin the day they are adopted. Keeping in touch with birth relatives can help adopted children understand their family history.
- Keeping in touch and staying safely connected can make it easier for your child to come to understand and accept their personal history. It can also provide a sense of continuity in their lives and help your adopted child to attach to you.
- Adopted adults who were adopted as children have said how important it was for them to know about their past and where they came from.
- The aim of the Letterbox service is to help your child feel both settled in their adoptive family and comfortable about their roots and origins.
- Research and our own experience of helping adoptive families has shown that where contact works well, the child grows up having a more realistic view and understanding of their birth relatives; it encourages greater openness about adoption and the adoptive placement is more likely to be successful.

- If in years to come, your adopted child thinks of meeting their birth relatives, having had news over the years will make them more confident of what to expect.

Benefits for you the adoptive family:

- The information you receive through the Letterbox Service may help prepare you to answer your child's questions about their birth relatives or their adoption over the coming years.
- The information you receive will give you an insight into the lives of your child's birth relatives, which can help with issues that may arise after adoption such as health problems or the birth of new brothers or sisters.
- The letterbox service may serve as a gentle reminder for you to talk about adoption openly with your child and build a pattern of communication.

Benefits for your child's birth family

- For the birth family- parents, grandparents, siblings, an aunt, giving up a child for adoption is often very hard. They do not forget the child exists. We know that being able to send a card, or letter can sometimes help to keep those memories in a good place and ensure that a child's general progress is shared.
- Birth relatives often have a strong need to be reassured that the child is well. Receiving detailed news of the child's health, progress and interests can help with this.
- For birth parents/relatives a regular exchange of information over the years may be helpful if the adopted child chooses to meet them when they are older.

How the letterbox Service works

A child's need for contact with their birth family will have been considered as part of making the decision to place them for adoption. Social workers, who knew your child while they were with their birth family, will have advised what sort of contact (indirect/direct) and with whom within the birth family will benefit the child.

The social workers will have taken into account the child's age and the significance of the relationships your child had with each birth relative or significant person (for example foster carers) involved in their lives.

If your child's of an age to understand that they are adopted, their views with whom they would like to keep in touch with will be respected in so far as it is safe to do so.

When an adoption placement is agreed, those directly involved – the adoptive family and the birth relatives - sign a Letterbox agreement that clearly sets out their agreed contact arrangement.

Generally, it is recommended that the Letterbox agreement is set up between the adults (e.g. adoptive parents and birth parents) and not between an adult and a child. Mostly this contact is an exchange of letters once per year.

Often an agreement will contain the following information:

- The type of contact (letter, card, etc)
- The time of the year the contact item will be posted
- The names of the people sending and receiving the Letterbox items
- How the items should be signed off

Once the Letterbox Agreement is accepted and signed by everybody, the Letterbox worker will send the adoptive and birth relatives their copies and will save a copy of each. The Letterbox worker will store the agreement in a file and keep everything confidential. No

contact items will be exchanged unless the Letterbox Agreement has been completed and signed.

Once the Letterbox begins contact items will be posted to the Letterbox worker, where they will be checked for appropriate content and a copy kept on file, before being forwarded on. Letterbox items that contain inappropriate content, or disclose identifying information (e.g. surname, address or telephone number) will be passed onto the Letterbox Workers who will contact you and discuss how we can support you to remove the inappropriate material.

The Letterbox Agreement

The Letterbox Agreement is a document that details your letterbox arrangements with your child's birth relatives. The Letterbox Agreement is a voluntary agreement that is signed by both you the adopters and your child birth relatives. The Letterbox Agreement is usually signed early on and before the adoption order is made.

The Letterbox Agreement clearly sets out what form of contact your child will have (direct/indirect) the frequency of this contact and what is to be exchanged.

The Letterbox Agreement is reviewed after around 2 years of child being adopted, then periodically to ensure that the contact is meeting your child's needs as they grow. As children grow their brain develops and they maybe become more curious about their birth history or birth relatives.

All proposed changes to the Letterbox Agreement must be discussed with the Letterbox Service who will offer you guidance and advice. The Agreement will be amended by us to reflect the agreed changes. If an agreement review is requested by your child's birth family for example, if they would like to decrease/increase contact we will contact you to discuss and offer you guidance and advice on their request. We will leave you to make an informed decision and consider what is best for the child at that particular time.

When can the Letterbox Agreements Begin?

Normally the Letterbox arrangement begins after the placement and starts with a settling in report from the adopters to the birth family within about a month or so. It should be up and running fully by the time the adoption order has been made by the court.

The Letterbox Agreement is voluntary and not an order from the court.

At this point we send a letter to both parties confirming what has been agreed and setting out guidelines as to what needs to be done in the future. Exchange of information may take place before this but is handled by the Child's Family Finder or Social Worker.

What can I send and receive through the Letterbox service?

Your Letterbox Agreement will state what may be included in your letterbox correspondence

These are the general items that may be sent from adoptive parents to birth relatives:

- A detailed news letter * if agreed
- Child's drawing (depending on the age of your child) * if agreed
- Birthday cards to siblings/birth parents * if agreed
- Christmas cards to siblings birth parents * if agreed
- Photographs * if agreed

What can I expect to receive from my child's birth family through the Letterbox service?

Your Letterbox Agreement will state the items agreed that may be sent to you and your child.

These are the general items you can/may receive from your child's birth family.

- A news letter * if agreed
- Photographs * if agreed
- Child drawings from siblings * if agreed
- Birthday cards * if agreed
- Christmas cards * if agreed

Unfortunately presents are not acceptable

What should a letter contain?

We know that it can be difficult to know what to write in a letter to birth relatives.

We can provide support with letter writing, please contact us if you like our help. We can provide you with telephone support, or a face to face meeting to help you write your letter. Writing a letter to your child's birth parents can be difficult. It is important to be honest about some of the difficulties your child may be experiencing.

We have put some hints and tips below to help start your letter:

- Let the birth parent know that the child is alright.
- You could mention developmental details, such as how tall the child is now, their shoe size, and their emerging personality.
- Talk about the things your child likes, such as TV programmes, music, food etc.
- Holidays/days out your child has enjoyed.
- What they enjoy at school, what they are good at.
- What activities they enjoy, i.e. swimming, football etc.
- Try not to gloss over problems, or paint a picture of everything being wonderful if it is not. It is important that birth parents know if your child is having problems but you will need to explain this in a balanced and sensitive way.
- If your child is on an Educational Statement, you could mention that he/she is having difficulty with some subjects/behaviours and is being given extra help to manage
- Try to ensure that your letter is sent to the central letterbox administrator on the agreed date, to reduce the possibility of anxiety for the birth relatives.
- It is not always possible, or recommended, to write a long 'newsletter'. Brief and sensitive is often better but too brief will raise anxiety in the birth family.
- If there are issues surrounding your child's health, development or behaviour that you find difficult to put in your letters, then the Letterbox Team are there to help.
- If your contact arrangement includes sending a photo of your child, please make sure that the photo does not show identifying information (e.g. school uniform with the school name on it)

Example Letterbox Contact from Adopters to Birth Relatives

Dear [First name of birth relative] and Date

Thank you for your last letter and photographs. X has recently been asking lots of questions about his/her past, and is very interested to hear about you.

X is now [Age] years old and in Year [number] at school. He/she is one of the tallest in her/his class [height] and gets on well with her/his classmates. He/she is often invited to birthday parties or to friends' houses after school. X had a very good school report in the summer – her/his teacher said that he/she has made very good progress in English, and

Maths is improving, although she/he does still struggle with it. X has recently played for the girl's/boy's football team and the school won the tournament. I have enclosed a photo of her/him holding the trophy. X also still attends dancing lessons once a week, and a recently passed a jazz dance exam.

We recently went on holiday to Tenerife, and I enclose a picture of X there. At the resort, there was a club for children in the evenings, X made lots of friends there. They had a disco on night, and we saw X teaching the other children dance routines to the songs! We took her/him to see a musical as a treat for her/his birthday, and she/he seemed to really enjoy this.

X enjoys reading, and her/his favourite author is J K Rawlings. She also enjoys playing on the Wii with her brother - their favourite game is X. We often play as a family, but the children are much better than us!

X said she/he wanted to send you something this year, so I have enclosed a drawing she/he did for you. We hope you enjoy looking at this.

Best Wishes

..... and(**sign off using just your first names or your agreed names for contact**)

How will you keep information confidential and safe?

Confidentiality and our help to you to stay safely Connected

- Once an item is received by the Letterbox worker, the content is checked and we then write to confirm that we have received your Letterbox items
- All Letterbox items received are logged, opened, photocopied and sent on by Recorded Delivery. This is to ensure that nothing inappropriate is forwarded and confidentiality is not breached.
- If we think the information we have received from your child's birth family or yourselves is inappropriate or distressing we will contact you or them to discuss our concern. We may recommend that the letter is re-written or the inappropriate content removed.
- We try to keep things informal and use first names in correspondence between yourselves and birth family. If you accidentally include any confidential information such as your address or your child's new surname we will contact you before this is sent on, and make sure it is what you want sent.
- It is your decision as parents as to when and how you share the information you receive with your child. Our experience is that children benefit from knowing information early on, as it forms part of their understanding of their adoption.
- Although most information and news passed through the Letterbox Scheme is positive, there may be times when difficult issues are addressed. We are here to offer help, guidance and support should you need to write/or have received difficult/upsetting news.

What if I don't feel able to keep to the agreement?

Currently Letterbox agreements are voluntary, and they depend on the understanding and goodwill of all those concerned to keep them going.

We realise when you are very busy with family life it can be very easy to forget to send information; but it is important to keep to your agreement and send in your letterbox items in the month agreed.

Birth relatives, brothers and sisters especially often feel very disappointed, distressed and let down if the news they are expecting is late or does not arrive at all. If you are having difficulties preparing your news, or for some reason you do not wish to continue with the arrangement, please discuss with us as soon as you can.

What if the letterbox arrangements need to be changed or if I need to discuss my Letterbox arrangements?

We recognise children's needs change overtime and contact agreements may need to be altered to reflect this. We will review your Letterbox Arrangement periodically to ensure they are still right for your child.

Please contact the Letterbox Team by telephone, email or letter. Our contact details are listed at the end of this leaflet, if you wish to review or revise your Letterbox Agreement.

What to do if you/your child are finding contact difficult

If you have a designated social worker you should talk to them in the first instance. For further assistance and guidance please contact us.

Photograph Guidance

Depending on your child's needs and their birth family circumstances (involvement of brothers and sisters) photograph exchange via the Letterbox Service may be helpful to them. The receiving/sending of photographs is for some children therapeutic, positive and may help them heal from their past experiences and settle well into their adoptive families. However other children may not find photo exchanges helpful therefore they may not be agreed as part of their agreement. Your child's social worker will discuss with you your child's contact needs in respect of photographs.

Birth relatives and photos

An in-depth discussion is held with your child's birth relatives about the exchange of photographs via Letterbox Contact. The birth relatives are asked to keep the child's photos safe, and not to post/ publish these on any social networking sites. Should they misuse the photos they receive through the Letterbox service, their letterbox agreement will be at risk of ceasing completely and photographs will be removed from their Letterbox agreement with immediate effect. We would investigate all allegations of the suspected misuse of an adopted child's photographs exchanged through the Letterbox Scheme. The Letterbox Service will inform you of the outcome of any investigation and discuss with you the options available.

If you have any suspicion or reason to believe that your child's photos exchanged via the Letterbox service are being misused please contact us as soon as possible and we will investigate this.

Social Media and Contact Following Adoption

The use of networking sites as you well know is growing at great speed. Social networking sites present a real challenge to adopted children and their families. Networking sites have made finding and contacting people easier than ever before, with both positive and negative outcomes. The use of Facebook has already had an impact on many adoptive families and has the potential to affect many more. Increasingly, adopted young people use it and other web sites to trace and contact their birth parents and other birth relatives. Birth relatives are using the internet to trace children.

From our experience engaging in positive letterbox contact, generally keeps communication lines open between you, your adopted child and their birth family. Birth relatives who engage positively in letterbox contact are less likely to seek to contact your child using other means.

What to do if your child's birth relative contacts you via Facebook or any social networking site

- Do not panic, stay calm
- Do not reply to the birth relatives message/friend request, take a copy of the message and contact the Letterbox Service who will offer you guidance on how to proceed

The letterbox Service will:

- Contact the birth relatives and discuss the breach of privacy
- A referral may be made to The Adoption Support Team for specialist support on the matter
- A review of your Letterbox Agreement may be required

Top tips for Letterbox

Do's

- Stick to the agreements or ask for a review
- Send correspondence on time – if you know that it is going to be late, please let us know
- Refer back to previous correspondence – if there is something written in a letter you have received that you would like to know more about, ask questions, but not too many and in context.
- Include any photographs if these are part of the arrangement – make sure there is no identifying information in letter or the photo or at the back of the photo
- Include a covering letter to the Letterbox Service, stating the child's birth name, Date of Birth – this ensures that we forward the correspondence as quickly as possible
- Contact us if you have any questions or would like help with writing a letter
- Let us know if you change your address

Don'ts

- **Don't put identifying information in your letters e.g. surnames, address, phone numbers, email addresses**
- **Don't include items that are not agreed in the Letterbox Agreement**

What happens when your child turns 18?

Letterbox contact usually ends when your child turns 18 years of age.

- As an adult your child will have the right to decide what contact there should be with their birth relatives. They also have the right to access information held in their file, view copies of their original adoption records and decide for themselves what to do with the information
- Some adopted young adults do so just after their 18th birthday or at the earliest opportunity, while others wait until they are much older and feel 'ready'
- Shortly after your child's 17th birthday, the Letterbox Team will contact you to remind you that your child's letterbox arrangements will soon come to an end.
- We will continue to manage letters sent for young people over 18 by agreement on how you and they wish us to manage any contact post their 18th birthday.
- We can continue to administer Letterbox until your child is 21 if there are exceptional circumstances that warrant an extension. Please contact us to discuss if you would like an extension.
- All young people are able to, after they are 18, place restrictions on their files should they NOT wish to be contacted by birth relatives.
- We will arrange with all parties for your final letterbox exchanges to take place just before/after the young person's 18th birthday

- We will also provide you with information for the sources of help and support available to you, the young person and their birth relatives
- We understand that this may be a very unsettling and uncertain time, and support is available if you need it, please contact us.
- Whatever the adopted young person's decision is, it's important to respect their wishes.

Useful Addresses and Contact details

**Western Bay Adoption Service
Letterbox Scheme
Port Talbot Civic Centre
Port Talbot
SA13 1PJ**

0300 365 2222 (local rate call)

Letterbox@westernbayadoption.org