

Letterbox information for adopters

What is Letterbox?

Letterbox is a system that helps birth relatives and adopters to stay in contact in a confidential way. It is managed by Together for Adoption (TFA). Letters are sent to the Letterbox Co-ordinator, who will check them, keep a copy on file, then pass this on to the birth or adoptive parents. You can learn more by attending the “Keeping Connections” workshop delivered by the TFA letterbox team.

How can the Letterbox help my child?

- Letterbox can help children gain a positive sense of their adoptive and birth identity.
- Adopters can ask questions and receive answers from birth family which will help them to respond to some of their child’s questions.
- Exchanging information allows an adopted child to know about any changes or important events from within their birth family.
- Letters can reassure children about the wellbeing of their birth relatives and can offer some comfort to birth families.
- Exchanging letters shows a child that their adoptive family acknowledges the importance of their birth family and that they accept and value everything about them.
- Letterbox can also help to prepare a child for their future as an adopted adult.
- Each child will have an individual letterbox agreement which will be agreed with you one month after the child is placed for adoption, when you will be contacted by your Letterbox Co-ordinator.

How will the Letterbox system work?

Letterbox agreements will be set up between adopters, birth relatives and TFA. The agreement will include the details of what information is to be exchanged, with whom, how often and when. Everyone involved in the exchange will receive a copy. One letter can be written, copied and sent to each adult involved in the agreement, although it is good to personalise them if you can.

Letterbox is “adult to adult” arrangement. When a letter is received, the Co-ordinator will check it and send it on. If there are aspects of a letter that we think may be difficult for you, we will phone you to discuss. A copy will also be saved on the child’s electronic file.

The Letterbox Scheme cannot be used to send presents or money. Adopters are encouraged to send anonymized photos and birth family are welcome to send photos of themselves. Anything received via the letterbox scheme must not be shared on social media and doing so could put the agreement at risk.

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When will the exchange start?

The Letterbox coordinator will contact adopters 4 weeks after the child moves in and the agreement will be confirmed. The month of the first letter will be agreed and confirmed in the agreement sent out to everybody. You will send your letter first, then birth family members can reply. In addition, a settling in letter should be given to birth family about 6 weeks after placement, coordinated by the child's social worker.

Are there any practical points that I need to remember?

- Please tell us if you change address, email address or phone number.
- Include your child's birth name, date of birth and placing authority in a note to the coordinator.
- Remember not to include identifying information within your letter, such as names of schools, sports clubs or specific towns.
- Use first names when signing your letter.
- Please do your best to keep to the dates agreed in your Letterbox Agreement as missed or late letters cause anxiety and distress.

What information should I put in a letter?

It's normal to worry about what to include or leave out of a letter. Adopters can feel anxious about telling a birth relative that the child is happy, as they are concerned this might upset them. Birth relatives sometimes feel that they cannot give good news about their own lives or are too overwhelmed by their sadness and feelings of loss. Your letterbox coordinator is available to help you with your letter – by email, over the phone or in person. Please contact them if you would like some support.

Here are some suggestions of things to include:

- The child's appearance, health and general development
- Their experiences at nursery or school
- Favourite activities, hobbies, events and trips
- Likes/dislikes – Food, colours, sports, activities
- Positive comments the child has made about adoption or the information in their life story book about their birth family.
- Information about any changes in the adoptive family (e.g. siblings)
- Use birth family and the child's name
- Be descriptive and ask questions – especially any questions from the child
- Include drawings, artwork, hand/footprints, string to show a child's height, photographs etc.

Writing letters to siblings

Siblings are a really important connection and children often feel more able to join in with these exchanges. Siblings may be adopted, in foster care, with birth parents or living independently. When writing to siblings, try to remember how old they are and reference

age-appropriate events and interests, as well as referring to things they wrote in their last letter. This is a good chance to ask any questions children have about their siblings and to seek reassurance that they are ok. As well as photos, you could include a picture the child has drawn or a card they have made.

What if a Birth Relative Does Not Wish to be involved in Letterbox?

At the time of adoption, some birth relatives may feel that it is too difficult to write letters but in the future they may begin to feel differently. For this reason, we let everyone know that we will keep any letters for them in case they wish to read them in the future. We ask adopters to keep sending their letters until a child turns 18, regardless of whether they've had any replies, for the same reasons.

What if the news I receive is distressing or difficult?

Your Letterbox Co-ordinator will contact you to discuss any particularly difficult information before sending out your letter. They can offer support to help you or your child deal with difficult or upsetting information. We encourage you to keep these letters, even if some of the contents may not need to be shared with the child until a later date.

If you think there is a need for news to be sent urgently (such as illness or death) please contact the Letterbox Co-ordinator.

What if I don't get a reply?

We know that this will be disappointing and we will be able to discuss this with you. We ask you to continue to send your news as agreed and it may be in the future the other person will start sending their news again too. We know that there are many reasons birth family members are not able to reply, but this doesn't mean they don't value the letters that you send.

How long will the service continue?

Letterbox exchanges will usually continue until the child reaches the age of 18. Once a child turns 17 we will begin conversations about what they want to happen next.

The Letterbox Contact file will then become part of your child's adoption records which are kept for 100 years from the date of their Adoption Order.

Contact details

Please ensure that you record the name of the local authority, birth name, date of birth of your child.

Email: TfAletterbox@wigan.gov.uk
Post: Letterbox Co-ordinator
Together for Adoption
Letterbox Service
Warrington Town Hall
Sankey Street
Warrington
WA1 1UH

Telephone: 01942 487272

Current Letterbox coordinators:
Wigan & St Helens: Liz Sherriff
CWAC & Halton: Sue Prince
Warrington: Sarah Harris

Photographs

We encourage photographs to be included in the exchange. The following guidelines are to safeguard the children and ensure the photo exchange is helpful.

- ✓ Photos of children involved in an activity or a close up shot are particularly appreciated, e.g. climbing.
- ✓ Please send clear photos.
- ✓ Please do not include people/children outside of your family.
- ✓ Please ensure photos do not include identifying information, e.g. school or team badges, local landmarks.
- ✓ Please ensure the child is fully clothed.

Examples of anonymised photographs:

We understand that people can be nervous about sending photos. We encourage you to send anonymised photos, like these below. These help give a real sense of the child, but without their face being seen. If you want to discuss this further, please contact your letterbox coordinator.



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Sample letter – From Adopters

Dear (First name)

We hope you are keeping well. Since we last wrote so much has changed.

When we last wrote Matthew hadn't yet started crawling and was only rolling and shuffling. However, he pretty soon began to crawl! He was very wobbly to start with, but as he is a determined little fella, he was soon a super speedy crawler who races us across the room!

Matthew really enjoys being outside, he likes touching the soil and the grass, but most of all likes to go on bike rides in his seat on the back of the bike, he shouts when the bike stops and looks very funny with his Fireman Sam cycle helmet on ! He also loves splashing in the bath, so was super excited when he first went swimming in his big orange rubber ring and can now kick himself across the pool.

In September the whole family went on holiday to Wales and Matthew got to spend time with the family and really get to know them. He spent lots of time on the beach, trying to eat the sand and enjoyed paddling in the sea. Whilst on holiday he first pulled himself up on the edge of the sofa and since coming home he has got more and more confident. He now walks along the furniture and can walk pushing along a cart full of blocks. I'm sure he will be walking by Christmas.

During the holiday we found out that Matthew loves ice cream, so for his birthday party we decided to have it at an ice cream cake. All the family came and lots of his new little friends. He blew out all the candles on his birthday cake that was shaped like a number one with little blue stars all over it.

We have just started going to playgroup and Matthew especially loves the singing at the end. He is always playing with his instruments, he has a tambourine, maraca and a light up drum that he loves to shake and bang!

Everywhere we go people talk to him, as he always has a beaming smile on his face. He is able to clap his hands, wave, blow raspberries and puts his hands on his head if someone says oh no! He has just started to give hugs and gives very sloppy kisses!

We are looking forward to Christmas and will tell you all about it in the next letter in August.

Best wishes from

Sally, Robert and Matthew xx

Sample letter – Settling in Letter

Hello Janine

Annie came to live with us in May and has settled in really well. She is a happy little girl, always smiling and giggling.

We first met her at her foster carers house and spent a few hours playing with her and then took her out for a walk in the buggy. Over the next few days we spent different parts of the day with her, getting to know Annie and her routine.

She is now making her first attempts at walking and is saying a few words like 'bear', 'there' and 'bye bye'.

Annie loves her food and sleeps really well she will sleep from 7pm until around 7am every night!. She also enjoys her milky bottle before going to bed. Annie now has 8 teeth, 4 at the top and 4 at the bottom.

Annie attends a musical group once a week and other play groups where she enjoys playing with other children.

Her favourite cuddly toy is a small pink Hippo that she cuddles up with at night. She loves watching Iggle Piggle on the television and gets very excited when she sees the Ninky Nonk!

We have an older son and they really enjoy playing with each other.

We hope that this letter reassures you that Annie is well and happy, and we look forward to starting letterbox contact next January.

Best wishes

Sue and Phil