

**ROCHDALE METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL
CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE SERVICES
PROCEDURE**

**LETTERBOX PROCEDURE FOR
POST ADOPTION INFORMATION EXCHANGE**

INTRODUCTION

1. The Post Adoption Information Exchange (often known as "Letterbox") is an arrangement through which birth family members and adoptive families can exchange information after adoption, usually once or twice a year, at a time agreed between those involved, in which confidentiality is assured.
2. The importance of maintaining birth family links for adopted children is now widely recognised. It can help a child develop a sense of identity and feel comfortable about their origins, whilst enabling the child to develop attachments in their adoptive family. Contact encourages greater openness about adoption and this can lead to a more successful adoptive placement.
3. For birth families it provides reassurance that the child is well, and gives news of their progress. Whilst it can sometimes be painful, most birth relatives would still prefer to receive regular information.
4. Adoptive parents can find it helpful to receive up to date information about the birth family, and it can assist in ensuring that adoption is discussed openly within the family. It can help in answering a child's questions.

PROCEDURE	TASK ALLOCATION
1. POST ADOPTION INFORMATION EXCHANGE GUIDANCE	
1.1 Is it essential to set up a clear written agreement to ensure that all participants understand the procedure	All to note
1.2 When a care plan for adoption is approved by the agency and the court the responsible social worker for the child will arrange with the birth parent and significant other where appropriate for a letterbox agreement (see Appendix B) to be completed	Social Worker
1.3 The agreement will be used as part of the adoption support plan presented to the adoption panel when a match is proposed.	
1.4 Information/news may be sent once or twice a year, at a time to be agreed by adopters and birth family. Do not agree higher levels of exchange as high levels of exchange can be burdensome to all concerned. Many people prefer to avoid emotional times, such as birthdays and Christmas. It is wise to avoid these dates	Letterbox Coordinator

PROCEDURE	TASK ALLOCATION
1.5 If there is a Court order specifying any contact arrangements, this should be attached to the Agreement. Details of the Agreement should be recorded in the Adoption Support Plan.	Letterbox Coordinator
1.6 In order to set up the agreement it is necessary discuss the arrangements with all those involved. The Agreements should specify the form of contact (i.e. letter, card, photograph, and other media) and the date contact item should be received by.	
1.7 We do not offer an exchange of gifts /money or vouchers and this is clearly stated in the agreement. There will be no exchange of these unless a court orders us to do so.	
1.8 There will be a separate agreement with each person involved in the exchange.	
1.9 The agreement when signed with the birth parent will be sent to the adoption team social worker who will place a copy on file and send a copy to the letterbox coordinator so that a letterbox file can be opened.	Social Worker Letterbox Coordinator
1.10 When a child is placed with adopters the child's social worker will arrange a letterbox agreement with the adopters and send a signed copy of the agreement to the adoption team social worker who will provide a copy for the letterbox coordinator.	
1.11 Each agency will have a centralised post adoption exchange system, preferably managed by an administrator with management oversight.	
1.12 Agreements should be completed and signed by all parties. Copies of the Agreement should be circulated to all those participating. Written information about the Local Authority's system should be issued to all parties. (See Appendix C) The original Agreement should be kept centrally on the letterbox file	
1.13 All Agreements will each have a file and photocopies of information exchanged will be kept on file, along with a record of the dates exchanged.	
1.14 All contact items will be opened, logged, photocopied and sent on by recorded delivery to the address on the agreement.	
1.15 If contact items do not comply with the Letterbox Agreement, these will be returned to the sender.	
1.16 The letterbox coordinator will send a reminder letter 2 – 3 weeks prior to the date on which information is due. If no information has been received 3 weeks after it is due, a further reminder will be sent.	Letterbox Coordinator

PROCEDURE	TASK ALLOCATION
<p>If information is still not received, a decision will need to be made as to what further contact can be made to encourage the exchange to take place.</p> <p>If all attempts to make contact fail, the other parties to the exchange will be informed and encouraged to continue sending information exchanges as per their agreement.</p> <p>1.17 The adoption team manager will only consider suspending the arrangement after all attempts to maintain exchange have been exhausted.</p> <p>1.18 It is the responsibility of all parties to notify any changes of address to the letterbox coordinator.</p> <p>1.19 The arrangements will be reviewed on a regular basis. It may be necessary to change arrangements if they are not working properly or when the child is older and wishes a different arrangement.</p> <p>Any negotiations re. changing the agreement will be done bearing in mind the welfare checklist of the Adoption and Children Act 2002. i.e. the decisions will be made in the best interests of the adopted person.</p>	<p>Adoption Team Manager</p> <p>All to note</p>
<h2>2. DRAWING UP AGREEMENTS</h2>	
<p>2.1 These should be discussed with the birth family at the time the decision is made that their child should be placed for adoption. This will enable you to complete those sections in the Child's Permanence Record regarding proposals for future contact and will help the birth parent express their views on the plan. It may be that you will already have discussed these plans with the birth relatives as part of the care planning process in order to complete the Final Care Plan submitted to court which will have detailed the plan for future contact.</p> <p>2.2 These should be discussed at placement planning meeting with the adopters and both the adopters and the birth relatives agreement will form part of the form part of the Adoption Support Plan</p> <p>2.3 Written information, explaining how the Letterbox system works, should be given to all parties. (See Appendix C)</p> <p>2.4 Frequency – once or twice year. Whilst twice a year is often recommended, annual reports may be more realistic. DO NOT agree to over frequent exchanges as it is unlikely that adopters will be able to maintain a high level of exchange</p> <p>2.5 It is recommended that emotional times such as birthdays and Christmas should be avoided where possible.</p>	<p>All to note</p>

PROCEDURE	TASK ALLOCATION
<p>2.6 The agreements contain a clause regarding the format of information to be exchanged i.e. letters and possibly photographs. <u>It is not the policy to allow exchanges of electronic information e.g. Videos/DVD, CD's</u> as great care needs to be taken with these formats as they may contain inappropriate and sometimes "hidden" messages. Also, such technology may become obsolete and information may need re-recording.</p> <p>2.7 Care should be taken with photographs to ensure that they do not contain identifying information (school badges, brownie/cub uniforms) and that information on the back of photographs i.e. the location of processing store, is not included. This may be in the form of code which can be decoded on the web.</p> <p>2.8 In any situation where there are serious concerns that photos may be used inappropriately, it will be necessary to keep them on file and invite relatives in to look at them in the office.</p> <p>2.9 Agreements will explicitly state that photographs must not, in any circumstances be posted on websites such as "Genes Reunited" or "Face Book". Should this occur, we will take all necessary action to have them removed. This would require a request being made by those with parental responsibility. In some cases websites have not co-operated with such requests. It should also explicitly state that if photographs are inappropriately made available to the public in any way, then no further photos will be provided.</p> <p>2.10 There should be a clear agreement with all those involved as to how letters/reports are signed. Only first names should be used. A frequent area of contention relates to how birth relatives sign themselves. Research suggests that first names are preferable, although some adopters accept "Mummy Jane" or "Daddy Steve". Ensuring clarity on this point can have a strong influence on whether adopters accept letterbox items.</p> <p>2.11 Contents are vetted to check whether any inappropriate information has been included. This may include issues of confidentiality or identifying information such as addresses or school information.</p> <p>2.12 All post should be sent by recorded delivery.</p> <p>2.13 If information is received which is likely to cause distress, then a decision must be made as to whether a covering letter should be sent or whether the information should be returned to the sender. The Adoption Team Manager should be consulted regarding this decision.</p>	<p>All to note</p> <p>Adoption Team Manager</p>

PROCEDURE	TASK ALLOCATION
<p>2.14 Participants should be given information as how to forward urgent or distressing family information such as the death of a birth parent or the death of a child. This would normally involve the Adoption Support Worker or child's Social Worker.</p> <p>2.15 When contact items have not been received within a reasonable timescale, a reminder letter will be sent</p> <p>2.16 It must be noted that individual circumstances vary considerably, and Workers involved will need to be sensitive and responsive to individual situations, seeking appropriate guidance where necessary.</p> <p>See also Letterbox Checklist (Appendix A)</p>	<p>Adoption Support Worker / Social Worker</p>

Appendices

A: Social Worker's Checklist

B: Letterbox Agreements

C: Information about the Letterbox Scheme

D: Information Pack

APPENDIX A

LETTERBOX SOCIAL WORKER'S CHECKLIST
(To be returned to LETTERBOX CO-ORDINATOR)

Name of child/children _____

Date of Birth _____

Name of Adopters _____

Address/Tel: _____

Adoption Agency _____
/Local Authority of Adopters _____ Tel: _____

Name of relatives that Letterbox is applicable for **Is agreement in place ✓ or x**

Birth Mother _____

Birth Father _____

Paternal Grandparents _____

Maternal Grandparents _____

Siblings/half siblings _____

Any other relatives :-(please state)

Date of Exchange _____

Are there any family members who have not completed Letterbox contracts as yet? (If so brief reason why)

Are there any family members **who should NOT** have Letterbox contact? (Brief reason why not)

Manager: Are you satisfied that indirect contact arrangements reflect care planning for this child and arrangements are in place.

Manager _____ Date: _____

Social Worker _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX B

LETTERBOX AGREEMENT (Birth Relative)

I/We: _____

Being the birth relative (s) of:

Address for
correspondence _____

Agree to send a brief update on his/her progress every year,

_____ (Approximate date(s) of exchange).

To be passed on to the adopters of my/our child:

Details Agreed (e.g. letters, photos etc) birth relatives will provide:

I/we agree that we will not be permitted to exchange cards, monies, gifts or vouchers, or any information stored electronically either tape/cd /dvd or in any other format.

I/We also agree that when we send you this information, we would like to receive any information which the adopters may have sent via the Child Care service about his/her current situation.

I/we agree that the information we send will be screened by the Letterbox Coordinator and if it is judged to be unsuitable or outside the scope of this agreement it will be returned to us/me and support will be offered to help ensure a suitable exchange of information can be successfully made.

I/we agree that any information or photographs exchanged will not be shared with anybody other than the intended recipient. I/We will not use the information in any form whatsoever (either printed or electronic or use in conjunction with any search system or social exchange system such as Face Book /Friends Reunited etc in an attempt to find or identify the subject of the information .

I /we acknowledge that if I/we do so the exchange agreement will be suspended and fresh agreement drawn up which will ensure no such behaviour can be repeated

I/we will agree/ will not agree to sharing information about any medical or genetic health issue that may be important for my/our child's health care needs as and when that information comes to my/our attention

Contd over

I/we agree to notify the letterbox coordinator if the address for correspondence changes

I/We would/would not wish to be notified of the death our child Yes/No

Signed _____ Date

Signed _____ Date

Signed (social worker) _____ Date

Rochdale MBC Adoption Service will use all reasonable attempts to ensure that this agreement will continue throughout the childhood of the named child. To do this we are dependant on both the birth family and the adopters working in partnership to meet the needs of the child. Should an exchange fail we will attempt to work with the parties to ensure it restarts so long as the Childs welfare will benefit fro the exchange as research says it does.

LETTERBOX AGREEMENT (ADOPTERS)

I/We: _____

Being the adoptive parent(s) of:

Address for correspondence **(this will not be shared with birth family)**

Agree to send a brief update on his/her progress every year, once/twice yearly (delete as appropriate), on:

_____ (Approximate date(s) of exchange).

To be passed on to the following parties:

Details Agreed (e.g. letters, photos etc)

Adopters will provide:

I/we agree that we will not be permitted to exchange cards, monies, gifts or vouchers or any information stored electronically either tape/cd /dvd or in any other format

I/We also agree that when we send you this information, we would like to receive any information which the birth parents may have sent via the Child Care service about his/her current situation.

I/we agree that all the information we send will be screened by the letterbox coordinator and if it is judged to be unsuitable or outside the scope of this agreement it will be returned to us/me and support will be offered to help ensure a suitable exchange of information can be successfully made.

I/we agree that any information or photographs exchanged will not be shared with anybody other than the intended recipient. I/We will not use the information in any form whatsoever (either printed or electronic or use in conjunction with any search system or social exchange system such as face book /friend reunited etc in an attempt to find or identify the subject of the information .

I /we acknowledge that if I/we do so the exchange agreement will be suspended and fresh agreement drawn up which will ensure no such behaviour can be repeated

I/we agree to notify the letterbox coordinator if the address for correspondence changes

I/We would/would not wish to be notified of the follows: (Delete as appropriate)

The death of a birth parent/sibling	Yes/No
The subsequent birth of half or full siblings	Yes/No
Any genetically or medically linked conditions present in the birth family which were unknown at the time of placement.	Yes/No

I/we agree to notify the adoption agency if the(name of child) dies or if he she develops a genetic/medical condition that is not yet identified that may have implication for any birth relative

Signed _____ Date

Signed _____ Date

Signed (social worker)_____ Date

Rochdale MBC Adoption Service will use all reasonable attempts to ensure that this agreement will continue throughout the childhood of the named child. To do this we are dependant on both the birth family and the adopters working in partnership to meet the needs of the child. Should an exchange fail we will attempt to work with the parties to ensure it restarts so long as the Childs welfare will benefit from the exchange as research says it does.

Appendix C

INFORMATION REGARDING THE LETTERBOX EXCHANGE TO BE GIVEN TO ALL PARTIES

THE ROCHDALE LETTERBOX SCHEME

Rochdale Child Care Services now operate a Letterbox system to enable information to be exchanged between birth parents and adoptive parents throughout a child's life. Birth parents rarely bury their memories and feelings about a child they have given up or lost through the courts, and that many find it valuable and comforting to have some regular communication about the child.

In the same way that birth parents can find it helpful to hear about the adopted child's progress, adoptive parents can in their turn find it very valuable to receive some up to date information about the child's birth family which they can share with the child. As the child grows up, the exchange of some information between birth parents and adopters can help everyone adjust to the situation and in later years cope with and understand it better. Research shows that where these arrangements are made and kept to the adopted person grows up knowing more about their birth family and are more likely to consider contact with them in the future

HOW THE LETTERBOX ACTUALLY WORKS

If you have agreed to either give or receive information from the birth family of your child, you will be asked to complete and sign an arrangement form, around the time of placement which states what and when information should be exchanged. Once this agreement has been set up and signed, you will be expected to send the information to the Letterbox Administrator, at the Child Care Services at the agreed time. If you are late, the Administrator will send you a reminder.

Once the information has been received from you, the Letterbox Administrator screen the information to ensure it is suitable and is in accordance with the agreement you sign. They will then pass it on, Recorded Delivery to the other side of the exchange. You will receive an acknowledgement letter confirming that the information has been received by the Letterbox Administrator, and forwarded to the other party.

We do not permit exchanges of;

- Gifts/vouchers/money.
- Information stored electronically e.g. DVDs, CDs, tapes, etc

If you send information that is not considered suitable it will be returned to you and help offered to ensure a suitable information exchange can be completed

If there is an agreement regarding the exchange of photographs then by signing the agreement you accept that you will not use them in order to identify or find the subject of the photograph and you are agreeing not to use any inform search system or social exchange system such as face book or friends reunited to find the subject. If you do so the exchange will be suspended and renegotiated in order to ensure such behaviour cannot be repeated.

If you have any queries or concerns please contact either the Letterbox Administrator, the Letterbox Co-ordinator or your Social Worker if you are still in touch with them.

WHAT TO PUT IN A LETTER

Your Social Worker will discuss the kind of information to be exchanged before the child is placed. Even so, many adopters become anxious when they attempt to write a progress letter to the birth parent. They wonder what to write and a common worry is that writing about how happy your child is may be upsetting for his/her birth parent.

The best letters are those which are informative and descriptive - examples are shown attached. Birth parents want to know how their child is doing at school and whether they enjoy swimming, football or painting etc. Most would rather their child be happy and settled even if he/she is living with someone else. The most common concern of birth parents is that something will happen to their child and they will not be told about it. Regular information, no matter how brief or subjective, at least keeps them in touch and gives them some reassurance.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The letter to be passed on should not contain your address. However, you will need to send a covering note with it, containing your current address and your child's name.

The Legal Framework for Contact

Judges and Magistrates, who hear applications by Local Authority, which involve placing a child for adoption, have a duty to scrutinise the contact agreements proposed between both relatives and adoptive parents. The Local Authority will include in the Care Plan, which has to be approved by the Court details of any contact, which is proposed under the Letterbox scheme. Ongoing indirect contact is usually felt to be of benefit to the child and it is expected that the adoptive family would honour the Local Authority's proposal with regard to contact through the scheme. The details of this are subject to negotiation between the Local Authority and the adoptive family.

If there has been an agreement between the parties about the contact arrangements to take place after the Adoption Order is made it is not usual for the court to formally order contact, however the agreement will have been noted by the court and will form part of its judgement. It is therefore important that these agreements are kept. In some cases the court will make a formal order for contact. If these arrangements are not kept to, then they could be enforced via the Court.

If a contact order is granted, it could be for more contact than originally agreed, including direct contact, if the court believes it to be in the interests of the children.

Advice and Information

The Letterbox Co-ordinator or Letterbox Administrator will be happy to discuss any concerns you have regarding the arrangements.

Address for Correspondence

Letterbox Co-Ordinator
Foxholes House
Foxholes Road
ROCHDALE
OL12 OED
Tel: 01706-710750

Appendix D

INFORMATION PACK

**ROCHDALE BOROUGH COUNCIL
CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE**

LETTERBOX SCHEME

Information to Social Workers

Please ensure information sheets are given to relevant parties.

Please note the implications of post adoption contact.

**ROCHDALE METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL
CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE**

ROCHDALE LETTERBOX SCHEME

Information for Social Workers

The Rochdale Letterbox Scheme was set up to replace the informal agreement to indirectly exchange information between birth families and adoptive families and route this information through one point following the adoption.

When should the letterbox be set up?

The letterbox agreement should be discussed with birth parents as soon as the decision that a child should be placed for adoption is made. Discussions about proposed contact arrangements need to begin during the early stages of planning for adoption, bearing in mind the best interests of the child and the birth parent's wishes.

It is at this point the adoption team send a letter to birth relatives regarding the services they are able to access.

The Child Permanence Record must contain clear details of what expectations we would have of adoptive parents in relation to contact, so that they can consider these details alongside other information on the child's needs and background, before the child is matched at panel.

The adoption panel will also need to know what the arrangements are and what the birth parents views are regarding the arrangements.

Sometimes a birth parent initially feels they do not wish to take part in the Letterbox Scheme. However, it is a good idea for a birth parent or her/his relatives to find out at this stage whether the adoptive parents would agree to send information into the Letterbox Scheme, in case the birth parent changes their mind in the future. We have found parents' views about this can change as time passes.

It is important that the adopters feel comfortable, and are not just agreeing because they feel it is expected of them.

How does Letterbox work?

The Letterbox pack contains two arrangement forms:

The Letterbox contract form (birth family)

The Letterbox contract form (adoptive family)

The **Social Worker** completes these with the respective families prior to the start of the placement if possible. The **Letterbox Co-ordinator** is available to discuss the proposed arrangements. The **Social Worker** then passes the completed forms to the **Letterbox administrator** who sets up a Letterbox file for each case. We also ask the Social Worker to complete an arrangement sheet with an overview of indirect contact arrangements and any problems in organising this exchange.

Both parties need to be clear with regard to information they each send or receive. It may not always be possible to reach agreement but this should be the aim.

The type of information exchanged consists of **letters and possibly photographs.**

We no **longer exchange cards** as often birth family cards are inappropriate, and don't forget the exchange is between the adults and not directly with the child.

Please ensure that when you talk to birth family and adopters about dates for exchange **you AVOID** the time around the **child/children's birthday** and **Christmas.**

The letterbox system is unable to pass on gifts.

The parties concerned send in the agreed information to the **Letterbox administrator** at the specified time (usually annually). An acknowledgement letter is sent out to them to confirm receipt of the information and to confirm that the information has been passed on.

The information is then sent out together with an acknowledgement slip asking the person to confirm receipt of the information. There is a system for sending reminders in the event of information not being received at the agreed time. A copy of all exchanges is also kept on file so the child can access these after the age of 18 years, or if birth parents etc commit to the exchange at a later date.

Confidentiality.

No identifying details are disclosed. All information is sent out **Recorded Delivery.**

The Legal Framework for Contact.

Judges and Magistrates, who hear applications by the Local Authority, which involve placing a child for adoption, have a duty to scrutinise the contact arrangements proposed between both relatives and adoptive parents. The Local Authority will include in the Care Plan, which has to be approved by the Court, details of any contact, which is proposed under the Letterbox Scheme. Ongoing indirect contact is usually felt to be of benefit to the child and it is expected that the adoptive family would honour the Local Authority and the adoptive family.

If the child is relinquished for adoption and/or if the child is not on a Placement Order, when the Adoption Order Application is heard, a record will be made by the Court if there has been an agreement between the parties about the contact arrangements to take place after the Adoption Order is made. It is unlikely that an adoption order will be made if there is no contact arrangements specified. As the letterbox agreement are not usually part of a court order they cannot be legally enforced after the making of an adoption order.

If the child is placed for Adoption under a Placement Order, adopters are not legally obliged to commit to an exchange and the family have no legal remit to ask the Court for a Contract Order.

However if there is doubt that the agreement may be made or if made may not be kept the Court may make a Section 26 order specifying the nature of contact. This order is legally binding on the parties.

Reviewing Contact Agreements.

Sometimes the birth or adoptive parents wish to change the arrangements.

Changes will only be considered if they are in the interests of the children, and the Letterbox Co-ordinator should be told why and in what way the changes are proposed. The changes must be agreed by all parties and a new agreement signed.

Help for Social Workers in setting up Letterbox

Sandy Gilmartin
Letterbox Co-ordinator
Foxholes House
Foxholes Road
Rochdale
OL12 OED
Telephone 01706-710750

Rochdale MBC

Letterbox Exchange Scheme

This Booklet is to give information about Rochdale's Letterbox Exchange for children placed for adoption. Letterbox exchange can last for many years; you may want to keep this booklet in a safe place to read again in the future.

The Letterbox Exchange exists to exchange information between adopted children, their adopted parents and members of the birth family.

Even though adopted children have become part of another family, most children benefit from having information about their birth families, so they grow up knowing who they are and where they come from and to know that their birth family is still interested in their progress. Children also benefit from knowing some information about what has/or is happening to their birth family Letterbox exchange can provide a straightforward way of keeping your child's information up to date as they grow up.

Often when adopted children grow up they do think about meeting their birth family, having had news of them over the years will help them be more confident about what to expect. This exchange also helps adopters prepare for and answer the child's questions about their adoption over the coming years and helps with an understanding of what has happened in the birth relatives lives and can provide a means of sharing important information such as any health issues.

Our Letterbox Exchange passes letters and sometimes photographs between birth families and adoptive families without names and addresses having to be exchanged. Research shows that most children do well in their adoptive family if they have knowledge of their birth family, for many children letterbox exchange is the preferred way to maintain this contact. Letters are sent to the adopters to share it with the child in the way and at a time which they decide is right.

Adopted children cannot use this exchange directly; all information will be exchanged between the adults involved. However, many children are actively involved and encouraged to be part of this exchange. Experience has shown us that it is most helpful to the child if this letterbox information is part of the child's understanding about adoption from early on.

The content of the exchange and when it will be sent is usually agreed through the child's social worker before the adoption order is made. Everyone signs an agreement to confirm the arrangement.

Questions often asked about Letter box Exchange

What does the Letterbox exchange do?

It makes it possible for birth families and adopters to exchange information regularly. In this way, children will not be left wondering what happened to their birth parents, brothers and sisters and other significant people after they were adopted. Birth families are also reassured by knowing news is available to them. It is important for adopted children to know as much as possible about their birth families, as a way of developing a healthy identity as they grow up and they too can gain a sense of wellbeing from knowing that their birth family are well.

How often can I send a Letter?

The usual letterbox exchange is once per year, sometimes, if it is agreed to be in the best interest of the child twice a year exchange is arranged. Photographs can also be exchanged if this is included in your letterbox agreement, sometimes there are very good reasons why photographs should not be exchanged but due to confidentiality of adoption issues the reasons may not be explained to you. If you can exchange photographs please write on the back who is in the photograph and the date it was taken (even just the year will do).

Everybody involved in a letterbox agreement will be sent written information setting out what can be sent, how often and by whom.

What information will I put in the letter?

Many birth and adoptive parents worry about what to include in a letter. Often adoptive parents feel anxious about saying how happy the child is, in case this upsets the birth relatives. Actually, birth relatives are often relieved that the child is well and happy even if they are living with someone else. We ask that everyone tries to ensure that news in letters is positive and reassuring but there may be times when difficult or painful or urgent information is received.

If you are not certain about what to put in your letter or you need to pass on difficult news you can ask the Letterbox Exchange co-ordinator for help. Details at the back of this booklet.

Sometimes letters may include information that the co-ordinator feels will be too difficult or distressing for the person intended. Sometimes, we may ask you to write something in a different way or we may contact you and the person going to receive the exchange and discuss this information before the letterbox exchange is sent out. As in all matters within adoption, confidentiality is very important and all information sent to the letterbox exchange will be treated as highly confidential.

We have included some sample letters in this booklet and also some helpful lists that you could use:

For adoptive parents;

Other things that could be included in a letter

- *Your child's progress at school and teachers comments*
- *Health and information about their development*
- *How your child gets on with friends and relatives*
- *Looks/personality/interests and hobbies*
- *Things your child can do well*
- *Favourite foods/programmes*
- *Any comments your child has made about their adoptive /birth family*
- *You may want to send drawings and photos*

There may be times when it is not always easy to send information but please remember your child will benefit greatly from these communications.

For Birth parents

You will have your own ideas about what to put into a letter. It is helpful to think about who is going to read the letter. It will be the adopters, who read the letter so it is better to write to the adopters and your child together. For example Dear John, Kate and Billy

It will be the adopters who will write to you with information about your child. If the child is young, the adopters will wait until the child is older to tell them what is in your letter. As the child grows older they will understand more of what is written and eventually read the letters themselves if this is appropriate for them.

It is important that positive messages for your child's future are passed on to them so they can feel safe and happy in their adoptive home. This could be difficult for you as you may have strong feelings about your child not living with you, but this letter is not the place to put these feelings.

If there are some things you would like to write which are more suitable for when your child is an adult, you can write a letter to go on the child's adoption file. This will be available to them when they are an adult.

Birth parents often feel they can't give good news about their own lives and focus on their feelings of sadness and loss. It may be important to your child's adoptive family and the child that you are thinking about them and are glad to hear of their progress. Your birth child may also want to know information about what has happened in your life.

How should birth family members sign the letters?

Most people think that it is better to sign your letters with your first name such as Mary, This is less confusing for your child and they will know the letter has come from their birth family.

How are children included?

Children's understanding of letterbox exchange will change as they get older. A child has a better chance of understanding this if they are aware of the exchange from an early age.

It is important to remember that all children are different and they should only be included if it is something they want to share in.

But children can also change their minds as they get older and views change. It is also important to keep asking if they want to be involved in the exchange. Sometimes, as teenagers, some young people may not want their adoptive parents to share information about them with their birth families any more. It is important to listen and respect the views of young people but also see if you can find some level of compromise in what information is shared. Even a little general information is useful and adopted young people are often pleased that they have some control over the exchange but still benefit from the exchange of information in the long run.

Should we put our address and telephone number on our letters?

*No it is important that you **do not put address or telephone numbers on your letters.** Please include a separate piece of paper with your name and address and the name of the child with your letter. It is very important we can make sure we have your right address for when we forward your letter.*

Should we seal the envelope?

You should not seal the envelope as all letters are checked in case names and addresses are included by mistake and to make sure all information is safe for the child. We also photocopy all letters so there is a complete record on the child's adoption file in case anything is lost in the future. Adoption records are kept for 100 years and the adopted child has access to these records if they wish when they reach 18 years of age. A copy of all letterbox exchanges from birth relatives and adopters will be part of this adoption record

*Please put your letter in an **unsealed envelope** inside a sealed envelope with your covering note with your name and address and telephone number on and send it to the letterbox exchange co-ordinator. The address is at the end of this booklet.*

How is information exchanged?

*Send your letter and covering note to the letterbox co-ordinator. They will then photocopy the letter for the child's adoption file and make sure there is nothing in the letter that is not appropriate to send. The letter will then be sent by **recorded delivery**. We ask everyone who receives a letter to fill in a slip to confirm they have had the exchange. You will be notified that your information has been sent.*

Can I send gifts?

*No, unfortunately we do not include any gifts, vouchers cards or money within letterbox exchanges. If you include them they **WILL** be returned to you*

Will I be reminded about my exchange?

Yes, if information is not sent to the co-ordinator at the agreed time, you will receive a reminder letter.

What if I can't read or write very well?

We can provide this booklet in large print, other languages and on audio tape and in Braille.

If you need someone to help you to write or read your letterbox letters to you, get in touch with your social worker, or the letterbox exchange co-ordinator to discuss this, or if you prefer a trusted family member or friend to help you. You can contact the letterbox co-ordinator to talk about any difficulties you may face; hopefully, we can help come up with individual arrangements that suit your particular circumstances.

If you need the letter translating we can arrange this, we can also arrange for letters to be re-produced in large print and Braille.

What happens if people don't keep to the agreements?

Agreements made under the letterbox scheme are normally voluntary and we ask that people only enter into agreements that they feel able to keep. If you want to change or withdraw from the agreement this will be discussed with the co-ordinator, who will then speak to the other people involved. Don't forget letterbox exchange is set up for the long term benefits for the child. Not keeping to an agreement can cause considerable distress to the child as they grow up and other people involved in the exchange.

It is unlikely an adoption order will be made if there is no agreement regarding contact or there is doubt that the agreement will be stuck to.

For those agreements made under the order of a court the parties to the agreement are legally bound to keep to them

When does letterbox start?

It usually starts at an agreed date after the adoption order has been granted. We do not exchange letters at Christmas or around the time of the child's birthday. Letterbox can be set up at a later date with agreement from all individuals concerned; however, no exchanges will be passed on without a completed and signed agreement form.

How long does letterbox last?

Generally, letterbox exchange is available until the adoptive child has reached 18 years old. In some circumstances, exchange can continue after the adopted person is 18 years. Continuation of the exchange needs to be agreed by all the individuals involved in the exchange and by the letterbox co-ordinator. At 18 years the adopted person has a right to decide for themselves what happens about contact with birth relatives in the future. At 18 years of age an adopted adult has the right to request information from their adoption file, although some adopted people do not request this until much older and some not at all.

What if I have not completed an agreement?

Letters sent without a formal agreement will not be sent on. We can keep them on file for the child should they request them in the future. Sometimes, birth relatives just don't wish to take part in the exchange and may never change their minds. However, birth family members are often very angry and upset with the Local Authority and do not wish to have anything further to do with them and therefore do not discuss or sign letterbox agreements, later (sometimes many years later) they may regret this and ask for letterbox exchange at this time, for this reason, we keep letters to birth family on file. We ask that adoptive parents send information anyway, even if it is just one way and kept on the file.

The individual circumstances of each child's family should have been discussed with the child's adoptive parents and how appropriate it would be to begin letterbox at a later date. It would be up to the adopters to decide if they are willing to consider such an exchange.

We ask social workers to complete a form at the time of a child being placed for adoption to state how appropriate exchange would be to the child.

What support is available?

All birth relatives are entitled to independent counselling from a service provided by a voluntary agency. For details of this service please contact the letterbox coordinator

Many adoptive parents and birth families have shared that it can sometimes arouse painful feelings undertaking this exchange. These feelings are natural and normal part of being involved in adoption.

Support is available for anyone involved in the letterbox exchange, this includes, the adoptive parents, birth family and the adopted child. We are happy to have a chat with you about what should go in your letter and even help you write a letter or help you identify someone else to support you. If you feel overwhelmed, do seek help, from adoption support workers, social workers, an adoption support service or family and friends.

The Letterbox co-ordinator can help you with any problems you might have. You can telephone, write or email if you have a question or concern about your exchange.

Birth parents can also leave information on Rochdale's contact register or National Contact Register please contact Letterbox Co-ordinator for further details.

Where do I send my letters to?

*Please send your letters and if agreed photographs to:
The letterbox co-ordinator or letterbox administrator:*

*Letterbox Co-ordinator,
Foxholes House,
Foxholes Road,
Rochdale OL12 0ED*

*You could also telephone and ask to speak with the
Letterbox Co-ordinator*

Telephone (01706) 710750

Fax Number(01706) 715033

e-mail: letterbox.admin@rochdale.gov.uk

Complaints

If you are not happy with the service you have received then you can

Write or telephone

Adoption Team Manager

Foxholes House

Foxholes Road

Rochdale OL12 0ED tel(01706)710750 or

Paul McGivern

Customer Relations Manager,

Cherwell Centre, Cherwell Avenue, Heywood OL10 4SY

Telephone (01706)626739

Fax(01706) 626740

Minicom(01706) 626743

Example Letter from an Adopter:

Dear Jean and John

How are you both? We are all fine, as you know Susan was adopted during the summer. It has made us very happy to do this. We thought about you a lot around that time.

We have told Child Care Services that we will continue to write to you. I have enclosed some photos of her birthday party, I hope you like them. Susan's hair has grown very curly and she likes to have pretty pink ribbons in her hair, she is a real girlie girl.

Susan has started dance lessons, she enjoys them very much and is very good at it. She will be starting school in September and is very excited.

We have recently moved house and have a nice garden which Susan loves, she has a playhouse and loves to play with all her dolls.

Susan has a cat called Daisy, it is six months old. The cat follows her everywhere she goes, and when Susan is at playschool, the cat can often be found curled up in her playhouse.

Thank you for the photos you sent, I have put them in Susan's life story book. She calls it her special book and likes to look at it from time to time.

I will write to you again with more news about Susan, she is happy and we will always do our best for her.

With best wishes,

Bob, Carol and Susan