

A Guide to Leicestershire and Rutland's Letterbox Service



Adoption Agency of Leicestershire & Rutland
Children and Young People's Service
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What is the Letterbox Service?

Letterbox is a system that enables adoptive parents and birth relatives to stay in contact by exchanging written information that will benefit the child they all care about. However, this is not a legally binding agreement but an expectation between adoptive parents, birth parents and Leicestershire Post Adoption Service.

The Benefits

For the Child

Most children benefit from continuing to have some form of contact with members of their birth family, initial information given when a child is first adopted soon becomes out of date.

It helps the child understand their history and develop a secure sense of identity. It is important for the child to know about their past and where they came from, to enable them to feel comfortable about their roots and origins and settled with their adoptive family.

It is important that they do not feel forgotten, and they can be kept up to date with changes and events that have happened to their birth family. Reassuring them that the family are well.

The child will be better prepared in the event of any future direct contact (Please see section 'What Happens When the Adopted Person Becomes 18?'), having had contact over the years will make them more confident about what to expect.

For the Adoptive Parents

Letterbox contact helps adoptive parents understand their child's background and answer any questions they have over the years. It can give adoptive parents an insight into the lives of their child's birth relatives which can help with issues that arise after adoption such as health problems. Letterbox can act as a regular reminder for adopters to talk about issues of adoption openly with their child, and help them better understand their child's needs.

Birth Parents

Letterbox offers reassurance that their child is happy and well, and provides information on their health and wellbeing. It helps keep the birth family up to date on the child's school progress and development and share important information on a regular basis for example happy events and medical issues.

It keeps important links and helps answer any questions they might have. Making the child better prepared for future direct contact.



Extended Families and Siblings

It is important that the Letterbox service is offered to extended families and siblings.

How is Letterbox Set Up

The children's social worker needs to make a referral to the letter box service, once there is a possibility that a child could be adopted. It is important for social workers, birth parents and prospective adopters to have early discussions about contact.

Once a child has been formally matched with an adoptive family, the social worker will draw up a contact agreement taking into consideration what would be best for the child and the needs and wishes of both the adoptive and birth families.

Unfortunately it is not always possible to meet all requests. The agreement is then formalised and signed by the adoptive and birth families. The Social Worker will detail if there are any support needs identified on the file.

The agreement will describe the time of year and frequency and type of contact that will take place after the adoption.

When Can Letterbox Start?

The letterbox arrangements start once the child has been matched with their prospective adopters. At this point we will send out a letter to confirm what has been agreed and setting out the guidelines.

The first letterbox contact will be offered within 3 months of child moving into the prospective adopters home. This will hopefully try and give a level of reassurance about how the child has settled in. Letterbox contact after this point, will be set out in the letterbox service agreements forms.

How Does Letterbox Work?

Information from both parties is sent in to the address at the back of this booklet for the attention of the Letterbox Coordinator. Depending on the agreement this can be a letter, card and sometimes photographs. This will have been agreed during the care proceedings for your child.

The Coordinator will then take a copy of everything for safe keeping and to form part of the child's adoption records. It will also be checked to ensure no confidential information has been included.

The Letterbox Coordinator will contact you when Letterbox arrives at your last known address, to confirm the address you would like the Letterbox sending to. The Letterbox is then forwarded on to the relevant party.



**Please inform us
of your change
address**

All Letterbox is treated as confidential and is shared only with those detailed in the agreement.

What to include in your Letterbox Contact

In general we recommend that the adoptive family gets things going and writes first, because having specific news about the child to respond to makes it easier for birth relatives to reply. We have included example letters and hints and tips, please find these at the back of this booklet.



You may like to talk about:

- Hobbies and interests
- Holidays and major events
- Pets, films, music and TV programmes
- Looks and personality
- Friendships
- Changes in your family

If there are any big changes such as new baby, marriages, illnesses or deaths these need to be written in a separate letter to the Adoptive parents.

Where can I get support or advice?

Whether you are a birth relative or an adoptive parent, there may be times when you feel concerned or distressed and need advice or assistance with Letterbox contact or any other aspect of adoption. Please contact us and we will either help you ourselves or put you in touch with the most appropriate source of support.

The exchange of written information between birth relatives and adoptive parents is important, but many people aren't very confident with writing. It is often difficult to find right words, especially if the information you are writing is difficult, sensitive or painful. Sometimes it is just difficult to think of something to write about!

We offer a drop-in service where a Support Worker from our Post Adoption Team are available to assist you, this is by appointment only. Please see the back of this booklet for contact details.

What if I have difficulty with reading and writing?

We are here to help. If you need someone to write or read your letters and you do not have a family member or friend to help, simply call the Letterbox Coordinator, as detailed above.

Translation Service?

If English is not your first language, please contact the Letterbox Coordinator who will arrange a translation of your letter.

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

At the time of adoption, some birth relatives may feel that they do not want to take part in the Letterbox service. These feelings may change in the future. The birth relatives may begin to feel differently or may decide that they want to take part in the letterbox contact. For this reason we let birth relatives know that we will keep any correspondence for them in case they wish to claim it in the future.

We ask adoptive parents to go on sending news to the Letterbox Service for the same reasons. If a long time has lapsed, it may not be possible to restart contact previously agreed, but we will always consider this.

What happens if contact stops?

The Letterbox Service will do their best to get regular news for you. Prompt letters will be sent out one month before letterbox is due. However, if we have lost touch with your child's adopters and not heard from them in a long time, we still want you to send your Letterbox in regularly so that it can be stored on file. If your child then chooses to access their adoption file when they are an adult, it will be important to them to see all of the Letterbox you continued to send in over the years.

Top Tips for Letterbox

- ✓ Do stick to the arrangements of your agreement, and send your correspondence in on time, allowing 14 days for your letterbox contact to be processed.
- ✓ Please include a covering note to the Letterbox Coordinator stating the child's Birth Name and date of Birth. This ensures we can send out correspondence as quickly as possible.
- ✓ Remember not to include your surname, address and contact details.
- ✓ 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!
- ✓ It is always nice to thank the reader for any correspondence you have received from them.
- ✓ Keep the letter light and positive.
- ✓ Please sign your letters with your first name only.
- ✓ Please understand that it can be confusing for your child if you sign your letters from 'Mum' or 'Dad'.
- ✓ Please do not include anything in your letter that will worry or distress the reader.
- ✓ Please do not send cards with 'Son' or 'Daughter', however cards saying 'to someone special', 'especially for you' or 'special little boy/girl' are acceptable.
- ✓ Please do not include money or gifts.
- ✓ **Please ensure you keep us up to date with all Your contact details e.g. telephone number and address.**



Photographs

Please observe the following guidelines with regards to photographs, these 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.

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- ✓ Please send no more than 5 photographs to your child.
- ✓ 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 full clothed.
- ✓ Please remember these photographs cannot be put on any social networking sites. If they are this may result in your Letterbox being stopped.

If your agreement states you are able to view a photograph of your child. The Letterbox Coordinator will make arrangements for you.

Receiving Letterbox

If we receive your letterbox contact and it is inappropriate or too emotional the Letterbox Coordinator will contact you and offer you advice and support over the phone. This will usually include the opportunity to rewrite your letter.

Example Letterbox Contact from Adopters to Birth Relatives

Dear Mary (first name of birth relative)

Date

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

Sarah is now 10 years old and in Year 5 at school. She is one of the tallest in her class and she gets on very well with her classmates. She is often invited to birthday parties or to friend's houses after school. Sarah had a very good school report in the summer – her teacher said that she has made very good progress in English, and her Maths is improving, although she does still struggle with it. Sarah has recently played for the girl's football team, and her school won the tournament. I have enclosed a photo of her holding the trophy. Sarah also still attends dancing lessons once a week, and has recently passed a jazz dance exam.

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

Sarah enjoys reading, and her favourite author is Jacqueline Wilson. She also enjoys playing on the Wii with her brother – their favourite game is Mario Kart. We often play as a family, but the children are much better than us!

We look forward to hearing your news.

Best wishes

Dave and Samantha (first names of adopters)

Example Letterbox Contact from Birth Relatives to Adopters

Dear Dave and Samantha (first name of adopters)

Date

I hope this letter finds you and your family well. Thank you very much for the recent letter and photos – it is incredible how big Sarah is getting!

I am glad to hear Sara is doing well at school and with her other activities. What grade was the jazz exam Sarah recently passed? Congratulations on winning the football tournament! Does Sarah support a football team? I support Oxford United, and sometimes go to the stadium to watch them play. Unfortunately we haven't won any trophies for a while!

I had to go to hospital for a minor operation a couple of months ago, but I am recovering well and should soon be back to my full strength. My friends have been very helpful, making sure I have everything I need. I am hoping to go abroad for my holiday this summer, although I am not sure where yet – I will let you know next time I write. Are you planning to go away again soon?

It is nice to hear Sarah has so many hobbies. I enjoy gardening, reading (my favourite author is Dan Brown) and watching films. Do you go to the cinema often? I have played on my nephew's Wii a couple of times but I was not very good!

I look forward to hearing from you again next year. I hope you all have a good Christmas and Sarah enjoys her birthday. I will be thinking of Sarah, and I hope she has a nice day.

With love,

Elizabeth (Birth Mum, First name of birth relative)

Reviewing Letterbox Arrangements

Please contact the Letterbox Coordinator if you wish to review the arrangements. However, please be aware that we do not review the arrangements in the first two years of the exchange starting, as we need to give the initial arrangements a chance to settle.

Some adopted children may not want news about themselves to be sent as they get older or become sensitive about having their photo taken. This is a normal part of being a teenage. Some may want to contribute to the exchange. Sometimes the views of adoptive parents or birth relatives may change, but it is important that the child's needs/wishes are respected at every stage.

If the letterbox arrangements need changing, the Letterbox Coordinator will try to facilitate this. If changes need to take place the Letterbox Coordinator will write to everyone involved to confirm the change.

What Happens When the Adopted Person Becomes 18?

As an adult the adopted person now has the right to decide what contact there should be with birth relatives. We can continue the Letterbox arrangement until the young person is 21 if they request it. They also have the right to access information held in their file, view copies of original adoption records and decide what to do with the information.

Before the adopted person reaches 18 the Letterbox Coordinator will write to the adoptive parents (and the adopted person) to remind them that the arrangements will soon end. We will also provide information about sources of help and support the future for adoptive parents, they adopted you person and birth relatives.

This can be a time of uncertainty, and support is available if needed, for adopted young people, adopters and birth relatives. Whatever the adopted person's decision, it is important to respect their wishes.

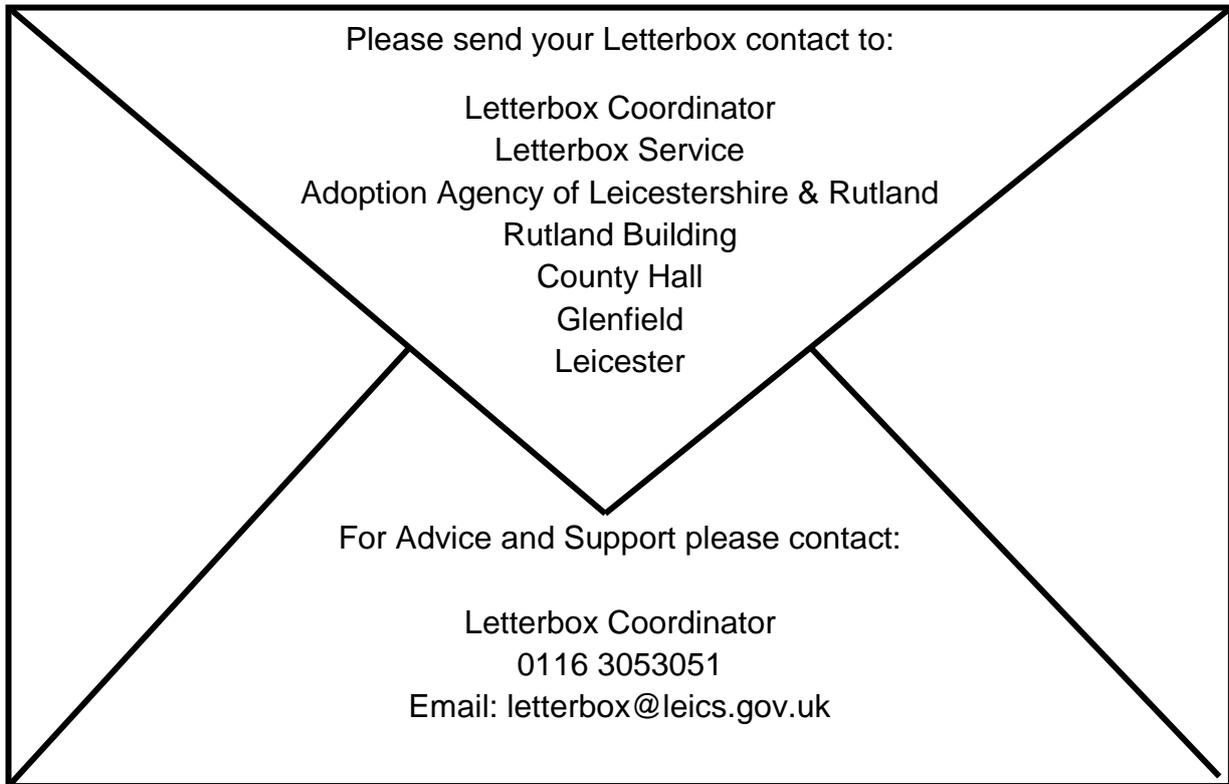
Support Services

Support and advice can also be sought through the following websites;

www.afteradoption.org.uk

www.pac-uk.org/our-service/birthfamilies

www.familylives.org.uk/advice/your family/fostering-adoption



Feedback

We welcome any feedback on the Letterbox Service. Please find the feedback form in the appendices.

Complaints

If you wish to make a complaint, please direct it to the address above.

LETTERBOX REFERRAL FORM

To be completed by the Child's Social Worker at the point of placement and sent to the Letterbox Coordinator.

Date of Referral: _____

| | |
|----------------------------|----------------------|
| Child's Birth Name: _____ | Date of birth: _____ |
| Gender: <u>Male/Female</u> | Ethnic Origin: _____ |
| Child's New Name: _____ | |

Letterbox Arrangements

Adopters

| | |
|---------------------------|--------------|
| Name of Adopters: _____ | Tel: _____ |
| Address & Postcode: _____ | Email: _____ |

| | |
|--|---------------------|
| We agree to supply the following: (✓ tick as appropriate) | |
| Letter | _____ Month/s _____ |
| Birthday Card | _____ |
| Christmas Card | _____ |
| Photographs | _____ |

| |
|---------------------------|
| Additional support needs: |
| |
| |
| |

Birth Relatives

| | | | |
|------------------------|-------|------|--------------|
| Name of Birth Mother: | _____ | Tel: | _____ |
| Address & Postcode: | | | Email: _____ |
| Name of Birth Father: | _____ | Tel: | _____ |
| Address & Postcode: | | | Email: _____ |
| Other Birth Relatives: | _____ | Tel: | _____ |
| Address & Postcode: | | | Email: _____ |

| | | | |
|--|-------|---------|-------|
| We agree to supply the following: (✓ tick as appropriate) | | | |
| Letter | _____ | Month/s | _____ |
| Birthday Card | _____ | | _____ |
| Christmas Card | _____ | | |
| Photographs | | | |

| | | | |
|--|-------|-------|-------|
| Siblings in Adoptive Placements | | | |
| Childs Birth Name | _____ | D.O.B | _____ |
| Adopters: | | | |
| Childs Birth Name | _____ | D.O.B | _____ |
| Adopters: | | | |

Support for Birth Relative(s) – please detail what advice and support may be required:

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Safety Considerations for the Post Adoption Support Worker to consider when meeting with any parties to the Letterbox:

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LETTERBOX IN-DIRECT CONTACT AGREEMENT (Adopters)

Letterbox Contact Agreement between (Adopter Names):

_____ and _____
Date of Agreement: _____

Current Address: _____ Telephone Number: _____
Mobile Number: _____
Email: _____

in respect of:
Child's Birth Name _____ D.O.B. _____

We agree to supply the following: (tick as appropriate)
Letter _____ Month/s _____
Drawings (from child) _____
Birthday Card _____
Christmas Card _____
Photographs _____

We agree to receive the following: (tick as appropriate)
Letter _____ Month/s _____
Birthday Card _____
Christmas Card _____
Photographs _____

IMPORTANT INFORMATION TO ADHERE TO:

- It is not allowed to display any of the photographs received via Letterbox on any social and public media e.g. Facebook. I understand that any photos found to be posted on Facebook or any similar sites will result in photos being withdrawn from my agreement.

THIS IS NOT A LEGALLY BINDING DOCUMENT



- We agree to notify the Letterbox Coordinator if the child/ren develops a medical condition which may be of a hereditary nature so that this information can be passed on to the birth family if appropriate.
- I will notify the Letterbox Coordinator in the event of the child's death.
- I will notify the Adoption Agency of a change of contact details e.g. address, telephone number.
- I accept that this is **not a legally binding document.**
- Please familiarise yourself with the Guide to Leicestershire Letterbox Service.

Adopters Signatures

| | |
|---------------------------|-------|
| Signed: | _____ |
| Print Name: | _____ |
| Relationship to Child: | _____ |
| Date: | _____ |

| | |
|---------------------------|-------|
| Signed: | _____ |
| Print Name: | _____ |
| Relationship to Child: | _____ |
| Date: | _____ |

Adoption Social Workers Signature

| | |
|-------------|-------|
| Signed: | _____ |
| Print Name: | _____ |
| Date: | _____ |

**LETTERBOX IN-DIRECT CONTACT AGREEMENT
(Birth Family)**

Letterbox Contact Agreement between (Birth Parent &/or Relative Name):

A separate agreement is needed for each individual unless living together at the same address

| | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------|
| | Relationship with Child: _____ |
| | Relationship with Child: _____ |
| Date of Agreement: _____ | |

in respect of:

| | |
|--------------------------|--------------|
| Child's Birth Name _____ | D.O.B. _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |

| | |
|------------------------|-------------------------|
| Current Address: _____ | Telephone Number: _____ |
| _____ | Mobile Number: _____ |
| _____ | Email: _____ |
| _____ | _____ |

| | |
|--|---------------|
| We agree to supply the following: (✓ tick as appropriate) | |
| Letter _____ | Month/s _____ |
| Birthday Card _____ | _____ |
| Christmas Card _____ | _____ |
| Photographs _____ | _____ |

| | |
|---|---------------|
| We agree to receive the following: (✓ tick as appropriate) | |
| Letter _____ | Month/s _____ |
| Drawings (from child) _____ | _____ |
| Birthday Card _____ | _____ |
| Christmas Card _____ | _____ |
| Photographs _____ | _____ |
| <i>Subject to Adoptive Parents Letterbox Contact Agreement</i> | |

IMPORTANT INFORMATION TO ADHERE TO:

- It is not allowed to display any of the photographs received via Letterbox on any social and public media e.g. **Facebook**. I understand that any photos found to be posted on Facebook or any similar sites will result in photos being withdrawn from my agreement.

THIS IS NOT A LEGALLY BINDING DOCUMENT



- I agree to notify the Letterbox Coordinator if anyone in the families develop a medical condition which may be of a hereditary nature so that this information can be passed on to the adoptive family if appropriate.
- I would/would not wish to be notified in the event of the child's death or that he/she has a hereditary condition. (please delete as appropriate).
- I will notify the Adoption Agency of a change of contact details e.g. address, telephone number.
- I accept that this is **not a legally binding document.**
- Please familiarise yourself with the Guide to Leicestershire Letterbox Service.

Birth Parents/Relatives Signature

| | |
|------------------------|-------|
| Signed: | _____ |
| Print Name: | _____ |
| Relationship to Child: | _____ |
| Date: | _____ |

Adoption Social Workers Signature

| | |
|-------------|-------|
| Signed: | _____ |
| Print Name: | _____ |
| Date: | _____ |

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|--|
| LETTERBOX SERVICE FEEDBACK FORM |
|--|

| Questions | Strongly Agree | Agree | Not Sure | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|----------|-------------------|
| The Letterbox process was explained clearly | | | | | |
| I understood the written agreement clearly | | | | | |
| I was kept informed about what was happening | | | | | |
| I was informed about the confidentiality and what information could be shared. | | | | | |
| Overall, has the Letterbox Service been helpful to you and your child? | | | | | |
| Overall, has the Letterbox Service worked as planned (frequency, etc) | | | | | |

Are there any improvements you can suggest?

Any other comments

Signature

(If you would like to include your name and contact details, please do so)

Date: