



Post Adoption Support

A Guide to the Adoption Mailbox Service

A detailed leaflet for birth relatives, adoptive parents and social workers



What is the adoption mailbox?

The adoption mailbox is managed by Lancashire County Council's post adoption support service and is a way of exchanging information safely on behalf of adopted children.

It enables them to have indirect contact with their birth relatives, and other significant people from their past, by an agreed exchange of information updates.

This leaflet tells you how the mailbox works and what you can do to help your own mailbox agreement run smoothly

What are the benefits of mailbox contact?

For adopted children:

- Research has shown that indirect contact can help children develop their sense of identity.
- It can help reassure a child about the wellbeing of their birth relatives.
- It can help to show a child that their adoptive family acknowledges the importance of their birth family and that they accept and value them as an essential part of who they are.
- If in years to come an adopted person is thinking about meeting with birth relatives, having had news of them over the years will make them more confident about what to expect.



For birth relatives:

- Birth relatives often have a strong need for reassurance that their child is safe, well and happy so receiving news of their health, progress and interests can help with this.
- It can help birth relatives understand that the child is growing up and where they are in terms of their development.
- For birth parents, a regular exchange of information over the years may help to smooth the way if the child wants to meet them when they become an adult.

For adoptive parents:

- Ongoing updated information from the birth parents helps adoptive parents to answer their child's questions as they grow up.
- The mailbox is also a way of obtaining information which may not have been available at the time of the adoption e.g. medical information.
- The mailbox can act as a regular reminder to talk openly to the child about their adoption and build up a pattern of communication and openness.
- If a young adopted adult decides to make contact with birth relatives, adoptive parents can find it less worrying if they have managed to establish a regular exchange with the birth family.



How does the mailbox work?

Frequently asked questions

Who can use the mailbox?

Adoptive parents, children, birth relatives and significant others could be included in an agreement. When considering who to include it's important to consider everyone's views, their individual needs and their likely commitment to the plan. This is so arrangements can be kept simple and manageable.

The mailbox is not just for birth parents. The child's siblings and other close relatives could be included if it is felt appropriate.

If brothers or sisters are placed in foster care or in another adoptive placement the adults, i.e. foster carers or adoptive parents, will be asked to sign up to the agreement on behalf of the child they are caring for.

There may occasionally be other unrelated people who are important to the child who also need to be part of the agreement. Each mailbox arrangement is unique to that child and should reflect the child's individual needs.



? What is the mailbox agreement?

The mailbox agreement sets out the indirect contact arrangements which have been agreed when a child has been adopted. The mailbox agreement forms are drawn up by the child's social worker and the adoptive parents social worker, usually around the time that the child goes to live with their adoptive family. This follows discussion with all those to be involved in the agreement and birth relatives are obviously an important part of this. The agreement sets out exactly what will be exchanged and when the exchange is to take place. Each party involved will be asked to sign the agreement and will receive a signed copy.

? What can I send?

It is important that you only send what has been agreed. Items which are not part of the agreement will be returned to the sender.

If you are unsure of what is included in your agreement please contact the post adoption support team.

? Is the mailbox agreement legally binding?

Mailbox agreements are not legal documents but they are a record of what everyone agreed to at the time and they depend on the goodwill of all concerned to keep to the agreement. Although mailbox agreements are voluntary, a court could review them at some point.

? When will the first exchange start?

Once the agreements are received by the mailbox administration team and an adoption order has been granted, confirmation letters will be sent out to all involved notifying them that a mailbox file has been set up. The first exchange can then take place in the month stated on the mailbox agreement form.

In cases where there is any delay in either setting up the agreement or the adoption order being granted, then the child's social worker will share the child's progress with the birth family or ask the adopters to write a brief progress report which can be passed on to the birth family.



? How does the adoption mailbox work?

All those who have signed up to the mailbox agreement are asked to write in with their information to the mailbox address at the back of this leaflet.

We ask you to put your information letter into an unsealed envelope. Place this within a larger sealed envelope which includes a note stating your name, the child's birth name and date of birth and who the letter is for so that it is easily identifiable.

It is often best if the adoptive parents write the first letter so the birth relative can write back the following month. It can be easier for birth relatives to write if they have some information they can comment on.

All the mail received is opened and read by the adoption mailbox support worker. This is so any difficult issues can be addressed at an early point e.g. overly emotional letters, confidential information such as an address being included or sensitive information for which support may need to be offered. If this is the case we will contact you to discuss the issues and offer advice and support where necessary.

Once the mail is read, it is photocopied and a copy kept on the child's mailbox record. An adopted person will have access to these letters should they decide to request information from their adoption file once they have reached the age of 18 years.

? Is the mailbox confidential?

The news and information exchanged through the mailbox is for the recipient only and they are responsible for keeping that information safe. It is very unlikely that photographs will be part of the agreement, although there are occasional exceptions. No information or photographs sent through the mailbox should be posted on social networking sites.

Any attempt to put information or photographs on a social networking site could jeopardise the agreement and mean that it has to be changed or ended.



? What if I/we need help with writing the letter?

We are often asked for advice about how to go about writing letters and what sort of information to include. Some general guidance is included later on in this leaflet, together with some sample letters which you may find helpful.

If you need any help at any time, please contact the post adoption support team and we will either offer telephone advice or arrange to come out to see you. We can offer regular support to those who need this as we want to do our best to ensure that mailbox agreements work for everyone concerned.

? What if I/we don't receive a letter?

This can be hard for adoptive parents, children and birth relatives alike and it can happen for many reasons. If your letter does not arrive within a month of when you were expecting it we would suggest you contact us and we will follow it up by sending out a reminder letter. We may occasionally contact you by phone if there are any particular difficulties.

It is possible to have a mailbox agreement that only works in one direction. For example, birth relatives may be happy to receive information about the child from the adoptive parents but they may not feel able to reply. We know that birth relatives, particularly birth parents, have to deal with very difficult feelings when their child is placed for adoption.

We would therefore ask adoptive parents to carry on sending letters as agreed so they can be kept on file for the birth relative to claim at some point in the future, if they wish. If a long time has lapsed it may not be possible to restart a mailbox contact agreement but we would make every effort to do so.



? What if I/we change address?

It is important that you inform us of any change of address so the mailbox records can be kept up-to-date.

We will not send out mail if we are unsure whether the recipient is still at the same address. If we are not able to confirm the recipient's address then the mail will be retained on file and the sender will be notified of this.

Moving house without leaving a forwarding address, or not sending mail in on time, can cause considerable distress for all parties concerned and we would therefore ask that you keep this in mind. We will always keep mail that cannot be forwarded on the child's file so they can access it when they are old enough to do so.

? Can a person who wasn't part of the original mailbox agreement sign up at a later point or send in a letter?

A mailbox arrangement for a person not named in the original agreement is unlikely to be set up at a later date, although an agreement could change if this was assessed as being in the child's best interests.

Adoption files are kept safely in Lancashire County Council's archives for 100 years.



? What if the mailbox agreement needs to be changed?

Post adoption contact arrangements can be reviewed by the child's social worker prior to the adoption order being granted and also post order by the post adoption support team.

Some older children may not want news about themselves to be sent, which can be a normal part of being a teenager. Some children may decide they want to contribute to the exchange. Sometimes the views of adoptive parents or birth relatives may change, but it is important that the child/young person's needs and wishes are upheld and respected at every stage.

We plan to send out an annual review form to mailbox participants, which is a way of identifying any issues or concerns.

? How long does the mailbox agreement last?

Mailbox arrangements normally end when the adopted person is 18 years old. However, it can continue longer if it's felt to be in the young person's best interests, and it's what they want. The young person or their adoptive parent would need to contact us to request this.





What happens when the mailbox ends?

As an adult, the adopted person now has the right to decide what contact there should be with birth relatives. They also have the right to access information held on their adoption file. There is support available from the post adoption support team should they need it.

When a young person reaches the age of 18 a birth relative can request an 'intermediary service' which could result in an adopted adult being approached by an 'intermediary agency' to ask if they would consider contact with the birth relative. The agency will assess the birth relative's request for this service and only approach the adopted adult if it is felt appropriate to do so. It will be the adopted adult's decision whether they agree to any contact and they must provide consent for any information to be shared with the birth relative.

Adopted adults can register a wish for no contact with a specific adult birth relative. This is called making an 'absolute' or 'qualified' veto. When a young person reaches the age of 18 years we will write to them and their adoptive parents explaining what their options are in more detail.

When the mailbox ends this can be a time of disappointment, uncertainty and frustration for birth relatives in particular, especially if the contact is to cease. Whatever the adopted person's decision, it is important to respect their wishes.

INFORMATION ABOUT WRITING YOUR LETTER

Please remember that, unless otherwise agreed, the letters are written from adult to adult i.e. birth relative to adoptive parents and vice versa.

When you sign the mailbox agreement form it will be discussed with you how to refer to yourself in the letter, but in most cases you would use your first names, for example "Dear Mary and Peter" (i.e. adoptive parents) and sign off, "Best wishes from Carol/Dave" (birth parents). In some instances it may not be appropriate to use the adopters' first names e.g. if they have easily identifiable first names. In this case we would suggest "Dear Adopters".



How to include the child in the mailbox

Birth relatives may wonder whether the adoptive parents will show their letter to the child. It will be the adoptive parents who will decide when information will be shared and their decision should be based on the child's age, level of understanding and their individual needs, such as their emotional state and any events in their life they may be dealing with.

If a child is too young to read the letter the adoptive parents may think it would be better to share the news in conversation with the child.

If for some reason it is felt that hearing news of birth relatives will be unsettling, the adoptive parents may choose to save a letter until the child is more settled.

Children's understanding about mailbox contact will change as they grow older. However, they have a better chance of understanding this contact if they are involved from an early age.

As children grow older it may be appropriate for them to add their name to the letter or include a drawing, and eventually they may want to write their own letter or card.

It is important to remember that each child is different and they should only be included if it is something they want to be involved in.

It is also important to remember that a child's views will change over time as their understanding grows – the views they held when they were five or six are likely to be different at nine or ten and different again when they are teenagers. So it is important to continue to ask them if and how they would like to be included.



Tips to remember

- Do keep to the arrangements in the mailbox agreement
- Do try and send your letter in on time – if you know it is going to be late please ring the mailbox contact number
- Do check back on previous letters – there may be information you would like to know more about
- Do write the letter adult to adult
- Do check there is no identifying information in the letter or in any photo that may be sent as part of the agreement
- Do contact the post adoption support team if you would like help or advice about writing your letter
- Do remember to include a covering note with your letter stating the child's name and date of birth and who the letter is from to ensure the letter can be sent out quickly
- Do notify the mailbox if you change your address
- Do only send items as stated in the mailbox agreement, otherwise these will be returned to you
- Don't put things in your letter that are likely to worry the reader – they will not be able to do anything about them



Letter from adopters to birth relatives

REMEMBER NOT TO INCLUDE YOUR ADDRESS!

Dear(first name of birth relative)

Thank you for your last letter. As you know Sophie is now 11 years old and in her last year at junior school. She has really shot up in recent months and is now 4ft 11ins and in size 4 shoes. She is really pleased that she is now as tall as her best friend Becky. She is still very close to Becky and they are hoping to move up to the same high school together. She is part of a nice group of friends and gets invited to lots of birthday parties.

Sophie is starting to show a real interest in clothes which is a surprise as she has always been happiest in her jeans. She has spent all her birthday money on clothes and she now looks like quite the young lady. She is also growing her hair again so we've told her she will have to get up earlier on school days to sort it out. She still loves her bed in the mornings!

Sophie's teacher seems very pleased with her progress. I think we mentioned in last year's letter that she was getting extra help with her maths as she was really struggling with it. The good news is that she has now caught up and is at the level she should be so she is really pleased with herself. She is still very into her activities, and loves netball and dancing. I know you mentioned in your last letter that you liked netball when you were a child so we told her this is maybe why she is so good at it. She hopes she will get into the team when she starts high school which we think she will. She is a bit nervous about moving schools which is to be expected. Her teacher knows that she tends to worry when there are going to be any big changes and goes out of her way to help her.

We went on a caravan holiday to France at Easter which everyone enjoyed, although Sophie had expected it to be a bit warmer. She and her brother Sam had a great time as there was an indoor swimming pool which was as well given the weather. Next year we'll try and go in the summer.

Sophie said she wanted to send you something this year so we've enclosed a drawing she has done for you. We hope you enjoy looking at it.

Best wishes

Sophie's adopters or and(first name of adopters)

Reply from birth relatives to adopters

REMEMBER NOT TO INCLUDE YOUR ADDRESS!

Dear Adopters orand.....(first name of adopters)

I hope this letter finds you well. Thank you very much for the recent letter. It's always so good to hear how Sophie is doing. I'm pleased she is doing well at school and that she has caught up with maths. I used to struggle at school and never liked it because of that so I'm really happy that you've made sure she gets the extra help. I'm glad she has friends too as I used to get bullied at school and I used to find it hard to make friends. Can you let Sophie know sometime that I have started going to college to help improve my literacy skills. I want to try and get a job but it's hard when you don't have any qualifications so I'm hoping this helps. I'm finding it easier since my ex-partner Andy moved out as he was causing all sorts of problems that I could do without. I now see my mum quite a lot as she has moved on to the same estate and we are now getting on a lot better. So things seem to be improving a bit for me at the moment. Your holiday in France sounded good. I've never been there but would like to one day. I had hoped to go on holiday this summer with my sister but I ended up having to go into hospital to have my tonsils out -at my age! We were going to go to Wales in a caravan but my sister says I can go with her next year if I want.

It's nice to hear that Sophie enjoys her netball. That was the only thing I liked at school and it helped because I was also quite tall for my age. I hope she makes the team at high school. Is she looking forward to her new school?

Anyway, I'll finish here but look forward to hearing from you next year. I hope you all have a good summer and that Sophie enjoys her birthday in June. I'll be thinking about her.

Best wishes

.....(first name of birth relative)

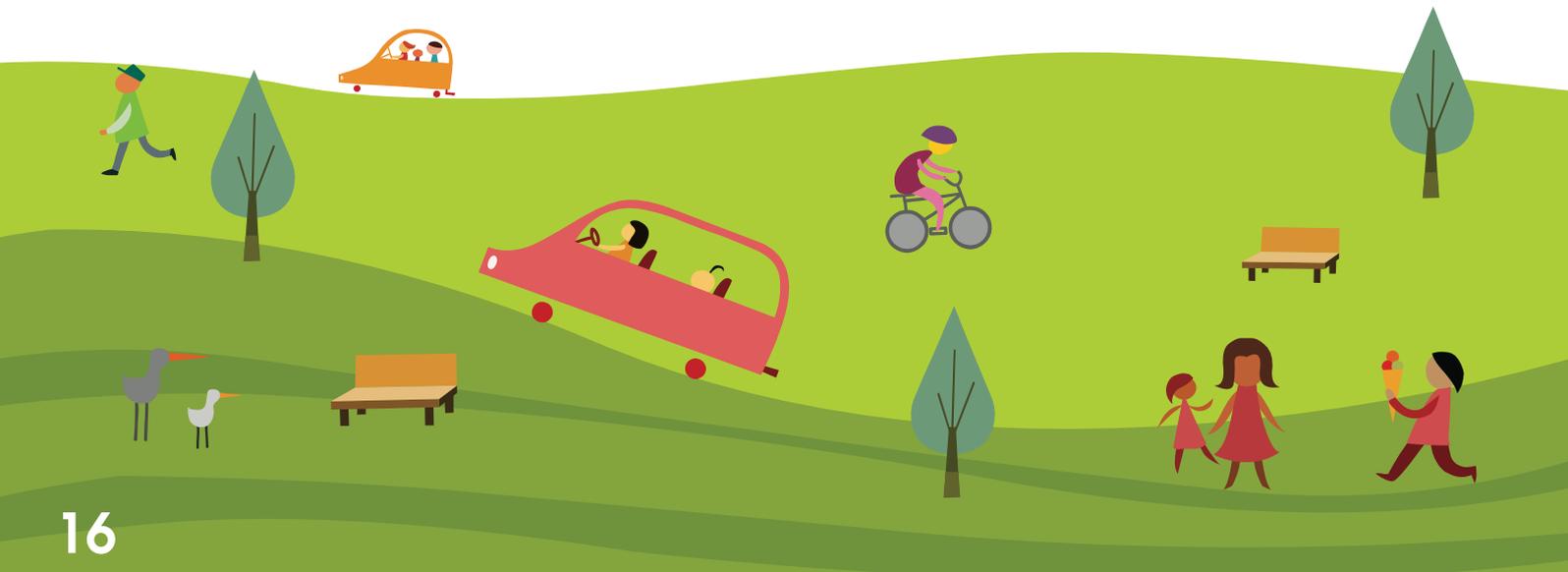


How and where do I send my mailbox letter?

1. Please put your letter/information update into a plain stamped, unsealed envelope.
2. Place this envelope in another envelope, together with a note with your name and address (sender), name and date of birth of the child the letter relates to and who the letter is for (adoptive parent/birth relative).
3. Please then post to:



If you have any queries, please contact the Post Adoption Duty Team on 01772 537135 between 1pm – 5pm Monday to Friday



Compliments and Complaints

If you would like to give any feedback about the service you have received, you can contact the Post Adoption Support Team.

By letter :

Post Adoption Support Team, Room C27, County Hall, Lancashire PR1 0LD

Tel: 01772 537135

Or email: adoptionletterbox@lancashire.gov.uk

In the event of a complaint that has not been dealt with to your satisfaction, please contact: complaintsandfeedback@lancashire.gov.uk

Or write to: Complaints and appeals team, Legal and democratic services, Christ Church Precinct, County Hall, Preston, PR1 8XJ - 0300 123 6720







NOTES

A large, empty rectangular area with a light beige background, intended for writing notes.



