

# Guidance for using the Adopt London South



# Letterbox Service

Letterbox is a service for adoptive parents and birth relatives to exchange written information that will benefit the child they all care about. Letterbox is an ongoing relationship between adoptive parents, birth parents, and other important birth relatives that supports open communication and exchange of information throughout childhood.

## What is Letterbox contact?

Letterbox contact is a formal arrangement for birth parents, birth relatives and the adoptive parents to share information about the child.

Letterbox contact is the exchange of letters between the adults on behalf of the child. The child can contribute, for example by including a drawing, handprint or by writing something when they are older, but only if they want to. Sometimes photos are exchanged but this can only take place if that was agreed within the Letterbox contact arrangements.

The letters should be shared with the child when they are old enough to understand and when the information can be shared in an age appropriate way.

Letterbox contact arrangements are usually made before the child goes to live with their adoptive family. We always consider all parties' wishes and it is the role of a social worker to ensure that the agreement for contact is in the child's best interest and acceptable for everyone involved. A Letterbox Contract is then agreed and signed by all the

adults who will be participating. This is not a legal contract but we hope that everyone will keep to it and send their letters knowing that the child will appreciate the ongoing relationship and any information shared in the letters.

Occasionally a 'Contact Order' is granted by the Court, making the contact arrangement legally binding, for example due to the importance of maintaining sibling relationships, or due to other special circumstances.

Letterbox contact is private and contains personal information. The content of any letters exchanged, or any photographs received, should be treated as confidential and should not be shared on any social media platform under any circumstances.



## Why Letterbox contact is important

### Benefits for the adopted child:

- To help develop their understanding about their life journey and their identity
- To reduce feelings of loss and rejection
- To reduce feelings of anxiety about the well-being of birth family
- As the child grows up it will be important for them to know that their adopters supported a relationship with their birth family. This will strengthen their trust and attachment.

### Benefits for the birth parents and family:

- To reassure them that the child is safe and well
- To give them updates about the child's progress, interests and personality
- Provides the chance to share news about their life that may be interesting and helpful to the child



**Writing letters can be hard because of my health, but receiving the letters means the world to me, I love hearing how the children are growing up. It brings me peace and helps me relax knowing they are safe and happy.” — BIRTH MOTHER**



- To help the child make sense of their past and boost their sense of self/identity. As the child grows up it may be important for them to know that their birth family stayed in contact. This may help them to make sense of their past and with their self esteem.

### Benefits for the adoptive parents:

- To support the child's identity and help them to understand their links to birth family
- It can help them to talk openly about birth family and adoption
- To help gather information about the birth family and the child's the child's background and answer the child's questions throughout their childhood
- To receive information about the wellbeing of the child's birth family
- To get to know and connect with the child's birth family
- To provide important information that may not have been available at the time of the Adoption Order, such as the birth or death of a birth relative or any medical history.

## How does the Letterbox service work?

The Letterbox service is run by a team of Letterbox co-ordinators and a consultant social worker, who are part of the Adoption Support Service. The Adopt London South Letterbox Service manages the Letterbox exchange for the London local authorities of Croydon, Greenwich, Kingston, Lambeth, Lewisham, Merton, Richmond, Southwark, Sutton and Wandsworth.

We have a Letterbox helpline which you can wcall for all Letterbox related enquiries. This operates from Tuesday to Friday from 10am–4pm on **020 7525 1376**.

You can also contact the Letterbox Service via email on **Letterbox\_EnquiriesALS@southwark.gov.uk**

Letterbox contact has been really great for us and our daughter since we adopted her. It's so helpful to find things out about her birth family and have things to connect over. The Letterbox officer has really supported our daughter's birth mother with the letters, which has ensured a swift response and allows us to keep the connection going between our daughter and her birth mother and siblings. We love sharing what she has been up to and her achievements, and it is heart-warming to learn of the common interests between them. The letters we receive are invaluable and we are beyond grateful to have this exchange." — ADOPTER



## What items we accept

All Letterbox must fit inside an A4 or A5 envelope. We cannot accept presents, gifts, parcels, boxes or letters larger than A4. We cannot accept gift vouchers or money. Please do not send birthday or Christmas gifts unless these are approved items, which have been agreed and included in your Letterbox agreement.

## The role of the Letterbox co-ordinators

When the Letterbox co-ordinators receive a letter, they check it through carefully to ensure that its content is suitable and relevant for whoever is reading it and to check the individual Letterbox agreement to ensure that the information received is in line with what has been agreed.

If they think the information could be distressing or is unsuitable in any way, they will contact you to see if the letter can be re-written, or reworded in a different way. If a person does not wish to re-write the letter, the Letterbox team will not be able to pass this letter on and it will be held on file, and both the sender and recipient will be informed.

The Letterbox co-ordinator will make a photocopy of everything received and will ensure this is stored on the child's electronic file. This is so the child can access the entire Letterbox exchange from birth family members and adoptive parents any time after their eighteenth birthday, if they wish.

## Where to send letters

There are two ways that birth family and the adoptive family can send letters.

By email to:

**Letterbox\_EnquiriesALS@southwark.gov.uk**

By post to:

The Letterbox Service  
Adopt London South  
Southwark Council  
PO Box 64529  
London SE1P 5LX

**Please include the child's name, their date of birth and the Letterbox reference number** in any letters or enquiries you send to us. If you do not know your Letterbox reference number, you can contact your Letterbox co-ordinator by calling **020 7525 1376** and they will be able to provide you with this before you send your letter into us, this will help us to process the Letterbox contact we receive quickly.

**My experience with the Letterbox Service has been great, very helpful, very kind and a great positive attitude. They help me with my writing needs, which is just fantastic. The whole experience is just so positive and reassuring.”** — BIRTH MOTHER



We are unable to provide copies of letters that we have forwarded to you, which may have been lost or damaged, therefore it is your responsibility to ensure Letterbox exchange is kept in a safe place.

If you are unsure how to communicate something through Letterbox, the Letterbox co-ordinators are available for you to speak to. Although most information and news passed through the Letterbox is positive, there may be times when difficult news needs to be shared, and we are here to offer help, and provide guidance and support when you need it.

The Letterbox co-ordinators can offer you an appointment to help you write a letter if you are finding this difficult. Please call our Letterbox helpline which operates from Tuesday to Friday from 10am – 4pm on **020 7525 1376**.

All the information passed through the Letterbox Service is treated as confidential and any identifying information such as an address or phone number will be removed before sending on. If it can not be easily removed, we will contact you to discuss.

It is the adoptive parents' decision when and how to share Letterbox news with a child. Our experience is that children benefit from having information shared as they grow up as it forms part of their understanding about adoption and their identity. The Letterbox co-ordinators can send reminders to adopters and birth family, however, the Letterbox co-ordinators cannot continually chase either party for Letterbox correspondence.

The Letterbox co-ordinators can review Letterbox arrangements if requested by either party, to ensure the arrangements remain in the best interest of the child.

## Timescales

We aim to process and share all Letterbox within four weeks. Some exchanges may take longer if we need to get information from our partner local authorities. We will aim to share with you the cause of any delays, when encountered.

Our Letterbox co-ordinators are here to offer help and support to all, and it is important that our members of staff are treated with courtesy and respect at all times. The Letterbox Service will not tolerate any form of verbal abuse or threats. Any verbal abuse to our staff via any channel will be treated seriously and may impact any future support you will be offered. A decision may be made to only communicate with you by email or letter.

We know that good quality contact arrangements between adopters and birth families can have a positive impact on children's wellbeing. The Adopt London South Letterbox Service is here to help everyone take part in effective and meaningful Letterbox contact.

**I like to hear about how my brothers and sisters who live in other places are. We swap recipes and jokes.”** — ADOPTED CHILD

