

## CVAA Practice Workshop: Letterbox Contact, March 2019

Please find below a summary of discussions at CVAA's Practice Workshop held in Nottingham on Wednesday 27<sup>th</sup> March 2019. We hope this helps you to reflect on the day, share the learning and have similar discussions within your own teams.

CVAA are grateful to Faith in Families for hosting this workshop, and to Laura Payne, Head of Professional Services, for sharing with us her experience of working in this area.

If you are a CVAA member please take a look at the members area of our website which holds a wealth of resources to support your CPD needs, including our presentation slides from this workshop. Register for our website by [clicking here](#).

### What the research tells us

- ['Just letterbox? A study of indirect contact in adoption', Edwina Brocklesby, PhD Thesis, School of Social Work, University of Leicester.](#)

"Improved defining of objectives, a low key review system and proactive professional intervention/mediation could influence letterbox outcomes. Letterboxes proved increasingly complex over time... demands for the coherent support of all parties to letterbox".

- [The joys and challenges of adoptive family life: survey of adoptive parents in Yorks and Humberside region, Neil et al 2018](#)

This study found that letterbox is the most common form of contact, but it is often not sustained over time:

- With birth siblings: 16% of respondents had two-way letterbox contact, 10% had one-way contact from their adoptive family and 49% had no contact.
- With birth parents: 41% of respondents had two-way letterbox contact, 25% had one-way contact from their adoptive family and 31% had no contact.

Letters were most greatly appreciated when they provided information on the young person's background and previously unknown information. Respondents were most dissatisfied with letters when birth parents had used the terms 'mum' and 'dad', been overly emotive, referred to unknown others, created false hopes, or failed to give wanted information.

Find links to even more open access research on this topic in the [accompanying PowerPoint presentation](#), CVAA members and subscribers can download this from CVAA's website.

### Echoes from Service Users

- [Hannah Meadows – Resources and Self-Care for adoptive parents](#)

Advice for adoptive parents, including advice on specific aspects of self-care, book reviews and other practical resources. In particular, find an example of letterbox exchanges and a template to help with writing letters. Author of the site, Hannah, is an adoptive parent herself and writes about her own experiences of living child-to-parent violence.

- [mumsnet:](#)

Find some interesting accounts from those with experience of letterbox contact which demonstrate how difficult and crucial this mode of contact can be. For example, "Letterbox

is definitely supposed to be for the child's benefit. It does force you to confront not being the only mother in a head on way. I am sure if [she] ... were a relinquished baby, writing would be different, but she's not. The letters I receive from birth mum reminded me of this- the dysfunction in her life was very evident in her letters".

- [We are Family, adoption support community](#)  
Read about adopters' experience of letter writing.
- [Click here](#) to hear from adopted children on their thoughts about letterbox contact as part of [UEA's Contact After Adoption](#) study.

## Key points and group discussion

Listed below are the key points identified by practitioners, to be considered carefully when working in adoption support.

1. Contact should be **purposeful**; how it benefits the child is key
  - Why are we doing letterbox contact? Is it about exchanging information, is it emotive, is it in preparing children for a meeting when they are 18?
2. Contact should be **individualised**, taking account needs and qualities of all parties
3. Contact is a **relationship-based** process that is **dynamic** across time (Beek and Neil et al 2015)
4. Contact plans should be based on particular needs of all parties not 'standard plans'
5. Contact needs to take into account today's modes of communication!

### Preparing Adopters; what can we do to help adopters see the value of letterbox?

- Often adopters agree to letterbox contact when it is a hypothetical, yet when faced with writing letters to a birth parent who has harmed their child, it understandably becomes more difficult. Early preparation and understanding of the challenges but also importance of letterbox is crucial, and part of this is preparing adopters for the fact that when you adopt a child they come with a family.
- Yorkshire Adoption Agency shared that they ask adopters to write down a small amount each month about their child and what they have done – this means that writing a letter at the end of the year is much less daunting and the process becomes normalised.
- The group agreed that it would be useful to run adopter prep groups around letterbox contact for parents who are already approved.
- The group discussed using one-off meetings to set agreements and boundaries to work to improve letterbox.
- We need to break down barriers and encourage prospective adopters to think about letterbox contact from the perspective of their children and their children's birth parents, rather than from their own.
  - Note: the group discussed the value of Coram's DVD made by adopted children, "Contact in Adoption: the views of young people", which is aimed at helping views understand their perspective and their views on contact. The DVD, which we saw a clip from at the workshop, is available to purchase [here](#).

### What happens when children reach the age of 18?

- Some local authorities are extending their letterbox services to the age of 21 where possible, or giving young people the choice of continuing or ending letterbox when they reach age 18.

At this point many are asked if they would like to write themselves or for their parents to continue to do this for them.

- Adoption Counts shared that they provide a booklet to adopted young people when they reach the age of 18 which provides information about accessing records and their options for continuing, terminating or changing the terms of their letterbox contact.
- We should be remembering that adopted young people often mature slowly, so it may be appropriate to continue to support letterbox post 18.
- Often birth parents are of the belief that as soon as their child turns 18 they will immediately get in contact with them. We must prepare them for the fact this may not be the case. David Howe and Julia Feast's study of 472 adopted adults who had either searched for or been sought by one or more of their birth relatives found that the average age of searching was 29 for women and 31 for men. It is often when starting a family of their own that adopted people consider contact. Read a summary of the study [here](#).

### Supporting Birth Parents

- Our birth parents commonly experience mental health difficulties and learning difficulties. How can we expect them to carry out the challenging task of writing appropriate letters if we do not support them?
- If contact is lost early on it is often lost forever. This is a great shame because birth parents may improve their situations and become capable of valuable indirect or direct contact later on.
- Grandparents are often more reliable and contact with them can help retain connectiveness between young people and their birth family.
- Some workers ask birth parents if they have any information they would like to share in a separate letter to the letterbox exchange. This is an appropriate way of sharing vital information. It is a good idea when receiving these to check with adoptive families first before sharing.
- We should be clear on rules around photographs and sharing of these on social media.