

CVAA Practice Workshop: Letterbox Contact, October 2018

Please find below a summary of discussions at CVAA's Practice Workshop held in Reading on Wednesday 24th October 2018. 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 PACT for hosting this workshop, and to Heather Atkinson, Coram, 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

- The group agreed that it is helpful to begin preparing adopters for contact as soon as they begin their journey. When adopters first come forward they may believe they would not be able to cope with contact. Rather than downplaying contact with statements such as 'it will just be letterbox', we should attempt to shift this mindset and explain the value of contact. As the assessment and preparation progress we need to help adopters appreciate both the value and complexity of letterbox contact. Research indicates that direct contact where it happens is often less complex and more successful than letterbox.
- Ken Watson, USA, has in the past used the term *connectedness* rather than contact. Relationships with birth families may resemble those members of our existing family whom we don't feel we have much in common with but remain connected to. This concept may help adopters feel less overwhelmed by contact.
- The group agreed that it would be useful to run adopter prep groups around letterbox contact for parents who are already approved. Note: Slough Children's Services Trust run a workshop with both prospective adopters and current adopters about letterbox contact and its importance. Participants are asked to practice writing a letter to help them understand birth parents' perspective.

Influencing LA decision making

- We should be asking local authorities what services they are able to offer birth parents. We should consider offering to support contact arrangements for local authorities, and where possible offering to help with letter writing. This will help us to influence local authority practice. See [the CVAA website](#) to download the slides presented by St Francis Children's Society at CVAA's Evidence Seminar in October 2018 where they described their

independent support services for birth families and the role they play in helping birth parents to participate positively in letterbox in order to benefit of all parties.

Supporting Birth Parents and setting agreements and reviewing them

- Photos: for adopters this involves fear about where photos may end up (eg. Facebook) and whether they might be traceable.
 - In the past advice was to avoid a photo being traceable, ensure the child is not wearing school uniform, remove the date or location from the photo. With the growth of social media the risks of how photos are used are much greater.
 - Slough Children's Services Trust noted that more recently they have been leaning towards a no photo policy.
 - Coram often hold photos on file for parents to view when they like, without taking them away.
 - Birth mothers need to be writing to the whole family, and they will reply from the whole family. This stops it being the responsibility of the child, and it means if there is no reply it is not a personal attack on the child, it is 'we didn't get a reply'.
- Slough Children's Services Trust are in the process of setting up a birth parents group for parents to help them write their letters etc.
- The group discussed the possibility of having a second meeting, after what we call the one off meeting , usually prior to placement, where contact arrangements can be considered in detail and all parties can agree on terms of use in letters, type of information to include etc.

Case study: Heather Atkinson, Coram

This year Coram have seen an exchange of 46 letters: 15 from birth parents, 31 from adoptive families. One administrator deals with the letters as and when they arrive with Coram and updates the agency's databases accordingly. Where there are queries or concerns a social worker is notified. Latterly Coram have only been involved if an adopter has had specific concerns. Interestingly and contrastingly, currently Coram's concurrent planning placements are involving an exchange of gifts and cards.