Nottinghamshire’s letterbox contact service

Pat Rajan and Liz Lister offer their views on the letterbox scheme which has been operating within Nottinghamshire’s Support After Adoption team since June 1994. This confidential service aims to maintain links between adoptive parents and birth families once an adoption order has been granted. Rajan and Lister begin by outlining the background to the service’s development, including the collection of information from consumers via national organisations. They describe concerns about confidentiality and recruitment of adopters, and discuss the criteria for selecting birth families most likely to respond to the scheme. By and large careful attention, both to the establishment of the letterbox service and to the selection of families who use it, has led to its success.

Background to the letterbox service
Nottinghamshire Social Services is a busy adoption agency and, especially since the early 1980s, has placed many older children for adoption – currently between 60 and 80 a year, of whom half are over five years old. In 1991, what we believe to be the first local authority post-adoption team was created in the county, comprising two-and-a-half social worker posts, a part-time administrator and a half-time manager.

This Support After Adoption team spent an initial period researching post-adoption needs in the voluntary and independent sectors, and talking to those with personal involvement in adoption, individually and via Parent to Parent Information on Adoption Services (PPIAS), the National Organisation for the Counselling of Adoptees and their Parents (NORCAP) and the Natural Parents Network (NPN). Many adopted adults, birth parents and adoptive parents spoke of the closed adoptions of the past and of their current preferences, for varied reasons, for a long-term flow of information between birth and adoptive families. The historical picture of extreme secrecy, often with inadequate initial information given to adopters and poor preparation to help their adopted children appropriately over the years, contributed enormously to the difficulties some adopters had in gaining advice and information, and in explaining adoption to their child. Some adopted people wanted information about birth parents and about their origins (Howe, 1990). Many of those able to express the joys and problems of reunions with birth parents and siblings reported raised self-esteem. Such experiences resulted in a number of adopted adults lobbying for information from birth families to be available during childhood to avoid the developing of fantasies and receiving false information. It was clear that the physical, mental and emotional well-being of many women had been undermined by the lack of even knowing whether their ‘lost’ child was alive and well or not (Scourfield et al., 1991).

The adoption climate of the 1990s is very different from that in which babies were placed ‘voluntarily’ by single mothers two or three decades ago. In Nottinghamshire the majority of children now placed for adoption are older children who have been the subject of Care Proceedings. They have significant attachments and memories. Some may have birth siblings still with their original family. The letterbox scheme was set up to enable some form of contact, where beneficial to the child, to be maintained with the agreement of the adopters. It was hoped that it would provide a unique way of helping to alleviate many of the problems that arose in the early days.

During the consultation period, one of the prime questions for the team was whether a letterbox service would enhance the capacity of adopters to parent. Some individual Nottinghamshire adopters expressed a wish for more
information to answer their children’s questions. PPIAS demonstrated its support for information exchange by producing a leaflet about a letterbox model. Support After Adoption also became convinced of the value of a letterbox system for all parties concerned and formulated proposals for such a scheme. The experiences of other local authorities, notably Bradford and Leicestershire, further helped develop our proposals. Bradford’s scheme included copying all information sent in, for the purpose of replacing missing information – as well as screening the contents. Leicestershire operated a one-way service from adopters to birth parents, with adopters signing a contract of undertaking. Although Nottinghamshire has not introduced contracts, we found Leicestershire’s guidelines for the contents of letters were helpful.

Fears and hopes
Proposals for the letterbox scheme gave rise to many hopes and fears among adopters, social workers, managers and legal advisers on adoption. Concerns that contact for abused children might not allow them the protection they need were balanced by the recognition that numbers of older children had significant attachments to members of their birth family who may have hurt or failed to protect them.

Legal advisers pointed to the possibility that the confidentiality and absoluteness of adoption could be undermined. In Nottinghamshire debates took place on divided loyalties, the making of attachments in adoptive families, the possible erosion of adoptive parents’ feelings of entitlement and whether disruptions would increase. Existing research on contact has its limitations (Quinton et al, 1997) and longer-term studies need to be carried out before the value of different sorts of post-adoption contact can be assessed. It was felt that a compulsory scheme might adversely affect the recruitment of adopters. Adopters and their children needed protection from communications which could be undermining or abusive. In addition, there was a call for more work to be undertaken in the counselling of birth parents. Also workers were concerned about whether vulnerable birth parents with literacy problems who relied on personal relationships with individual workers would be able to manage an impersonal, written, geographically more remote system.

Alongside these fears ran many hopes. Individual contact arrangements already operating on behalf of some children were seen to be of value and workers felt positive about offering this service in a less idiosyncratic way. These early contact arrangements also indicated the way in which birth parents’ views of adoption could change from opposition to acceptance, bringing benefits to all. Some workers hoped that this continued ability to show care and to have information about their child’s welfare would discourage birth parents from embarking on future pregnancies which might result in a reception into care. The letterbox could also provide an opportunity for siblings to retain contact when some were removed from their birth home while others stayed behind – and it could provide reassurance for an adopted child about the welfare of birth relatives. Adoptive parents could also be empowered in their task of ‘telling’ about adoption by regular communications from birth relatives. Some research indicates that the acceptance and open acknowledgement by adopters of the differences between adoptive and biological parenthood makes it easier for them to be positive about openness (Di Giulio, 1987). A letterbox exchange would keep these differences alive, providing a window through which to view adoption and learn about the effects of contact.

Criteria for the Nottinghamshire scheme
The consultation resulted in a proposal for a scheme which acknowledged that adoption is the transfer of legal rights and responsibility from birth parents to adoptive parents, and that it is permanent, confidential and secure. It also accepted the benefits of ‘openness’ for some parties and more especially for some...
adopted children. The letterbox proposals were set within a written contact policy recognising the complexity and contentious nature of policy and practice in the area of adoption contact.

The original policy outlined the local authority’s duty ‘to safeguard and promote the child’s welfare’ and emphasised the benefits of openness but did not enshrine contact with birth family as being of universal benefit. Contact was always to be assessed on a case-by-case basis according to the needs of the individual child, applying the following criteria:

- Are the links to be preserved of known significance and positive value to the child?
- What can be learned from the actual contact which has occurred?
- What are the child’s views according to age and understanding?
- How reliable, child centred and capable are the parties concerned in recognising and responding to a child’s needs (bearing in mind that a child can be attached to a very unreliable parent)?
- Will the proposed contact arrangements assist and support adopters in their exercise of parental responsibility?
- In the exceptional case of a transracial placement, how significant is contact in maintaining the child’s cultural identity or religious link (in other cases too)?

The above criteria were to apply both to direct and indirect (including letterbox) contact. Letterbox contact was envisaged in situations where a child had a significant or valued relationship with a birth family member. Flexibility enabled indirect contact to be agreed if important to an individual child. However, letterbox contact was not envisaged for babies and very young children. Adopters’ views on contact were crucial to the success of the scheme, as was relying on their goodwill in maintaining voluntary arrangements.

The policy also differentiated between the letterbox service and the obligation of the department to keep the parties informed about each other prior to an adoption order, and responsibilities to:

- preserve records fully, adding correspondence from either party subsequent to the order;
- attempt to contact adopters if information becomes available which is highly significant to the child’s future welfare (eg medical information);
- advise about the Contact Register;
- offer post-adoption support.

The letterbox was a new and important addition to the department’s post-adoption service. The success of the scheme is partly a result of careful assessment at the approval stage. This means excluding the birth parent who is unaccepting of responsibility or is in other ways thought likely to undermine the adoption or not put the child’s needs first.

Establishment of the scheme
The key elements of the letterbox scheme were to be as follows:

1. Any letterbox arrangement had to be agreed by the adoption panel, as part of the decision to match a child with adopters. The aim here was to achieve consistency.
2. It was to be managed and supported by the Support After Adoption team.
3. The scheme was to be voluntary with no signed contracts. This was to reduce the likelihood of possible legal complications.
4. It was to operate one annual exchange between adopters and birth families on behalf of children up to 18 years. It could operate both ways, or one way only.
5. It was to operate confidentially using the child’s birth name and an adoption reference number, via a Post Office Box Number (in case the team moved). In this way the adopted name would never be given inadvertently to birth relatives.
6. Correspondence was to be screened and copied and all recipients contacted prior to information being forwarded to ensure confidential information did not go astray, and to allow 'lost' information to be replaced in future, if necessary.

7. It was to be a written exchange (no presents) but photographs, tapes and videos could be sent after careful screening.

8. The letterbox scheme would be reviewed after one year and researched over time.

Names, dates of birth, addresses and months of exchange were put on computer to minimise administrative time needed. ‘Reflex’ software was used (although others now could be more effective). Paper files were chosen with pockets for the storage of letters and photos, with sheets for recording key information and dates of exchanges, and with space to file other correspondence. All standard forms and letters were devised to be as simple as possible with some personalisation of letters feasible on occasion.

The team’s commitment to the success of the scheme was high and exchanges were encouraged by provision of stamped-addressed envelopes and reminder letters, and counselling and support when required. A comprehensive leaflet was aimed at adopters, birth families and social workers, providing guidance on the scheme, contents of letters and the exchange itself, and again offering advice and counselling where necessary. This leaflet invited consumer comments and criticism in keeping with a regular review of the scheme. Previous individual letterbox arrangements were honoured, having been operated by individual social workers. These were few in number but included some with two or three exchanges per year.

The Support After Adoption team was concerned to manage the workload as effectively as possible by setting aside specific time-limited sessions where administrative and social work staff could work on the task together, logging a time-consuming workload.

**The letterbox so far**

The scheme came fully into operation on 3 June 1994 and regular internal discussions have taken place to develop practice and improve procedures since. Three years on, it is proving to be a great success, with the majority of exchanges continuing and positive feedback from adopters, birth families and social workers. Commitment to consumer feedback meant that a comprehensive review was undertaken after the first year of operation by approaching adoptive parents, birth relatives and professionals. At that stage there were approximately 45 children in the scheme with at least one annual exchange of information each. Almost two years later the number has risen to over 100 children and is still increasing. The majority of these exchanges run smoothly with sensitive and sometimes touching letters from adopters and birth families alike. These are frequently accompanied by photographs and sometimes letters or drawings by the children themselves.

Medical information has been exchanged and appreciation for birth parents expressed by adopters. Children and birth parents have been enabled to express their continued concern and love for each other. One birth parent said: ‘I like the scheme because it keeps you in touch with them [the children] and you know how they are growing up, and what progress they are making.’

The 100 children in the system in 1996 had 193 contacts with a variety of birth relatives – sometimes more than one – including birth mothers, birth fathers, siblings, grandparents and others. Occasionally letterboxes operate one way (usually from adopters to birth family) but over 95 per cent are reciprocal. Of the 100 children, over 90 were aged 11 or under. Black children were notably under-represented with only four in the scheme – a statistic requiring investigation.

**What has been learned**

As part of the review undertaken in June 1995, questionnaires were sent to adopters, birth parents and relatives, social work staff, administrative staff, the adoption panels and other adoption...
agencies who also operated 'post-box' systems. For adopters and birth family, the questionnaire asked for views on the scheme, how well prepared people had been, the value of the explanatory leaflet, concerns and other comments. Social work staff were presented with the same issues as well as views on the clarity of the policy on when to recommend a letterbox exchange. In terms of replies, nine out of 34 adopters responded (26 per cent), six out of 26 birth parents (23 per cent), two out of five birth relatives (40 per cent) and 23 social work members of staff. Replies were received from the two adoption panels and ten other adoption agencies.

A half-day workshop was held for about 40 adoption and fostering social workers to look at what was working, both generally and specifically, and what needed changing. The feedback was generally positive with some requests for change. Two adopters questioned the use of the child's birth name by the agency in correspondence, feeling this undermined their status as an adoptive family. Some birth parents thought letterbox contact was insufficient and wanted to send gifts or have direct contact.

Adoption workers expressed concern that most babies and young children were excluded from the scheme in that they were not regarded as having a 'significant relationship' with their birth parents (under the terms of the contact policy). They wanted 'retrospective' letterboxes to be set up in post-adoption situations where adopters and birth parents wanted this. They also requested further training regarding decision-making about contact and for adopters on how to manage a letterbox exchange and deal with the issues raised. Further counselling for birth parents and training for adoption panels were suggested. Workers were generally happy with the scheme, the information leaflet and the referral system.

Support After Adoption workers pointed out that the contact policy needed to clarify the purpose of letterbox exchanges. Contact occurring by post only once a year could 'keep the door open' on a relationship and could provide a channel for information. It could not preserve a significant relationship that had existed prior to adoption. The team recommended that there be separate criteria for direct and indirect contact.

In the early days adopters struggled more than anticipated with such matters as how to begin or sign letters and how to tell of a child's progress and their own pleasures in parenting, while maintaining sensitivity to the birth family's loss. Occasionally adopters' anger about their child's experience at the hands of the birth family was found to impinge on their willingness to engage fully in the letterbox. Birth relatives' feelings of anger and loss were also evident in letters where 'letting go' was required. The siting of the letterbox within a post-adoption team separate from other teams for children, such as for those looked after, seems crucial, allowing workers to undertake counselling which often facilitates successful exchanges. There is no doubt that for both parties, particularly where there has been no face-to-face meeting between birth family and adopters, it can be a challenge to start a correspondence 'from scratch', and additional training may be useful.

Adopters need to be counselled about the possible pitfalls and stress of this form of contact (especially when the local authority appears to be prevented from offering ongoing financial support in any contested adoption contact proceedings post adoption). One adoptive family failed to forward the expected letters and was challenged by the birth mother's solicitor in court.

Phone calls, ostensibly about practical matters, can often lead to counselling or advice on a child's attachment problems, or unresolved feelings of loss expressed by the birth family. Some adopters who appeared resistant to the letterbox were able through counselling to be far more positive about their child's history and the task of telling it.

Because of careful screening prior to setting up letterboxes, there have been only three or four 'unsuitable' communications, where, for example, birth parents overtly challenged the permanency of their child's adoptive
placement. Only one of these arrangements has been suspended. In others counselling and support have facilitated appropriate letters. Birth parents with literacy problems have enlisted help and we are not aware of any case where such problems have prevented a birth relative from using the scheme, although they may exist. Some birth relatives have moved without leaving a forwarding address. All reasonable steps are taken (including recorded delivery mail) to locate the person and to keep the letterbox facility open by encouraging the other party to send information. In this way there will be information for the ‘lost’ party should they make contact in the future. Finally, it has been important to maintain a personal and flexible approach to individual cases. For example, the delight of a small child receiving a present justified one decision made.

A healthy debate about many of these day-to-day issues continues on an informal level and contributes to an ongoing evaluation of the letterbox systems and associated professional practice. Longitudinal and independent research, starting in 1998, should provide much needed data on the effects of indirect contact via the letterbox.

The contact policy has been revised in response to experience and consultation. It now states:

The letterbox scheme enables the ongoing long-term passage or exchange of information between members of the birth and adoptive families, where this is seen by the parties and the agency to be in the child’s interests, and where it needs to be done in a confidential and non-identifiable way.

Some of the benefits and potential problems of letterbox contact are now clearly outlined in directions to workers counselling adopters. There is more discretion to allow letterbox contact to be set up for babies and very young children and, exceptionally, in retrospect. Birth families not using the letterbox can have information put on the child’s case file and send updating information.

By incorporating such changes, the department continues to model flexibility which is also required in its adopters. We hope that policy and practice will continue to reflect a willingness to change and improve based on experience and feedback from users and workers.

Conclusion

A letterbox gives permission for a child’s relationships with his or her birth family to exist beyond adoption. Birth families are enabled to offer support to the child in their adoptive home over the years. We believe the self-worth of children is increased and research will tell us whether this is so. Fears about the inability of birth families who have abused or failed to protect their children to write appropriate letters have not yet been borne out because of careful early assessment. We have some wonderful examples of generosity of spirit in letters from birth families and adopters, and honest, loving and sometimes sad or angry letters from children to their birth family, thereby enabling them to communicate feelings they may have otherwise had to suppress or deny.

A birth mother who had four children wrote to say she was sorry she lost the court case, hopes the children can forgive her for what happened and wishes them the best in their adoptive homes. A 13-year-old girl, adopted, wrote an angry letter to her birth mother. At the time of writing, she is very upset about what her birth mother did to her and does not want to write again at the moment. A letter from adopters to a birth mother thanked her for her letter and said that it was like receiving news from a ‘treasured relative’.

The scheme is providing a rich source of information which is contributing to our knowledge of post-adoption needs, important at this time when support of older, more troubled adopted children and their families is increasingly necessary. Adopters struggling with their 13-year-old daughter gradually realised the importance of her birth grandmother to her and decided that they needed to make contact and meet her themselves.

It is important for us to research the value of indirect contact in its own right.
The letterbox offers a window on ordinary adoptive family life, and on the life of birth families after an adoption order has been made – unique in not being solely focused on problems. This view is not only informing practice on contact but on adoption practice in general.

As individuals and social services departments, can we continue to take up the challenges we pose to our adopters and birth families through their participation in the letterbox – and engage with sometimes painful issues in sensitive, constructive and open ways? In Nottinghamshire we will continue to try. We look forward to hearing your views on our efforts.

References

