Adoption information exchange Evaluation of a letterbox system in a local authority

Veronica Carter, Sally Magee and Rosalind Thoday describe the results of a survey of the Adoption Information Exchange, a ‘postbox system’ between adoptive and birth families which operates within Hampshire Social Services Department. The system, set up in 1993, provides a third-party, confidential means by which adoptive and birth families can share updating information. The survey sought the views of the adoptive and birth families involved, as well as social work colleagues who had set up exchange arrangements.

Introduction
Postbox or letterbox systems are a means of maintaining indirect contact between an adoptive family and birth relatives, ensuring the confidentiality of all parties, with the adoption agency acting as an intermediary. These systems were pioneered by the voluntary adoption agencies, which in the past have had a more open door policy of encouraging some kind of contact with the agency after the making of an adoption order. Local authorities, with their more bureaucratic structure, have also begun setting up such postbox systems. (For a description of Nottinghamshire’s scheme, see Rajan and Lister, Adoption & Fostering 22:1, 1998.)

Hampshire has one-and-a-half Commissioning Officers (Post Adoption) and a part-time Administration Assistant. The exchange is only part of the function of the small team, whose main aim is to raise the profile of post-adoption services in the county. Any face-to-face contact is managed by the area and is separate from the postbox system.

Hampshire’s Adoption Information Exchange was set up in 1993 and is run centrally at headquarters, thus formalising many existing arrangements across the county. A leaflet setting out the guidelines was devised for all parties to the agreement, and there was an agreement form for both adoptive and birth families. The aim was to keep the forms as simple as possible to avoid confusion and allow flexibility. It was expected that agreements would continue until the child was 18.

The opportunity to make a contact order under section 8 of the 1989 Children’s Act has provided the impetus to think about the kind of contact which may be appropriate. The concept of openness has also been influenced by section 51 of the 1976 Adoption Act which allowed adults in England and Wales access to their original birth certificates, and therefore the means to trace their birth parents if they wished. Birth parents in this country do not have the same legal right to identifying information.

The purpose of exchanging information between the adoptive and birth family is perceived by those with experience of adoption as of benefit to the child (Fratter, 1996). It enables the child to develop a sense of identity which incorporates knowledge of the birth family gained throughout childhood. A second but no less important purpose is to give birth parents the opportunity to learn about the progress of their child through childhood; to know they are alive and well, a knowledge denied to many birth parents in the past. Thirdly, for adopters it can be seen as a way in which to update their children’s birth history and raise the issue of adoption within the family in a natural way.

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agree. It is interesting to note that social workers in Nottinghamshire were requesting this facility.

**Evaluation survey 1993–1996**

The aim of the survey was to look at the Adoption Information Exchange since its inception in 1993. Its objectives were:

1. To seek the views of the adoptive and birth families on the operation of the Information Exchange with particular regard to:
   - The benefits to the child;
   - The benefits to the adults concerned;
   - The difficulties involved.
2. To seek the views of social work colleagues who have been responsible for setting up the initial exchange;
3. To review the frequency and type of contact in the exchange;
4. To identify which members of the birth family are participating in the exchange.

Part 1 of the survey analyses the information from the Adoption Information Exchange files. Part 2 gives the responses received from the questionnaire returned by birth parents and adoptive parents respectively, and analyses the information provided by social workers. As the exchange is between birth relatives and adoptive parents on behalf of their children we did not send the children questionnaires.

**Analysis of files**

At the time of the survey – November/December 1996 – there were 121 adoptive parents and 170 birth relatives involved in the scheme. This related to 75 girls and 78 boys: 83 aged under five; 83 aged from five to ten; and 22 aged from 11 to 16. Additionally, one 19-year-old continued to participate by special request until the age of 21. Table 1 indicates the birth family members involved and illustrates the fact that the majority of exchanges take place with the birth mother. We have not analysed the differing response rates but we think that the extended family, in particular the grandparents, provides a more consistent response than many of the birth parents who have a less settled lifestyle.

The following is a breakdown of the frequency of the exchanges within the system at 1996:

- Annually: 70
- Twice yearly: 42
- Quarterly: 2
- Significant events: 3
- Every two years: 1
- Every three years: 1
- Every five years: 1
- Discretionary: 6
- One-way information to adopters: 3

As can be seen, the majority of exchanges (54 per cent) were annual, typically arranged at birthdays or Christmas; twice annual exchanges usually covered both these times. In 50 per cent of the agreements with the birth relatives the type of communication had not been specified, but letters, cards and photos were being sent. However, 20 per cent were limited to cards only. The exact reason for this was not always clear, but in some cases related to the birth relative’s learning difficulties. In several cases information was held on the file for birth relatives for whom there was no current address.

In general the adopter’s participation was set up to mirror that of the birth relatives, at about the same time of year.
and with the same participants. Thirty-four per cent of the exchanges specified a photograph and progress report to birth family members. Forty-five per cent of the adopters agreements did not specify the content of the exchange. From the survey of the files it was noted that nine per cent of the planned exchanges had not commenced. A proactive stance had not been taken and it was realised it may not have been clear to the participants who was to take responsibility for the first contact. A letter is now sent to the participants, confirming the agreement and date of first exchange.

Responses to the questionnaire
The questionnaires were similar for both birth relatives and adoptive parents, asking for factual details such as age of child, their views about the exchange, if there were any difficulties and if they had suggestions for improving the service. In addition the adoptive parents were asked whether or not they involved the children and if so the child’s reaction. With hindsight it would have been interesting to have asked whether or not adoptive and birth families had met, and to have analysed whether this made for easier exchanges.

Birth family response
All 128 birth relatives were sent questionnaires and 48 replies were received, representing a 38 per cent response rate. We enclosed a stamped addressed envelope but did not follow up those who did not reply. The replies proportionately reflected the numbers from the files, ie most replies were from birth mothers and related to children between the ages of five and ten. Most of the exchanges took place annually and they sent and received permutations of letters, cards and photos.

The birth families’ replies fell broadly into two categories: those who felt that they wanted to share in the child’s progress and those who found it difficult but needed a reassurance that their child was alive and well.

These are some of the comments made on the helpfulness of the exchange:

I can keep in contact with my son’s progress, his interests, and reassure him of my well-being. I value the service beyond words. For me it’s a mediation between the two families which benefits both.

It gives me peace of mind that my son and his family are doing well, and I hope that it may help him accept that he is adopted without any pain, by giving him up-to-date information about me.

It helps me to stop worrying about my son.

As grandparents, it is interesting (if sad) to keep in touch. The parents are extremely good about sending photos – they seem perfect and caring.

The Adoption Information Exchange is an invaluable service without which I do not know how I would have coped with the trauma of my daughter being adopted. In my case it works well and I receive lovely letters and photos from the adoptive mother.

When birth relatives were asked whether there were difficulties, 26 said there were no difficulties or made no comment. Others wrote:

Not with the exchange itself, but sometimes there are emotional difficulties, as each time there is contact it opens old wounds. But I don’t mind, I suppose, because it’s so lovely to know that she’s well and that her family are so happy too.

Mail is sometimes late and I would like to receive more than one photo.

At first it was emotionally difficult, painful to write to the kids, but that has changed over time. Although it is still emotive, it is also a precious communication. I feel more comfortable now, by the adopters’ acceptance of my relationship with them.

Suggestions for improving the service included:

An acknowledgement slip should be sent to confirm arrival of letters, vouchers, etc.

There should be a way of enforcing agreements.

I’d like more information on how the
child is getting on at school, whether she
has been ill, and more photographs to see
how she is growing up would help settle
my mind.

The department should give us some details
into how the exchange system works.

Response from adopters
Sixty-two (51 per cent) of the 121
adoptive parents replied to the
questionnaire. Again those who replied
mirrored the information taken from the
files: the majority had children between
the ages of five and ten, most exchanges
were with birth parents, and cards, letters
and photos were usually exchanged
annually. The adopters’ replies indicated a
general acceptance of the exchange and a
willingness to try and make it work.

When asked what they found helpful
about the exchange, 11 adopters made no
comment. Others had this to say:

It's a chance to reflect on the year and
another opportunity to talk about his life
before adoption

It's useful to store up for the child, to
know in the future that his birth mother
did not forget him.

Not having met any member of the birth
family, it helps to remind us that we have
adopted him and it keeps that fact active
in our minds.

[I like] the fact that he can have some
contact with his mother but we still retain
our anonymity. It has helped him accept
his adoption.

When asked what they found difficult
about the exchange, ten said ‘nothing’
and 23 made no comments. Some other
observations were:

Our child has expressed a desire for no
more photos to be sent, which puts us in
an awkward position.

We worry that the mother will stop
writing which will be difficult to explain.

Obviously the letters bring back memories
for me, i.e. my child is not biologically my
own, but I feel it is her right to know of
her origins.

Adopters’ suggestions for improving the
service included:

. . . guidelines about what to write, what
not to write.

We’d like to receive information on life
events that occur in the birth family which
may not be shared with us otherwise, e.g.
birth of sibling, death, remarriage.

We’d like to know if letters/photos are
seen by the birth mother . . . more about
how information is passed on.

Although it is meant to be an exchange,
there are several instances where adopters
have sent an annual letter and photo and
receive nothing in return. Initially this
did not seem to be an issue, but as time
has gone on several of the adopters have
commented on how difficult it is to send
letters into a vacuum, not knowing if they
are appreciated or appropriate.

Response from social workers
Questionnaires were sent to 72 social
workers who had been involved in setting
up an exchange. Sixty-three per cent
returned the completed forms concerning
81 exchanges. The questionnaires were
designed to find out who was involved in
the setting up of the exchange, how long
it took, what they felt the issues were for
the participants and what the issues were
for them. The workers’ roles in setting up
the exchanges were as follows:

- Social worker for child: 61
- Post-adoption adviser: 8
- Family placement social worker: 7
- Team/line manager: 4
- Adoption adviser: 1

As can be seen, the overwhelming
majority of arrangements were set up by
the child’s social worker.

Perceptions of birth family participation
Use of the exchange was first suggested
by the birth family in nine instances, by
the social worker for the child in 42
instances, by a team manager in two and
in one instance by each respectively: the
adoptive parents, the family placement
social worker, the guardian ad litem, the
judge at the hearing, a previous foster
carer and a post-adoption adviser.

Table 2 shows the stage at which
social workers initiated discussion about
the exchange with the birth family, while
Table 3 shows broadly the amount of time
needed before agreement was reached
with birth families.

Some of the concerns which were
raised in discussion with birth families
were as follows:

- How to maintain contact, especially
  when social worker no longer involved;
- Trust of the other parties involved,
  including the exchange itself;
- Content of what should be exchanged –
  photographs significant;
- Maintenance of confidentiality;
- Who would initiate exchange;
- Birth and adoptive families’ feelings
  of loss.

Perceptions of adoptive parent
participation The stage at which the
social worker initiated discussion of the
exchange with the adoptive family can be
seen in Table 4.

Some visited jointly with the family
placement worker or explained the
procedure in discussion about the life
story book. Forty per cent of the adopters
appeared receptive to the idea of an
exchange and discussion was brief, in 30
per cent of cases, an estimated one to two
hours were spent in discussion and in 17
per cent the social workers engaged in
several meetings over weeks or months.
The issues raised in discussion with
adoptive parents very much reflected those
raised by birth parents. However they
raised the following additional concerns:

- What if the child does not wish to
  continue sending information?

Table 2
Stage at which social workers initiated discussions with birth
parents

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<thead>
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<tr>
<td>1–2 years</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before at court</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placement</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Foster placement</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pre-placement</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Before birth</td>
<td>35</td>
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Table 3
Amount of time needed for agreement to be reached with
birth families

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<th>Time</th>
<th>Number</th>
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<td>1–2 meetings</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 meetings</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
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<td>Several days</td>
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<td>Several months</td>
<td>20</td>
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Table 4
Stage at which social workers initiated discussion with
adopters

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Stage at which</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<tr>
<td>After linking</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At court</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>After adoption order</td>
<td>20</td>
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- Difficulty of maintaining indirect
  contact with siblings in other adoptive
  homes;
- How to deal with the situation when
  there is no exchange for another child in
  the family;
- Dealing with inappropriate material
  from the birth family;
- Child’s fears of birth parents finding
  them and taking them away, particularly
  where abuse has occurred.

Agency process The general opinion was
that the Adoption Exchange guidelines,
leaflets and forms were helpful;
suggestions were made to have different colour paper to distinguish each party and to provide a set of pre-addressed labels to help the forgetful and those who had difficulty with writing.

Social workers were asked what purpose they thought the Adoption Information Exchange served. Some of their responses were:

*It helps to facilitate the child’s knowledge and understanding of birth origins as he/she grows to adulthood.*

*It helps the birth family initially, but in some ways prolongs the agony.*

*It’s a fair system without prejudice.*

*It’s a more formal and more efficient mechanism for indirect contact than an individual social worker or an area office could achieve.*

When asked about the disadvantages, replies included:

*Problems may arise with birth parents or adopters who do not maintain commitment.*

*It relies on trusting others to honour a promise which may well be reneged upon, adoptees may lose out through adopters being unwilling to comply.*

*It can possibly make adoptive parents anxious if a child starts wanting to meet his or her birth parents.*

*It encouraged the birth family to believe adoption is something that can be challenged.*

Finally, social workers were asked if they had any other comments to make about the Exchange:

*Overall I feel the service has great value in ensuring that all parties in adoption have access to information about developments and significant life events. It may help birth parents to cope better with their child’s adoption, regardless of whether the decision to opt for adoption was made by them or the local authority.*

*In both cases where I have been involved with setting up an exchange the birth parents and adopters have met after the placement. All parties commented on how beneficial this was (although admitting to initial qualms); meeting appears to have enhanced their commitment to maintaining the exchange, especially from the adopter’s viewpoint.*

*Having first-hand knowledge of several failed adoption placements, I am not sure of the reasons for failure, but if the exchange can help in any way, then it is of inestimable value.*

**Discussion of findings**

*Information from files*

The system is clearly not without faults and the survey has highlighted several areas which had felt unsatisfactory. Practically, these include a need for acknowledgement of all transactions; a reminder system to prompt participants; and for clear forms and a booklet on all aspects of the exchange, including guidelines on how to write a letter to the other party involved. Given the resource implications, should we seek to standardise the timing of exchanges, for example at mid-year and/or Christmas? It is interesting to note that in the evaluation of a scheme for baby adopters and their birth parents run by a voluntary agency, Logan (1997) noted that, from the birth parents’ perspective, the process of writing letters was always difficult.

A more fundamental issue to be addressed is the extent to which it is appropriate for an agency to intrude upon unwilling participants, for example where one party to the agreement feels the other has defaulted; or to give guidance on timing where this wanders; or on content where there is any risk of disturbance or upset.

*Questionnaire responses*

*Birth family* The most striking element about the birth families’ response was just how positive so many were about the exchange, even though at times it was very painful emotionally. Although the focus has inevitably and rightly been on the child, it is clear that a valuable service is being provided to birth parents whose needs have been ignored in the past.
Adoptive parents For many adopters, regular communication with the birth family is not something they find easy to undertake. There is a sense that some adoptive parents are not convinced of the long-term value of an exchange for their children. In many ways it feels like a transitional stage; adoptive parents are having to adapt to a changing ethos which encourages greater openness. Some adoptive parents still feel that this is a current trend that does not always bear reference to what the child needs. At the other end of the spectrum, some extraordinarily positive responses indicate that adopters are already anticipating their child meeting birth parents in the future and see the exchange as preparation or as a means of easing the transition to some form of direct contact. Many though, are simply trying to strike the balance between maintaining indirect contact with the birth family, at the same time ensuring that their child’s needs are secure.

Social workers The role of the social worker in setting up the exchange is absolutely vital. How issues and concerns are dealt with at this stage will lay the foundation for the future success or otherwise of an exchange. The process itself may indeed help the birth family to reach a decision to relinquish a child. One worker commented:

A birth mother would have found it very difficult to place her child and never again know how he was doing . . . meeting the adopters after placement increased her confidence that the adoption exchange would continue.

Adoptive and birth families may need some time with the worker to ensure that the exchange feels comfortable to them. It is important that the practical details are clarified and fears and fantasies addressed. Training and support for social workers setting up an exchange seem to be crucial.

Conclusion
It is with some relief that we can conclude from this brief survey that the Adoption Information Exchange seems to be providing a useful service to the users – that is to birth and adoptive families and their children. Staff limitations mean that there is no regular ongoing support for those involved; queries and concerns are dealt with as they arise. Several of the comments highlight the need for professional input, not just in the fine tuning of arrangements, but also as the point of contact for other concerns or worries in the broader context of post-adoption issues. The more welcome spin-off from operating a system such as this is the opportunity it affords users and colleagues to explore, albeit in a limited way, those concerns which are not yet a major problem.

Only a longitudinal study of postbox systems can tell us how valuable such schemes are in maintaining contact between adoptive and birth families. Despite some criticisms, this survey on the whole has shown that a postbox system can work, perhaps because there are some very special people involved – brave and positive adopters and birth parents who want it to work for their children. It is not appropriate in every adoption, but seems to be right for most. It does maintain the confidentiality of all concerned to the degree wished by each participant. Only time will tell if it is beneficial to all concerned, particularly to the child growing up. Adoptees spoke up about needing to know of their origins and brought about the change in law for England and Wales in 1976. Parents who had children adopted many years ago are saying loud and clear that they should have the right to know what has happened to their children, now adults. We will only know how this generation of adopted children feel about ongoing contact when they tell us. Let’s hope we get it right.

References
Fratter J, Adoption with Contact: Implications for policy and practice, London: BAAF, 1996