More than just a letter Service user perspectives on one local authority’s adoption postbox service

Postbox contact, in which an adoption agency mediates the exchange of letters between adoptive and birth families, now appears to be the most common contact plan for adopted children. Despite their prevalence, postbox services have received little attention from researchers and is not the subject of any national policy or practice guidance. This article by Julie Selwyn, Lesley Frazer and Peter Wrighton draws on a recent evaluation of one local authority’s postbox service and in particular the perspectives of adopters, birth mothers and extended birth family members using it. The evaluation found that adopters and extended family members were often very committed to sustaining the service for the benefit of children. However, birth fathers were rarely involved and birth mothers had great difficulty in writing, although they valued receiving news of their children. There was considerable scope for disappointment when parties embarked on postbox with different expectations and could not directly communicate their motives and wishes. Overall, the paper concludes that postbox users require more support if this form of contact is to be sustained. It also calls for researchers, practitioners and policy makers to devote further attention to postbox and in particular its longer-term impact on children.

Introduction
With more openness in adoption and the shift towards the adoption of older children with adverse prior experiences, postbox contact (also referred to as ‘letterbox’ contact or ‘adoption information exchange’) has become a common method of enabling limited ongoing communication between adoptive and birth families. Adoption agencies that provide postbox services typically act as intermediaries between the parties involved. Although there is variation in how services are delivered, most agencies screen letters, cards, vouchers and photos exchanged between adoptive families and birth relatives at agreed intervals, with confidentiality assured.

Studies including Kirk’s seminal work, Shared Fate (1965), demonstrated that successful adoptive parenting was associated with the adopters’ acceptance of the child’s dual identity, and highlighted the ongoing emotional significance of the birth family both for the child and for the adoptive parents. Further studies found that when adopted children and young adults had problems related to their adoption, these often involved issues of identity (Brodzinsky and Schechter, 1990). Much has also been learnt from adopted adults seeking counselling under section 51 of the Adoption Act 1976 (Howe and Feast, 2000). However, less is known about the ongoing effects of contact for children, particularly for those placed after adverse early childhoods (Quinton et al, 1997).

A survey by Lowe and colleagues (1999) found that 95 per cent of adoption agencies were providing a postbox service. Other research indicates that this form of indirect contact is now the most common contact plan for young adopted children (Neil, 2004). Despite this growth, there is nothing in current adoption legislation to guide agencies in the provision of such services. Courts will consider the child’s contact needs upon application for an adoption order, but the Adoption and Children Act 2002 does not specifically legislate for postbox services. The power to make such arrangements therefore still derives partly from the Adoption Agencies Regulations and partly from the consensual nature of the arrangements (since courts rarely make orders for contact after adoption). The National Adoption Standards (A11, C4 and D) do, however, require that adoption plans include details of the arrangements for maintaining links with the birth family and significant others, and that adopters and birth family members are involved in discussions as to how they can best
maintain any links, including contact. Postbox arrangements as part of an adoption plan clearly offer one way of satisfying these requirements.

The few studies which have looked in detail at agency postbox schemes have consistently shown that postbox contact is viewed as helpful by many adopters and birth relatives (Rajan and Lister, 1998; Carter et al, 1999; Logan, 1999; Vincent and Graham, 2002; Neil, 2003). However, these authors and US literature (Berry et al, 1998; Grotevant et al, 2004) also point out that participation in postbox services is challenging and that many families need help with both emotional and practical aspects if they are to sustain the arrangements. Neil’s study of contact (2002) found that nearly 50 per cent of birth relatives experienced mental health problems, 25 per cent had a learning disability and 40 per cent had literacy problems and therefore agency support was needed for postbox contact to be successful.

In mid-2004, the Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies was commissioned by the postbox organiser (a senior adoption practitioner) in one local authority to undertake an evaluation of its postbox service. This authority, like all others, had experienced a rapid growth in the making of postbox contact arrangements and had already made efforts to administer them more consistently through identified postbox staff. The authority had recently moved from postbox services being managed by social workers from children’s teams to a service delivered from one adoption support office. However, there was concern that adopters and birth family members were receiving a variable service. We discuss the findings from the evaluation, focusing in particular on the perspectives of the adopters and birth family members involved in the postbox arrangements.

Method and sample
The evaluation was both retrospective, to map changes over time, and prospective, to examine current social work practice. We were particularly interested to know how many planned postbox arrangements had ‘got off the ground’ and what might influence this. The design of the study included both qualitative and quantitative elements, as we expected a low response rate from birth parents based on others’ experience of trying to reach this group (Rajan and Lister, 1998; Carter et al, 1999). The sample design included all the new postbox arrangements made by the local authority during 2001–03. This comprised 35 arrangements, which related to 47 children and involved 85 adults in the exchange of information. The children’s ages at September 2004 ranged from one year seven months to 15 years, with an average age of six years (s.d. 2.2). In this study, children were not interviewed because the funding that the authority provided was too limited to allow this.

All these postbox files were read and details were collected on the original plan and the frequency and content of communications. The numerical data were entered on to an access database for analysis. Prospective data were gathered through a focus group with 12 social workers and interviews with birth relatives and adaptors. An investigator-based approach to the interviews was used (Brown, 1983; Quinton and Rutter, 1988) and schedules developed that asked questions about how the arrangements had been set up and how they had worked in practice. The method combines a ‘qualitative’ approach to questioning but allows a ‘quantitative’ treatment of data. It provides systematic and detailed coverage of topics and numerically analysable data while supplying extensive case material.

The researchers contacted all 85 adults involved in the 35 postbox arrangements. Forty-eight (10 adopters and 38 birth relatives) declined further contact or could not subsequently be interviewed. At least nine of these were found to be no longer living at the address used by the postbox service. Thirty-seven agreed to be interviewed (21 adopters, 7 birth mothers and 9 extended birth family members including older siblings, aunts, grandparents and great-grandparents). Overall, at least one party in 23 of the 35 postbox arrangements was interviewed (66%). In ten cases we were able to interview both the adopter and at least
one family member, enabling direct comparisons to be made between the perceptions of different users of the service. In the remaining interviews we were able to obtain only a partial view of the postbox arrangement, with ten cases seen only from the perspective of the adopter and a further three only from the perspective of a birth relative. Data were analysed using the matrix method (Dey, 1993). This approach provided the systematic organisation through cross-tabulation of data, so information could be compared across cases more easily.

In considering the findings of the interviews, it is important to look at who was missing from the sample and what bias this may have introduced. Although the sample appeared reasonably balanced in terms of the number of adopters and birth family members, the 16 birth family members interviewed comprised just 30 per cent of birth family members with a postbox arrangement. Most of these were actively using the postbox. It is probable that the birth family members missing from the interview sample included not only those who had moved and lost touch with postbox, but also some who had never used or were no longer using it, and others who continued to receive but did not send things. Consequently these perspectives were largely absent from our interview findings. By contrast, the 21 adopters whom we interviewed comprised 68 per cent of adopters with a postbox arrangement and reflected a range of experiences, and almost all were still sending things for birth family members. The adopters missing from the sample therefore included most of those who were no longer sending information to birth family members. It is also important to note that the interview sample was almost exclusively female and white. In spite of efforts to ensure as many as possible of the respondents were interviewed, all except one birth family interviewee (a grandfather) were female. None of the four birth fathers who were still sending letters agreed to be interviewed. The same gender bias was present in the interviews with adopters (18 adoptive mothers, one adoptive father and two adoptive couples).

The case files
Data were collected from postbox case files on the original plan and subsequent postbox activity. Files did not contain enough information to know why arrangements were not working as planned, but it appeared that birth parents were the group least likely to reciprocate, with 60 per cent having sent no items in the past year. The majority of inactive arrangements had failed to get off the ground because birth parents had never sent any letters or cards. By contrast, 89 per cent of extended family members were continuing to make use of the service. The usual frequency was once or twice a year.

Copies of cards from birth parents and extended family members revealed that they contained little information. Generally, cards were simply signed ‘with love from . . .’ Adopters’ communications varied in their content. A few were reluctant to give away any detail, requests for photographs were refused and their annual letter gave basic factual details of health, developmental and educational progress. Only a few adopters’ letters described the child in their social context, giving news of the family’s activities (including non-related siblings) and friendships. These more personal letters often contained items such as the child’s handprint or school reports. There was one letter in the postbox files from a child to her birth parent but this had received no reply.

Views of social workers
Twelve social workers were asked for their views on the postbox service in a
focus group discussion. The focus groups were guided by the facilitator to consider the following areas: making decisions about when postbox was appropriate and setting up and supporting the arrangements. The group met for an hour and issues raised and comments made were written on a flipchart for the group to reflect on. When asked about the purposes of the postbox service, they listed its benefits as:

- facilitating contact;
- maintaining a link for the child with their own history and genetic inheritance;
- reassuring the birth mother that the child was well;
- maintaining an information store;
- keeping contact so that the birth family would not receive the unexpected knock on the door.

It was also seen as a way of filling gaps in life story work (particularly for relinquished infants) where little was known about the birth family, and as offering the possibility of the child seeing a more positive picture of the birth parent than that expressed in social work reports.

The overall view was that while postbox offered a good service, more needed to be done to enable birth parents to write. Workers thought they had made efforts to explain the postbox system to birth parents but contact arrangements were often discussed when birth families were in conflict with the local authority and court hearings were pending. Workers believed that levels of anxiety and distress were often so high at this time that birth parents did not hear or comprehend the arrangements that were being made.

The greatest area of concern for social workers was whether adopters would renege on the agreement once the adoption order had been made. The predominant view was that adopters were likely to block postbox communications. There was a certain amount of discomfort expressed about courts’ unwillingness to impose contact orders and social work plans being disregarded. Social workers regretted the loss of control over contact occasioned by changes in the child’s legal status and the centralised administration of postbox. They expressed concern that postbox services required individuals to remain in contact with an agency rather than a person. The majority wanted a more proactive service, where late letters were chased and social workers alerted to any difficulty. The needs of mothers who had concealed their pregnancies were also raised as an area of concern for practitioners in making a successful postbox plan. Where could letters be sent if secrecy was to be maintained?

Views of adopters and birth family members

Twenty-one adopters, seven birth mothers and nine extended family members agreed to be interviewed. The majority of adopters and birth family members viewed postbox favourably and all the interviewees were able to identify positive aspects of the service. In describing what they liked about it, some adopters concentrated on the benefits of the service structure, as it provided anonymity, secrecy and convenience and created a distance between those involved. It was also seen to encourage the discipline of regular writing and provided a prompt for regular discussions of adoption and the birth family with the child:

*I like the concept. I can see that the idea could work very powerfully – frequent, safe communication. At the very least it gives us an excuse every six months to talk with the children about their birth family.*

Adopters also talked about the benefits for a child of having links through postbox to their previous life and to the life that might have been. These connections were thought to reduce the possibility of the child creating a fantasy birth family and to provide the means by which direct contact might be facilitated by the adopter when the child grew older, or be initiated by the children themselves. Postbox would ensure that both the adopted person and the birth family would know something of each other. Some adopters also saw it as insurance against a future...
day when their children might hold them as parents to account:

The benefits aren’t for me, they’re for the children. It’s something for them to have of their birth family, and they won’t hold it against us later on; they can’t reproach us for not allowing contact.

Birth family members expressed gratitude at being allowed to remain in touch. Many said how much they appreciated knowing that items had been passed on. Extended birth family members believed it was particularly important to let children know they were loved and thought about and that a link was maintained:

We’re definitely better off with it than without it. Otherwise it would be too easy to push things to the back of your mind. It’s made it a lot easier to think about and cope with it.

Not all interviewees felt so positively about postbox, and even those who valued it had concerns. These aspects of the service are described in the following sections.

Setting up the arrangements

Adopters and particularly birth family members expressed concern at the way the arrangements had been set up. The majority of adopters thought the service had been explained to them but they concurred with the views of the social workers, believing that the start of the placement was too emotional a time to take in detailed arrangements.

In contrast, few birth mothers and extended family members felt that the service had been properly explained. Two birth mothers did describe being fully informed by their social workers and thought this had been very helpful; others thought they had been misled about what they could send and with what frequency. However, one birth mother acknowledged that, even if her social worker had explained postbox, she was not able to retain the information when all her attention was focused on the impending loss of her children:

The social worker mentioned it just before the adoption, but I can’t remember how it was explained. Too much else was going on for me to remember. I wasn’t in agreement with the adoption; I was really hurting at the time.

All thought greater clarity was needed in the setting up of the postbox arrangement and, given the difficulty of recalling agreements made when emotions were running high, it was thought that family placement workers should take responsibility for informing everyone of the arrangements in writing. Overall, birth relatives wanted greater honesty from social workers and did not want promises that could not be kept. Adopters suggested having more input on postbox during adoption preparation training, with well-written letters available as examples of good practice.

Initial perceptions of the postbox service

Since starting postbox, many adopters had come to believe that it would have future benefits for their children. However, most admitted that this had not initially been their view:

I saw it as a way for the birth mother to have indirect contact and to know how their child is doing, as opposed to the child having information . . . really that way round, for the adopters to provide the birth parents with information.

Despite this perception, most adopters said they had initially felt quite positive about agreeing to postbox contact, as they saw it as a fairly innocuous process that would enable some link to be maintained without the need for regular face-to-face contact. Two adopters were unhappy from the start and had continued to feel that way:

The problem is that we’re never actually moving on. The [birth family] have a lot of emotional problems, and I thought postbox was being set up more to meet their needs and wouldn’t help our children at all. But I felt under pressure to accept it.
Birth family members were more likely to have viewed postbox from the outset as a reciprocal activity. Many described it as having twin purposes, enabling them not only to hear about children but also to convey to children symbolically, through cards and tokens, that they were still loved and not forgotten. Unsurprisingly, however, six of the seven birth mothers whom we interviewed talked about how difficult it had been initially to envisage a postal link:

I couldn’t imagine what it’d be like, and when you’re trying to think what to put in the cards and that, it’s still really, really hard [starting to cry]. It’s been four years now and I still get upset.

Guidance and support with writing
The researchers asked all the interviewees about their experiences of writing via postbox. Although all the adopters except two were still sending updates for birth family members (mainly to birth mothers), very few had felt confident from the start about what to write. Most had arrived at a formula they were now happy with, but a significant number clearly still felt less than confident that they were getting either the tone or content right:

Sit there and think, ‘Oh what on earth do I do?’ . . . There are lots of things to think about. You’ve got mother to read it, sibling to read it, social services to read it and [child] himself.

Some thought their letters/reports had to be very factual, stating briefly what the child had achieved. Others tried to give a more rounded picture. A few included details of scrapes the child had got into or less attractive personality traits. This was not what birth parents always wanted to hear:

I don’t like it when I get bad letters . . . She [adoptive mother] says [child] gets aggressive and violent . . . and she was never like that. It’s very worrying. I don’t like reading things like that. I don’t want to know the bad stuff . . . I just want to remember her the way she was when I last seen her.

All the adopters wanted better guidance on what to write, length and how to refer to the different parties. Others raised the issue of how the child should refer to their birth mother when they were old enough to write for themselves.

Writing was clearly even more challenging for birth family members. Of the seven birth mothers interviewed, only three were still writing through postbox with any regularity and one of these was thinking of stopping. Interestingly, all three were getting help to write from their own families:

To start with I didn’t have a clue what to write. What on earth am I going to write? I still do that now, just sit there and think, ‘What am I going to tell her; what am I going to write?’

Of the remaining four birth mothers, two had sent a single card but had not wished to send anything further and two had never sent anything. These decisions seemed to stem from worries about what to write, combined with concerns about causing distress to children and a wish to avoid the re-stimulation of their own painful memories:

No idea. I just put ‘with love from Mum and Dad’ on the card. I don’t know what else to put, what’s allowed. I’m no good at writing letters. That’s why I just put ‘Mum and Dad’.

Among the wider birth family, only two of the nine had never sent anything. All were very concerned not to break the rules about what it was acceptable to write or send, and this limited the content:

The family placement worker just said we could send cards but only write specific things, like ‘Nana’ and my name. They’ve got their little rules . . . We just send very simple cards. We were clear that we would just put a simple ‘with love from’. That’s all, just the message.

Empathy for the recipient
The majority of the adopters who were still writing expressed empathy for birth family members and gave considerable
thought to the impact of their letters on the recipients:

*I think about how she would be feeling reading it, would she get upset, and the sorts of things she might like to know. I try to put myself in her situation and think what sorts of things I would like to know.*

All the birth family members who were still sending letters or cards spoke thoughtfully about the possible impact on both children and adopters of receiving them:

*I think about it a lot. I don’t know whether they read them or have them read to them. I try to write it so it’s children’s writing.*

One birth mother who had maintained regular written contact was considering stopping it because her own life had improved enormously and she felt increasingly guilty and worried about the impact of this on the adopters and on the child she had given up:

*If she told her [adopted child], what would she be thinking? The worst, I keep thinking she’d be thinking the worst.*

In four of the postbox arrangements, there was ongoing face-to-face as well as postbox contact between adopters and birth family members. In two cases this was described as working well and seemed to reinforce the feelings of empathy between the participants, but in the other two cases the negative views that people formed in face-to-face meetings tended to spill over into postbox. A few adopters and birth family members also talked spontaneously about the helpfulness of having met just once, in terms of their ability to picture and empathise with one another in their correspondence:

*We met her before [child] came to us. She chose us, really. That was our only meeting but it personalised the while thing. I could then write to her in a personal way.*

(Adoptive mother)

*I had one face-to-face before he was adopted. It was definitely helpful to have met them and have a picture of who I’m writing to.*

(Birth mother)

This was not a universally beneficial experience. Where there had been an initial face-to-face meeting and then no letters or cards were received from a birth parent, two adopters expressed more criticisms of the birth mother. They thought mothers had been given every chance and could only think that the lack of response signified rejection of the child.

Mismatched expectations

Despite empathy for the feelings of recipients, the researchers found important differences in what adopters and birth family members expected to send and receive. Although all of the adopters (except two) were still sending letters to their children’s birth mothers at the time of interview, only seven were receiving letters or cards in return. Adopters expressed considerable disappointment about what they saw as a lack of reciprocity in their arrangements:

*A lot of effort went into that letter and we wanted feedback, but we didn’t get it. If things come, it will help us to talk to him about it [being adopted]. We’ll be surprised if nothing comes, and disappointed for [the child] that he didn’t get things. We thought the birth mother would write a letter to him explaining how the adoption came about.*

Five of the seven adopters who received items regularly from birth mothers felt positively about the experience:

*She sends a letter back with the same level of information. I think both parties are getting what we want from it . . . We will definitely continue it forever.*

In some of the cases where the researchers interviewed both the adopter and birth mother, it was salutary to note the impact of the mother’s failure to reciprocate. In the following example, although the birth mother had decided that it would be better for the child if she never wrote, she placed enormous value on the letters
she received from the adopters. The adopters, however, were becoming increasingly disenchanted with the whole process:

_They've always been extremely good at writing to us and keeping us updated. What we've received has always been the same, you know, just an informative letter about how she's doing at school, what her likes and dislikes are, her health and some photographs of her at Christmas and birthdays. And that's always been the same, and I wouldn't want any more than that. It's just right, yeah, they're very thoughtful in the way they write the letter and stuff . . . They could stop it at any time, but they don't, they've been very good._ (Birth mother)

_It's one way. There's a lack of feedback. You put all that personal stuff in the post and it's hard to give over. We don't get any feedback that the birth parents need and want information. We need feedback. Otherwise you get discouraged and when do you stop? How long does postbox go on for?_ (Adoptive mother)

Because the different parties did not know the motives and wishes of the others involved, the potential for such misunderstandings between adopters and birth mothers seemed widespread. When we asked the seven birth mothers about their experience of receiving things, it was clear that although four had decided it was better from all points of view not to write, most of them (5/7) found it very important to receive regular reports about their children and they particularly enjoyed seeing photographs of them looking well and happy:

_She always sends me a proper letter, writing what [the child] is up to, and in nearly every letter she always puts 'thank you' at the bottom . . . I didn't expect them to be personal like that._

This mismatch was also found between adopters and extended birth family members. Extended birth family members were very committed to sending things for children, and adopters generally spoke warmly about the cards and vouchers that

children received from the wider family, primarily grandparents. However, adopters rarely seemed to reciprocate and, although most extended birth family members had become resigned to receiving little in return, this was a source of disappointment:

_I expected a short report, a photo, news about school and his health. We haven't had what we thought; we've had nothing at all._

Adopters talked very little about receiving or expecting contact from birth fathers. In only one case were children regularly receiving things from their birth father, and just one adopter said she would like to know more about or hear from the birth father.

Censoring of mail

Most of the adopters and birth family members whom we interviewed felt reassured that all letters were opened and read by the postbox organiser, although three birth mothers were unaware that this happened. Both adopters and birth family expressed concern that some mail had got through without being adequately censored. Although the researchers only heard of one example of any real threat being posed through postbox (by a birth mother who hid frightening messages to her children and the adopters in the items she sent), careless vetting had nonetheless caused a great deal of distress. We were also surprised to find that letters and cards had been received that had not gone through the postbox service. Twelve of the adopters and eight of the birth family members had received items through other routes, often via social workers:

_The social worker brought things [from birth mother] outside postbox: books, small gifts, photos. I didn't like it . . . it wasn't appropriate._

Making postbox work more effectively

Adopters and birth family members, like the social workers, all wanted the postbox service to chase missing post and do more to make arrangements work as planned. Some adopters felt that postbox contact
with siblings was particularly important and that the local authority should do more to ensure that foster carers helped sisters and brothers to maintain regular links. There was also concern about unexpected changes in the patterns of correspondence. One adopter, for example, had been receiving cards for several years from grandparents. These suddenly stopped and the adopter did not know why and was concerned that they might be ill or have died. Clearly any system that relies for its continuity on postbox users notifying changes of circumstance is vulnerable to unexplained loss of contact. For example, the researchers found that at least nine people were no longer living at the address used by the service. This raised issues about confidential information being sent to the wrong address and especially of birth parents dropping out because their whereabouts were unknown.

A number of interviewees felt that the postbox service needed to understand the emotional impact of delayed delivery of post. They wanted greater efficiency in speeding up delivery times and recognition by workers of the distress that would be caused if letters were held up:

You feel like you’re hanging in the balance really, particularly because you have no idea what’s going on. When things don’t arrive . . . you don’t realise you probably rely on them as much as you do, you just imagine the worst. If it’s left in someone’s tray for three months, then that’s causing more pain to me than knowing you’re not going to get any letters at all. With adoption as sensitive as it is, you’ve got to appreciate it might just be a letter to them, but it’s much more than that to us. (Birth mother)

Extended birth family members, although the most likely to keep communication going, seemed to have little involvement in the making of arrangements. They seemed more likely to join the arrangement after the initial agreement had been made and were often left confused about what was expected of them and whether they could request items in return. Few people appeared to realise that they could ask for a review of the existing postbox arrangements.

Involving children in postbox now and in the future

Although most of the children of those interviewed were still very young, adopters’ decisions about whether to share items was not related to the child’s age but seemed rather to reflect the adopters’ views about the benefits of postbox. Only two adopters had passed everything to their children. Five had given some things directly but withheld more precious items until the child was more mature. Ten had put everything away to share at some point in the future, when adopters thought children would be of an age to understand. These adopters talked about having a special box or file where everything to do with the adoption was stored, including copies of their own letters to birth family.

The impact on children of postbox contact could therefore not be gauged from this evaluation. Nonetheless, many of the adopters saw themselves continuing to send letters and reports indefinitely. This prompted several adopters to ask how long the commitment was expected to last, and whether the service would continue to be offered once their children reached adulthood. Others thought that the commitment of birth relatives was more likely to dwindle with time. Some remained hopeful that birth mothers, and to a lesser extent birth fathers, would reciprocate:

We’ll keep sending the letters . . . Mum won’t appear but we live in hope.

The seven birth mothers who were interviewed voiced a range of hopes and fears for the future. Two hoped that postbox would help their children understand why they had been adopted, and that it was not their mother’s fault. Two thought postbox contact would just carry on, but one was fearful that as her child matured he would not want to sustain any contact. Another said she held out no hopes for the future. Only one (who in fact was considering stopping contact because she found it so upsetting) voiced any hope of seeing her
child again one day, a prospect that also filled her with apprehension:

I want to see her again. I’d love to see her again. In a way I’m dreading it . . . if she gets upset and that, I’m absolutely dreading it. How on earth am I going to answer her questions?

A similarly mixed picture emerged from interviews with the nine other birth relatives. Four feared that postbox contact would dwindle with time or that letters would be withheld from children. Five (all grandparents or great-grandparents) had hopes that postbox might eventually lead to less formal arrangements for contact, or that children would one day seek them out:

In ten years’ time, once she’s old enough, there’s a letter waiting for her with my address and telephone number. She can find out for herself then. I imagine her knocking on the door and saying, ‘I’m your granddaughter’ . . . and I’d say, ‘Come in’.

Discussion

These findings are the result of the evaluation of one local authority’s postbox service and as such are limited and may not be typical of postbox services in other parts of the country. Comparing the findings with previous research (Rajan and Lister, 1998; Carter et al., 1999; Neil, 2004) many of the themes are similar: the difficulty birth mothers face in writing without additional support, knowing what to write and the rules and mechanisms of the letter exchange. However, this evaluation examined all planned postbox contact and therefore provides some new information on actual take-up of the service, as most other studies examine contact that was ongoing and active.

The overall picture to emerge from this evaluation was of adopters and extended birth family members showing immense goodwill and persevering with postbox in the belief that, in the long run, children would benefit from knowing more about their birth families and feeling they had not simply been discarded and forgotten. This ran counter to the received wisdom among the social workers in the focus groups who were concerned that adopters would stop using postbox as soon as they were able. Perhaps unsurprisingly, birth parents were the least likely to sustain their active involvement in postbox arrangements and birth mothers clearly felt daunted at many levels by the prospect of writing. Not only were they least likely to sustain active involvement but the majority of arrangements that had not ‘got off the ground’ had failed because birth parents had never sent a letter.

Birth parents who had continued with postbox had received help in writing letters from another relative and this raises questions about the setting up of postbox arrangements without better support for birth parents. Birth parents, in particular, require significantly more help with writing, especially in the early stages of adoption, if they are to establish any sustainable pattern of postbox contact.

It also confirmed findings from other studies (Farmer and Moyers, 2005) about the marginalisation of extended birth family members in permanence planning and the lack of value placed on their efforts to sustain positive links with children. This suggests that practitioners need to pay more attention to the inclusion of extended birth family members when postbox arrangements are being set up.

Despite high levels of mutual empathy, the different parties sometimes misunderstood the motives and wishes of others because they had no means of directly knowing them. The researchers likened this process to a game of ‘Whispers’, in which participants’ intentions could all too easily be misconstrued and have unintended consequences for the continuation of postbox.

Although social workers thought that one of the main benefits of postbox was that it allowed the child to grow up with current knowledge of their birth family, this had often not yet occurred. The cards sent by birth family members symbolised their love and good wishes, but they felt constrained from writing personal information, either because of a misunderstanding about the ‘rules’ or because they were embarrassed to reveal details about their
current lives. Adopters, although prepared for postbox contact, had been given little guidance on what to write. Nor had they seen an exemplar during training.

To develop the kind of proactive service that users wanted will demand greater investment in post-adoption services and recognition that postbox is not a purely administrative task. It requires skilled adoption support staff who can work with all the parties to untangle misunderstandings, review and clarify arrangements and encourage them to use postbox to the long-term benefit of children.

The task of checking mail also requires skilled oversight. Agencies need to establish clear guidelines on what it is appropriate to forward to the different parties, and ensure that these rules are consistently applied. This is not a straightforward task and again requires careful professional judgement. The administrative connotation of ‘postbox services’ can be misleading and there are differences between authorities in how much responsibility they believe they hold for children they have placed in adoptive placements (Selwyn et al, 2006). These differences can be seen in agency views about whether postbox services should be responsible for vetting mail or whether this should be the prerogative of adoptive parents.

The researchers identified seven letters that had not been passed on to adopters because their content was viewed as unacceptable. In most cases there was no question that this was the correct decision. However, in the following example of a letter that was withheld, the decision appeared less clear-cut. This highlights the dilemma for postbox staff of deciding whether an item will be helpful or unhelpful to an adopted child and the ethical and professional issues in censoring mail:

Please forgive me for getting you adopted. It does not mean that I don’t love you but I only wanted the best for you in life and I am sure mummy x and daddy will provide the best for you in life because I know they love you like I do . . . tried my best for you so don’t ever think that I did not fight for you.

The interviews with adult users of postbox raised other issues which this small study was unable to answer. There were concerns expressed by families who had different contact arrangements for children adopted at different times. What would it be like growing up in a home where one adopted child received lots of items and another received none? There were concerns about the sustainability of postbox contact, particularly as children matured and began to voice their own feelings about letters and photographs being sent to birth family members. Most importantly, there were unanswered questions about the longer-term outcomes of postbox contact for children. Indirect contact is often still not recognised as an important, complex and integral part of adoption services. The focus has been on face-to-face contact although this occurs for only a minority of children. Given the growing prevalence of postbox arrangements in adoption, these are undoubtedly important areas that urgently require further attention from researchers, practitioners and policy makers.

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