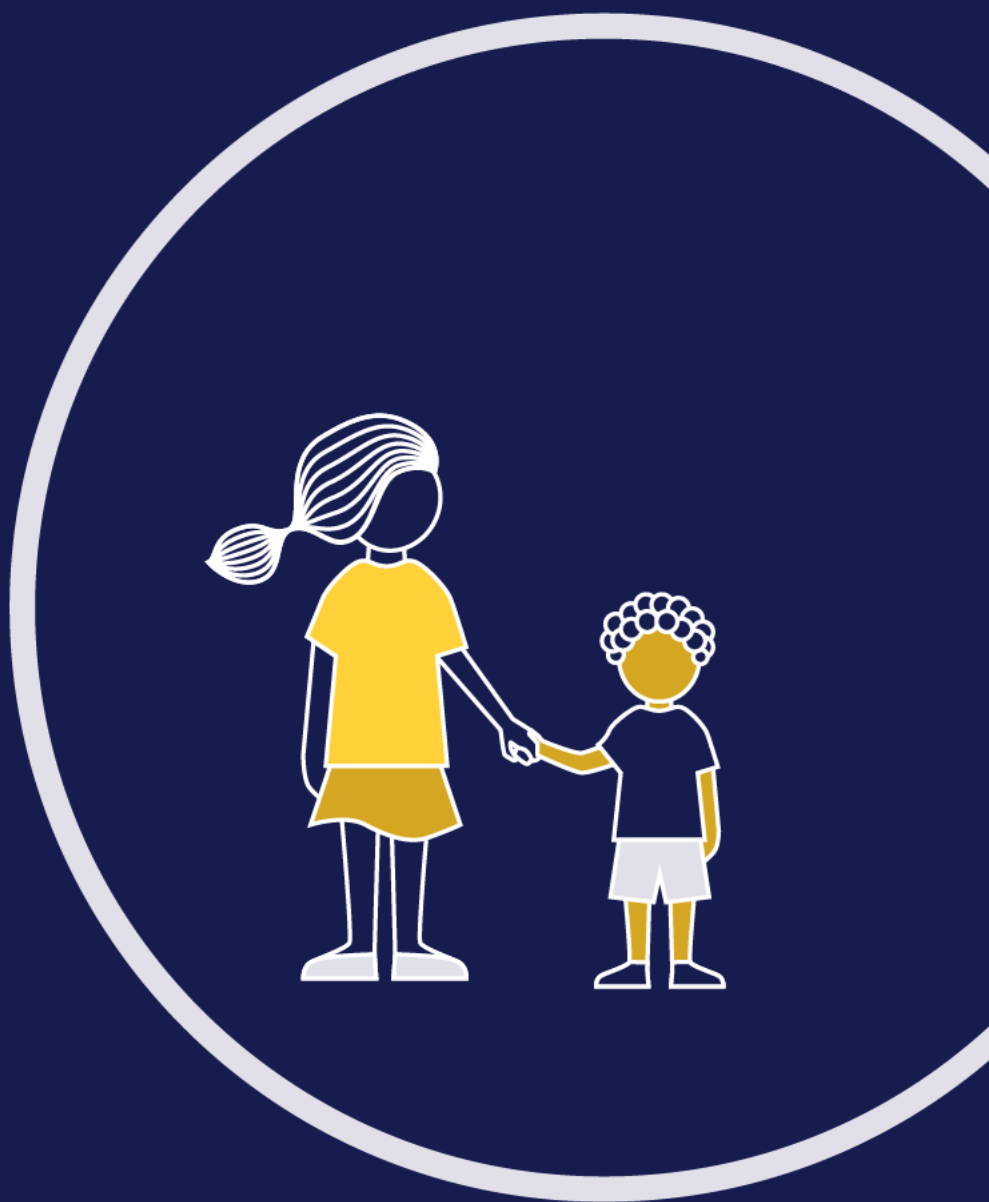
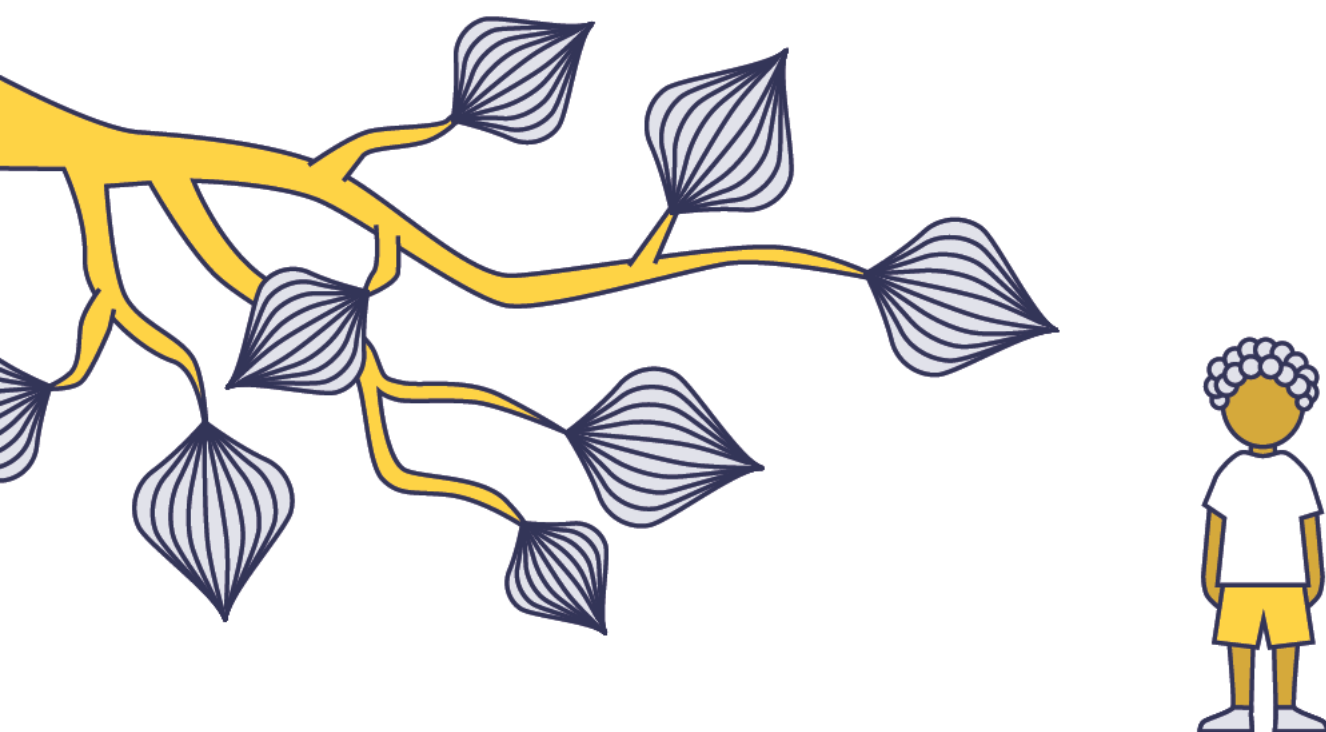


Contact | August 2021

Modernising post-adoption contact: findings from a recent consultation





Introduction

A wealth of research and evidence shows that when children are separated from their birth families and are either adopted, placed in long-term local authority care, or live with a kinship carer, maintaining contact with the people who are important to them—from separation and right throughout childhood—has significant impact on their well-being.¹

Having contact with birth relatives can help adopted children cope with loss and separation, navigate identity issues, and make sense of the past. Over time, it can potentially help to build or sustain direct relationships with birth parents, siblings, and extended family members.

When maintained, the 'letterbox' system typically used for facilitating contact between birth and adoptive families serves as a way of addressing children's identity needs. However, it is focused on the exchange of information as its primary purpose—rather than maintaining meaningful

opportunities for connections—and is a notoriously difficult way of enabling rewarding and lasting contact.

Sustaining positive exchanges through letters sent over time can be challenging. Letter writing may be difficult for some people. It may lack relevance for the parents and the child involved, and takes place in emotionally difficult contexts. It can also be complex and time-consuming for adoption agencies to manage. In addition, the 'rules' on what can be shared can differ between local authorities, and can appear arbitrary.

Evidence suggests that this almost universal approach to post-adoption contact, which has been the norm for 20 years, needs substantial change to make it fit for the modern world.

Through our adoption connections project, we consulted over 80 people and organisations, including birth families, adoptive families, young people, local authorities, and regional

and voluntary adoption agencies in England on modernising mediated post-adoption contact.²

The project included an exploration of how digital solutions could help to address some of the known difficulties of letterbox contact—and we also examined, demonstrated, and encouraged pilot digital products and services. We have identified that using digital forms of communication to modernise letterbox contact may, if implemented carefully, better meet the needs of some families and children in this complex area.

This paper outlines our learnings from the consultation, which took place over a six-month period in 2020/21, and draws on existing research into contact, post-adoption contact and virtual contact.³ We aim to highlight some of the issues that adoption agencies should consider when planning to modernise their systems and approaches.

¹ See, for example: Iyer et al. 2020; Holmes et al. 2020.

² See: <https://www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/adoption-connections-bubblegram.pdf>

³ This report draws heavily on the work of numerous academics and particularly that of Professor Elsbeth Neil and the Contact After Adoption Team at the University of East Anglia (<https://sites.uea.ac.uk/contact-after-adoption/home>).



What does the research tell us about post-adoption contact?

A strong message from the research evidence is that children and young people need to be able to make sense of their relationship to their birth family as well as being part of their adoptive family (or their foster or kinship family).

The value that positive contact can have for children and young people and their families is well known. Well facilitated, good quality contact (managed in emotionally attuned contexts and being adaptive and responsive to the needs of children and their parents) is associated with positive well-being outcomes for children and young people in both the short and long term. It can contribute to a sense of identity and mitigate issues around attachment, and can help children and young people to find a sense of acceptance and a greater understanding of the reasons why they are not growing up with their birth parents.

Evidence from three reviews commissioned by Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (Nuffield FJO) provided six key messages for planning for and supporting contact (Ryan 2020):

- focus on the quality of contact
- listen to the views of children and young people
- recognise the significance of siblings, grandparents, wider family and friends
- ensure that all involved are clear about the purpose of contact
- ensure that contact plans are tailored to each child and regularly reviewed
- ensure skilled professional support is available.

The complexity of human relationships means contact can be upsetting for children for a range of reasons. However, research indicates that this may not always have a negative impact on a child's well-being, certainly in the longer term, providing there is support for them and their families in managing this. Where contact cannot take place because it is unsafe or unwanted by the child, there is still a need to support them in understanding their family heritage and identities, and to prepare them to manage complex family connections beyond childhood and into their adult lives.

What do we know about the letterbox system?

For the last 20 years, letterbox contact has been the typical way of enabling adopted children to stay in touch with their birth families. It usually involves the exchange of letters between adoptive parents and birth relatives (most commonly the child's birth mother, father, or grandparents), facilitated by an adoption agency, once or twice a year. In some cases the exchanges might take place more often, and might include photographs, small gifts, drawings or cards, and some adoptees might be more directly involved with the correspondence.

Adopters can share and develop an understanding of their child's birth family, and birth parents and family members who receive and exchange information are helped by being informed about their 'lost' child's progress. As they grow, adoptees can know they have not been forgotten by their birth families.

However, it is hard to achieve any meaningful sense of relationship from the infrequent mediated exchange of letters. And writing a letter can be difficult; being faced with a blank page can be a daunting challenge, and even more so in the context of post-adoption contact.

A considerable number of people who have their children removed from their care and adopted have difficulties with literacy. Not only that, but birth parents are also likely to be experiencing an emotionally challenging time following separation. The idea of writing a letter, or replying to one, especially within a certain timeframe (in the first six months, for example, which may be the adoption agency's protocol), can

be inconceivable. Meanwhile, adoptive parents can have their own fears and anxieties, and might not be sufficiently prepared for receiving, writing, or replying to letters.

Post-adoption contact plans need to be flexible. But currently they are made during proceedings, when there is much uncertainty and when emotions are running high. This is often not the best time to make firm and lasting arrangements. Contact plans are often fixed at this point, with little challenge.

In addition, the 'rules' on what can be shared, and whether letters are redacted or not, or copied or not, can differ between local authorities. The rules can also appear to be arbitrary, and not always in line with what the parents or child wish to express to each other.

A range of research has found most letterbox arrangements to be inactive, even by middle childhood, and many either stop working early on, or never get off the ground.

Research by Professor Anna Gupta suggests that many adopted children will want to know about their birth parents at some point in their lives (BBC News 2021)—and if formal processes for contact are not in place, or are not working, social media enables adoptees and birth families to take contact into their own hands.

According to research carried out by Professor Elsbeth Neil in 2018, contact between adopted young people and their birth relatives via social media platforms had emerged in the previous 10 years, and social media searches for 'lost' relatives happened in the context of ongoing contact being absent (Neal 2018).

In 2019, an Adoption UK survey found that a quarter of adopted teenagers had had some form of unmediated contact with their birth family in the previous year (BBC News 2021).

According to the Adoption UK Adoption Barometer Report (2019), while the majority (84%) of established adoptive families had signed up to an agreement for ongoing indirect contact with birth family members:

- 45% of adoptive families felt that continuing contact with birth family members was not well managed or effectively run by their agency
- 72% of adoptive families stated that their child's birth parents did not regularly participate in continuing contact arrangements.

Sustaining meaningful connections could enable adopted children to access knowledge and to have their questions answered in a timely way that meets their changing needs, as well as their growing independence and competence to make decisions about how they choose to relate to their birth families. Maintaining positive communication can pave the way to direct face-to-face contact or future reunion.

At the forefront of contact planning, the question must be: what impact will the decision about post-adoption contact have on this child's life course?

Contact: a point of view. Lord Justice McFarlane (now Sir Andrew McFarlane, President of the Family Division)'s keynote speech, Nagalro annual conference 2018

'I would encourage all those involved in adoption planning and decision making to focus more on the issue of contact and to ask, in each case, whether the model of life-story work and letterbox contact is in fact the best for the individual child in the years that lie ahead for her, or whether a more flexible and open arrangement, developed with confidence and over time, may provide more beneficial support as the young person moves on towards adolescence and then adulthood.'

The Association of Directors of Children's Services Position Statement, What is Care For? May 2021

'More recently, questions about what adoption in the 21st century looks like have been posed by the sector, given all we know about the importance of contact and self-identify. In this digital age, where the internet and social media are part of everyday life, is the concept of closed adoption really viable, and the best decision for children? Everything we know about a child's best interests tells us that self-identity is key; children want to understand where they have come from. If we are to shift the paradigm to one which is more open and supports continued contact with birth families, we must ensure we are recruiting adopters who are comfortable with this whilst developing our offer of support to birth families to help them engage meaningfully and without reinforcing previous trauma.'

Some adoptees told us that they had not known that their birth parents had been forbidden to say 'I love you' in their letters until they had reconnected as adults. Some adopters told us that they had wanted to share more truth about their child's presenting issues but had been advised against doing so for fear of distressing the birth family and/or being seen as failing.



What did our consultations reveal?

The value and importance of contact

It is critical for professionals involved with contact plans to be as informed as possible about research evidence on contact and children's needs from a developmental perspective. It is equally important that families—birth, extended and adoptive—understand what it means in the context of their own lived experience and, critically, the current and future lived experience of the child being cared for.

Our consultations highlighted a need for more updated knowledge and

understanding on the role and value of contact in adoption, with genuine recognition that the framing of post-adoption contact and support needs updating to reflect current research evidence.

Statutory guidance on adoption for local authorities, voluntary adoption agencies and adoption support agencies in England was revised in 2013, but does not reflect the full weight of the evidence as to the benefits of contact on children's

well-being. In relation to the national minimum standards of care (2011 revised 2014) 'digital' communication is largely constructed as a risk and threat to relationships.⁴

The gap between research policy and practice needs to be attended to—otherwise, any new service, approach or tool designed to modernise arrangements will struggle to gain traction or have the desired impact.

⁴ For statutory guidance and national minimum standards relating to adoption see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adoption-statutory-guidance-2013> and <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adoption-national-minimum-standards>.

The need for ongoing, adaptive support

Preparing birth and adoptive parents for contact is an ongoing process, and their capacity to engage with its principles and approaches will change over time. Increasing overall success in sustaining post-adoption communication requires a willingness to adopt this developmental approach.

During our consultations, both birth parents and adoptive parents frequently brought up the need for guidance and support on how to establish and manage contact. Any request for support and access to related services should be seen as a positive, beneficial step. Some individuals spoke of ongoing support from contact coordinators who enabled contact to go well and were responsive to the changing needs of adopted children. Others, however, reported resistance and challenge from adoption agencies when attempting to review or even restart letterbox contact.

Emotional well-being and practical support—including counselling and help with letter writing and reminders, restarting contact, reunions or accessing files—is key. However, while adoption agencies have a statutory duty to provide support, what is given often depends on the level of investment in time and resources. While there are many examples of adoption agencies providing quality support, this is not universal, and some support plans and processes are more developed than others.

All parties involved—children, birth relatives and adoptive parents—require diverse types and levels of support.

- Many children who have been removed through care proceedings will have experienced poor relationships with their birth parents—providing skilled support in relation to contact can contribute to recovery.

- Birth family members will need support to manage the complex experiences of loss associated with child placement. Those involved in care proceedings frequently have underlying complex needs and can face many challenges in their daily lives, such as poverty, learning disabilities, mental health problems or addictions, which can affect their capacity to manage and maintain contact.
- Some birth parents might need ongoing support to read or write letters (unpublished research carried out by Professor Elsbeth Neil in April 2020 found that social workers sometimes physically write letters for parents), and to remind them when letters are due.
- Support for adoptive parents is equally important, to promote understanding and empathy for birth parents' difficulties, and to understand and respond to children's complex emotional responses to contact. Adoptive parents may also face their own challenges and insecurities related to the child having another family.
- Early in the process, parents should be supported to develop their communication skills and confidence in ways that are appropriate to them. Being able to express yourself clearly, share appropriately but meaningfully, and respond to constructive criticism are essential skills for developing and maintaining contact—and helping parents to improve these skills could help reduce the need for social workers to moderate communication.

Supporting adoptive and birth parents in managing their complex relationships will be of benefit to children, and trust and engagement between adults should be encouraged.

Good relationships between adoptive parents and birth parents helps to create positive experiences for children, whereas conflict is associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety, and behavioural difficulties.

Support plans need to be individualised, flexible and responsive. Children's and parents' needs will change over time, and support must be adaptive and take account of life changes. For example, a birth parent's emotions—which can include loss, grief, trauma, and distress—can be too overwhelming for them to initiate and maintain contact from the start, or even within the first few years. Or, if a birth parent manages to write a first letter, it might be some time before they can face writing another. Circumstances and feelings can change however, and birth parents might want to make contact in the future—and they will need support.

There are no national standards on system re-entry points for those offering support services. It can be easy for birth parents to become 'lost' in the system, especially if it is adoption agency protocol for birth parents to send a letter in a certain timeframe, such as within the first six months after adoption. Adoptive parents can face similar challenges if exchanges have been limited or non-existent and they want to contact the birth family (to answer questions about the child's past, for example). Re-engaging can be even more challenging if birth parents or adoptive families have moved to a new area.

Alongside support and guidance, parents also highlighted that they want access to real-life stories from people with experience of contact, and from different life stages. They were keen to hear about any challenges and how these were managed, as well as the experiences and views of young people.

Potential for digital letterbox contact platforms

Transformative possibilities

We identified that some birth and adoptive parents may benefit from being able to communicate in different formats or in simpler or more structured ways, and that digital letterbox contact platforms may offer an alternative that is more accessible, opening up new opportunities.

Digital solutions broaden the potential for creating adaptive, flexible, and accessible forms of communication that meet needs over time. A well-supported digital pathway could enhance the sustainability of a positive and meaningful sharing of knowledge, reinforcing the key benefits of letterbox.

For many children and young people, communicating using digital media can feel comfortable, familiar, and enjoyable. Many are used to texting and messaging, video calling, and using social media, and it can feel more interactive and engaging (and less daunting) than writing a letter. The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, and the rapid shift from routine face-to-face to digital communication, have demonstrated what is possible. Digital mediums such as Skype, WhatsApp video and FaceTime have helped children stay in touch with family members they do not live with. The pandemic has potentially instigated a permanent change in the way people who are separated from each other communicate, how and where they connect and how they

feel about connecting. It has also highlighted there are opportunities for the timing and duration of contact to be more flexible, individualised and rewarding.

Digital solutions potentially allow people to express their feelings more easily (there are limits to what can be accommodated in a physical letter sent via the post). Digital tools may provide many new ways of communicating, such as video, voice notes, questionnaires, 'likes' and emojis (and could also help to create a digital life story for the child). For birth or adoptive parents who find letter writing challenging, it may be easier for them to 'like' something that has been shared or to communicate their thoughts through emojis.

With a digital platform, conventional letterbox communication (such as sending a letter or card) could be clearly defined, and automated prompts or alerts could remind people when it is time to make contact. This could potentially help people to plan and be more prepared, enabling them to establish and maintain connections in an easier and more manageable way.

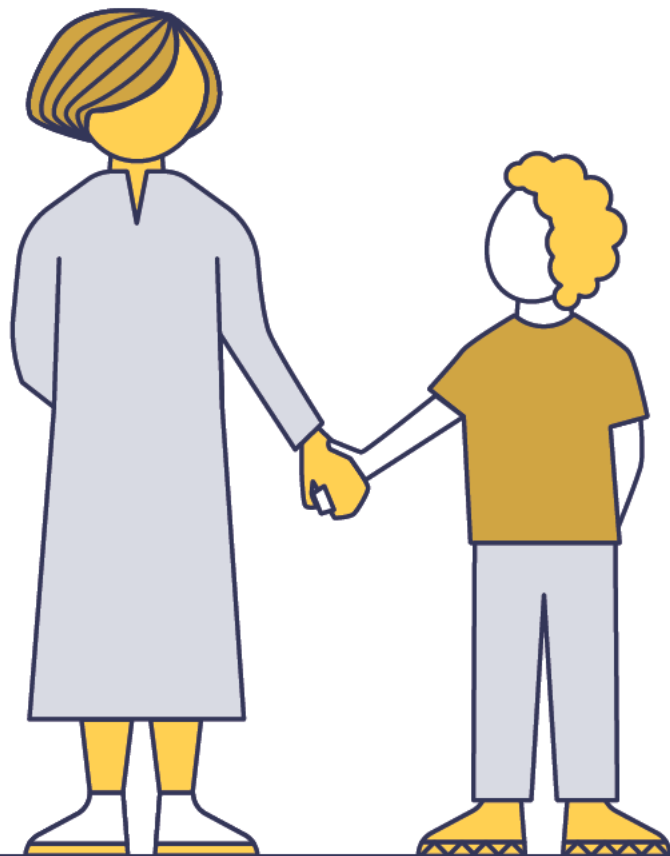
Digital communication also has the potential to make contact more fluid and flexible. Preferences (such as whether cards can be sent, for example) could be changed more easily and communication between different family members—such as siblings and grandparents—could be accommodated by providing separate logins.

In addition, rather than writing a detailed letter every six months, a digital system could be designed to capture smaller, granular moments more frequently (in the same way as people use social media). This could help to enrich contact, with birth parents potentially feeling less out of date and more in touch with the adoptee's life.

Digital tools could also improve record-keeping, with contact being digitally logged/registered and status updates or read receipts confirming when messages/letters have been sent and read, whereas physical letters can be misplaced, lost in the post, or not even posted at all. They could also help with re-engagement (a notification could be sent to request contact, for example).

Some adoption agencies scan and keep digital copies of all items received through letterbox schemes but digital solutions may make it easier to store and manage the data more efficiently. For example, digital encryption may enable agencies to retain a copy of the content sent without needing to have direct access to it in the first instance.

With digital systems, adoption agencies' manual processes can be automated, making letterbox contact less resource-heavy—and reducing administration tasks means that more resources can be allocated to helping and supporting families.



Drawbacks and challenges

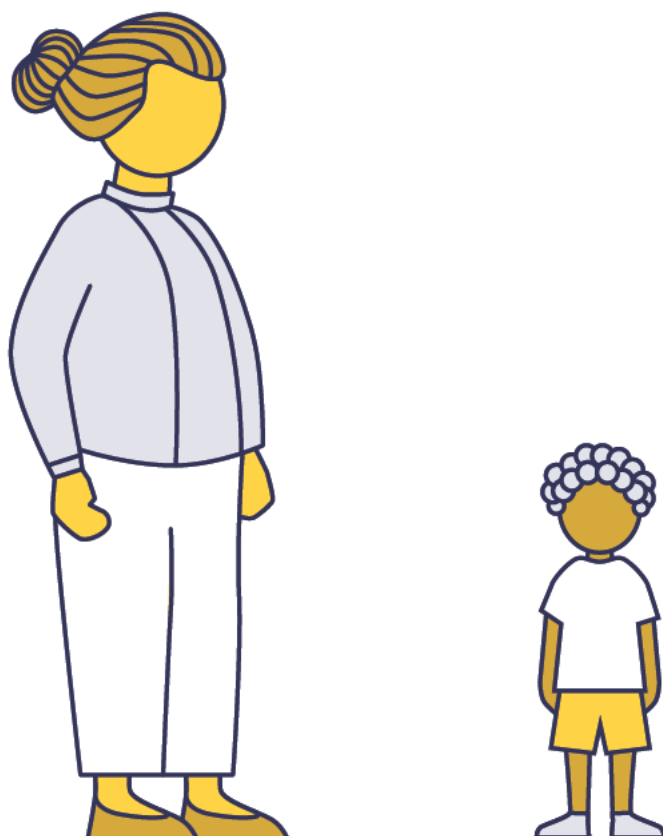
The project also highlighted that digital solutions will not be appropriate for everyone. For some people, letters and other items sent through the post are important and highly valued—they are kept, treasured, and potentially shared with other family members. Writing a letter or drawing a picture takes time, effort, and consideration—and holding a piece of paper or a physical photograph can provide an emotional and personal connection that potentially cannot be replicated in the digital world. Some see the digital space as ‘not real’ and therefore contact cannot be experienced as an emotionally enriched connection, even if the items received digitally could be printed.

There is also the question of whether changing the medium to digital influences the messages that people send. While there is the potential for more information to be shared more frequently and in an easier way, this should not have an impact on its value—if contact becomes a series of emojis and likes, it could become meaningless.

With the perceived ‘everydayness’ of the digital space, digital solutions also have the potential to make the birth family ever more present, which the adoptive family might not be prepared for. The sense of intrusion, and indeed invasion, that some adoptive parents may feel in receiving an unexpected notification on their phone via an adoption app might feel all too real, breaking the insulation of

the family identity they have created. For some, a planned letter, prepared for and constructed every six months, provides a controlled ‘out of sight, out of mind’ experience when adapting to and coping with the arrangement of adoption in England (which largely takes place as a non-consensual process).

Digital solutions also change expectations when it comes to response time—in the digital world, people have come to expect an immediate response, and if it takes time for someone to reply, the other party might be left feeling anxious about the reasons why. With a letter sent through the post, there is likely to be a much reduced sense of urgency and expectation.



Accessibility, exclusion, and adapting to new technology

There are several challenges in terms of digital poverty and competence. Digital technology cannot be regarded as equitable. Birth parents are likely to be at an economic disadvantage compared to adopters, and poor internet connections, limited data credit, and a lack of devices are likely to affect their access to digital-based contact services.

Some birth parents and grandparents may have low digital skills and confidence. Not everyone can use a computer (it can be a particular challenge for people with learning disabilities), and some people might not have or want the technology needed to access a digital platform

(a mobile phone or email account, for example). In adopting digital systems, agencies will need to ensure that birth parents who are living in poverty or who have special needs or vulnerabilities are provided with direct and practical support to close the gap from an already existing inequality.

Some adoptive parents might not be digitally savvy either, particularly when it comes to using digital communication platforms with their children. Parents may be introducing new behaviours into the family by sharing personal information, updates, and images with people they do not know directly, which may be less safe in other contexts.

And while children and young people—and in many cases their birth parents—have grown up with technology, no assumptions should be made about ‘digital nativity’.

Many professionals may also struggle with navigating technology and adapting their practices to an unfamiliar medium. The need for organisations to manage and safeguard content in an efficient way must also be considered—for example moderating voice notes may be much more challenging for professionals than checking a letter, and the inclusion of images can potentially pose security issues (if, for example, they reveal the child’s location or address—although the use of social media can raise similar issues).

Understanding privacy and security is important for all users; sites will be handling very sensitive information, and managing certain aspects such as passwords and access is key (explored further below in the section on data and security).

Digital pilots and prototypes

As well as consulting with birth families, adoptive families, young people, local authorities, and regional and voluntary adoption agencies, the adoption connections project explored what digital letterbox contact might look like. A proof-of-concept 'design sprint' was undertaken with Reason Digital and a paper prototype was created. It was designed to be a starting point for adoption agencies that are considering developing a digitised letterbox contact system.

The prototype tool includes a core set of features, such as sending and receiving messages, notifications and read receipts, and creating profiles and access levels. It is mobile-friendly, has multimedia capabilities, and enables inappropriate content to be flagged.

But the tool and its features sit in a much wider context. They need to be considered within the wider system in order to be authentic, meaningful, and effective. Systems that sit completely

outside of current processes are much more likely to cause friction, will require additional budget and resources, and will lack long-term sustainability. Getting the balance right between easy assimilation within existing systems and meeting the specific needs of post-adoption contact is challenging and needs regular review to avoid digital tools being siloed or not used at all.

Some of our learnings include the following.

- Any digital contact tool needs to accommodate the diverse needs and user experience of parents and children, and to provide different formats in a safe and manageable way.
- Before building a new system, or adapting existing tools, it is important to allow enough time and resource for user testing. It is also equally important to consider long-

term development, evaluation and maintenance. Taking an iterative, user-centred approach will help ensure the tool meets real-life needs in an effective way.

- It is also important for digital systems to build on best practice, and not to replicate the existing weaknesses of the letterbox system. For example, post-adoption contact does not have to be automatically regarded as high risk, or to be set as such as the default on a digital platform, and there should be flexibility around whether moderation is required and how it is managed.
- A set of guiding principles, open standards and metadata for national and international digital contact systems may be of practical benefit to local agencies and is something for national organisations to consider supporting.

Link Maker

Link Maker (www.linkmaker.co.uk) is an online service best known for family-matching in adoption. Including contact on the platform had always been one of Link Maker's ambitions—and after being approached by Nuffield FJO, a start has been made.

Building on an already extensive platform of highly secure communication, Link Maker's developers are preparing to build a new system with a view to piloting with three regional adoption agencies in England towards the end of 2021. Letterbox staff from One Adoption West Yorkshire were recently walked through a detailed prototype and were enthusiastic about its potential.

The hope is to then extend the system. While the initial pilot will involve the exchange of traditional 'letters', in many cases relationships might benefit from more

spontaneous messaging or video calls. It is also hoped that children could become more directly involved in contact, where appropriate and with support.

ARC Adoption North East

ARC Adoption North East (www.arcadoptionne.org.uk) is a voluntary adoption agency based in North East England. Through a government practice and improvement grant, ARC developed its ARCBOX digital platform to engage with children and young people in care, to produce high-quality life narratives, maintain a timeline photo gallery, provide space to express feelings, worries and anxieties, to celebrate successes and enjoy games and activities. Contributions to this real-time narrative can come from numerous people, each significant to the child—most notably birth relatives.

Currently, ARCBOX allows for one-way contact in that, with permission

and management oversight, birth relatives can post a contribution to their child's life timeline safely, without having access to any other parts of the platform.

ARC Adoption North East's current prototype seeks to open this communication channel to make it a secure two-way platform. It presents the opportunity for letterbox contact to be facilitated, recorded and managed via ARCBOX at whatever frequency is deemed beneficial to the child/young person in their communication plan. ARCBOX will then become a communication platform for a child, housing their life story and contact arrangements in the same place. The hope is that this paves the way for more openness in adoption.

For further information on these projects, contact info@arcadoptionne.org.uk or support@linkmaker.co.uk



Other digital considerations

Children's rights and protection

Any digital system will need to consider and respect children's rights as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Particularly relevant is a child's right to privacy, to be informed, and to express themselves. General comment No. 25

(2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment includes a specific mention of a child's right to access digital technologies to maintain contact with family.

Balancing children's rights and parental

(and corporate) responsibility will be key for any successful digital system. Consideration may be needed of how to identify and resolve situations where parental interests/responsibility and the best interests of the child and their rights may be in tension.

UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), General comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment

'87. It is important that children separated from their families have access to digital technologies. Evidence has shown that digital technologies are beneficial in maintaining family relationships, for example, in cases of parental separation, when children are placed in alternative care, for the purposes of establishing relations between children and prospective adoptive or foster parents and in reuniting children in humanitarian crisis situations with their families.

Therefore, in the context of separated families, States parties should support access to digital services for children and their parents, caregivers or other relevant persons, taking into consideration the safety and best interests of the child.

88. Measures taken to enhance digital inclusion should be balanced with the need to protect children in cases where parents or other family members or caregivers, whether physically present or distant, may

place them at risk. States parties should consider that such risks may be enabled through the design and use of digital technologies, for example, by revealing the location of a child to a potential abuser. In recognition of those risks, They should require an approach integrating safety-by-design and privacy-by-design and ensure that parents and caregivers are fully aware of the risks and available strategies to support and protect children.'

Data and security

Any successful digital service involving rich communication and increased amounts of information is going to create a lot of data—whether contact details, contact arrangements, the content of letters, or enquiries. Digital solutions may also create new types of data such as location, time stamps, activity on sites/apps, and IP addresses.

System developers will need to consider how data and sensitive content is collected, catalogued and maintained, how access to it is managed and tracked, and how it is stored securely over the long term. Understanding what data is recorded, how it may be accessed, and who by, may require agencies to consider new models of data governance

and access, together with improved communication and processes. Furthermore, if platforms integrate with any other systems (calendars, email or messaging services, for example), additional care over data privacy and security may be required.

During our discussions with regional adoption agencies and academics, the idea of a legal 'digital trust' began to emerge, where young people's transmitted information would be held by the adoption agency, like a child trust fund.

Understanding the opportunities and challenges and how they fit within the wider data governance and safeguarding system of an existing service is fundamental—though this is not unique to digital letterbox systems.

For further information on data governance and safeguarding:

- Information Commissioner's Office (ICO), particularly Age Appropriate Design: A Code of Practice for Online Services: <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-data-protection/key-data-protection-themes/age-appropriate-design-a-code-of-practice-for-online-services/>
- Open Data Institute (ODI): <https://theodi.org/>
- Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation (CDEI): www.gov.uk/government/organisations/centre-for-data-ethics-and-innovation

Interoperability

On a larger scale, interoperability between contact systems should be collectively considered by adoption agencies—for example, if parents and children move to a different area and a different adoption agency, how would the different systems communicate?

Re-engagement with the system after a period of no contact or reduced contact also needs to be considered, and this will create a more complex (albeit necessary) user journey and messaging.

Bearing in mind the speed of technological change, digital redundancy and how data would be transferred if a system became outdated or obsolete, is another important consideration.

Financial viability

A cost-benefit analysis is urgently needed to help define a scale that would make a digital system financially viable. Taking a small-scale build-out approach, we asked Social Finance to support an initial dialogue with its adoption agency partners on the key considerations related to developing business cases for digital projects.

A framework for analysing local and regional current spend on all contact, including business and family support, and the investment costs in digital, will dictate the local model. Regional adoption agencies are in a potentially good economy of scale position if they form 'digital contact systems' collaborations.

Reflections

There is a need for: conventional letterbox contact to be reviewed; more positive contact between birth parents, adoptive parents and children to be facilitated in everyday life; and contact to be fit for the modern world.

The evidence and research referenced, and the collaborations built through this project, myth-bust the misplaced idea that adopters and birth parents have contrary interests, or that a wall of defence has to be built around an adopted child. The shared experiences from very uniquely different perspectives were evident in this project.

There is potential for a responsive, more immediate, and—crucially—reviewable set of arrangements

that can be in the control of parents. Mediation would be used in circumstances that need it, such as when risk assessments are required, or when support is needed to ensure just and easy access to digital platforms. By enabling a process that supports trust and confidence in the relationship between the parents and the child to be built over time, digital pathways could be a gateway to direct face-to-face contact.

A determination to embrace and offer the different approaches that digital can deliver in post-adoption letterbox contact—where possible and appropriate, and in line with key research messages—is needed. However, the potential impact can only be fully realised if underpinned by

concrete policy that sensitively meets the different support needs of birth parents, adopters and children.

This project has also recognised that people have diverse needs: for some, digital communication will be appropriate; for others, items received in the post are valued, treasured, and shared, and a more conventional or combined approach may be preferable. These preferences, and the support families need, might change over time.

While one size does not fit all in terms of contact plans, format, and support, what can be seen as universal is an adopted child's need to retain positive, continued connections with their birth family.

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About Nuffield Family Justice Observatory

Nuffield FJO aims to support the best possible decisions for children by improving the use of data and research evidence in the family justice system in England and Wales. Covering both public and private law, Nuffield FJO provides accessible analysis and research for professionals working in the family courts.

Nuffield FJO was established by the Nuffield Foundation, an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. The

Foundation funds research that informs social policy, primarily in education, welfare, and justice. It also funds student programmes for young people to develop skills and confidence in quantitative and scientific methods. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Ada Lovelace Institute and the Nuffield Council on Bioethics.

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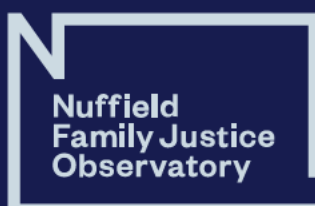
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