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Evaluation of Letter Swap Pilot: Final Report

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Chapter 1 – Background to the research

1.1 Addressing challenges with letterbox contact

The investment in exploring digital platforms in post adoption contact stems from a growing recognition of the importance of contact with birth relatives for the healthy development of children and young people in care, kinship care and adoption (see Iyer, Boddy, Hammelsbeck & Lynch-Huggins, 2020). This aligns with an understanding of the need to respect adopted children’s identities and relationships, rather than cutting them off (Neil & Beek, 2020) and to think about contact in terms of promoting “safe and meaningful” relationships with people who matter to the child (Iyer, Boddy, Hammelsbeck & Lynch-Huggins, 2020). Accompanying this is a shift in the use of language, moving away from terms such as “contact” (which can seem impersonal or clinical) towards terms such as “maintaining relationships” or “keeping in touch”. “Contact” however continues to be a useful umbrella term to capture a wide range of ways of staying in touch, and for clarity and ease of reading we continue to use the term contact and letterbox contact in this report. For adopted children in England, there are widely acknowledged problems with the most common contact arrangement: mediated exchanges of letters via ‘letterbox’ systems (Adoption UK, 2022; PAUSE, 2022). Research has highlighted the difficulties of letterbox contact which include practical and emotional strains for adoptive and birth parents in exchanging letters and knowing what to write to each other (e.g. Neil et al, 2015). Consequently, many adoptive parents and birth parents are unhappy with the system. Complaints include (Barnett-Jones & Manning, 2021; Neil et al, 2015):

- not receiving letters reliably or on schedule,
- being unhappy with the content of letters,
- contact support professionals may criticise the content of letters or set restrictive guidelines, the result being letters that can feel bland or impersonal
- letters not being sent by either party,
- a lack of feedback about letters sent e.g. what did the recipient think of the letter?

Adoption agencies have a high volume of letterbox cases creating challenges around supporting this form of contact. Unless letterbox exchanges are sustained and meaningful the potential benefits to adopted children are not realised (Neil et al, 2015).

Calls have grown rapidly over the past few years for the development of digital methods to facilitate better contact in adoption. In 2021 the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care highlighted the “outdated” approach to contact in adoption arguing letterbox contact is “antiquated in a world where social media allows a child to track down a birth relative and initiate a relationship without any support” (MacAlister, 2021, p.109). The report recommended that contact be “modernised through the swift roll out of technology enabled methods of contact, such as Letter Swap” (p.110). Support for the development of digital contact methods was also expressed in Adoption UK’s (AUK) barometer report in 2022. In her forward to the report, Heather Liveston (adoptee and adoption social worker) noted: “I am also looking forward to the expansion of digital contact options which will enable more dynamic and modern communication between children, their birth parents and other birth family members” (AUK, 2022:3). The government’s Adoption Strategy in England, published in 2021, highlights the need for greater attention to the issue of birth family contact, arguing for an individualised approach and greater support for contact (Department for Education, 2021).

1.2 What do we know about the value of digital methods in contact?

A review of 16 studies where digital contact had been attempted in public and private care contexts argued that it was not possible to simply state that digital contact was either positive or negative for children (Iyer, Albakri, BurrIDGE, Mayer & Gill, 2020). Key findings of the review were:

- digital methods can be more immediate, less formal and can help facilitate relationships with parents/relatives living elsewhere;
- digital methods can help overcome geographical distance;
- challenges are created for professionals and families around managing boundaries and supervising contact and unwanted digital contact can have risks;
- digital contact methods should not replace in person contact, but can be used alongside this;
- appropriate forms of digital contact depend on the child's age and experience, and adult scaffolding is needed – methods such as video calls may be of limited benefit to young children, whereas teenagers may be comfortable with and sometimes prefer digital methods.

The review offers suggestions for professionals about how best to facilitate digital contact in ways that are positive for children's wellbeing. They recommend taking a child centred approach, managing expectations and transitions to a digital approach, the importance of supporting all parties and of acknowledging digital inequalities.

A study during the first Covid 19 "lockdown" in 2020 provided an opportunity to understand how digital methods such as video calling, email and messaging could support contact between children in care, kinship care and adoption and their birth relatives (Neil et al, 2020). The study also explored the views of professionals, foster carers, adoptive parents and carers and birth relatives about the future use of such methods outside of the context of lockdown. Most supported the idea of having a wider range of options for contact including digital methods. During the pandemic agencies were not able to physically exchange letters between adoptive and birth families, and many began to use email as an alternative. There was support for the idea of the development of systems to enable ongoing digital exchanges, although the need for security/confidentiality and mediation was highlighted.

1.3 Moving towards the development of a digital platform – the origins of Letter Swap

The Nuffield Family Justice Observatory published a report based on their 'adoption connections' project (Barnett-Jones & Manning, 2021). This project involved consultation with over 80 people and organisations with a focus on modernising mediated post adoption contact. The project explored how digital solutions might address some of the known difficulties of letterbox contact, identifying potential benefits and drawbacks of a digital system. In addition it highlighted: the need for any such system to consider children's rights to both contact and online safety; data security; interoperability (for example how families' data could be moved between different platforms); financial viability.

The work of developing a digital letterbox system was taken forward by Link Maker, who named their new platform 'Letter Swap'. Link Maker are a social enterprise who have a track record of maintaining an online platform across the UK. One of their key established functions is a searchable register containing profiles of children 'waiting' to be adopted and profiles of approved prospective adopters. This platform can facilitate adoption placements outside of traditional geographical or agency boundaries. Most adoption agencies have existing contracts and relationships with Link Maker, who are aware of the safeguards and legal requirements of sharing this type of data. Once developed, the Letter Swap platform was made available for some adoption professionals as well as birth and adoptive families to explore and feedback on. At the point the pilot started, the platform was not yet live.

1.4 Details of the pilot

This research was commissioned by Adoption England to support the implementation and evaluation of 'Letter Swap'. The pilot began in July 2022 in five (of the 33) English Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs), with a sixth joining in July 2023. It was initially envisaged to last for 13 months, but was extended by two months to the end of October 2023. The Post Adoption Centre – UK (PAC-UK) were partners in the pilot, tasked with offering additional support to birth relatives wanting to use the platform. This pilot of Letter Swap was led by an implementation lead from the Adoption England, supported by a steering group. The aims of the evaluation were:

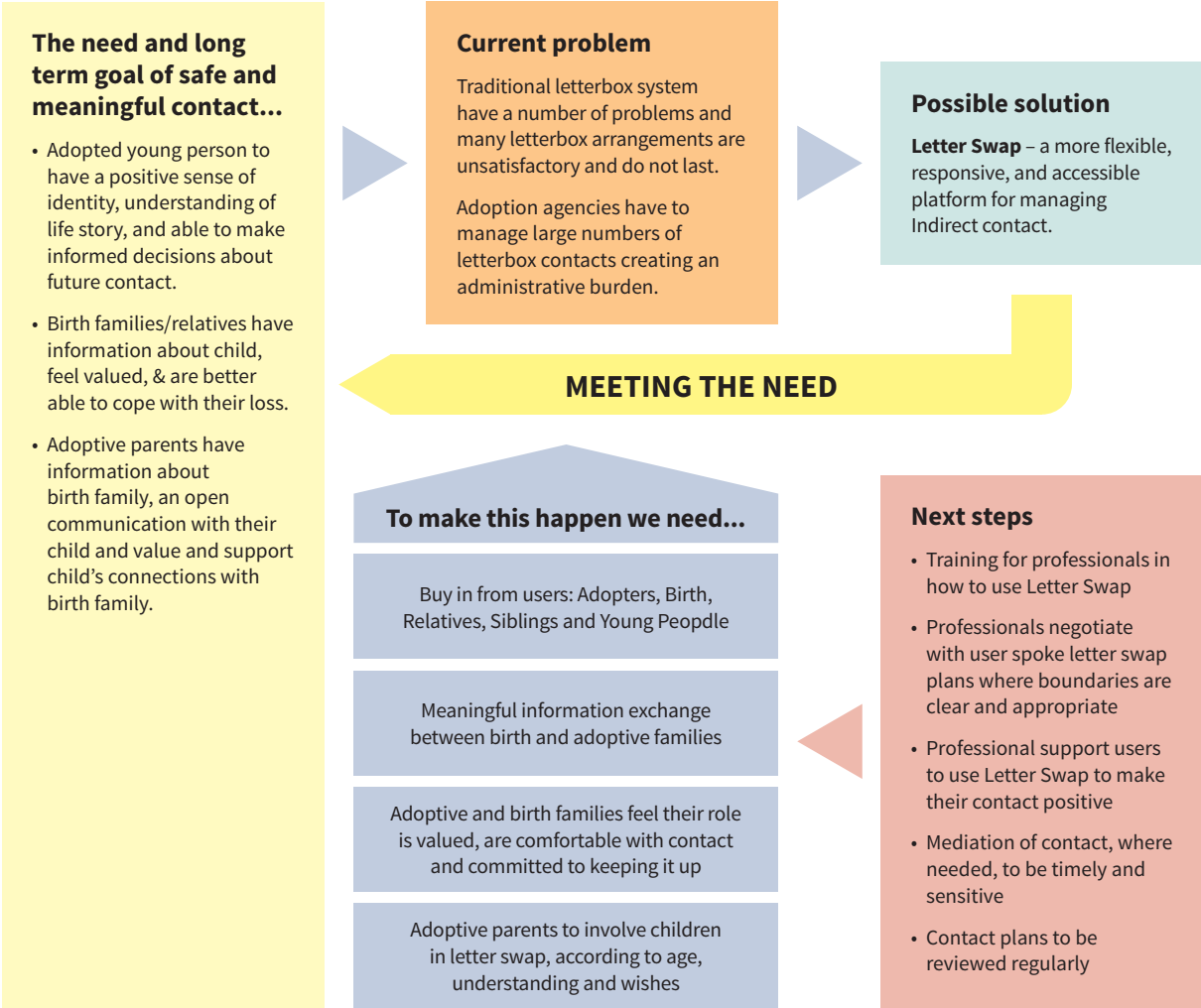
- To understand the challenges in implementing 'Letter Swap' and use this feedback to inform the pilot.
- To find out how Letter Swap is working in practice: does it help adoptive and birth families stay connected, and is there anything about Letter Swap that needs to change to make it better?
- To inform the future use of Letter Swap: to help people working in adoption and families decide whether to use Letter Swap.

1.5 Theory of Change

The research team were asked to lead on work in collaboration with PAC-UK, RAA leaders, and Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board (ASGLB) 'maintaining relationships' subgroup to develop a Theory of Change for Letter Swap and post adoption contact, more broadly. Theory of Change helps to detail why a change and/or intervention is necessary, what it aims to achieve, and factors that can block and/or facilitate change. The Theory of Change built on learning from existing research and a rapid consultation with: Letter Swap pilot site professionals, birth and adoptive parents, adopted teenagers and adults, RAA leaders and ASGLB subgroup members. The Theory of Change identified consensus about the need for change, particularly to achieve letterbox plans that were more likely to be reciprocal, rewarding, and sustainable. There was also universal agreement that Letter Swap would need buy in from all relevant groups to work well, and that the platform would need to be accessible and usable by all groups (see figure 1.1 below).

Stakeholder perspectives differed as to the goals of Letter Swap. Some emphasised the need for

Figure 1.1 How the Theory of Change applies to the Letter Swap pilot:



Letter Swap to help existing types of arrangements (which tend to be mediated, low frequency, and not include video and audio materials) to work better – a “fix the basics” type approach. Others hoped Letter Swap would be more transformative and, for example, allow for more frequent exchanges, less mediation, and greater use of audio and video materials. Some people felt that it was important to “learn to walk before you run” in terms of establishing whether Letter Swap worked before attempting a more ambitious agenda. Link Maker saw the purpose of the pilot to firstly establish “proof of concept” that the system could be used to facilitate exchange of letters, with additional enhancements to be developed in later stages of the pilot. As the pilot progressed the divergent goals and ambitions of different users continued to influence how the platform was used.

Theory of Change was documented and shared with steering group and other practitioners working in the pilot. It was used in staff training to prepare professionals to recruit and support families. The Theory of Change was then revisited at the end of the project – see chapter 6.

1.6 Chapter summary

- As part of a wider move towards modernising adoption in terms of maintaining relationships for adopted children, there is widespread acceptance that letterbox contact between adoptive and birth families needs improvement. The development of digital ways for adoptive and birth families to stay in touch is a much-anticipated development.
- Previous research suggests digital methods of contact can be useful for children separated from family members, but that key challenges associated with these methods must be addressed to ensure they are accessible, safe, and rewarding.
- Letter Swap is a digital platform to facilitate post adoption contact developed by Link Maker following a programme of work by the Nuffield Justice Family Observatory to develop the concept.
- In developing a Theory of Change, there was widespread agreement about the need for Letter Swap. But views diverged in terms of the extent to which people wanted to use Letter Swap to bring about significant changes in the nature of letterbox contact, or to establish the ability of the platform to replicate existing forms of contact on a digital system.
- The piloting and evaluation of Letter Swap was commissioned by Adoption England. Letter Swap was piloted by five Regional Adoption Agencies, with a sixth joining late on in the pilot. The evaluation of the pilot was carried out between July 2022 and October 2023.