

**An Evaluation of
One Local Authority's
Adoption Post Box Service**



Executive Summary

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Background

All local authorities have seen a rapid growth in post box arrangements. Research (Grotevant *et al.* 2003, Neil 2004, Selwyn *et al.* 2003) has begun to show that letterbox can be fraught with difficulties: social workers see it as a risk free activity and fail to make thorough assessments, birth parents and adopters struggle with arrangements, and there is confusion about what constitutes good practice. It was against this background that one local authority commissioned an evaluation of its post box service.

Design and Method

The evaluation was retrospective, to map changes over time, and prospective, to examine current social work practice. All the post box arrangements made by the local authority in 2001 – 2003 were selected (35 arrangements which related to 47 children). Retrospective data were collected from post box case files on the original plan and subsequent post box activity. Prospective data were gathered through focus groups with social workers and face-to-face and telephone interviews with birth parents, kin and adopters. The researchers contacted all 85 adults involved in the 35 post box arrangements. Thirty-seven agreed to be interviewed (21 adopters, 7 birth mothers and 9 extended birth family members). Overall, at least one party in 23 of the 35 post box arrangements was interviewed (66%).

Summary of the Findings

The adopters and birth family members had many good things to say about the post box service and generally appreciated the work that it did. They saw post box as performing an important role in enabling and mediating some ongoing contact between adoptive families and birth family members. However, the evaluation highlighted a number of areas of concern and identified changes that service users and social workers wished to see.

- ***Setting up the arrangements***

All parties wanted greater clarity when arrangements were set up, with the plan set out in writing. It was also thought there should be guidance for social workers planning contact and appropriate input to children's reviews to ensure that contact plans are realistic and manageable.

- ***Managing mismatched expectations***

There were significant differences in what adopters and birth family members expected to send and receive. Because the different parties did not know one another's motives and wishes, these were sometimes misunderstood. For example, adopters wrote to birth mothers but were disappointed that they rarely got much back; birth mothers found it very important to receive but often told themselves that not writing was the best thing for the children and adopters; social workers were concerned that adopters would soon stop writing when in fact adopters were the most likely to persevere. These different views showed that post box is not just an administrative task. It requires skilled staff, able to work with all the parties to clarify arrangements and encourage fulfilment of the plan.

- ***The need for guidance and support with writing***

All the birth mothers felt daunted by the prospect of writing. In the few cases where birth mothers were writing regularly, they were getting help from their families. Writing was also a difficult task for adopters and not many were confident they were 'getting it right'. They wanted better guidance on what to write, length and how to refer to the different parties.

- ***Administration***

The study reinforced the need for all items to be photocopied and kept on the post box file for children to see at some point in the future.

- ***The need for feedback***

Adopters wanted to know how their letter/report had been received by the birth parent. In at least one case the adopter was thinking of giving up writing, believing their letters were no longer wanted, when in fact the birth parent valued them highly. Social workers also wanted to know how post box was working so they could follow up with birth parents if necessary.

- ***Making post box work***

All parties wanted the post box organiser to chase missing post and do more to make post box work as planned. Some adopters thought the local authority should ensure that foster carers enabled contact with siblings.

- ***Managing changes of address***

The researchers found that at least nine people were no longer living at the address used by the service. This raises issues about confidential

information being sent to the wrong address and of birth parents dropping out because their whereabouts are unknown.

- ***Better censoring of mail***

Adopters and birth parents had concerns that some mail had got through without being censored, causing a great deal of distress. Other items had been handed directly to adopters by social workers. Adopters felt that all items should go through the post box service unless otherwise agreed.

- ***Adding extended family members to arrangements***

Extended family members, although the most likely to keep communication going, seemed to have little involvement in the making of arrangements. Where people joined the post box arrangement after the initial agreement had been made, they were often left confused about what was expected of them and whether they could request items in return.

- ***Minimising delay***

A number of interviewees felt the post box service needed to understand the emotional impact of delay. 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.

- ***Reviewing arrangements***

Few people appeared to realise that they could ask for a review of the existing post box arrangements. In a number of cases it was apparent to the researchers that a review was needed if post box contact was not to break down. As discussed previously, however, this is not an administrative task but one requiring skilled mediation.

Other issues

The interviews raised other issues, which this small study was unable to answer. There were questions about the motivation of some adopters who saw post box as a kind of insurance against the future when the children might call them to account. There were concerns about families who had more than one adopted child with very different contact arrangements. These are undoubtedly important areas for a future, larger study to explore, in considering the longer-term impacts of post box contact and its wider contribution to children's experiences of adoption.