Evaluation of the Letter Swap Pilot: Briefing

regional adoption agencies working together

Why is this study important?

The majority of adopted children have a plan to stay in touch with birth relatives through 'letterbox' systems where letters are sent between birth and adoptive families through adoption agencies. Agencies manage large numbers of often quite complex contact plans, with tailored offers to support/review arrangements. When letterbox contact is kept up over time, it can have benefits for adopted young people, birth relatives and adoptive parents. However, this way of staying in touch is not always easy for families practically or emotionally, and many plans do not work out because adoptive parents and/or birth relatives stop writing. Administration can be challenging too, with it being difficult for families to know if items are sent on, received and/or read. Even when contact does continue, people sometimes feel that letters are not informative and they do not bring the other person to life.

There are now widespread calls for the approach to contact in adoption to be modernised, and digital platforms which could facilitate letter contact and offer other ways of staying connected (via short messages, photos, audio or video notes) are a growing area of interest. Digital ways of staying in touch can be more immediate, trackable and less formal than other methods, though risks and boundaries need to be managed and issues of digital poverty and competence in using digital devices must be considered. In response to calls for the development of a digital letterbox system Link Maker developed an online platform called Letter Swap. This study evaluated the first pilot of this online platform.

Aims of the study

- 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.

How was the study done?

This research was commissioned by Adoption England to support the implementation and evaluation of their commissioned pilot of 'Letter Swap.' The pilot began in July 2022 in five English Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs), with a sixth joining in July 2023. It lasted for 15 months. The Post Adoption Centre – UK (PAC-UK (Post Adoption Centre UK)) were partners in the pilot, tasked with offering additional support to birth relatives wanting to use the platform. The pilot was led by an implementation lead from Adoption England, supported by a steering group. This was a formative evaluation, meaning that we collected data throughout the pilot as opposed to just at the end.

A mixed-methods design was employed, the key elements being:

- The analysis of anonymised user platform data from Link Maker.
- Qualitative interviews with platform users (19 adoptive parents and 10 birth relatives)
- A user survey (19 adopters and 10 birth relatives registered on the Letter Swap system)
- Three rounds of interviews and focus groups with implementers (Regional Adoption Agency workers and managers, representatives from Link Maker, PAC-UK, and Adoption England). These were held at the beginning (n=11 participants), middle (n=14 participants) and end of the pilot (n=12 participants).
- Normalisation Process Theory was a guiding framework to understand the factors and processes affecting the implementation of Letter Swap.

Key findings.

What were the challenges of embedding Letter Swap as a new culture within adoption agencies?

- Different agencies had differing hopes in terms of what they wanted Letter Swap to achieve and for which families – affecting their recruitment of families to the pilot.
- There were also diverging expectations of the purpose of the pilot between Link Maker and the participating agencies. These were particularly about whether the initial focus was on achieving the exchange of letters versus introducing enhanced functions such being able to add case notes or use video messaging.
- The motivation of adoptive parents and birth parents to try out the new system also varied. Adoptive parents did not necessarily want to change their contact plans when switching to a digital system. Birth parents did not see any benefit to Letter Swap if their contact plan remained the same; they also feared the loss of existing personalised arrangements. These factors created challenges for professionals in recruiting families to the pilot.
- RAAs who joined the pilot in earlier stages found initial problems with the platform and fed these back. Whilst this helped improve the platform it created extra work for agency staff and could undermine their confidence in promoting the platform to families.
- Difficulties with the system improved over time as enhancements were released, and workers became more familiar with using the system. Agencies who joined the pilot after the first few months met fewer problems as early difficulties had been ironed out.
- Learning how to use the new system and supporting participating families was challenging for frontline workers. Taking part in the pilot took up more time than they originally expected, and the new system had to run alongside existing systems.
- The participation of professionals was supported by the implementation lead from Adoption England who helped address issues and barriers and increased the buy in of agencies.
- Letter Swap was valued by professionals as a safe way for families to continue, deepen and extend contact where this was desired (often in response to changing identity needs of adopted young people). However, they felt that for wider changes to contact plans to take place (for example exchanging letters more frequently, using video messaging or voice notes, exchanging letters that did not need to be checked by the social worker) other aspects of professional practice needed to change.

- Agencies taking the part in the pilot valued the learning from the pilot. They felt the potential for digital contact had been shown.

Findings from the analysis of Link Maker data.

- By the end of the pilot, 135 letterboxes had been created by RAAs on the Letter Swap system. Each letterbox related to a child or sibling group and covered contact between the adoptive parent/s and one birth relative.
- Over three quarters of letterboxes (n=104, 77%) became active during the pilot period, meaning that at least one item had been sent by one or more of the parties. 23% (31) were 'inactive' (meaning no items had yet been sent). Families may not have sent any items because contact may not yet have been due to happen.
- At the end of the pilot, 438 items had been sent through Letter Swap: 235 from adoptive families (102 messages, 63 documents, 64 images and 6 videos), 103 from birth relatives (71 messages, 16 documents and 14 images), and 100 from RAAs (74 messages, 24 documents and 2 images). Video and audio files could only be sent at a late stage of the pilot.
- Not every letterbox account had both adoptive parents and birth relatives connected to it. Just under half of letterboxes (n=61, 45%) had just an adoptive parent connected to the letterbox. In some cases, one party to the contact took part 'offline' e.g. sending a paper letter via the agency, something the system was designed to allow for.
- Both adoptive families and birth relatives being registered to the same account was achieved for 47 (35%) Letter Swap letterboxes. Of these cases, two-way communication had been achieved in 11 cases. The short timescale of the pilot, and the low frequency at which contact was planned to happen, may have limited the amount of two-way correspondence seen.
- Where checks were not needed or when workers were able to respond promptly, Letter Swap could facilitate a fast, responsive, and confidential exchange that traditional letterbox methods simply cannot achieve.
- Most letterboxes (n=119, 88%) required correspondence to be checked by the agency before being released; checks were generally completed in a prompt fashion.
- The possibility to set a date for review of contact was only used in a few cases.

How did adoptive parents and birth relatives experience using Letter Swap?

- Adopters entered the Letter Swap pilot with different starting points – some had no desire to change their contact agreement but were happy to try a new platform. Others hoped that Letter Swap could open up relationships with birth relatives. Birth relatives had no or low expectations that Letter Swap would change how and when they had contact.
- All families interviewed had prior experience of off-line letterbox contact. Most were switching their plans onto the digital platform on a 'like by like' basis, but a minority were changing aspects of their contact when moving to the new platform.
- Families saw Letter Swap as serving two functions – to administer contact and to help build relationships.
- The benefits in relation to administering contact included the ability to keep a repository of contact, efficiency, speed of exchange, a tracking and acknowledgement function, added security, and flexibility with contact type.

...now I don't have to [file printed letters away] so I just log in and it's all in one place and it's there as and when he wants to access it when he's older. (Adoptive parent)

- The drawbacks included difficulties with logging in, initial formatting limitations, worries of users about the confidentiality of the platform, and issues with digital literacy and poverty for birth relatives.
- Benefits for facilitating relationships included the ability to communicate more flexibly on a 'little and often' basis, being able to access contact when emotionally ready and the inclusion of mediation.
- Anticipated drawbacks included the possibility that boundaries could be blurred with frequent communication, support from a contact co-ordinator could be absent and the tactile element of exchanging letters, photos and artwork could be lost.
- In some cases, Letter Swap transformed the way adoptive and birth families communicated with each other, and for some it was paving the way to an unmediated direct or indirect arrangements in the future.

[Letter Swap makes contact a] bit more informal, which is what I really want, to be able to send and share stuff where and when it's needed. I don't want a piece of paper to say you can only write in this month and this month, because obviously situations change… by using Letter Swap it breaks down barriers for that kind of option [meeting up in person]. (adoptive parent)

You can ask questions throughout the year…I love that. It has been every couple of weeks since it started…it's brilliant…Last one I got was when daughter's tooth had fallen out and they wanted to know when my first tooth had fallen out, so I responded. (birth parent)

Key recommendations and implications of the research

Implications for developers of digital platforms for contact

- Ease of accessibility should remain a key goal, and testing with a range of users a central part of product development.
- Platform developers should collaborate with professionals and people with lived experience to continue to develop the guidance for families using the platform. Some specialist consultation around the needs of people with learning difficulties could be helpful.
- The potential of adopted young people to become direct users of platforms such as Letter Swap is an area for future exploration.
- Ensure clear communication for users (both professionals and families) around the security features of the platform to address anxieties and build confidence.
- Options for professionals to practice skills in using the platform using a 'dummy' version or 'trial runs' are needed.
- For independent agencies to effectively help birth relatives remotely there should be a way for approved professionals to access the digital platform when assisting birth relatives.

Messages for policy makers

- There are promising indications from this pilot that the goal of improving post adoption contact can be furthered by platforms such as Letter Swap, when accompanied by significant 'buy in' to a different approach from all involved.
- However, the contribution of digital platforms such as Letter Swap to modernising contact in adoption will be limited unless accompanied by broader changes to contact planning and support, including better preparation and support for adoptive parents and birth parents.
- Digital platforms should not be seen as a panacea to the problems with the current approach to post adoption contact, either in terms of creating more open adoptions or bringing about cost savings for agencies.
- The development of new technologies such as Letter Swap needs to be undertaken in tandem with wider cultural change: we cannot have a culture of more open contact without the tools to do so, but the tools themselves will not meet their full potential without the culture shift.
- Adoption agencies will also need adequate resourcing to implement new ways of working- not just to support the introduction of digital platforms, but to undertake the wider culture change work that will enable these platforms to work most effectively.

Key recommendations for adoption managers

- Digital platforms should be considered alongside a range of other options so that bespoke plans can be made for each child. The Letter Swap platform offers a flexible range of ways for families to stay in touch where some level of confidentiality and/or mediation is needed, including situations where families are also having or wish to have in-person contact.
- The full potential of Letter Swap will not be realised without wider changes to professional practice alongside an increased willingness of adoptive parents to consider a wider range of options for contact. There is therefore a need for professional development around 'maintaining relationships', and a need for more training and support for adoptive and birth families involved in contact plans.
- Managers should involve local authority partners in developments around using digital platforms so that children's social workers understand the options for digital contact.
- Managers should undertake work with their team to clarify the goals they are trying to achieve using digital platforms and therefore which families they may wish to target.
- Frontline staff will require training, including opportunities to practice using the system. The added work of learning a new system needs to be accounted for in workloads.
- Agencies need to be realistic about the need to keep services to support non-digital indirect contact. This is to allow allowing families to exchange tangible items of sentimental value, and to meet the needs of users for who cannot use the digital platform.
- Where agencies are working with independent birth relative support providers, the role of these providers in supporting parents with digital contact should be considered. This may work best when birth relatives are 'new' to contact and where trusted relationships can be built with support workers.

Key recommendations for professionals supporting families with contact

- Workers should help families to consider a wide range of options beyond the traditional model of infrequent letter contact. Contact plans need to be decided on a case-by-case basis, but some families may prefer higher frequency of communication, or they may wish to try communicating through images, voice notes or video for example. Establishing a shared understanding of the nature and purpose of the digital contact will be important.
- The need for agencies to check/read correspondence should be considered on a case-by-case basis, rather than being a blanket policy.
- The opportunity to review plans for digital contact should be built in to practice, allowing for contact plans to change and evolve. For example, where contact is not working well, to consider what support people need to help it go better. Or as children get older and their needs change, to consider what changes to contact might help them.
- For families to make full use of Letter Swap they need to continue to have access to a named person within their adoption agency they can contact for support with contact.
- Birth relatives should be offered or directed towards tailored support for contact (including from independent agencies). Some birth relatives such as those who have limited experience with digital devices, and/or who have learning difficulties may need extra support, including access to appropriate devices. Digital methods may not be suitable for all birth relatives, and alternative options such as traditional letterbox or meeting in person should be considered.

Strengths and limitations of the research

- This research captured feedback on the progress of the Letter Swap pilot 'in real time' as the project evolved, and early findings were fed swiftly to the implementation teams.
- Feedback was captured from a range of people including adoptive parents and birth relatives, front-line workers and managers, and other key implementers, allowing us to evaluate the pilot from a range of different perspectives.
- The research helped to develop and refine a theory of change around the use of digital platforms in modernising contact, clarifying what digital methods can, and cannot do, in changing the culture regarding post adoption contact.
- This pilot's main limitation is due to its short timescale (meaning long-term outcomes could not be examined) and the early stage of the project (it is important to remember that this was the first rollout of the platform, and many difficulties identified with the platform have now been addressed).
- The longer-term benefits and drawbacks of the digital system needs further research. It will be important to understand whether the platform encourages greater continuation of contact plans across time.
- The timescale of the project did not allow us to see whether in the longer-term people not initially wanting a change to contact, will use the platform to open up their contact plans.
- We were not able to examine in any depth the pros and cons of using the video and voice functions.

How to cite this briefing

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