

Guidance for later life letters – Adoption

Purpose of this work:

The adoption later life letter should give a young person a clear explanation about why they were in care, the reasons for social services involvement in their lives, as well as additional and more detailed information building on the life story book about their birth parents and family and the issues that meant that it was decided they should be adopted. This is provided to a young person so that they have a clear understanding about decisions that were made about their life when they might no longer have professionals around to answer any questions that they have.

What it is and what it isn't:

It is a letter to the child that includes detailed information about their birth family, why they were removed from their birth parents and why it was decided that they should be adopted. It should be written for a child to read when they are 12 years old approximately.

It is a considered document that is written with input from the birth parents and in consultation with the adoptive parents so it matches the narrative that they feel comfortable giving to the child. The information needs to remain factual but the wording might be altered as necessary.

It is an extension of the information that is provided in the life story book, the information should be consistent across the two pieces of work but more detailed in the letter.

It is not a goodbye letter from the social worker, there might be some comment about who wrote it and how they knew the young person but a separate goodbye letter should be written that gives detail about that worker's involvement and enjoyment in working with the child/young person.

When should it be completed?

Adoption later life letters should be given to the adoptive parents at the time that the later life book is given to them, ideally by the time of the celebration hearing or at a goodbye visit just afterwards.

Giving the letter to the child will be at the discretion of the parents and the information from the letter might be shared over time with the parents using the letter to inform their discussions. In some cases the letters might be given directly to the child and this could happen at any point that the parents think the child will be able to understand it. The letters should therefore be written in a way that will be understandable for a child of around 12.

What should be included?

Include as much information as you can as this will be important for the child/young person receiving the letter. They don't want to be left with more questions than answers.

Break the letter down into sections so that it is easier to read and information is not forgotten; follow a similar layout to that in the life story book:

- Explanation of what the letter is about – be clear that it is an account of what is known by social services and that might not be the same as other people's memories/views about things that happened and these are explained where known.
- Information about the birth parents and family – this should be as descriptive as possible to give a clear picture of who the birth parents were. This section will also include some information about the parent's relationship, any difficulties they had and the reasons for these. Information about their backgrounds and the wider birth family should be included, especially any siblings.
- Before coming into care – Information about the child's birth, why social services became involved and any experience that the child had of being cared for in their birth family. Include details of the key concerns that led to the court proceedings being initiated.
- Court proceedings – An explanation of the different assessments and work that was done during care proceedings as well as the decisions that were made. Who did the child live with during care proceedings and what contact did they have with their birth parents during this time? Include the dates of when orders were granted.
- Finding the adoptive parents – An explanation of the process and work involved in finding their parents. If the birth parents were involved in the decision at all this information should be included as well as what their feelings were about it. Include any additional information about the child meeting their parents or refer back to the information in the life story book.
- Ongoing contact with birth family – Include what the arrangement is about any ongoing contact the child might have with their birth parents, other siblings or wider birth family. It is probably helpful to state that often birth parents find it very difficult to keep up with letter box contact and although a particular agreement may have been made the child might not have received letters as planned.

Further points to consider:

Acknowledge the difficult feelings that are likely to have been felt during each stage by the different people involved. Be clear if you are hypothesising or there is an actual account or memory from someone.

Try to keep a balance between negative and positive information. The birth parents undoubtedly loved the child a lot and that there were positive experiences as well as more difficult ones.

The adoptive parents should be referred to as the parents (mummy, daddy, etc.) throughout and the birth parents by their first names.

You can include the full names of birth family but don't include their dates of birth, you could say the age that the birth parents were when they had the child. Also don't include exact addresses but information about the general area in which they lived or grew up might be interesting for the child (e.g. the Holloway area of Islington).

If there is a particularly difficult or sensitive background for the child, or the birth parents, then it might be more appropriate to write two letters to be given to the child at different points. Discuss this with the adoptive parents as they will need to decide how the information is shared with their child.