

I am a birth mum, who has had 12 years of letterbox contact with my daughter and her adoptive parent. My daughter is now 18 years old, and we have recently reunited. I wanted to share some of my feelings about the letterbox service.

Waiting for the postman to drop that letter through the door, was like a child waiting for Father Christmas except he doesn't come. The letter never arrived on time and I was left with emptiness inside, longing and yearning to know how my daughter was doing- if she was still alive even. It sounds extreme but all kinds of things used to go through my head when a letter didn't turn up. For a whole year I was left dangling once, each month I got more anxious and frightened that something terrible had happened. The people who worked at the Letterbox were lovely though, they would always treat me sensitively and kindly. Without them to reassure me and give me the hope that they would be able to contact my daughter's adopter, I probably would have gone out of my mind.

The day that the judge dispensed of my consent and gave permission for my daughter's adoption to go ahead I felt devastated. (That word minimises how I felt- there are actually no words to describe how I felt) When I was granted letterbox contact it was a huge relief. It gave me a shred of comfort like a pinch of salt in an empty salt bottle; I had that small piece of hope to cling to, amongst so much disappointment, torture and pain. That hope that I may get a letter once a year to fill me in on the facts of how my first born child was, my first and only baby girl, whom I treasured and adored with all my heart. Whether that letter was sent though was up to the adoptive parent(s), but upon meeting the adopting parent and her acknowledging how much I loved my daughter, she promised she would always write and let me know how she was. She promised to always love and protect her. I had to live with those words repeatedly playing in my head - which said she will always do her best to love her as much as she knew I did.

Upon receiving the letter I would feel included in her life and at peace to know she is safe and healthy doing normal girly things. Finding out who her new friends were and what her new favourite TV. Programme was, how school was going and where she had been on holiday was such a big thing for me. Being kept in the loop like that meant so much to me. For years I lived for that letter, I didn't feel I had much else to live for.

I have 3 other children, who live at home with me, and have always grown up knowing about my first daughter. It was so important for them to have news of their older sister through the letters, and to see her growing into a young woman, not just remaining the little girl in the photographs I had of her at home from before she was adopted.

It was hard for me to know what to write every year. I so wanted her to know that she was loved and missed and was forever in my thoughts, and I wanted her to know about her younger siblings, but I struggled with guilt that she might feel replaced by them in some way. I wanted her to know that I had made changes in my life and that I was doing really well and that her brother and sisters were well and happy. But I did not want her to get the message that my life was totally wonderful without her in it. Although the letters were a lifeline, they were not always easy to do and I agonised over getting them just right. They were bittersweet; I had to work through my own feelings and accept that she was now also someone else's daughter and sister and that she had relationships and ties in her other family, and experiences that I could not share. I also had to live with the

constant question of whether my letters were really being shared with my daughter; but I had to trust her adoptive mum on that one. I was so relieved when we actually met and she told me she had always seen my letters every year.

When my daughter reached 17 years old she asked to meet me. She had never been able to write her own letter to me over the years, although she had been fully included in deciding what her adoptive mum would tell me. She didn't want to write letters, she was impatient to have a face to face meeting instead.

A social worker from Letterbox made our reunion possible and brought a hopeful dream to reality for me and my daughter. They helped her adoptive mum deal with it all too and tried to give my daughter the support to cope emotionally with the feelings she had toward me and her birth family prior to the actual reunion. They made the reunion a process and slowed down what could have been done faster and been hard for my daughter (and myself) to cope with. The lady that came to see me a few times prior to the reunion was particularly lovely, very friendly and supportive, running through all the possible scenarios that could well happen at the time we were to reunite. The support was available to me about a year prior to the actual reunion and for a few months after by way of phone contact support. I felt very cushioned at the actual meeting but was relieved when my daughter suggested we meet alone as it felt very overwhelming to have everyone observing our relationship as it is a relationship like no other, and no-one knows what way it was going to go and what was going to happen.

Having had contact via the contact letterbox helped me and my daughter when we reunited because we had things to talk about, from what we had read in the letters that we had exchanged over the years whilst we had been apart. Knowing where she had been on holiday and other things like what her favourite foods were where helpful to give us that little head start on our relationship, as it is very much like meeting with a stranger that you feel very connected to because of the blood ties.

My daughter was upset that she hadn't received any birthday or Christmas cards from me all the years she had been adopted. When I explained that the conditions of contact were that I could only send one letter and 1 photograph at the same agreed month each year, and that when I had sent such things they were sent back to me, she didn't know whether to believe me as she had been told that I could send such things. It would have been more helpful if this information had been clarified to her more accurately. Also, while I know there can be problems with cards, I do think that in our case they would have helped my daughter to know her birth family was always keeping her in mind.

That, amongst other facts she had been told that weren't accurate confused her and understandably made her question the system and whether they had lied to her. She was a child who had suffered the trauma of being parted from her mother, and as her Mum I have been forthcoming in holding my hands up to my errors of not putting her first and getting into a difficult and dangerous situation which resulted in her having to be removed from my care. I have apologized many times to my daughter and will forever continue to say how genuinely sorry I am for everything. My naivety, vulnerability and bad decision making in my teenage years affected my daughter in such a life changing way.

Because of the letterbox contact I have formed a positive relationship with my daughter's adopter from a distance. It was through her efforts to keep in contact over the years that I grew a deep respect for her and I am really grateful for the great way in which she has guided and brought my daughter up. - (And still does, continue to be her Mum and support her now too.)

Just meeting her birth Mother does not take all my daughter's pain and hurt and anger away, just brings it all to the surface I have recently learned. I worry when there are questions asked and the answers may not always be what my daughter is wanting to hear, I feel it would be more beneficial for me and her adoptive mum to work together to help with the emotional turmoil of the after ripples of the very much dreamlike reunion.

So, the next stage is working out future contact between me and my daughter's other mum. I feel it would be beneficial for all if we were to work together in supporting my daughter through those difficult teenage years. But, this will be a balancing act as she is currently wanting to keep her two families quite separate from each other. Just knowing there can be continued support from the Support After Adoption team helps.