

‘New doors are opening up all over’: modernising post adoption contact – findings from adopters and birth relatives in evaluations of the Letter Swap digital platform

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Abstract

One hundred years after the introduction of legal adoption in England, there is a strong focus on safely maintaining relationships between adopted children and their birth families, including using digital contact tools. This research draws on the development and evaluation of Letter Swap, a bespoke digital platform for contact in adoption. Letter Swap offers flexible options for adoptive and birth families to stay in touch including online letter exchange and video and voice notes. Sixteen birth relatives and 32 adopters (predominantly foster care adoptions) taking part in the Letter Swap pilot in eight English Regional Adoption Agencies (2022–2025) were interviewed. We briefly describe the digital platform, pilot and evaluations, then report findings using a Normalisation Process Theory framework, paying particular attention to relational impacts of ‘going digital’ on kinship networks. Positives included contact feeling more meaningful and real, enabling birth and adoptive families to build closer connections and move towards in-person meetings. Challenges included technical difficulties, and emotional and relational challenges of new ways of communicating. We conclude that to realise the benefits of a new digital system, changes in wider professional attitudes and practices are needed, including addressing issues of digital poverty and know-how, providing individualised planning and support.

Plain language summary

This article examines how adoptive families and birth relatives in England used a new secure online platform called Letter Swap. Letter Swap enables birth and adoptive families to exchange letters, short text messages, videos, and voice notes online. Developers created the platform to address

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problems associated with traditional forms of post-adoption contact. In England, families have typically maintained contact by sending letters once or twice a year through an adoption agency, which often reviews the content before forwarding it. Many families have found this system ineffective and outdated. Although instant messaging and social media have transformed how most families communicate, these technologies do not always provide a safe option for children adopted from foster care because of child protection concerns. Letter Swap therefore offers a more flexible and engaging alternative while maintaining appropriate safeguards and confidentiality. This article reports findings from the initial testing of Letter Swap and explores how adoptive parents and birth relatives experienced using the platform. Researchers interviewed 32 adopters and 16 birth relatives who used Letter Swap. Participants reported a wide range of experiences. Many valued the speed and meaningfulness of contact through the platform. For some birth and adoptive families, these benefits helped strengthen relationships and created opportunities to move towards face-to-face meetings. Participants also identified challenges. Some found the platform difficult to use, particularly those with limited technological experience. Many highly valued the ability to send and receive videos and voice notes, including (reportedly) adopted children and their siblings living elsewhere. However, these forms of communication could also be emotionally demanding. We recommend that professionals adapt their practices alongside technological innovations if families are to experience meaningful change.

Keywords

Adoption, post-adoption contact, digital contact, Normalisation Process Theory, Letter Swap

Introduction

The Adoption of Children Act (1926) established the first legal framework for adoption in England and Wales, transferring parental rights and responsibilities from birth to adoptive parents. It did not explicitly ban contact between parties, but laid the groundwork for a highly secretive adoption process that sought to conceal the child's origins and birth parents' identities. The Children Act (1975) made it possible for adults who had been adopted to access information about their birth parents. However, it was not until the Adoption and Children Act (2002) that there was any duty to even consider what contact the child should have with their birth family after adoption. This legal change has not to date realised the anticipated changes towards more birth family contact, with agency mediated (indirect) letter contact (referred to in England as letterbox) consistently preferred over face-to-face ways of staying in touch (Public Law Working Group, 2024).

Over the past 20 years, email, video calling, instant messaging, and social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Tik-Tok have proliferated (Ofcom, 2025; Pew Research Centre, 2025). Following Facebook's worldwide availability in 2006, adopted teenagers and adults, birth relatives and adoptive parents began to use it to find out about or contact each other, opening doors that the adoption system had previously closed (Whitesel and Howard, 2013).

In the context of children being adopted from foster care (the predominant adoption pathway in England over the past 30 years), early reactions to social media-initiated contact focused on potential (and reported) harms to children (Simpson, 2020). Concerns centred on unexpected contact and the vulnerability of children who were ill-prepared to manage risks (Fursland, 2013; Oakwater, 2012).

The rapid uptake of digital methods to sustain family contact for children in care which took place during the Covid 19 pandemic (2020–21) revealed potential benefits (Neil et al., 2020) turning attention to whether bespoke digital platforms might maximise potential advantages whilst minimising risks (Barnett-Jones and Manning, 2021). Improving the outdated approach to ‘maintaining relationships’ in adoption is now seen as an urgent priority (Adoption England, 2025; Neil, 2024; Public Law Working Group, 2024), with digital methods seen as key to modernising adoption (Public Law Working Group, 2024).

This article draws on early evaluations of a platform for digital contact: Letter Swap. It focuses on how adoptive parents and birth relatives understood, interacted with, and evaluated Letter Swap, and how some used it to develop closer relationships between adopted children and their birth families.

Maintaining relationships in adoption

Both ‘birth’ family and ‘contact’ are contested terms; however, they are widely understood, and ‘contact’ is a useful umbrella term to capture varied ways of staying in touch with a range of birth relatives. In practice ‘staying or keeping in touch’, or ‘maintaining relationships’ are likely better ways to think and talk about contact, as they normalise practices and emphasise their relational underpinnings (Simpson and Clapton, 2020).

In general, studies have found that good-quality and sustained contact, of whatever type, can be beneficial to children adopted from care. It can support open communication with adoptive parent(s), the understanding of identity, and reduce adoption-related losses (Iyer et al., 2020a; MacDonald, 2023; Neil et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2020). Unpicking ‘good quality’, the evidence review of Iyer et al., (2020b) identified three key factors associated with children’s well-being: taking children’s feelings into account; ensuring the meaningful involvement of key adults and effective communication between all parties; and providing skilled professional support for all involved.

Concerns about birth family contact (which chiefly relate to direct contact with birth parents) is that where children have a history of maltreatment, poor quality contact might reactivate trauma or undermine the child’s sense of security in their adoptive family (Collings et al., 2022; MacDonald, 2021). Contact, therefore, needs to be safe and meaningful, individually tailored, and supported in a trauma-informed way (Iyer et al., 2020a; MacDonald, 2021).

Letterbox is often considered less risky than in-person contact, but over half of letterbox arrangements ‘fail’ in terms of being sustained over time (Adoption UK, 2025; Neil et al., 2015). Reasons for this include lost or delayed letters, inappropriate or uninformative/bland content (sometimes following risk-averse professional guidance), birth relatives losing touch or not responding – often due to poor understanding or support, adopters ceasing contact, or children requesting that it stops (Barnett-Jones and Manning, 2021).

Digital contact – advantages and disadvantages

Digital contact in adoption includes a myriad of possibilities. Contact can be ‘passive’ (e.g. viewing another person’s social media account) or ‘active’ (Black et al., 2016). In ‘active’ contact, members of the adoption kinship network have reported using email, social media, and voice or video applications to initiate and sustain communications (Black et al., 2016). Such contact can vary in terms of frequency, who is involved, the content of exchanges, whether it is asynchronous (e.g. exchanging emails) or synchronous (e.g. audio or video calls, back-and-forth instant messaging).

Crucially, contact can be planned, often ‘supplementary’ to in-person contact, or it may happen ‘out of the blue’, sometimes unbeknown to adoptive parents (Greenhow et al., 2016; MacDonald et al., 2023).

Looking at benefits, digital contact can bridge geographical distances, including in international adoptions (Iyer et al., 2020b; Shier, 2021). Digital formats allow for greater informality and frequency (e.g. extended conversation through video calls, greater spontaneity, ‘little and often’ messages) (Copson et al., 2022; Simpson, 2020). This can create a sense that ‘then it’s kind of normal conversation’ (Shier, 2021: 416) as between friends and family outside of the adoption network (Whitesel and Howard, 2013). Even minimal connections such as viewing and liking posts on social media can create a sense of ‘continuous connection’ (Simpson, 2020). That digital contact feels ‘normal’ may be particularly true for teenagers or younger birth relatives who are ‘digital natives’ (Copson et al., 2022; Simpson, 2020).

Considering ‘relationality’ in digital contact is vital (MacDonald et al., 2023). Digital contact has been found to work better where there is an existing relationship between parties, hence contact supplementary to in-person meetings is often highly valued (Baude et al., 2023; Copson et al., 2022). Digital contact can lack the emotional intensity of in-person contact (Baude et al., 2023; Copson et al., 2022). This can impede relationship building especially for young children (Copson et al., 2022), but may be advantageous in some circumstances; for example, during the pandemic, some children in care felt emotionally safer on switching to video contact (Neil et al., 2020). Digital contact can also be a safe space to gradually get to know the other person and build towards in-person contact as it provides ‘connection and distance at the same time’ (Whitesel and Howard, 2013: 22). Digital contact in adoption also has the potential to change power dynamics, shifting power from professionals and adoptive parents towards those with typically less control (adoptees and birth relatives) (Simpson and Clapton, 2020). Supporting children to exercise their rights to digital inclusion needs to be balanced with consideration of their wellbeing and children’s expertise in managing digital risks should not be assumed (MacDonald et al., 2023).

In terms of disadvantages of digital contact, unexpected or unsupported contact is associated with safety concerns for children who have additional risks and vulnerabilities such as those adopted from care (Baude et al., 2023; Iyer et al., 2020b). The child may not be emotionally ready for the contact, birth family members may pose risks (e.g. the possibility of children being enticed into emotionally or physically risky encounters), and privacy concerns (e.g. a child’s information being shared widely online) (Iyer et al., 2020a). Adoptive parents may feel constrained in exercising parental control, recognising their child’s ability to continue the contact with or without their support (Greenhow et al., 2017; MacDonald and McSherry, 2013).

Digital contact can allow for a sense of co-presence, but this can generate challenges in managing emotions and boundaries (MacDonald et al., 2023). The ‘always on’ nature of digital contact can cause concerns about intruding on another’s personal space, feeling obliged to reply, or worries when an immediate reply is not forthcoming (Whitesel and Howard, 2013; Shier, 2021). Using mainstream social media platforms make this boundary work harder, as they exist essentially to extend users’ social networks (e.g. through suggesting new connections) and encourage frequent interactions (MacDonald, 2023).

Digital contact can exclude users experiencing digital poverty or who lack digital competence, an issue that affected many families with social workers during the pandemic (Copson et al., 2022). Finally, regarding specifically the replacement of letterbox contact with digital contact, the lack of tactile elements of contact – holding a handwritten letter/artwork – may be regretted by some (Barnett-Jones and Manning, 2021).

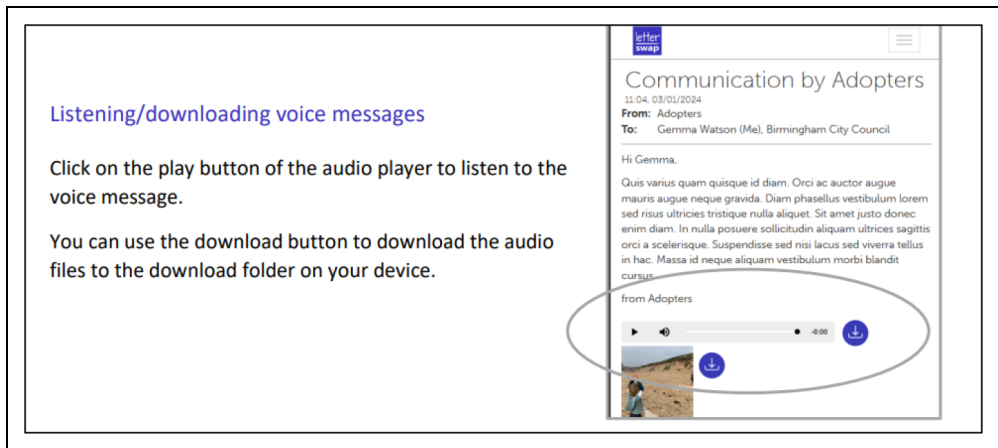


Figure 1: Extract from Letter Swap guidance (see: <https://www.letterswap.co.uk/static/Letter-Swap-Guide-for-birth-family-members-Vrs-3.1.pdf>)

The development of Letter Swap

The research to date around digital contact is almost exclusively based on contact using mainstream digital platforms. This article reports on experiences of Letter Swap (www.letterswap.co.uk) – a bespoke platform for agencies to administer digital post-adoption contact. Building on initial consultation work (Barnett-Jones and Manning, 2021), Letter Swap was developed by Link Maker, a UK social enterprise with a track record of maintaining an online platform for matching adopters to waiting children. Agencies set up a child’s case letterbox on Letter Swap and invite linked users (individual birth relatives and adoptive parents) to register. Names and contact details remain confidential by default. Children cannot (yet) register or login, but can participate through their adoptive parents’ account. Letter Swap can support individualised contact plans, with options set by agencies or left open to exchange short messages, letters, photos, PDFs and asynchronous audio or video messages to schedule or otherwise. Agency content checks are available and optional, and the platform issues reminders and notifications. For example, the extract below (Figure 1) shows how to download and listen to audio messages – and is taken from Letter Swap guidance for birth family members.

Methodology

Our mixed methods, formative evaluation/implementation of the early-stage pilot detailed findings in relation to platform registration and use, the challenges of embedding Letter Swap as a new culture within agencies, and families’ experiences of using the platform (see Neil et al., 2024). This ran for 15 months (July 2022–October 2023) in six of the 33 English Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs). Despite the many barriers to implementation overall, Letter Swap was valued as a secure way for families to continue, deepen and extend contact where this was desired. In most cases, online contact mirrored offline plans (infrequent text only messages, often checked by the agency) – novel audio and video functions being added only late in the pilot. The conclusions noted that longer-term use and wider culture change around the approach to contact were needed to enable Letter Swap to facilitate a genuinely new approach and reap relational benefits. Culture change

work progressed (led by Adoption England with UEA) after the original evaluation and included nationwide online training, the support of ‘maintaining relationships’ champions (nominated staff members) in adoption agencies, and the development of online practice resources (Copson et al., 2025). A follow up evaluation (the ‘revisit’ study) was then carried out one year after the original pilot ended using similar methods (October 2024–March 2025, see Rimmer et al., 2025).

The conceptual framework used for both evaluations was Normalisation Process Theory (NPT) (Murray et al., 2010). NPT is built around four core constructs representing key mechanisms of action related to the kinds of work people do when they implement a complex intervention (May and Finch, 2009). The details of how the four NPT constructs relate to the wider Letter Swap evaluation are given below, with their application in brackets.

1. **Making sense of Letter Swap:** who is it for, what is it trying to achieve? (Coherence)
2. **Buying-in to Letter Swap:** how do individuals and groups set up to implement it? (Cognitive participation)
3. **Managing contact work through Letter Swap:** can individuals and groups manage contact work using the digital platform? (Collective action)
4. **Appraising Letter Swap:** how do individuals and groups evaluate the digital platform? (Reflexive monitoring)

NPT was used to develop all data collection tools and in analysis. In both evaluations, a mixed-methods design was employed featuring: analysis of anonymised platform data, interviews (see guides and NPT application in supplementary file), developer administered surveys with adopters and birth relatives, and interviews and focus groups with implementers (see Neil et al., 2024 and Rimmer et al., 2025). Although (adopted) children might be creating and receiving content shared on the platform by the adults in the contact plan, they cannot create accounts and were not included in the evaluation. Also it should be noted that we did not have access to the content of platform data – users’ private messages.

This article presents findings in relation to the question: *How can relationships between adoptive and birth families be developed using a bespoke digital platform?* Although informed more broadly by patterns in platform activity data and survey responses, we draw here upon analysis of interviews with adoptive parents and birth relatives.

Interviews with platform users

Users were given an information sheet about the study by their agency. They could then contact the researchers directly or ask the agency to pass on their contact details. Additional users were recruited via responding to surveys issued by developers. Semi-structured interview guides (see supplemental file) for birth relatives and adopters covered: for whom participants were using the platform (the child/ren); their motivation to try Letter Swap; their experience of accessing and using it so far; any support they received; the comparison with any previous experiences of letterbox contact; and (for adoptive parents and carers of siblings) their child’s involvement in Letter Swap.

Participants were interviewed via phone or video call (at their preference), with consent taken at the beginning. £10 vouchers were offered as a thank you. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes. JR (female) conducted the majority (44) of the interviews with CR (male) undertaking four. Both were unknown to participants.

Telephone interviews were recorded, and detailed, anonymised summaries were made from recordings. Video interviews were recorded and transcribed by the software then checked for

Table 1. Interview sample details by participant type, relation and research stage.

Type of participant	Original pilot users (n = 29)	Revisit – original pilot users (n = 8)	Revisit – new users (n = 11)	Total in revisit	Total unique participants across both evaluations
Adoptive parent	19 (11 mothers and 8 fathers)	5 (4 mothers and 1 father) (N.B: 3 are 2 nd interviews)	8 (6 mothers and 2 fathers)	13	32–3 = 29
Birth relative	10 (7 mothers, 2 fathers, 1 sibling)	3 (2 grandmothers and 1 mother)	3 (1 grandmother, 1 mother and 1 adult sibling)	6	16

accuracy/anonymised. Researcher field notes were also made. Data were analysed within computer analytical software (NVivo) using NPT, with some minor additional inductive coding.

The University of East Anglia's School of Social Work Research Ethics Committee approved the original evaluation (ETH2122-1676) and revisit (ETH2425-0161). No adverse incidents were reported.

Participants

Table 1 below outlines the interview sample: 45 users took part in 48 interviews (three adopters from the pilot were reinterviewed during the revisit to explore longer-term use). Ten of the cases were linked (i.e. we interviewed both an adopter and one or more birth relative involved in an exchange, with 10 adopters and 12 birth relatives).

The adopters were all from different families (i.e. no couples interviewed). The adults were connected to 39 children on Letter Swap (some had more than one child using Letter Swap). The children ranged from 0–6 years at adoption and 2–14 years at the time of interview, and were almost exclusively adopted from foster care. Interviewed users varied in terms of how much or how little they had been able to use Letter Swap: from not having done much more than register to exchanging a range of file types (message, image, audio, video) a few times. All except three interviewees were switching from an existing letterbox system. In findings sections, quotations from adopters are referred to in abbreviation within brackets and by numbers, for example (AD21), and birth relatives as for example (BR11).

Findings

How users 'made sense' of Letter Swap

This first construct of NPT is about how users understood the purpose or potential of the Letter Swap platform/pilot. As discussed below, this sense-making was, in part, framed by how their agency implemented the platform. Adoptive parents viewed the platform/pilot potential largely in relation to their own investments in staying in touch, how satisfied they were with their contact arrangements to date, and any specific risks or barriers to contact in their adoption network. Two patterns were evident.

1. *Letter Swap as a 'like-for-like' alternative to letterbox contact.* Most adoptive parents interviewed who were trying the platform in the original pilot (12/19) had no desire to change their existing contact agreement (typically letter exchange 1–2 times a year, mediated and checked by the agency). Once assured about its security, they were happy to try Letter Swap with plans moving onto the platform on a 'like-for-like' basis. In cases where adopters had previously sent letters to agencies via email, the platform involved minimal change. The perceived benefits here were efficiencies, transparency of process and archiving.

2. *Letter Swap as a way to develop relationships.* Other adopters in the pilot (7/19) hoped Letter Swap could help them develop their relationships with birth relatives, usually in line with a shift in their child's identity needs. In the revisit, after national and local culture change work, all adopters interviewed (10/10) were using the platform with this motivation.

In three cases where adults were already having in-person contact, Letter Swap was viewed as a way to support communication outside of meet ups and/or as a repository:

...because if anything went awry [...] it's a third party, basically, that (Adopted son, aged 3) can go to and send information out to when he gets older, if he wants to (AD21).

Some adopters – focused on potential future developments of relationships with birth relatives – saw Letter Swap as mitigating against unexpected contact through offering secure options to develop trust and scaffold children towards developing unmediated arrangements and/or eventually meeting their birth relatives.

Birth relatives in the pilot expressed fears that switching to Letter Swap would jeopardise valued aspects of their existing contact arrangements, particularly the support they received from known and trusted letterbox coordinators. Birth relatives interviewed did not always have as full an understanding of the possibilities of the platform as adopters or, if they did, had no or low expectations about the likelihood that Letter Swap would change agreements. This reflects the relative powerlessness of birth relatives in determining the nature of post-adoption contact compared to adoptive parents.

Birth relatives highlighted potential benefits around ease of use such as more informal messaging rather than sending annual letters. Like adopters, they hoped that the digital platform would make visible agency mechanics of contact, be faster, and/or avoid human error:

(Letter Swap) could build trust in the system because you can see the whole transaction, what has been edited by (Social Services), if it has been read (BR03).

In terms of relational benefits between families, most birth relatives did not envisage Letter Swap facilitating these within the timeframe of the pilot evaluation. At best they hoped for more meaningful future contact with, or about, their child by building trust through the platform and some of the novel functions. Hopes for relational benefits were greater amongst those birth relatives interviewed for the revisit, as audio and video functions were live and some agencies were facilitating reviews of 'opening up' contact agreements.

Across groups, users hoped Letter Swap could help overcome specific barriers in their contact arrangements, such as stalled contact, connecting with siblings, or making it easier for a birth parent with learning difficulties and neurodiverse children to participate.

How agencies could shape users' expectations

Agencies also differed in how they made sense of Letter Swap and how they implemented it (Neil et al., 2024). Despite aspirations for culture change they were necessarily often guided by individual cases (adopters') wishes and birth relatives' digital capabilities. The pilot evaluation recommended that in future, agencies gave more consideration to what they were hoping to achieve through its implementation and resourced/supported it accordingly. The revisit evaluation provided a clear opportunity to study different ways of making sense of the goals of Letter Swap with two new active agencies making different implementation decisions: one agency (RAA7) promoted a more open approach (not checking content and allowing free use of all functions as a default, but only if no specific risks/concerns) and RAA11 (with less staffing) were initially more cautious (replicating existing contact agreements), with a view to opening up in the future. Agencies thus set the parameters for users' engagement with proportionately more use of the more 'novel' functions (short messages or exchange audio/video) in RAA7 than RAA11. In the revisit, some users specifically wanted to use Letter Swap for the video function to develop closer relationships with birth relatives. Their experiences are discussed later.

How users 'bought in' to Letter Swap

This NPT construct examines the extent to which users commit to and engage with piloting Letter Swap. The original evaluation was the first live testing and, as such, it was designed to identify potential technical problems so that these could be addressed. By the time of the revisit several 'glitches' in the Letter Swap platform had been ironed out.

Factors affecting 'buy in' initially

Birth parents reported greater barriers (digital poverty and literacy) accessing the platform compared to adopters. Most were doing so using phones. There were reported issues for all users getting onto the system which required two-factor authentication, but the aforementioned (anticipated) functionality issues could also frustrate. This demonstrated a tension between the end users' need for a secure system versus their need to access the system easily. Once registered, much procedural 'buy in' work was built into the platform itself in terms of automated reminders and prompts to ask for help. Infrequent use by those whose contact may have only been once or twice a year hampered user familiarisation and limited evaluations of buy in.

Fluctuations in 'buy in' over time

In the revisit, seven of the eight users who started using Letter Swap during the pilot were continuing to do so. Here, most reported sustained buy in, with experiences on the platform building motivation and commitment. For example, AD20 saw the platform as pivotal in evolving contact to adult face-to-face meetings with a birth relative:

We've moved on to something even better since then so through the use of Letter Swap. So it's been a very positive thing for us (AD20).

In a smaller number of cases, negative experiences had decreased motivation to continue. AD26 had reverted to sending letters to the agency via email, because her child's birth mum had not

been able to overcome technical barriers to engagement. Similarly, AD13 was hoping the system would appeal to older siblings, not previously engaged in contact, but was disappointed at their lack of engagement and now uploads her letters to the platform only for archiving.

In two long-term use cases where we had data from both parties, children had been involved in creating/exchanging video through Letter Swap, helping to address their identity needs and leading to very positive relational developments.

In the first case, the platform fostered greater connection between half-siblings – two older girls under the care of their grandmother (BR16) and their younger adopted brother. AD11 felt that the platform had come at the right time for her son to develop his awareness and understanding of his sisters:

So, we started off with pictures (photos) and then we moved to video ... Because it (the adoption) was bringing up some more feelings for the girls, and I'd also just started to introduce (Son, aged 7) to: these are your sisters (AD11).

From the correspondence with the elder siblings' grandmother, the adopter had also learned of their concerns for their younger brother's wellbeing. The adopter did an introductory video of herself and supported her son to put his short video together sharing favourite toys and his snack drawer in the kitchen. They received one similar in reply, then exchanged videos about pets. The grandmother describes the importance of videos and the girls being able to rewatch them on the platform in bringing their brother 'to life', providing reassurance that he is cared for, and in mitigating their feelings of shame around difficulties with writing letters. Crucially in sustaining her buy in, she needed and was given agency support to use the system on her phone. Both carers agreed that the video exchanges had been very positive and were hoping that they would lead to meeting up in-person. The adopter noted that a live video call option within the platform might be useful too.

The second similar case is reported in the following section to illustrate the emotional work done to maintain and progress relationships using the platform.

How users 'managed contact work' through Letter Swap

This third NPT construct relates to the work done by users to maintain contact via this digital platform.

Managing technological challenges

Beyond the issues (described above) in accessing the platform, some users found Letter Swap a comparatively simple site – straightforward and intuitive to use; others (both adopters and birth relatives) found it challenging. When users met challenges, they tended to contact trusted agency staff rather than the developer. In the revisit, despite bugs in the system being much less a feature, accessing and using Letter Swap remained challenging for those less used to technology.

The additional work, but additional benefits of using new functions

The case example below shows how using Letter Swap involved more relational and emotional 'work' for all involved, but that this additional effort was worthwhile. This adopter (AD19) was one of the few to have sent videos in the original pilot. His child's birth mother (BR12) and grandmother (BR11) who had been supported (and supported one another) to engage were also

interviewed. Starting with AD19 sending one initial video this adoption kinship network had progressed to exchanging photos and videos, and were still posting (physical) letters, as preferred by BRs.

I think since then (pilot). It's been [...] I'm just thinking of examples: around birthdays [...] a message on Mother's Day, things like that. [...] it's really useful because he, you can do it so quickly [...] it's the responsiveness of it is that we can get a message through and it can do it at short notice [...]. And then the other things we've done is send just videos of doing things, you know, just being out of the park, things like that. And we've also used it to upload pictures at times, like school events. [...]. I think we think we uploaded a short video of him on his bike. So again, it's showing them what he's doing but showing him in action, [...] that's what kids want to do isn't it – they want to come and show us what they can do (AD19).

Birth relatives gave perspectives on the emotional significance of video exchange, but also the demands of the increased responsibility to engage. The grandmother watched the first videos initially, then reassured and encouraged her daughter (her grandson's mother) to do the same. BM described heightened feelings about receiving videos after such a long time, and the effort put into formulating her reply:

...it took me a while to do it (do a video in reply), I always forget what to say so I were trying to like read it, write it down what I was going to say [...] I think I did a couple (of takes) (BR12).

The adopter also talked about the emotional work of supporting his son (in effect scaffolding his son's 'buy in') through exploring and sitting with these mirrored, mixed emotions invoked by opening their contact plan:

...It was difficult for him to get them (videos), but it were always going to be and it, the benefits of it for him outweigh the difficulties (AD19).

The grandmother had experience of adoption in a previous generation, and could compare these new forms of contact with past experiences as well as support her daughter to reap the benefits:

New doors are opening up all over. I can't fault it. See, some people might not be able to cope with it emotionally – seeing videos and things like that, but for kids, if the kids want to do it, then they've got to do it for them (BR11).

All parties highlighted the need for professional scaffolding for the work they were undertaking. In this case the agency coordinator visited birth relatives at home to support them and the relationship building between the birth and adoptive family.

How users 'appraised' Letter Swap

This final construct of NPT examines users' appraisals of the platform/pilot.

The 'administrative' value of Letter Swap

Across both evaluations users valued the platform as a repository, as potentially speeding up exchanges, and for enabling agency checks to be completed in a timely manner:

...we just sent it through there and then got the reply literally the next day from the sister (AD09).

The acknowledgement and tracking functions were appreciated, but it was difficult when someone could see that the recipient had read the letter but not yet replied.

Some adopters valued the security that Letter Swap offered in removing location details from electronic files or photos, when compared to exchanging items via email to the agency.

The 'relational' value of Letter Swap

The pilot evaluation gave some early signs of promise that where users were seeking to evolve relationships, Letter Swap could be a catalyst for enabling more regular, informal contact in a flexible range of formats.

In RAA7 in the revisit, implementation was done specifically to support opening up contact plans. This gives us feedback (less evident within the original pilot evaluation, but congruent with a small number of longer-term use cases in the previous section) around how use of the platform's newer, novel functions (particularly exchange of video) had evolved relationships and helped overcome some traditional barriers. The complexities and needs for support were also evident however, as shown in the three examples below.

The first example gives some useful insight on the emotional challenges of video content. Prior to Letter Swap this adopter and birth mother had annual face-to-face contact, without the child. The adopter (AD25) describes how she proposed that her daughter do a purposeful video for birth mum, talking to her as she showed her around her bedroom. However, this led to some behavioural regression (a 'baby voice'), that AD25 worried might give a problematic impression to the birth mother. She instead uploaded an existing video of her daughter swimming:

So there hasn't been anything too emotive, like (Daughter, aged 9), speaking to her mum, [...] because I think that would be, I think I think she would struggle with it a little bit and I think that's quite a lot for (daughter) as well as birth mum (AD25).

Lacking feedback about how the child's birth mum felt about receiving videos, this adopter has been careful about sending too many.

In a second case, video exchange brought more informality and depth to sibling connections and very quickly evolved beyond Letter Swap to live video calls between adopters, the (pre-school) children, a birth parent and siblings. AD24 reflects powerfully upon Letter Swap in relation to evolving their contact plan:

In the more frequent exchanges [...] we wanted some real genuine moments from the children, and that's what Letter Swap enabled us to do through the video and voice notes, which again I think then made those video calls much easier because everything felt a bit more authentic in their connections [...] even though things may seem like they've moved away from Letter Swap because of the video calls, actually I don't think that would have been as powerful or as easy without it (AD24).

Finally, we have a more salutary tale: where lack of professional support in terms of pacing and emotional checking in has threatened to derail what was a previously quite positive contact arrangement. AD22 wanted to use Letter Swap to scaffold towards more direct contact for her daughters' sibling group and their birth parents. They were keen to embrace options for audio/video within the platform, and the adopters supported each child in choosing a different format: 'because they were

really nervous' (AD22). The siblings were excitedly waiting for a response from their birth parents on Letter Swap, but uncharacteristically, none came:

...within 24 hours they'd opened it. And then we didn't hear from them for like months. [...]. But maybe my biggest fear at the time was – what if us instigating this change leads to a really acute mental health event for birth mum, all because we've sent them this film? (AD22).

When they did eventually get something back from birth parents (three months later), it was only a short message, referencing difficulties getting used to the platform and some photos, with no reference to the videos. This chimes with wider research about adoption grief, the risks of rejection in contact, and the impact of letterbox not arriving (Neil et al. 2015), which digital platforms cannot remove, and which had been very challenging for these girls:

...they (birth parents) didn't acknowledge having seen the girls. [...] You know the worst thing is, is that they (the children) are they, their default position will always be to be experiencing everything through the lens of rejection. So as far as they're concerned, there must be something wrong with what they sent because they didn't get it back (AD22).

It is difficult to know what support was offered to birth parents to ask them about wanting to receive videos, to prepare them for their arrival and to manage expectations around responses to them. The adopters are still committed to trying to make the platform work, but they feel that, ultimately, if the birth parents give up (AD22 can see that the parents hadn't read the last upload), they will revert to the previous method of contact.

Using Letter Swap to overcome traditional barriers in writing letters

Finally, case examples in the revisit study also showed the potential for Letter Swap to support users who have challenges in writing. AD28 reflected that his child's birth mother, who has learning difficulties, found working through a digital platform easier than writing a letter: 'the fact she (BM) can do it on a computer and you spell check and other kind of assistive technology, I think probably helps her quite a lot'.

In another case contact plans that had become stuck were reinvigorated; for example, AD27 described excitement at the prospect of voice notes for her child's birth father, who had struggled to write any letters previously, but who engaged immediately with Letter Swap, allowing more meaningful, frequent exchanges, with the child (who was too young yet to read) getting involved also:

What has he sent us? Voice notes he sent now, which [Adopted daughter, aged 5] loves. I think he sent a video. Yeah. And some pictures. And he does actually write short letters. I mean, you know, a paragraph or two. So he's really using it as we are. You know, every kind of angle [...]. [Adopted daughter, aged 5] sometimes helps choose the photos, [...] and then she records as well. A few voice notes (AD27).

AD27 feels hopeful that the relationship will likely evolve towards more direct contact.

Discussion

This study used Normalisation Process Theory to understand how a bespoke platform to facilitate staying in touch plans after adoption was implemented. Letter Swap offers users multiple asynchronous options for secure, indirect staying in touch arrangements, with various options for agency

mediation. The evaluations explored adoptive parent and birth relatives' sense making about the difference this digital platform could make to their contact (coherence), their 'buy in' (cognitive participation), their management of contact work via the platform (collective action), and their appraisal of Letter Swap (reflexive monitoring). This provides insights into when and how digital methods can contribute to the 'modernising adoption' agenda. The most evolved use was in cases where the platform came 'at the right time' from the reported understandings of the age/developmental stage of the child with all parties 'bought in' to changing their communication. Letter Swap was also helpful where it addressed problems in exchanging 'letterbox' the traditional way with some finding short messages, voice notes and video more authentic and engaging. A key learning point is that realising the relational benefits of a new, bespoke digital system needs time and to be accompanied by changes in wider professional attitudes and practices. Acknowledging Iyer et al.'s (2020b) review, we discuss the findings in relation to three key areas of professional practice: planning, supporting and reviewing digital staying in touch arrangements.

Planning contact

Introducing digital methods at a case level needs careful, collaborative planning that explores the needs and wishes of each party (including the child) and the strengths or challenges likely to impact these plans (e.g. Baynes et al., 2024). The management of boundaries needs upfront discussion to ensure shared expectations and establish a mutual comfort zone of interaction (Grotevant, 2009). Adoptive parents have the power/parental responsibility to initiate shifts in contact plans based on their understanding of their child's needs. In going digital, birth relatives were sometimes unaware of the full range of functions on offer (e.g. video), perhaps because agencies were aware that adopters would not agree to their use. Birth relatives also often felt fearful of losing aspects of letterbox they valued (trusted relational support, tactile elements). Discussion with birth relatives (e.g. making sure that they are prepared to accept videos and are comfortable meeting obligations regarding replying) is imperative, especially in making sure digital methods offer genuine possibilities for relational development rather than creating new problems and inadvertently reinforcing existing inequalities. The potential rewards of agencies allowing more 'open' adopter-controlled use of Letter Swap functions for deepening relationships are clear (especially video exchange), but timing and pacing need consideration – with the child's needs taking precedence.

Supporting contact

The work needed in using Letter Swap was technical, emotional and relational. Users wanted the platform to be safe, efficient and secure, whilst also being easy to use. Users with high 'buy in' tended to persist in trying to resolve any technical difficulties. But where initial motivations were weaker and/or people (typically birth relatives) had limited digital skills (digital competencies), or experienced digital poverty, buy in waned, and they reverted to established modes. As falling off of contact over time is a common feature of letterbox contact (and importantly, is often interpreted negatively by children, see Neil et al, 2015), it is vital that digital platforms achieve greater sustainability of contact.

Beyond the challenge of developing a safe but user-friendly platform that recognises digital inequalities, the issue of support is vital. A valued aspect of traditional letterbox was trusted letterbox coordinators, who understood needs and vulnerabilities (in the wider context of inequality) and offered sensitive support. This human element of having a trusted person available when struggling with either practical or emotional aspects of contact remains important when contact is largely

mediated through a digital platform. Without support, users facing more barriers to doing the work of digital contact could be unfairly blamed if it fails.

As highlighted in the literature (e.g. MacDonald et al., 2023) this research shows digital contact can have a strong emotional component for all. For children, adoptive parents are key to providing emotional support, though some teenagers may want and value independent help. Video and audio options had significant impact in mostly positive, but also difficult ways, underlining that support needs should be considered at the planning stage. Adoptive parents and birth relatives (many of whom will be caring for siblings of the adopted child) may appreciate guidance/support with how to use video/audio to involve and support children in new digital forms of contact, and assistance in negotiating family boundaries. Contact involves complex relational dynamics where kinship network members must negotiate and renegotiate over time how close or distant they want to be (Grotevant et al., 2019). Guidance specifically focused on building relationships between birth and adoptive families is often lacking in contact support (e.g. Neil et al., 2011). Facilitating initial and occasional ongoing meetings between birth relatives and adoptive parents can help support relational development and troubleshoot problems, building the trust that is key to contact being sustained (Neil, 2024).

Reviewing contact

Letter Swap users had varied goals, and they judged the system in relation to these. The revisit highlighted the potential for managed digital platforms to provide a safe space for adoptive and birth families to explore making their connections more meaningful and real through having more frequent contact, typically without agency checks, and/or the use of video and audio. Although not representative of wider platform use (see Neil et al, 2024) the progress achieved over a relatively short period of time for some families using audio/video could be transformative, including in cases where contact had previously been ‘stuck’. This underlines the importance of reviewing plans that are not working (the point at which many people exit), or when children’s needs or wishes change. Having a named person to contact when people want to review their staying in touch plans is important. Rather than leaving the onus on adoptive parents or birth relatives, periodic reaching out to users – particularly as children approach new developmental stages (Grotevant et al., 2019) – is likely to be helpful.

The Letter Swap platform is not currently developed for children’s direct use (and we did not hear from them directly in the evaluation), but allowing children safe ways to increase their contact as they develop was a hope for the future of the platform expressed by many adoptive parents. Key issues to consider when involving young people are allowing them to exercise agency and control about their participation, including what is recorded and shared, the importance of parents helping their children/teenagers to talk about the feelings communications give rise to, and supporting narrative sense-making (Hammond et al., 2025).

Strengths and limitations

This study builds an understanding of for whom the platform works well, and in what circumstances. The longer-term impact of Letter Swap needs further monitoring. The sample does not represent all adopters and birth relatives. Adopters and birth relatives involved in the pilot were either invited to try Letter Swap by their agency or they self-selected – all had an interest in trying the digital system. No families using Letter Swap for older teenagers took part. The direct views of children were not explored here; this is a priority for future research.

Conclusion

After 100 years of legal adoption, the harm that closed adoption has caused must be acknowledged. Open adoption practices that maintain meaningful birth family connections, whilst recognising children's safety needs, are a moral imperative. Alongside promoting maintaining relationships through in person contact wherever possible (Public Law Working Group, 2024), managed digital platforms offer a wide range of other options that can help move away from formulaic planning. But entrenched cultures are hard to shift, and digital platforms such as Letter Swap will not by themselves catalyse change. To achieve this, professional reflection and reorientation of priorities and efforts is needed, and as shown here, is possible. With this, digital platforms (such as Letter Swap) can support flexible options for both long-term indirect contact that is more engaging and meaningful, plus a means of safely increasing communication, trust and closeness, in some cases leading to fully disclosed in-person relationships.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made for supporting relationships in digitalisation of staying in touch arrangements.

1. The introduction of digital platforms needs to be done through planned (case-by-case) exploratory discussion of aims, support needs, boundaries and comfort levels, with all relevant parties. It should not completely replace valued aspects of existing non-digital methods but can be considered within a range of options that meet the different needs of people in the adoption kinship network, with the child's needs at the centre.
2. To reap the maximum relational rewards, our evaluation of Letter Swap for staying in touch underlines the need for accessible, trusted, human support – to anticipate, review and help families navigate the complex relational dynamics and inequalities at play in adoption.
3. Whether or not a bespoke digital platform is used, it is professional attitudes, assumptions and practice that needs to shift to drive the opening up and modernisation of staying in touch arrangements after adoption.

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Ethical approval and informed consent

The University of East Anglia's School of Social Work Ethical Research Committee approved the original evaluation (ETH2122-1676) and revisit (ETH2425-0161). All interviewees gave informed consent to take

part and for their anonymised data to be included in publications – given verbally at the beginning of interviews.

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Data availability

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available as consent for data to be shared beyond the original research team was not obtained.

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