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# Evaluation of the Letter Swap Pilot: Final Report

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# Chapter 1 – Background to the research

## 1.1 Addressing challenges with letterbox contact

The investment in exploring digital platforms in post adoption contact stems from a growing recognition of the importance of contact with birth relatives for the healthy development of children and young people in care, kinship care and adoption (see Iyer, Boddy, Hammelsbeck & Lynch-Huggins, 2020). This aligns with an understanding of the need to respect adopted children’s identities and relationships, rather than cutting them off (Neil & Beek, 2020) and to think about contact in terms of promoting “safe and meaningful” relationships with people who matter to the child (Iyer, Boddy, Hammelsbeck & Lynch-Huggins, 2020). Accompanying this is a shift in the use of language, moving away from terms such as ‘contact’ (which can seem impersonal or clinical) towards terms such as ‘maintaining relationships’ or ‘keeping in touch’. ‘Contact’ however continues to be a useful umbrella term to capture a wide range of ways of staying in touch, and for clarity and ease of reading we continue to use the term contact and letterbox contact in this report. For adopted children in England, there are widely acknowledged problems with the most common contact arrangement: mediated exchanges of letters via ‘letterbox’ systems (Adoption UK, 2022; PAUSE, 2022). Research has highlighted the difficulties of letterbox contact which include practical and emotional strains for adoptive and birth parents in exchanging letters and knowing what to write to each other (e.g. Neil et al, 2015). Consequently, many adoptive parents and birth parents are unhappy with the system. Complaints include (Barnett-Jones & Manning, 2021; Neil et al, 2015):

- not receiving letters reliably or on schedule,
- being unhappy with the content of letters,
- contact support professionals may criticise the content of letters or set restrictive guidelines, the result being letters that can feel bland or impersonal
- letters not being sent by either party,
- a lack of feedback about letters sent e.g. what did the recipient think of the letter?

Adoption agencies have a high volume of letterbox cases creating challenges around supporting this form of contact. Unless letterbox exchanges are sustained and meaningful the potential benefits to adopted children are not realised (Neil et al, 2015).

Calls have grown rapidly over the past few years for the development of digital methods to facilitate better contact in adoption. In 2021 the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care highlighted the “outdated” approach to contact in adoption arguing letterbox contact is “*antiquated in a world where social media allows a child to track down a birth relative and initiate a relationship without any support*” (MacAlister, 2021, p.109). The report recommended that contact be “*modernised through the swift roll out of technology enabled methods of contact, such as Letter Swap*” (p.110). Support for the development of digital contact methods was also expressed in Adoption UK’s (AUK) barometer report in 2022. In her forward to the report, Heather Livenesson (adoptee and adoption social worker) noted: “*I am also looking forward to the expansion of digital contact options which will enable more dynamic and modern communication between children, their birth parents and other birth family members*” (AUK, 2022:3). The government’s Adoption Strategy in England, published in 2021, highlights the need for greater attention to the issue of birth family contact, arguing for an individualised approach and greater support for contact (Department for Education, 2021).

## **1.2 What do we know about the value of digital methods in contact?**

A review of 16 studies where digital contact had been attempted in public and private care contexts argued that it was not possible to simply state that digital contact was either positive or negative for children (Iyer, Albakri, BurrIDGE, Mayer & Gill, 2020). Key findings of the review were:

- digital methods can be more immediate, less formal and can help facilitate relationships with parents/relatives living elsewhere;
- digital methods can help overcome geographical distance;
- challenges are created for professionals and families around managing boundaries and supervising contact and unwanted digital contact can have risks;
- digital contact methods should not replace in person contact, but can be used alongside this;
- appropriate forms of digital contact depend on the child's age and experience, and adult scaffolding is needed – methods such as video calls may be of limited benefit to young children, whereas teenagers may be comfortable with and sometimes prefer digital methods.

The review offers suggestions for professionals about how best to facilitate digital contact in ways that are positive for children's wellbeing. They recommend taking a child centred approach, managing expectations and transitions to a digital approach, the importance of supporting all parties and of acknowledging digital inequalities.

A study during the first Covid 19 "lockdown" in 2020 provided an opportunity to understand how digital methods such as video calling, email and messaging could support contact between children in care, kinship care and adoption and their birth relatives (Neil et al, 2020). The study also explored the views of professionals, foster carers, adoptive parents and carers and birth relatives about the future use of such methods outside of the context of lockdown. Most supported the idea of having a wider range of options for contact including digital methods. During the pandemic agencies were not able to physically exchange letters between adoptive and birth families, and many began to use email as an alternative. There was support for the idea of the development of systems to enable ongoing digital exchanges, although the need for security/confidentiality and mediation was highlighted.

## **1.3 Moving towards the development of a digital platform – the origins of Letter Swap**

The Nuffield Family Justice Observatory published a report based on their 'adoption connections' project (Barnett-Jones & Manning, 2021). This project involved consultation with over 80 people and organisations with a focus on modernising mediated post adoption contact. The project explored how digital solutions might address some of the known difficulties of letterbox contact, identifying potential benefits and drawbacks of a digital system. In addition it highlighted: the need for any such system to consider children's rights to both contact and online safety; data security; interoperability (for example how families' data could be moved between different platforms); financial viability.

The work of developing a digital letterbox system was taken forward by Link Maker, who named their new platform 'Letter Swap'. Link Maker are a social enterprise who have a track record of maintaining an online platform across the UK. One of their key established functions is a searchable register containing profiles of children 'waiting' to be adopted and profiles of approved prospective adopters. This platform can facilitate adoption placements outside of traditional geographical or agency boundaries. Most adoption agencies have existing contracts and relationships with Link Maker, who are aware of the safeguards and legal requirements of sharing this type of data. Once developed, the Letter Swap platform was made available for some adoption professionals as well as birth and adoptive families to explore and feedback on. At the point the pilot started, the platform was not yet live.

## **1.4 Details of the pilot**

This research was commissioned by Adoption England to support the implementation and evaluation of 'Letter Swap'. The pilot began in July 2022 in five (of the 33) English Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs), with a sixth joining in July 2023. It was initially envisaged to last for 13 months, but was extended by two months to the end of October 2023. The Post Adoption Centre – UK (PAC-UK) were partners in the pilot, tasked with offering additional support to birth relatives wanting to use the platform. This pilot of Letter Swap was led by an implementation lead from Adoption England, supported by a steering group. The aims of the evaluation were:

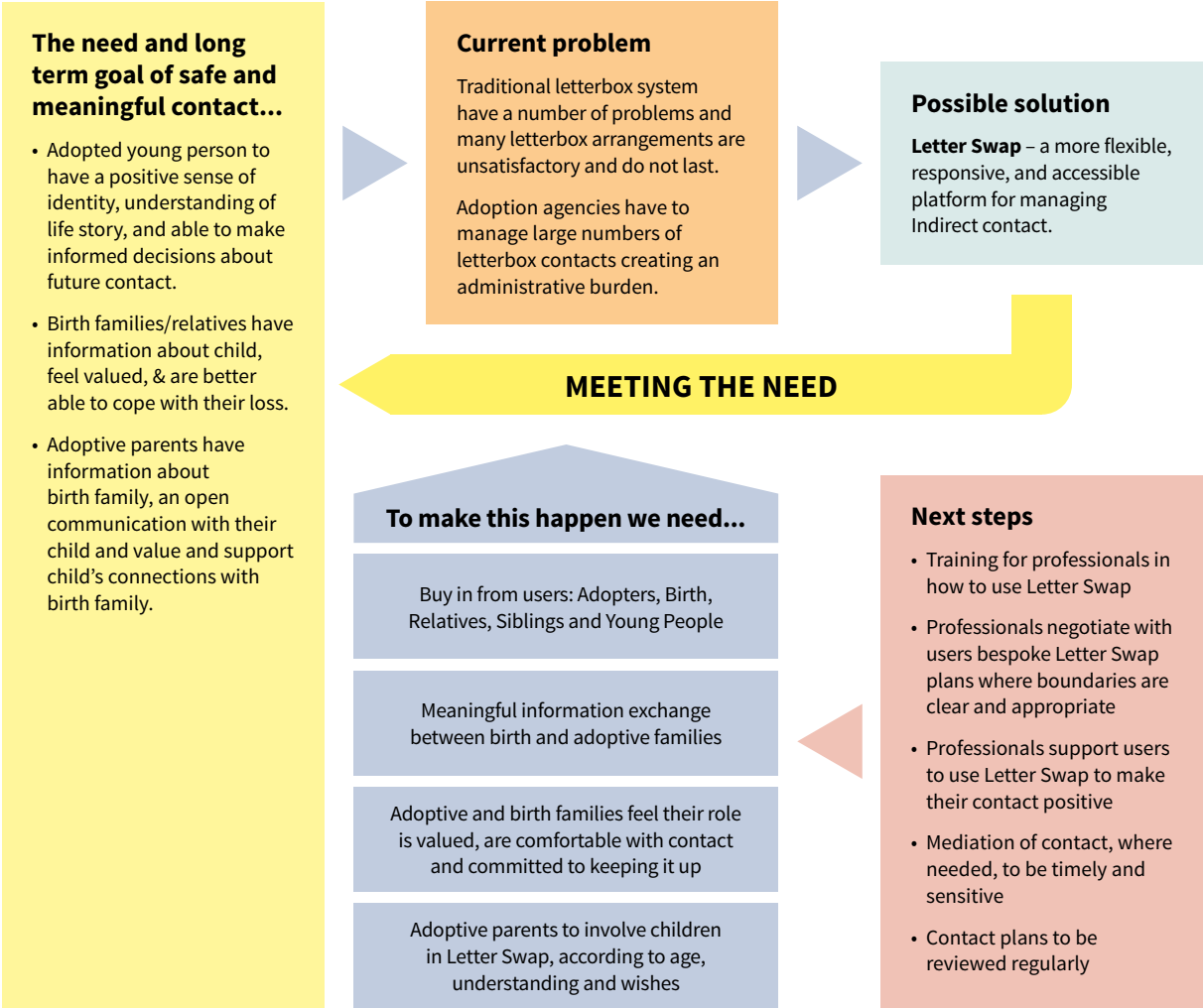
- To understand the challenges in implementing 'Letter Swap' and use this feedback to inform the pilot.
- To find out how Letter Swap is working in practice: does it help adoptive and birth families stay connected, and is there anything about Letter Swap that needs to change to make it better?
- To inform the future use of Letter Swap: to help people working in adoption and families decide whether to use Letter Swap.

## **1.5 Theory of Change**

The research team were asked to lead on work in collaboration with PAC-UK, RAA leaders, and Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board (ASGLB) 'maintaining relationships' subgroup to develop a Theory of Change for Letter Swap and post adoption contact, more broadly. A Theory of Change helps to detail why a change and/or intervention is necessary, what it aims to achieve, and factors that can block and/or facilitate change. The Theory of Change built on learning from existing research and a rapid consultation with: Letter Swap pilot site professionals, birth and adoptive parents, adopted teenagers and adults, RAA leaders and ASGLB subgroup members. The Theory of Change identified consensus about the need for change, particularly to achieve letterbox plans that were more likely to be reciprocal, rewarding, and sustainable. There was also universal agreement that Letter Swap would need buy in from all relevant groups to work well, and that the platform would need to be accessible and usable by all groups (see figure 1.1 below).

Stakeholder perspectives differed as to the goals of Letter Swap. Some emphasised the need for

Figure 1.1 How the Theory of Change applies to the Letter Swap pilot:



Letter Swap to help existing types of arrangements (which tend to be mediated, low frequency, and not include video and audio materials) to work better – a ‘fix the basics’ type approach. Others hoped Letter Swap would be more transformative and, for example, allow for more frequent exchanges, less mediation, and greater use of audio and video materials. Some people felt that it was important to ‘learn to walk before you run’ in terms of establishing whether Letter Swap worked before attempting a more ambitious agenda. Link Maker saw the purpose of the pilot to firstly establish ‘proof of concept’ that the system could be used to facilitate exchange of letters, with additional enhancements to be developed in later stages of the pilot. As the pilot progressed the divergent goals and ambitions of different users continued to influence how the platform was used.

The Theory of Change was documented and shared with steering group and other practitioners working in the pilot. It was used in staff training to prepare professionals to recruit and support families.



## 1.6 Chapter summary

- As part of a wider move towards modernising adoption in terms of maintaining relationships for adopted children, there is widespread acceptance that letterbox contact between adoptive and birth families needs improvement. The development of digital ways for adoptive and birth families to stay in touch is a much-anticipated development.
- Previous research suggests digital methods of contact can be useful for children separated from family members, but that key challenges associated with these methods must be addressed to ensure they are accessible, safe, and rewarding.
- Letter Swap is a digital platform to facilitate post adoption contact developed by Link Maker following a programme of work by the Nuffield Justice Family Observatory to develop the concept.
- In developing a Theory of Change, there was widespread agreement about the need for Letter Swap. But views diverged in terms of the extent to which people wanted to use Letter Swap to bring about significant changes in the nature of letterbox contact, or to establish the ability of the platform to replicate existing forms of contact on a digital system.
- The piloting and evaluation of Letter Swap was commissioned by Adoption England. Letter Swap was piloted by five Regional Adoption Agencies, with a sixth joining late on in the pilot. The evaluation of the pilot was carried out between July 2022 and October 2023.

# Chapter 2 - Methodology for the evaluation

## 2.1 Evaluation design

This formative evaluation used mixed methods. The project was designed to support the implementation of the Letter Swap pilot with findings shared and discussed with the pilot steering group to refine the implementation. The method of enquiry chosen was Normalisation Process Theory (NPT) (Murray et al, 2010). NPT is a practical theory which provides a means to identify the processes at work when service improvers seek to implement, integrate, or embed new sets of practices or ways of doing things into 'normal' routine practice (May & Finch 2009). It is a useful framework for action research methods (de Brún et al, 2016). NPT is built around a set of four core constructs that represent key mechanisms of action related to the different kinds of work that people do when they implement a complex intervention (May et al., 2007). The box below details how the four constructs relate to the Letter Swap evaluation.

*Figure 2.1 : The constructs of NPT as applied to this evaluation*

1. **Coherence:** how do people **make sense** of the new tool? What is Letter Swap, who is it for, what is it trying to achieve?
2. **Cognitive participation: buying-in** to the work required for successful innovation – how do individuals and groups set up to take part or deliver Letter Swap and do they see this as a legitimate work activity?
3. **Collective action: doing** this implementation work – can individuals and groups do what needs to be done to implement Letter Swap?
4. **Reflexive monitoring:** systematically **evaluating** the innovation and responsively modifying the work – how is using Letter Swap for post adoption contact affecting me and others?

This formative use of NPT allowed us to explore both views of the platform and the practices and processes involved in implementing the pilot from the perspective of implementers (i.e. workers in the pilot RAAs, PAC-UK, Adoption England and Link Maker) and users/pilot participants (adoptive parents and birth relatives). NPT was used to develop all interview and focus group topic guides.

## 2.2 Research design of the Letter Swap pilot

To best meet our research aims, a mixed-methods design was employed. The key elements of our data collection were as follows:

- Anonymised user platform data from Link Maker were analysed at regular intervals.
- Qualitative interviews were carried out with platform users (adoptive parents and birth relatives) at various timepoints throughout the pilot.
- We also analysed responses from a Link Maker user survey (adopters and birth relatives registered on Letter Swap system) in autumn of 2023.
- Three rounds of interviews and focus groups were undertaken with implementers. These were held at the beginning, middle and end of the pilot.

A project flow chart ([Appendix 1](#)) illustrates the platform development over the pilot's 14 months alongside the evaluation research phases and the methods employed.

## 2.3 Description of Letter Swap and recruitment of families to the pilot

Letter Swap is a web-based application, fully accessible on mobile devices (it has a mobile view). It is not currently available as an 'app' or application to be downloaded to mobile devices (although this is currently under development). Letter Swap is hosted on the existing Link Maker platform with all the same security, but with its own web address. The platform resides in a virtual private cloud, and is protected with anti-virus, continuously monitored with a threat detection service, and measured for security compliance to industry best practice.

Technological support was provided to both RAAs and directly to pilot users of the system via a phone line. Timely reporting of technical issues was important throughout the pilot. Processes put in place by the implementation lead helped to collate, document and relay issues to Link Maker as they occurred in the pilot sites. Link Maker delivered training to RAAs on the use of the platform in the initial eight weeks of the pilot, with some additional sessions offered later, when needed. Written guidance for users of the platform was made available.

Each of the participating RAAs were asked to recruit a range of 10 birth relatives and 10 adopters to the pilot study, including a mixture of cases in terms of factors such as which birth relatives were involved, variations in the nature of the contact plan, variations with regard to the adoptive family for example age of children. These adopters and birth relatives did not all have to be connected in the same letterbox arrangement. Letter Swap 'letterboxes' are created for a child or sibling group, and connected to that are the adopter/s and the birth family member. An adoptive family may have more than one letterbox relating to a child depending on the number birth family members they are remaining in touch with. This can also be the case for birth family members if they have two or more children living in different adoptive families.

Of the five initial RAAs in the pilot, there was wide variation in terms of the numbers of families recruited, type of families (new versus existing letterbox users; wanting to change contact versus keep it the same) and the timing of when families were put on the system. Not all RAAs reached their target in terms of numbers of families on the system. These variations are discussed in further

detail in chapter 3.

## 2.4 Ethics statement

The University of East Anglia's School of Social Work Research Ethics Committee approved both the ToC work and this evaluation study on 27 May 2022 (ETH2122-1676). No adverse incidents were reported during the project.

## 2.5 Link Maker Letter Swap platform user activity data

Anonymised platform activity data were provided on a regular basis to the research team for analysis in an excel spreadsheet. This comprised of non-identifying information concerning account data and activity – organised at a case level – i.e. we could see data relating to each individual 'letterbox' on the system. These data were used to provide descriptive statistics about activity on the platform. Neither Link Maker nor the evaluation team had access to the content of correspondence on the system.

**2.5.1 Account data.** Each letterbox had two potential parties: the adoptive parent/s and a birth relative. Data included the nature of the birth relative relationship (mother, father, grandparent, sibling, aunt/uncle, etc), as well as the status of all parties in terms of whether they had completed the registration process and fully logged onto the system. Details of whether correspondence needed to be checked by the agency before being released to the recipient, and the schedule of the contact plan were also provided. Although we were not given any data that would identify the regional location of individual accounts, total figures for each RAA were provided, showing how engagement varied between regions.

**2.5.2 Activity data.** Details of each individual correspondence: the type of correspondence (image/message/document); its status (such as: draft/sent/pending review/reviewed/redraft requested/draft deleted); who was the sender and recipient (adoptive family, birth family, or RAA); and the date and times that it was created, reviewed by the RAA, and read by the recipient.

## 2.6 The involvement of families in the research

**2.6.1 Interviews with users.** Our aim was to interview up to 25 birth relatives and 25 adoptive parents to understand their experiences of using Letter Swap. RAA workers forwarded invitations to be interviewed with options to contact the UEA team directly or consent to agencies passing on contact details to the evaluation team.

Adopters and (adult) birth relatives using the platform were interviewed via phone or video call (at interviewee's preference). Interviews covered people's interest and motivation to use Letter Swap, their experience of using the platform so far, the support they had received to use it, the comparison with previous experiences of letterbox contact, and (for adoptive parents) whether and how they had involved their child using Letter Swap. £10 amazon vouchers were offered to adoptive parent and birth relative participants as a thank you for their time. Interviews recordings

were transcribed verbatim and anonymised. Data were analysed thematically within computer analytical software (NVivo) using the constructs and components of NPT as a coding framework.

**2.6.2 Survey of users.** In the autumn of 2023 Link Maker invited all users registered on the platform to complete a brief survey giving feedback about their experience of Letter Swap. Respondents were made aware that their anonymized data would be shared for the purposes of research. The survey included a mixture of open and closed questions exploring similar areas to the interviews (see above). Text from the open questions was analysed alongside the data gathered in interviews. Closed questions were used to generate some descriptive statistics. To keep the survey short, no demographic data beyond type of user (e.g. birth relative or adoptive parent) were collected.

The participation of families in the research is summarised in Table 2.1, with further details given below. Because the survey was sent to all Letter Swap users, it is possible that some people who were interviewed may also have answered the survey. The fact that the same number of adopters and birth relatives took part in each strand of data collection is a coincidence.

*Table 2.1 - The participation of Letter Swap users in the evaluation*

Type of participant	Interviews	Survey
Adoptive parent	19 (8 fathers, 11 mothers)	19
Birth relative	10 (2 fathers, 1 mother, 1 adult sibling)	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>29</b>

In the interview study:

- The adopters were parents to 26 children for whose contact Letter Swap was being used (some had more than one ‘letterbox’).
- The age range of the children was between 2- 12 years with 8 being under age 5.
- Almost all users were switching from an existing letterbox system where they had used either mail or email. Only one person was new to letterbox contact.
- Usage of Letter Swap varied from not having been able to use the system yet through to experiencing one way contact or two ways exchanges (in one case including video messages).

In the survey:

- 23% (n=29) of registered users responded to the survey.
- 24 respondents had sent and/or received items via Letter Swap – 23 had sent something and 16 had received something.
- No-one from the survey had sent or received audio or video.

## 2.7 Data collection with RAA staff and other implementers

The topics explored in the interviews and focus groups varied across the life of the project as follows:

Round 1: sense making and buy in to implementing the platform: training the frontline workers (Letterbox coordinators etc) to use the system and to begin recruiting families willing to pilot it.

Round 2: progress with implementation: issues with recruitment, emerging issues with platform functionality, and agency reflections on the system and preparing for the larger enhancements.

Round 3: progress with implementation and use of the platform, but with more emphasis on evaluations of the platform and pilot.

- RAA frontline workers were invited to join online focus group(s)
- RAA leads took part in focus groups in round 1, then individual interviews in rounds 2 and 3
- Interviews were carried out with the Letter Swap implementation lead from Adoption England, and representatives from Link Maker and PAC-UK.

The numbers of implementers who participated in the research in the three rounds is shown in table 2.2 below. Not all RAAs were necessarily represented in every focus group.

*Table 2.2 – Participation of implementers in the evaluation*

Type of participant	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3
RAA Letter Swap leads (focus group in round 1, interview in rounds 2 and 3)	4	5	5
RAA Letter Swap workers (focus groups)	5	7	3
PAC-UK representative			1
Adoption England Implementation Lead	1	1	1
Link Maker representative/s	1	1	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>12</b>

Data from focus groups and interviews with implementers were transcribed and analysed thematically using the NPT framework to code the data.

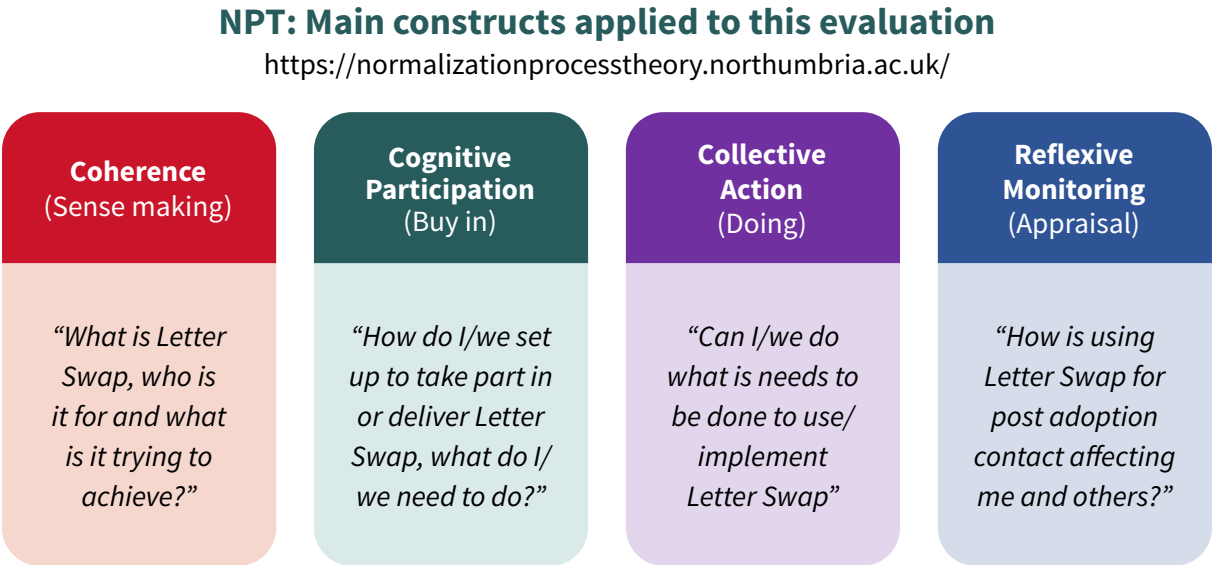
## 2.8 Chapter summary

- The evaluation used Normalisation Process Theory as a guiding framework to understand the factors and processes affecting the implementation of Letter Swap in the RAAs.
- This was a formative evaluation meaning it took place during the pilot rather than after it was completed.
- The research analysed both quantitative data about platform use supplied by Link Maker, and qualitative data collected from adoptive and birth families, and professionals working to implement Letter Swap.
- Data were collected continuously throughout the pilot from adoptive and birth parents. Nineteen adoptive parents were interviewed, and 19 completed a survey. Ten birth relatives were interviewed, and 10 completed the survey. Because the survey was anonymous, it was not possible to know whether the interview and survey samples were completely distinct.
- Data were collected in three rounds from implementers using focus groups and interviews.

# Chapter 3. What were the challenges of embedding Letter Swap as a new culture within adoption agencies?

This chapter draws on the data collected from the implementers of the pilot: the frontline RAA staff, the Letter Swap leads within the agencies, the Adoption England implementation manager, the PAC UK representative, and representatives from Link Maker. The data were analysed using the constructs from Normalisation Process Theory as summarised in figure 3.1 below.

Figure 3.1 – NPT constructs applied in the evaluation



## 3.1 Coherence – what do people hope to achieve using Letter Swap? Was there agreement about the goals of the pilot?

Coherence is the sense making work people do when implementing a new innovation like Letter Swap. Implementation is more likely to be successful where those involved are ‘on the same page’ about what they are trying to achieve. Our initial round of data collection with implementers revealed a number of **barriers to building coherence**. The first such barrier was variation between the different RAAs and also between Link Maker and the RAAs in understanding the purpose of the platform.

Different RAAs had different expectations, these often depending on their starting point. RAAs varied in terms of: IT systems for managing contact; current approaches to letterbox (for example if the RAA was already offering exchanges by email, the extent to which mediation was routinely built in or not); systems for supporting users with letterbox (for example was birth parent support available ‘in-house’ and or via an external organisation; systems in place for reviewing contact). Existing systems and arrangements also varied *within* RAAs with some sub-regional local authorities having kept historical arrangements, and some RAAs having undergone transitions to review, consolidate/integrate structures, staffing, IT systems and approaches.



These different starting points affected people's hopes of Letter Swap in various ways. For example RAA1 hoped the platform would be a comprehensive system (complete therefore with case note recording functions) onto which they could migrate all their cases.

...because we've got five local authorities in our [agency] and so we've got five different recording systems that we use and plus we've got Letter Swap as well. [...] That's what I really need to aim for is a solid recording platform that enables people to keep in touch more easily as well (Leads FG Round 1 RAA1).

The initial prototype however did not have case note functions and as a time limited pilot, agencies needed to keep parallel notes/records in established systems, meaning their work was duplicated. A case note function was developed during the pilot, and further follow up is needed to examine how this is working.

Others were expecting that the platform would be a more modern/user friendly 'app' that would add to their existing practice of digital exchanges through email, particularly for those families wishing to take more control and to try something less formal:

[...] so it was kind of almost kind of a step forward from letterbox, but something that we could be involved in if families wanted us to be so, you know, in terms of exchanges coming by us and us forwarding them, but equally where it could be family to family and we didn't need to be involved... (Lead interview R1: RAA4).

Link Maker had developed the platform from their own resources – with no additional funding. The purpose of the pilot to them had been to test 'proof of concept' of a digital platform that initially would focus on a basic exchange of letters. Their hopes were to begin with replicating traditional letterbox arrangements (exchanging letters) in order to understand how automating the system could improve things. For example whether it could speed up exchanges or whether it was helpful for families to be able to track the progress of their letter through being able to see if it had been received, when it had been opened and checked by the agency, when it was forwarded to the other party, and when it was read by the other party. Their initial goal was not to implement a 'finished article' in terms of a product that could totally replace existing letterbox systems by offering accompanying case recording. Neither had they planned to offer enhanced functions such as video messaging in the early stages of the pilot.

For us, we were getting pressure [...] to deliver the record keeping element of Letter Swap which was never promised in the initial stages. (Implementer 2, R2)

These differing expectations affected the progress of the pilot in a number of ways. For agencies, it affected which families they recruited to the pilot, and it shaped their appraisal of the platform. For Link Maker, the desire of some agencies to bring in enhancements added pressure, making it harder to focus on the initial delivery of the basic functions of the platform. For agencies who were particularly focused on enhancements such as case notes or video messaging, it affected their willingness to add cases to the system. By the time some enhancements arrived, some professionals then felt that with the end of the pilot approaching, it was not worth attempting to use the new function. An example of this was 'settling in letters' (a letter written by adopters soon after the child moves in to let the birth family know how the child is settling in), an option for which was added to the system after pressure from agencies, but which was not used by agencies.

There was a **widespread internalised commitment expressed** across the pilot to the potential of digital contact, although agencies already offering some digital options (e.g. two RAAs already offered digital exchanges of photos and letters exchanged via email) had more reservations about what Letter Swap could add. There were also hopes around a digital system automating some administrative aspects, freeing up staff for other skilled work:

It doesn't need to be done by a person then that's got to be a benefit because it frees up work time for others to do more meaningful work rather than just clicking a button or sending an e-mail (Lead RAA6).

There remained acknowledgement of the likely existing barriers that the system would not address, these relating to aspects of letterbox that require a 'human' element. For example, the system is dependent on users to be able to read. When letters are not sent, a follow up by the contact coordinator to find out why and offer support will be needed. Generally workers expressed commitment to not lose valued elements of the existing system: particularly tailored support for birth families to do contact and tactile elements of receiving something created by hand etc.

**Frontline workers charged with undertaking most of the implementation work were not directly involved in the development of the platform and pilot** despite their sense making being crucial to implementation: *'we were told about it but not asked about it. It wasn't a consultation'* (Workers FG R1:1). There was also some acknowledgement by leads interviewed that letterbox coordinators might be anxious that Letter Swap was an *'electronic system trying to do away with our jobs and let's automate everything'* (Lead RAA6). Workers in the focus groups also identified **problems with the timing, mode and content of training** offered to them to support coherence and successful implementation. With delays to the readiness of the platform and start date of the pilot, there was a longer than anticipated gap between training and using the system for some RAAs. The training was also felt to be rushed, using a less functional prototype, and without the opportunity to try using it. Offers of additional training were made by Link Maker, though these were not always taken up.

...initially we struggled [...] I don't think the kind of the training right at the beginning was very helpful and there was still a lot of unanswered questions... I know there were quite a few teething problems, I think when (Implementation Lead) became involved that that's been a really good (RAA3 Lead: R2).

Finally here, and linked to the two issues above, as the pilot progressed we found **variation in agencies' coherence re: recruitment of their 10 adopters and 10 birth relatives**. Although guided to recruit for maximum variation in types of adoption cases, this was interpreted differently and, as discussed in section 3.3, strategies adopted reflected evolving local understandings of the purpose of the platform, but also frontline workers' relationships with families. Some agencies targeted families with track records of consistent contact, even if only one way. Others focused on looking for families eager to innovate or try advanced functions. One agency specifically tried to recruit families whose contact letter was due in the near future, so that they could try out the system without too much delay. One agency added quite a large number of cases to the system, targeting mainly 'new' letterbox users. The thinking behind this was that people already used to an existing system might be reluctant to try something else, whereas new users might be more willing to try a novel system. A consequence of putting new cases on the system however was

that families and workers were familiarising themselves with the new system, alongside trying to actually establish the contact itself. Added to this, the first contact exchange may not have been due for families who had recently adopted their child. These reports of variations in the types of families added to the system were useful in understanding the activity of families on the platform, as reported in chapters 4 and 5.

A lot of work was done about one third of the way into the pilot to address and improve collective coherence with assurances given about the functionality of the platform, what cases couldn't be included, what features or enhancements were able to be added within the lifetime of the pilot, and when. Monthly implementation group meetings for frontline workers and the implementation lead were also established to monitor and support coherence and buy in (see next section). These groups were later identified as very helpful in identifying concerns and giving frontline workers a better understanding of the overall pilot.

### **3.2 Cognitive Participation – how did the professionals organise who was doing what in order to implement Letter Swap? Did team members ‘buy into’ new ways of doing things?**

Cognitive participation is the relational, ‘buy in’ work that people do to build and sustain a community of practice around the implementation of new tools or practices. For the funders and Link Maker in particular, funding the pilot and evaluation and developing the platform for and through piloting involved significant buy in and commitment from the start.

Obviously [we] have had a lot of people working on it and haven't had any money in yet, so yeah, it's been. It's basically the investment from existing income ... I think this bit of funding to extend the pilot I think is the first time [...] there's been any kind of investment, otherwise it's all been us (Implementer 4, Link Maker).

Buy in was also bolstered through standard governance and communication structures set up within the pilot. The theory of change work also focused on clarifying goals and potential barriers and challenges, though perhaps it was more successful in raising awareness of different aims than arriving at shared understanding of what was everyone was trying to achieve. The pilot implementation lead was key in driving the pilot forward. Although appointed only in the run up to the pilot going live, this lead had the necessary background in adoption agencies and understanding of contextual challenges. Feedback from all partners was unanimous that this lead was a key facilitator in implementation, being available, knowledgeable and someone who listened to concerns, addressed barriers efficiently and who could petition to unlock/input extra resources as required.

(Lead name) emails and checks in, goes to you directly rather than via your manager, what we are raising is actually being heard. (Lead name) understands the frustrations, things are working well on that side. (RAA3, FG:R2a)

Discussions between the implementation lead and agencies had taken place to address the legal agreements/work to support data sharing, governance issues and identifying frontline workers

for training. As mentioned in earlier sections, not all RAAs participated to the same extent. In a minority of RAAs not all sub-LAs were taking part in the Letter Swap pilot. Thus, some agencies were more 'bought in' than others and some more 'ready to proceed' than others – even having identified potential pilot families/participants. Although the numbers of RAA workers involved in the pilot varied over time, most agencies trained a wider number than actually went on to recruit or register/support families on the platform.

Within adoption agencies there are procedures and protocols in place to maintain the separation of personal details of adopters and birth relatives to mitigate against data breaches. So there **was apprehension and anxiety reported from workers about the platform requirements that details of both parties are held together on the same platform**, and how they might allay pilot participants' concerns about safeguarding confidentiality: *'I think a lot of my team are very nervous about it, what people can see.'* (RAA1, FG2:G1).

The level of **workers' and agency buy in to Letter Swap and its pilot varied over its lifetime**.

Buy in was positively influenced by steps taken to increase coherence, but frustrations with barriers in operationalising Letter Swap could undermine buy in of agencies and families. Agencies who had been most prepared to set up to begin the pilot met more challenges and reported more frustration. Those who started later had been forewarned to anticipate certain barriers, and they benefited from the fact that earlier glitches had been fixed. Some agencies thus never reached their target of getting 10 families on the system (as buy-in waned over time) whereas an RAA who began work on recruiting families later on added many more families to the platform.

From the Link Maker user data it was very clear that some agencies, and authorities within agencies, were much more proactive than others in getting families onto the system and then prompting them to use it:

I don't know if they're more committed to using it than others, but some of them seem to be more engaged with their families and moving them on and making sure that they've registered and making sure that there's a full contact, whereas others have kind of put their families on and just let them develop on its own without giving it a little nudge. (Implementer 2: R2).

Certainly by the last round of data collection, fewer workers attended the focus group and nearly all that did reported having lost momentum - being less actively involved with the platform and following up families, knowing that the pilot was coming to an end.

...none of my families are really using it at the moment. ... I feel like I've not used it properly for ages and I've probably kind of left it myself as well. Do you know? Because I don't feel like it's working for us and people prefer to do it just in the way that they've always done. (RAA3, W1).

Those workers who remained most active were those trying to encourage families to try the new audio/video functions and those who were interested in progressing relationships between adopters and birth families. At the point the evaluation ended new agencies were only just joining the platform; their experiences may be more positive as early glitches in the system have been remedied.

### 3.3 Collective Action- could the professionals do what was needed to be done to implement Letter Swap?

Collective action is the operational 'doing' work to enact an innovation. Those charged with the majority of the operational work of Letter Swap were the frontline workers in the RAAs. Also heavily involved in operational work were the developers at Link Maker, seeking to maintain and develop the platform (for market). Participant users of the platform (families) were meant to contact Link Maker directly when meeting any functionality issues but as the quote below illustrates, most families took their issues to their known agency worker who then had to try and report this to Link Maker. This more circuitous route was problematic in terms of developers being able to get to grips with the details of the issues affecting user.

Occasionally families have come to us directly about login issues and we've helped them along, but the issues tend to be directed back to the local authority. The local authority comes for questions to us and it goes round in a loop that way. (Implementer 2R2).

Similarly, whilst it had been hoped that partners PAC-UK would be involved in supporting birth relatives in using the platform (rather than frontline workers), in reality it proved difficult to get people to take up this offer, despite PAC-UK having existing contracts with some agencies to undertake similar work:

But within (RAA2-4), we do the whole range of stuff (supporting birth relatives and adoptees) and we've had contracts with them for years, ...and yet and yet they didn't take up the support ... I'm not quite clear why, because we have quite trusting relationships' (Implementer 3).

PAC-UK were not able to log into Letter Swap to edit/upload content etc., meaning that they would need to physically be with birth relatives in order to help them. It was also noted that not allowing third party access might also impact ways of working with other sections of agency adoption support, for example duty workers being able to deal with queries. This meant some RAAs felt they could not switch entirely over to Letter Swap: "*we are never going to do a complete swap over. We are always going to be playing with these two things and that feels clunky as a service as well*" (FG2b)

In the end PAC-UK not being to access the platform was a moot point, as birth relatives did not in fact take up the offer of having someone new support them. RAA workers believed that this was because they valued the relationship with, and support of, their familiar coordinator (frontline worker).

It's just an added complexity on top of an already very complex service that we run: 'I don't want PAC-UK coming out to help me, why can't you just come out and help me I have built up my trust with you, I know you, I don't want anyone else helping me, knowing my business' (RAA3, FG2).

Where the PAC -UK offer might have worked better is in situations where birth relatives had disengaged from contact (and therefore where they didn't have an existing relationship with a trusted worker), or in 'new' contact cases. In such situations, offering new, independent, specialist

support would perhaps have been differently valued. However, agencies did not typically target these types of situations for recruitment to the pilot. The key material point here is that **participant families did not take up offers of external support built into the pilot and as such, frontline workers were burdened with platform support issues.**

Interviews and focus groups with RAA leads and workers detailed similar **difficulties in getting used to, and using the platform.** This was in respect to the (above) noted anxieties around safeguarding security and inputting details of families, with the system requiring both a phone number and e-mail address for each registered user, even if the other party was not participating. They needed confidence that the programmers had thought about such issues and how potential possibilities for breaches had been mitigated against. It was also felt that staff needed practice in using a dummy version of the system, before approaching families.

...we feel it would have been better to have had a period where we could have done some kind of testing in house, a bit like what we're doing now, creating the dummy accounts before and with them, before they went out to service users (Lead interview R1: RAA4).

Both these issues contributed to **high levels of anxiety** about a) being able to use such a technical system for sensitive data/issues, and b) to be able describe it accurately to potential families who might take part in the pilot and have a good understanding of their user experience.

In terms of workers using the system, there were **reported various inefficiencies and reliability issues. This is to be expected in an early stage pilot, and many issues were fixed during the pilot.** For example, two early fixes were allowing workers to search for and link to individuals already on the system, such as a birth relative with children in separate adoptive placements; and allowing updating of users' contact details.

**Further issues continued into the middle and later stages of the pilot. Several of these have now been or are being remedied** (altogether Link Maker released 11 waves of enhancements during the pilot). While some issues may have related to limitations of the technology, others were more to do with either families or workers not fully understanding how the platform worked. Issues reported at various stages by professionals included:

- Not being able to send the same contact item to multiple recipients in one go: *“And I think what we were hoping is that almost you could have had like a tick box to who you wanted it to go to and it would just then be sent”* (RAA5 Lead:R2).
- Users having to upload contact items e.g. a letter, photos separately rather than as a bundle (a fix for this issue has recently been released)
- Whilst able to support sibling contact through allowing foster carers to register, the platform could not register/support within agency adopter to adopter exchanges, or non-UK resident adopters, so those adopters had to be told they could not take part in the pilot (Link Maker are currently working on the issue of adopter to adopters exchanges. The option to add non UK resident users is now available).
- Workers missed alerts of activity on the platform as cases were not assigned – some staff understood that Letter Swap required cases to be assigned to individual workers, but this is not always how agencies work. In fact there was an option to add a team email, but not everyone was aware of this.



- Issues with the platform not registering activity: RAA3: *'I had a problem with the system not showing that people had sent things as well ... so that kinda it don't really make you trust it, does it?'* (FG2:G2). This is an example of a problem possibly caused by users not fully understanding how to use the system. For example family users were creating drafts but not sending the message, possibly because they understood that the agency could see and check the draft. However organisations could not see drafts of letters until family users pressed "send". There was also a bug affecting the platform for about four weeks in January to December 2022 which affected updates about the status of communication.
- Barriers to users' registering on the system and indeed logging into the system afterwards in order to send contact materials, with families often contacting RAAs rather than Link Maker.
- There was also a period of time when staff at one RAA couldn't access the platform, which took a lot of time and effort to investigate. This was ultimately an interface issue between the platform and the IT systems at that particular LA, about which insufficient detail has been passed to Link Maker.

Another significant barrier to operationalising Letter Swap was **the amount of work involved in reporting and evidencing the 'bugs' or glitches in the platform**. This was not anticipated by the pilot and was frustrating for workers and families taking part. Meeting such bugs, many families (particularly birth relatives) immediately disengaged and reverted to using previously established means of doing contact, sometimes with agency workers uploading on their behalf. Even when families persevered, 'bugs' could cause frustration, sometimes threatening agencies hard-won, trusted relationships with families. Here a birth grandmother within RAA4 tried five times to log onto the platform:

RAA4: '[Grandmother] has lost faith in us, ... people don't understand that it is something from an outside [organisation] ... For so much of our birth families this is way over their heads, this is adopter level, it's not birth family level' (FG2b)

From the monthly Link Maker data it was clear that recruitment of families was slow and that (as anticipated) there were more adopters than birth relatives being added to the system. **Strategies within agencies varied in respect to which families they were approaching** (see section 3.1 above). Agencies were not seeking to reignite contact where this had been lost, through offering new options.

Despite the agency buy in to the theory of change underpinning modernising contact, established adoptive families approached to participate in the pilot were not necessarily bought in, or even aware of such direction of travel in policy agendas: to open up post adoption contact (see chapter 5). Ultimately adoptive parents have sole parental responsibility for the child and can thus veto any proposed additions to the post adoption contact agreements, **therefore workers seeking to recruit both/all exchanging parties to the pilot tended to start with adopters before approaching and potentially disappointing birth relatives**, despite birth relatives being anticipated to face greater challenges to participation in any digital platform. **Workers were not using recruitment to the Letter Swap pilot as an invitation to review contact agreements**, this being something that was more routinely done in response to requests from families, in line with child's changing identity development needs. Workers were also wary about contact agreements becoming more like an informal messaging service that would require increased agency checks.

**Workers reported multiple barriers to recruitment.** These included:

- Adoptive parents' discomfort with going digital being seen as compromising confidentiality, combined with workers lack of knowledge and confidence around security aspects.
- Adopters not being open to doing anything new or additional to that already set out in their post adoption contact agreement.
- Given many adopters did not want to change contact plans, workers felt that they could not offer the birth relative the novel options or indeed anything 'new'.
- Fears that switching some birth relatives to an online platform **would be reducing what they were offered in terms of a personalised, tailored support service:**

RAA3: 'We do a lot of creative things to get letters to families and families don't want to try something new when they are getting a tailored approach. It's that relationship between the birth families and us that's the key' (FG2:G2).

- Difficulties in more vulnerable birth relatives' understanding of what they were being invited to participate in:

RAA2W1: '... because birth parents have got learning difficulties, they just wouldn't grasp. Do you know what I mean? [...] because it's a new system, it's, it's difficult for them to get a hold of if that makes sense' (FG3).

There was a shared understanding that as the pilot progressed the platform became much more stable, but in adding new functionality like video, new problems arose causing further frustrations for staff and worries about the impact on end users:

RAA3: ' [...] it feels like we've jumped through a lot of hoops for this one exchange [of videos] ...because it's the young person themselves that's actually done the video' (FG3).

Analysis also showed staffing pressures within agencies, and the pilot participation taking up more of worker's time than anticipated causing issues. For example, in RAA5 a single worker (more senior coordinator) was expected to deliver Letter Swap on top of, and in some ways in duplication of her existing work:

RAA5: 'I can't keep doing home visits (to support families to get on Letter Swap) and I'm the only member of team doing Letter Swap, so that is a massive difficulty for us at the moment, doing all legwork and support on top of coordinating, so it's definitely difficult' (FG2)

The pressures of the pilot for all, at times led to a lack of mutual understanding between RAAS and Link Maker around issues like who should support families, how quickly families were being added to the platform, and speed of adding in enhancements. As the pilot progressed the range of challenges described above started to affect the appraisal and consequent collective action of some agencies who slowed down or stopped their work with the Letter Swap system. This is discussed further in 3.4 below.



### 3.4 Reflexive Monitoring – how did people feel using Letter Swap was affecting them and others?

Reflexive monitoring is the appraisal work that people do to assess and understand the ways that working with an innovation, such as Letter Swap, affects them and others around them. At the point that final appraisals were made there was broad congruence across agencies about the pros and cons of Letter Swap. As the pilot progressed, some agencies experienced a dip in positivity about Letter Swap – due to ongoing operational problems, increased demands and a lack of positive feedback from families. For example, the following RAA lead had hoped the platform might result in more unmediated contact exchanges, reducing work for professionals: *“But I don’t think that that’s happened with any of the ones that we’ve set up to date. So I think rather than it helping us, I think it hasn’t been an additional task that we’ve had to complete”* (Lead interview RAA5:R2)

Despite the widely reported frustrations and disappointments, agencies maintained their commitment to the direction of travel in terms of digital contact’s role in opening up post adoption contact, and some viewed **the pilot as a valuable learning exercise**. Benefits from the pilot identified by implementers included:

- A more consistent approach to letterbox within the RAA as co-ordinators from partner LAs worked together on the pilot
- Benefits of working alongside other RAAs to focus on letterbox: *“It has been really interesting to work with different RAAs ... it really makes you think and make sure we realise really what a massive area letterbox is and the complexities of letterbox. ...”* (Lead interview RAA1:R2)
- Building understanding of the potential of digital contact and for whom, through feedback about positive experiences:

The feedback ... in terms of the two way exchange we have had has been really fantastic and really heart warming and we’ve really it’s just been such a success and if we could bottle that and do that for all our contacts then, you know, I’m sold [...] The platform has given that particular exchange the ability to build and grow and develop, and that is only going to be positive for that for that for that child (Lead interview RAA1:R3)

It feels as though it’s either a system potentially for new families, newly formed families that haven’t had an experience of letter box [...] or for those families who are kind of chomping at the bit for something more than letterbox [...] It does kind of have those flexibilities. It allows for options for ourselves to be involved or not involved (Lead interview RAA4:R3)

Where it is working well is where ‘kids are getting involved’ – they have teenagers in the family and they are inputting into the content (RAA5, FG1).

I think when there’s siblings. Definitely, because obviously you know it makes it much more natural communication. And... standard adopters that are open and willing ... the ones that you know are willing to send photos and things. I think that is your ideal. (RAA 3, FG3).

Others felt the **costs involved in the pilot possibly outweighed benefits**, particularly in terms of issues families had experienced with the system:

...we feel pretty strongly at [RAA4] that the system should have been trialled before we started involving real families in it, and I think some of that troubleshooting should have been done beforehand, cause I think that was probably the bit that kind of led to us getting a bit deflated with it (Lead interview RAA4:R2)

Link Maker reflected that they had **learned more about the needs of birth relatives** and the challenges for parents in using the system, particularly for people with learning difficulties. But they commented on the challenges of preparing accessible documentation for parents with learning difficulties.

I personally don't have experience of catering for that kind of vast range of needs and making documentation that is suitable for everyone [...] (Implementer 2: R3)

Ultimately, there was consensus amongst workers in the last focus group that more work needed to be done around the culture for change in respect to opening up post adoption contact, and that this platform alone could not make that happen: (RAA3W2): *'I think we're creating a system for a culture that isn't there yet. It's how we'd like it to be'* (FG3). From one lead, we also heard that there is perhaps more resistance than anticipated in respect to existing adopters signing up to this culture change:

I often hear that adopters are really keen to do kind of change maintaining relationships, [...] but actually there are a vast amount of our adopters that don't hold those views. (Lead Interview RAA5:R3).

### 3.5 Chapter Summary

- There was variation between agencies' understanding of the Letter Swap platform and pilot in terms of how Letter Swap differed to existing approaches and whether it was universal – suitable for managing all agency cases, or for particular families looking to evolve contact.
- There were also tensions between Link Maker and participating agencies in terms of the goals of the pilot. Link Maker were more focused on testing the routine exchange of letters, and learning about the automation of this process, whereas some professionals were focused more on the potential of the platform to undertake new functions such as case notes and video messaging. The speed of the rollout of these additional functions was therefore a source of frustration for agencies, whilst Link Maker felt under pressure to deliver developments faster than expected.
- Frontline workers delivering Letter Swap felt they could have been better prepared to understand and use the system, although offers of additional training were not always taken up.
- The participation of professionals was facilitated by the implementation lead from Adoption England who helped address issues and barriers and increased the buy in of agencies.

- The participation of families was facilitated predominantly by known and trusted workers (usually letterbox coordinators) within RAAs, but it was challenging for these workers to support families to use the system alongside their other work.
- Workers within the agencies generally found that taking part in the pilot took up more time than they originally anticipated as the new system had to run alongside existing systems.
- Agencies encountered difficulties in recruiting users to the platform; adoptive parents did not necessarily want to change their contact plans, and birth parents faced a range of barriers including not seeing any benefit to Letter Swap if their contact plan remained the same, and fearing the loss of existing personalised arrangements
- There was strong internalised commitment from agencies in terms of the potential for digital systems to be useful in facilitating post adoption contact. However delays and glitches in the rollout of Letter Swap, together with the time-limited nature of the pilot, affected the confidence of both users and professionals throughout the pilot. This impacted the action taken by agencies and meant that recruitment of new families petered out before the end of the pilot.
- Difficulties with the platform improved over time, and workers became more familiar with using the system. RAAs who joined the pilot in earlier stages encountered more problems than those who joined later, by which time early difficulties have been ironed out.
- Letter Swap was valued as a safe way for families to deepen and extend contact where this was desired, but the platform was designed with a wider culture change in mind that had not yet been achieved.
- Agencies taking the part in the pilot valued the learning from the pilot. They felt the potential for digital contact had been demonstrated.

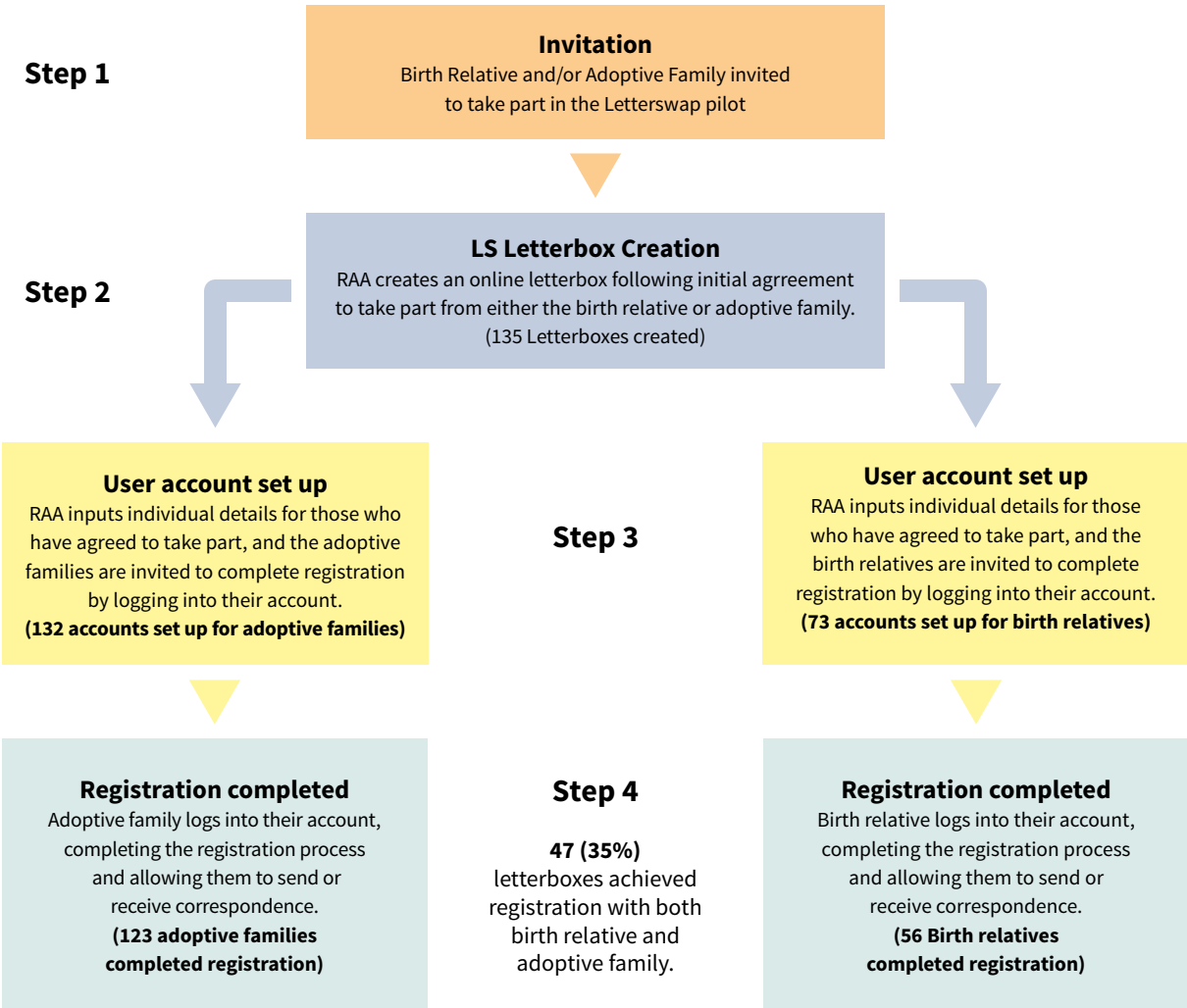
# Chapter 4 – Findings from the Analysis of Link Maker data

## 4.1 Recruiting families to the pilot

The goal for the pilot was to have between 60 - 120 letterboxes trying out Letter Swap. By the end of the pilot, there were 135 Letter Swap letterboxes. These involved 135 potential birth relatives, linked to 77 adoptive families, involving 94 children.

Figure 4.1 below shows how families were added to the system. For each adoptive family or birth relative who agreed to take part in the pilot (Step 1), the RAA would create a letterbox for that contact arrangement (Step 2) and set up an account for each user who had consented to take part (Step 3). The adopter and/or birth relative would then be invited to complete the registration process by logging into their account and confirming their details (Step 4). This process meant there were three possible statuses for each party: ‘not taking part’ (initial invitation declined by that party or they were not invited), ‘set-up’ (agreement to take part given and agency enters initial details), and ‘registered’ (adopter/birth parent logs in and completes their account). - see figure 4.1 below.

Figure 4.1 - Stages of set-up and registration



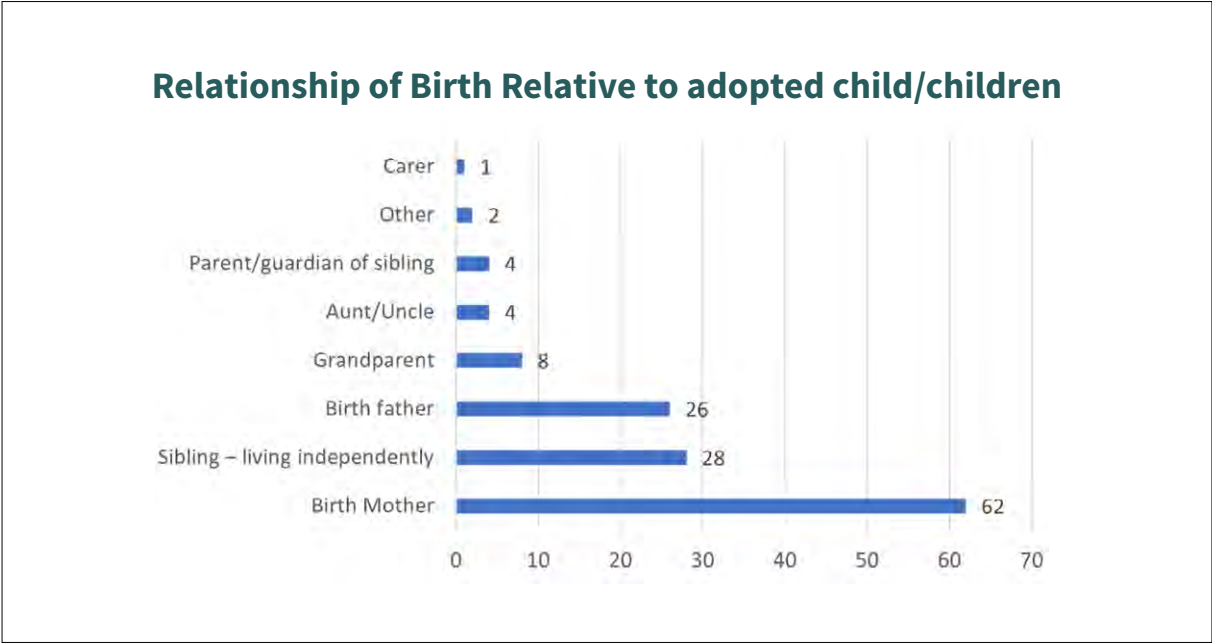
Adoptive parents were both more likely to agree to use Letter Swap and to successfully register compared to birth relatives. Of the 135 LS letterboxes

- 132 of 135 had accounts set-up for adoptive families; 123 (93%) of these had registered (one adoptive family could be linked to more than one letterbox if contact was taking place with different birth relatives, or they had more than one adopted child).
- Only 73/135 had accounts set-up for birth relatives of which 56 (77%) had registered.
- Both the adoptive and birth family being registered to the same account was achieved for 47 (35%) of letterboxes.
- The most prevalent situation, (61 letterboxes, 45%), was to have the adoptive family fully registered, but the birth relative not taking part.

More adopters may have been on the system because agencies tended to approach adoptive families first. Adopters may have been set up on the system, and subsequently birth relatives may have declined to take part. There were 15 cases (11%) where birth relatives had been set up on the system, but had not completed the registration process. There were three cases where the birth relatives had completed the registration but the adopters were not set up on the system, and three cases where neither party had completed the registration. Some of the 'adopter only' letter boxes may still have been functioning two-way letter exchanges, but with the birth relatives taking part off-platform (e.g. their correspondence being sent to the agency by post or email). The Letter Swap system was designed to cater for plans where only one party wished to use the digital system. In other cases the adoptive parents may have been writing letters knowing they may not necessarily receive any reply - as sometimes happens in traditional letterbox systems.

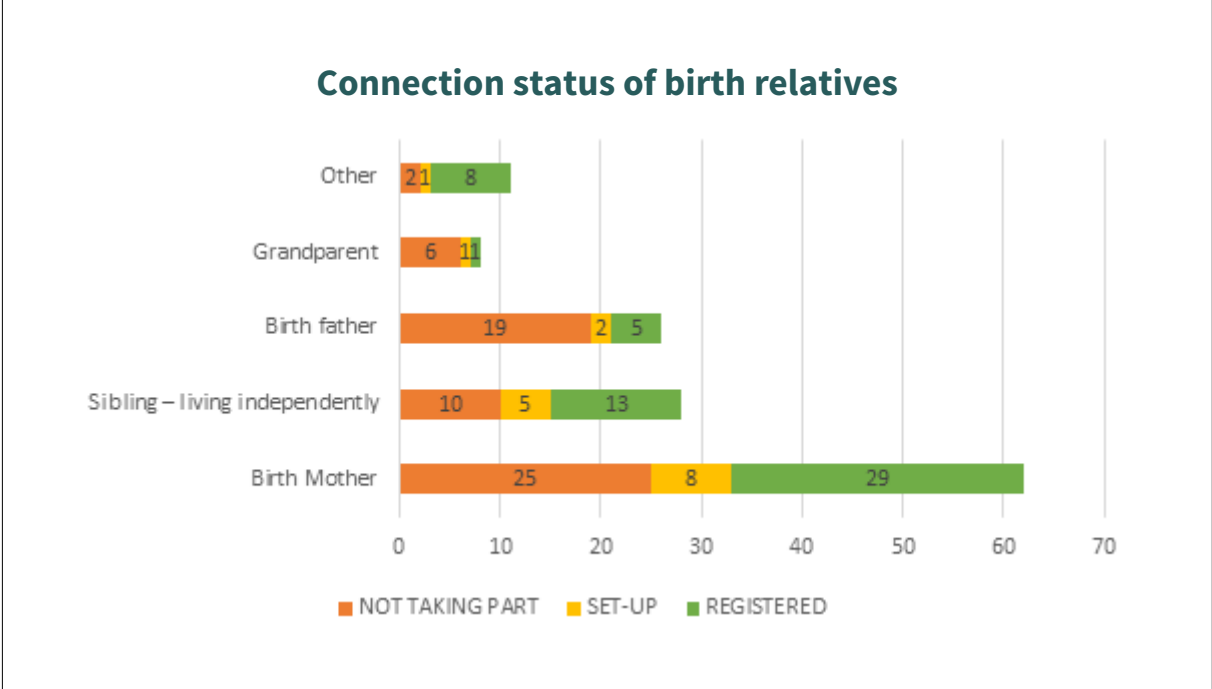
Figure 4.2 shows the range of different birth relatives associated with each account. The largest number was of birth mothers, with less than half that number again being older siblings living independently, closely followed by birth fathers. Two thirds of letterboxes were with birth parents (65%, 88) and one third with other relatives or carers of siblings (35%, 47). The predominant focus on birth mothers is reflective of general practice in letterbox contact. The involvement of older siblings is interesting as these are not a group who have previously been highlighted in studies of letterbox contact. It may be that older siblings are disproportionately represented as practitioners may have felt that digital methods would particularly appeal to them.

Figure 4.2 – Types of birth relatives for whom letterboxes were set up.



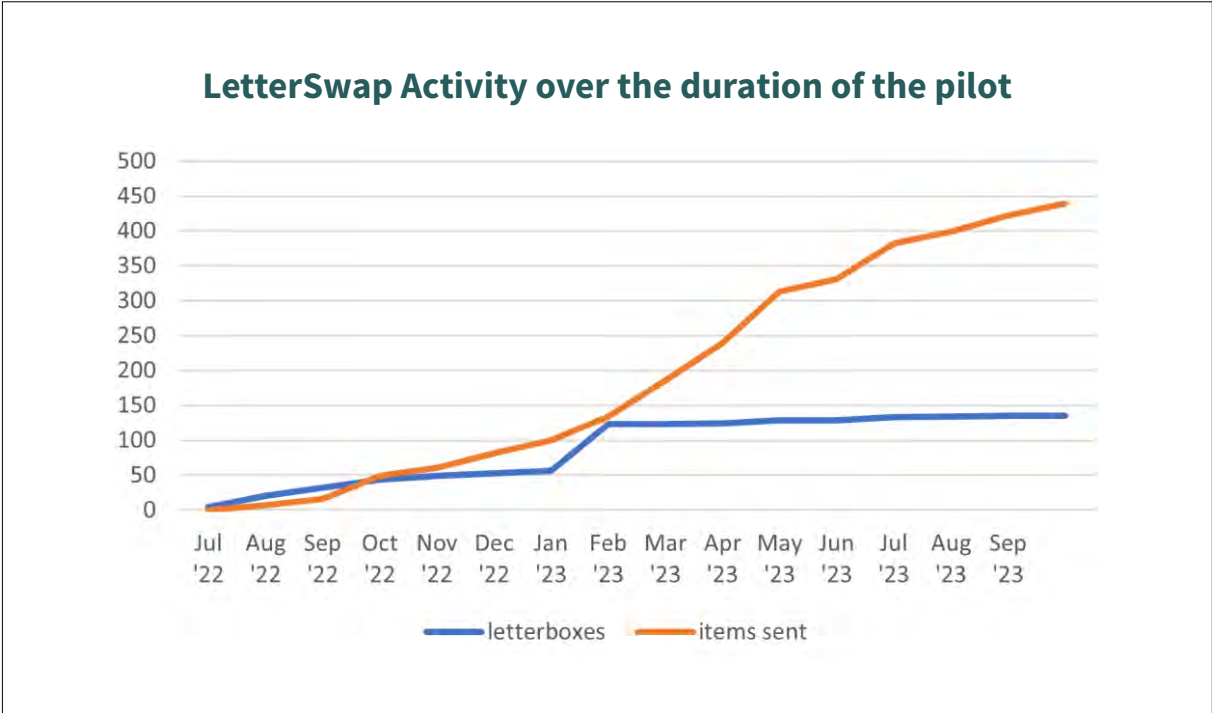
Looking at the breakdown of birth relatives in relation to connection status (Figure 4.3) we can see that for both birth mothers and siblings, there were slightly more registered than not. In contrast birth fathers and grandparents appeared proportionally less likely to be registered.

Figure 4.3 – Birth relatives’ connection status



The first Letter Swap letterbox was set up on 30/06/2022. Figure 4.4 shows how, following a surge in new letterboxes in February '23, numbers plateaued whilst usage rose until the end of pilot.

Figure 4.4 – Recruitment to and use of Letter Swap across time



## 4.2 How was Letter Swap used?

### 4.2.1 Overall activity on the platform.

- Of the 135 letterboxes created, 23% (31) did not send any correspondence during the pilot (this may include families where the contact was not yet due to happen).
- Three-quarters of letterboxes (77%, 104) were ‘active’ meaning at least one item had been sent by one or more of the parties.
- In 57 letterboxes (42%), correspondence was just between the birth relative or adoptive family and the RAA because the other party to the contact had not fully registered. This number will have included some cases where correspondence from the unregistered party may have been sent offline and therefore two-way contact was happening.

Of the 47 cases where both parties were registered and therefore two-way online exchanges were possible, two-way communication was achieved in 11 cases. These two-way exchanges are explored in section 4.2.5 below. This represents 8% of overall letterboxes and 23% of cases where both parties were registered. This small number may relate to restrictions in the frequency of contact. Many contact arrangements were just once a year and therefore a letter may not have been due to happen within the timescale of the pilot, especially for families who joined later.

**4.2.2 Use of schedules for contact.** Letterboxes could be set up with an agreed schedule for correspondence, or this could be left open for families to decide. Almost all birth relatives registered on the system (98%, 47 of 48) had a schedule setting out how often and/or when they could send/

receive items. A significant minority of adopters registered on the system had no defined schedule meaning they could send items when they chose (13%, 108 of 123). We cannot tell from data if families reviewed or changed their contact schedules as part of agreeing to join the pilot, although this was intended to be a conversation that agencies could open with participating families.

**4.2.3 What types of items were sent/received?** From the start, users of Letter Swap were able to send either messages, documents (such as a pdf file), or images (e.g. photos of child or photos of child's artwork). In the 4th stage of the pilot the option of sending voice messages and videos was also added. Within the pilot one adoptive parent used this facility, sending six videos to three birth relatives. At the final point of data collection, 438 items had been sent through Letter Swap: 235 from adoptive families, 103 from birth relatives, and 100 sent by the RAAs. Table 4.1 shows how these numbers were composed regarding the different type of items sent and to whom, by each of the three user groups. This distribution is arguably reflective of the registered numbers of the respective families: there were considerably more adoptive families registered, and they sent substantially more items of correspondence.



Table 4.1 – Correspondence sent by RAAS, adopters and birth relatives, by intended recipient and correspondence type

Number of items sent by type of sender	Intended Recipient	Correspondence Type	
100 RAA	57 Adoptive Family	37	Messages
		2	Images
		18	Documents
	43 Birth Relative	37	Messages
		6	Documents
101 Birth Relative	9 Adoptive Family	1	Message
		8	Documents
	60 Adoptive Family/RAA	39	Messages
		14	Images
		7	Documents
	32 RAA	31	Messages
		1	Document
	235 Adoptive Family	185 Birth Relative/RAA	6
66			Messages
62			Images
51			Documents
50 RAA		36	Messages
		2	Images
		12	Documents
2 Birth Relative/RAA	2 Adoptive Family	2	Documents

It was not possible for us to know the content of the correspondence from RAAs. However RAAs were encouraged to send users guides through the system to adopters and birth relatives. Some of the correspondence sent by the RAA may have been items from birth relatives not registered or actively using the platform e.g. where a birth relative provided a handwritten letter which was scanned and uploaded by the RAA (often with the original also being sent by post).

#### 4.2.4 The role of RAAs in checking correspondence between adopters and birth relatives.

Of the 135 LS letterboxes, 119 (88%) required correspondence to be checked by the agency before being released to the intended party. Mostly the checking process was relatively quick. For the 196

items which required agency checks, the time taken for the agency to review and release the item ranged from under 1 minute, to 55 days (excluding an outlier of 129 days):

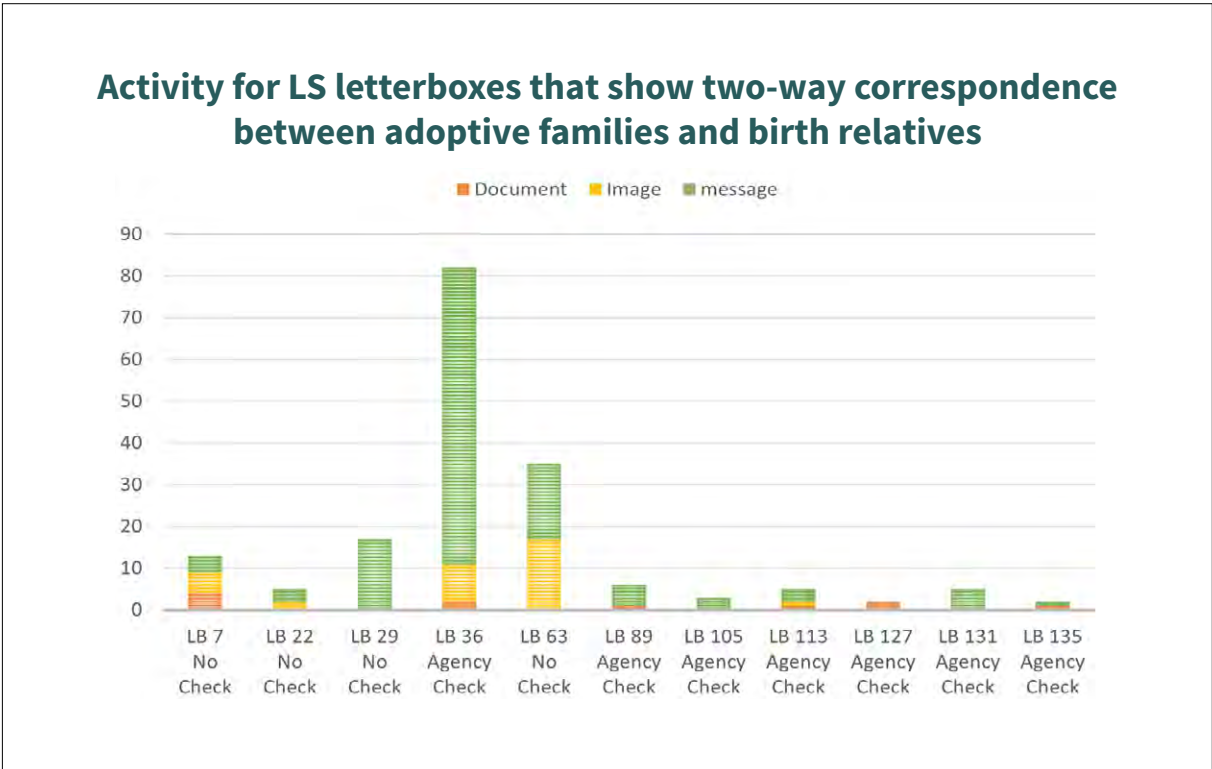
- 38% (75) were checked within 24 hours
- 57% (113) were checked within 3 days
- 70% (138) were checked within 7 days
- 77% (150) were checked within 14 days
- 23% (46) took more than 14 days to check. This included 13 items still waiting to be checked at the time of final data collection, 6 of which had been sent within the last week.

Delays in checking correspondence may have been linked to instances of staff absence or work pressures. There was also a bug that affected some items sent between mid December '22 to the second week of Jan 2023. This meant that for this short period, in a few cases staff were not notified of items waiting for review.

The option to set a date to review the contact was rarely used: only 9 of 135 (7%) of letterboxes had a scheduled review date registered on the system.

**4.2.5 Successful two-way connections.** Figure 4.5 shows the amount of correspondence within the 11 letterboxes that achieved two-way correspondence; in some cases the exchanges included several items. With the requirement of an agency check, high frequency two-way communication could make considerable demands on the agency in fulfilling their role as a mediator. For example, of the 82 items exchanged through Letterbox 36, 26 (32%) were sent by the RAA either to the birth relative or the adoptive family. The remaining 56 items (68%) all had to be checked and released by the RAA worker.

Figure 4.5 – Number and type of items exchanged in two-way contact letterboxes.



Although the number of two-way exchanges was small within the limited timescale of the pilot, these cases do demonstrate that where checks are not needed or when workers were able to respond promptly, Letter Swap can facilitate a fast, responsive, and confidential exchange that traditional letterbox methods simply cannot achieve. To illustrate this, we can look at a short exchange of messages and pictures that took place in the space of 40 minutes for Letterbox 63:

- At 18:54 the birth relative sent a message and photograph.
- The adoptive family responded with a message and photograph at 19:14.
- The birth parent replied promptly with a follow up message 10 minutes later.

It is easy to see how such a responsive messaging system could build meaningful and rewarding connections between birth relatives and adoptive parents, encouraging sustained contact. This in the longer term could have the potential to meet the identity needs of the 5-year-old child at the heart of this network.

### 4.3 Chapter summary

- By the end of the pilot, it had achieved its aim with respect to the number of families recruited and letterboxes (135) created by RAAs. Recruitment to the pilot varied widely between RAAs with not all reaching their target.
- More letterboxes included adopters who successfully registered compared to birth relatives. 93% of the accounts set up for adoptive parents had the adopters completely registered. Of accounts set up for birth relatives, in 77% of cases the birth relative had fully registered.
- Both adoptive families and birth relatives being registered to the same account was achieved for 47 (35%) Letter Swap letterboxes. The most prevalent situation, accounting for 61 of the letterboxes (45%), was to have the adoptive family fully registered, but the birth relative not taking part.
- Although the number of letterboxes created was in line with pilot aims, of the 135 letterboxes created, 23% (31) were 'inactive' (meaning no items had yet been sent). 104 (77%) were 'active' meaning at least one item had been sent by one or more of the parties. Families may not have sent any items because contact may not yet have been due to happen.
- In 57 letterboxes (42%), correspondence was only between the birth or adoptive family and the RAA because the other party to the contact had not fully registered (although contact may have been sent traditionally, off platform).
- Of the 47 cases where both parties were registered and therefore two-way online exchanges were possible, two-way communication was achieved in 11 cases. This represents 8% of overall letterboxes and 23% of cases where both parties were registered.
- At the final point of data collection, 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 items (74 messages, 24 documents and 2 images) sent by the RAAs. Video and audio files were only able to be sent in the later, 4th stage of the pilot. One adoptive parent used this facility, sending six videos to three birth relatives.
- Of the 135 LS-letterboxes, 119 (88%) required correspondence to be checked by the agency before being released to the intended party. Mostly, the checking process was relatively quick.

- Within the 11 letterboxes that achieved two-way correspondence, four did not require agency checks and 7 did - in some cases the exchanges included several items.
- 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.

# Chapter 5 – How did adoptive parents and birth relatives experience using Letter Swap?

In this chapter, we draw on data from both the interviews and survey: 38 adopters (19 interviewees and 19 survey respondents) and 20 birth relatives (10 interviewees and 10 survey respondents). Some participants were linked and discussing the same scenario e.g. birth parent and adoptive parent of the same child. These findings only encompass the views of those who had agreed to try the platform and had at least registered for Letter Swap. The user data do not reflect the views of those that were invited but declined to take part in the pilot.

## 5.1 The aspirations of adoptive parents in relation to keeping in touch

From the interviews in particular and to some extent from the survey responses, it was identified that when joining the Letter Swap pilot adoptive parents fell into two categories regarding their starting point with maintaining relationships with birth relatives – **those who wanted to maintain the existing contact arrangement** but were happy to move platform (n = 12 interviewed) and **those who wanted contact to evolve** and saw Letter Swap as a potential way to make this happen (n = 7 interviewed).

**5.1.1 Maintaining existing arrangements - ‘like for like’.** There were variations in adopters’ feelings and approaches towards contact exchanges within the group who did not envisage Letter Swap evolving the contact arrangements. Some had an overall positive view of contact and had no objections to trying the new platform to hopefully make the process more streamlined (‘may as well try it’). These adopters were satisfied that the current arrangements were working well and had no desire to make any changes to duration/frequency, but still wanted to keep lines of communication open.

...maybe I’m being a bit over optimistic, but I like to think the fact that we keep consistently writing nice letters will encourage [birth family] over time to keep communicating with [adopted child]...at the end of the day, they’ve got the answers to some of the stuff we’re never going to have. AD13 (Interview)

Some adopters saw the contact process in general and writing letters as something that had to be done. The option of a platform which might make the process more efficient was appealing, but overall they wanted quite a limited and tightly controlled arrangement.

...it sounds terrible because obviously I do have massive empathy for Mum and birth Dad, but it’s not my job to appease their guilt... it’s my job to look after [the children] and make them have the best life they can possibly have and to support them in any way that I can. And that involves... some contact with birth family...But I don’t need to be speaking to them every day... I don’t need them in my life. We’re busy...once a year is fine and we wouldn’t want it to be renegotiated in any way, like full stop. AD09 (Interview)

For all adopters in this group, contact plans were moved onto the Letter Swap platform on a 'like for like' basis and the function of the platform was simply to **administer contact**. Where exchanges were already taking place digitally, for example by e-mail via the agency, Letter Swap changed the contact arrangement in only minimal ways.

**5.1.2 Evolving relationships.** Of the minority of adopters who joined Letter Swap with the desire to change contact arrangements and move relationships on, some had instigated this already, for example with the use of shorter, more informal messages or the sending of a video. The motivation for change was already there when signing up to the platform.

...I think for me the biggest thing...is that [adopted child] wanted to hear your voices and would like to share with you and see videos. His main motivation were to see them... it's kinda come up at that right time. So that's the biggie for me. If it works out in the way they hoped, then it's like all great stuff because it's just a more natural form of sharing information isn't it? And then if we can send things at all the times rather than just waiting every three months ... AD19 (Interview)

Others were tentatively hopeful that Letter Swap would facilitate a change in contact arrangements to something that may suit all parties better and open channels of communication in a more creative and flexible way. This shift was seen to possibly pave the way to a more informal, unmediated arrangement e.g. over Whatsapp and/or future in person meet ups. In two examples where adopters were having in person contact with birth relatives, Letter Swap was viewed as a platform to support communication outside of these meet ups. For example, one adoptive parent was messaging the birth relative on a monthly basis in order to build trust; they wanted to use Letter Swap to make arrangements for meet ups without having to exchange phone numbers or rely on the contact team. The circumstances relating to the adopter below were that there was a plan for the agency to step away from future mediation. They wanted Letter Swap to provide a confidential but quick and direct way to contact birth relatives.

...so in two years...we don't have this support...then we have to find another means of being able to communicate. And what if we get stuck in traffic? Like how do I contact them without them having my phone number?...as much as we get on really well, you still have to just be aware that they're not your best friend... you've still got to protect [adopted child] just in case....it gives me a bit more control in a way because I will have to take the control off the post adoption team eventually and we'll find a way of communicating. AD03 (Interview)

For other adopters, consideration was given to how the child may communicate with their birth family themselves in the future and Letter Swap was seen as a secure way to do this, potentially mitigating against unsolicited contact via social media by offering other options to scaffold this process.

...it's a safer place for her to have that...there's less of a barrier, which for [adopted daughter] as she gets older is a safer place for her to have that contact. AD16 (Interview)

## 5.2 Hopes and expectations of birth relatives

For birth relatives, most did not envisage Letter Swap changing the frequency of contact. Some were hopeful it might but thought it was unlikely. Of those who did experience an increase in frequency and type of contact, they were pleasantly surprised by this move and extremely grateful about the impact that Letter Swap had on how they kept in touch with their adopted child or sibling.

Three birth parents who responded to the survey believed that their contact agreements had changed frequency from annual to monthly, as this is what was stated on their Letter Swap page. They were pleased and excited by this however found that they had not actually received any additional letters to normal. One adopter noted that the stated monthly frequency on their Letter Swap page was a mistake which they ignored as they knew there had been no change to the annual agreement. This could possibly have been due to incorrect information being entered by the RAA and/or a lack of communication and clarity from a contact co-ordinator regarding the agreement.

Due to the transactional nature of contact, the Letter Swap platform on its own did not open up contact. This **facilitation of relationships** could only happen with a willingness on both sides and often with skilled professional support. Adopters hold the power in relation to contact agreements, but also hold more responsibility to assess what contact is right for the child given their current development, understanding and evolving identity needs. Birth relatives will generally be unaware of the circumstances of the adopters and child, and may be left feeling as though they have no say in decisions around contact. As one birth relative stated about maintaining future contact:

It's not about how I feel. I have sent my letter via Letter Swap but not received a letter from adopters... the adoption agency I feel haven't done enough to ensure this scheme can work, which it can. BR18 (Survey)

The quote above suggests a need for agencies to follow up with both adopters as well as birth relatives if agreed to correspondence is not sent.

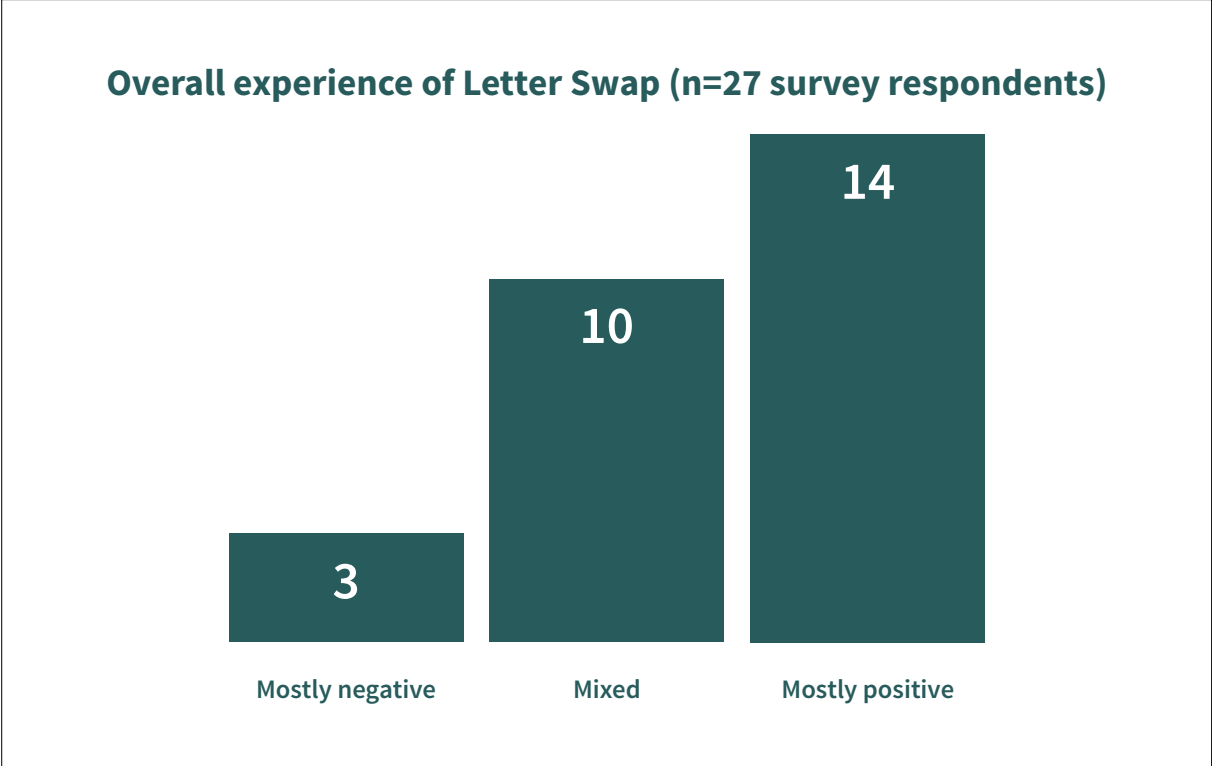
## 5.3 Involvement of the child in Letter Swap

The degree to which the adopted child was involved with Letter Swap varied but in both the survey and interview just over half of parents said their child/ren was not aware of Letter Swap or involved in it at all. Reasons identified by adopters for not involving the child included them being too young and 'not ready' (data about the age of the child was only collected in interviews where all the children were age 12 or under). Some were wary of telling the child about letters due to not getting anything back and some felt a difficult 'adoption dynamic' or the child's negativity about contact meant it was better not to discuss it at the current time. Where children were involved, some adopters read the content of letters to the children but felt they didn't necessarily understand the platform used due to their age. Children who were aware, were given the opportunity to contribute to letters by asking questions, choosing photos or artwork to send and pro-actively requesting more contact.

### 5.4 Overall experience of using Letter Swap – survey respondents

Respondents (18 adopters, 9 birth relatives) rated their overall experience of Letter Swap, the options being: not at all good/more bad than good (recoded as mostly negative); mixed; more good than bad/very good (recoded as mostly positive). Results are shown in Figure 4.1 below.

Figure 4.1. Survey respondents’ overall experience of Letter Swap



The views of adopted parents were more mixed and less positive compared to birth relatives, though numbers were too small to reach definite conclusions.

Of those who expressed a view about whether they preferred traditional letterbox or Letter Swap almost two thirds (15 of 24, 63%) either preferred Letter Swap or liked it ‘about the same’. Just 3 people preferred traditional letterbox and 6 people felt it was ‘too early to say’.

Almost all survey respondents (22 of 24, 90%) felt they were either more likely to maintain future contact following a shift to using Letter Swap (n= 11, 45%) or they felt the same as before (n=11, 45%). Two felt it was ‘too early to say’ and no-one felt less likely to keep up contact as a result of switching to Letter Swap. There was also no indication from the interviews that Letter Swap itself had a significant negative impact on the continuation of contact in the longer term.



### 5.5 Using Letter Swap to administer contact

Effective administration was essential for all types of user. Adoptive parents and relatives who were not expecting contact to evolve could still benefit from the positive administrative elements of Letter Swap. Figure 4.1 below illustrates the benefits and drawbacks of Letter Swap as a tool to administer contact as identified by participants.

Figure 5.1 – User perceptions of benefits and drawbacks of Letter Swap as a tool to administer contact

Benefits	Drawbacks
To use as a repository, keeping exchanges all in one place	Difficulties logging in
Convenience and speed of exchanges (dependent on agency mediation and response time)	Lack of options to format messages (this function was added during pilot)
Simple and intuitive to use	Limited to one email address for logging in and managing contact
Tracking and acknowledgement function	Limited or no access to a computer and/or internet
A secure way of exchanging contact	Initial user instructions not received

Both adopters and birth relatives identified a key benefit of Letter Swap as having all contact exchanges in one place e.g. **a repository**, which were saved in chronological order. This allowed easy access to previous exchanges and could be used for example to pull up a previous letter when writing a reply.

...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. AD11 (Interview)

The Letter Swap platform **sped up the exchange** of letters by eliminating the element of a trip to the post office and waiting for post to arrive. Replies could be received within a few days or sooner as opposed to weeks or months with traditional Letterbox, whilst still being mediated by the agency.

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

This **efficiency**, however, was reliant on exchanges being sent in a timely manner by both adopters and birth relatives, and by agencies checking and accepting them on Letter Swap. Adopters and birth relatives were frustrated when delays occurred.

The **acknowledgement** function, to see when a letter had been uploaded successfully, approved by a contact co-ordinator and received and opened by the final recipient was a helpful tool for both adopters and birth relatives. It was difficult, however, when someone could see that the recipient

had read the letter but not yet replied.

...to me I think it felt faster, [...] because you are getting snippets of they've opened it, they've read it, they acknowledge it, it feels more smooth. You're not chasing coordinator saying have they read it, have they come back to you, you can see it for yourself, which I think is nice. AD10 (Interview)

Some adopters identified the **security** that Letter Swap offered as a positive of the platform, particularly in comparison with exchanging letters via e-mail where there may be the possibility of identifying location details from electronic files or photos. There were concerns by more than one person, however, that the personal information displayed on the front page of Letter Swap after login would be visible to the birth family. One adopter altered the contact details the agency had inputted, as they did not feel it was necessary or safe to have this information on Letter Swap, for fear it might get passed on to birth relatives.

The thing that is worrying about Letter Swap is the detail you see (and which you assume the birthparents will see) which is the new name, our contact details... all the stuff you should not have the birth family see. The potential for (human) error and systemic failure here seems way too high. AD25 (Survey)

The visibility of adopters' details to birth relatives (or vice versa) is not something that would be possible on Letter Swap, and no data breaches occurred during the pilot. So concerns of adopters such as these perhaps reflect fear of the unknown, and are an unanticipated consequence of giving users more direct access to data held about them on file (as of course other recording systems for letterbox contact will also hold personal details of both parties). This illustrates the importance of users receiving reassurance about what is and is not visible to others on the platform.

Whilst some users found Letter Swap straightforward and intuitive to use, others (both adopters and birth relatives) had **difficulties logging in** (log in required two-factor authentication), and found the site challenging to use.

The login is very convoluted, I usually have to login at least twice as when I put the password in from the email it takes me back to the start. Once it took four attempts. AD35 (Survey)

As the pilot progressed various bugs were fixed. However, problems with accessing the platform were not necessarily confined to early users of the system. In some cases birth parents were having to overcome a wide range of barriers to access the platform e.g. one birth parent described problems with their phone meaning they could not use that to log on. They had to either borrow a friend's laptop or go to the public library, and they needed a friend to help them log on and navigate the platform. In addition they needed the help of the letterbox coordinator to know what to write in the letter (they had dyslexia).

Support with using the site also varied. Some users said they were simply sent a link to sign up without any information or instructions, whereas others received a helpful 'how to' guides and/or had a specific person in the adoption team to reach out to. It was also noted that only one email address could be used to log in. Where this was a personal email and passwords were not shared between a couple, only one adopter (in a couple) could register on the platform and manage

the Letter Swap. This could leave one person feeling responsible for facilitating all contact. This problem could be remedied by couples using a shared email address or sharing password details.

There were elements of Letter Swap that people felt weren't particularly user-friendly, with **formatting issues** such as not being able to use paragraphs in the messaging function, so letters looked *"like an old-fashioned telegram like transcript"*. It was described as a basic site which *"does what it says on the tin"*. Participants made suggestions for improvements such as being able to use bold, italics, a spell check function and a translation tool. Some of these improvements were introduced during the pilot. For example, although the messaging function was only designed to be used for short communications, the option to format messages was added. The option to use spell checking will be available to some users, depending on the browser they are using.

There were concerns that **digital literacy and poverty** may be a barrier to people accessing the Letter Swap platform, particularly for birth relatives (identified as an issue by adopters) who may struggle with using a computer due to learning difficulties and/or not having access to one. There were some limitations with how user friendly the platform was via a phone.

...for one of my adopted children I was unsure how computer literate her birth parents were and whether they had access to a computer so I phoned the office for the letter to be posted. AD30 (Survey)

Where users did experience IT difficulties (particularly with logging in to Letter Swap), this caused frustration and could be a barrier to engagement with the contact agreement at all. One birth relative who responded to the survey described it as 'disheartening' and others did not feel able to access support via Letter Swap.

I tried it about four times then I left it, because I was getting a bit frustrated' 'I don't know if there's an actual app for it or its just internet...I did mention it to (coordinator) and she said there was a number to ring, but I have just had a lot going on... BR04 (Interview)

## 5.6 Using Letter Swap to facilitate relationships

Where there was a desire for a change in how contact took place in order to evolve relationships, Letter Swap could be a catalyst to make this happen. Figure 5.2 below summarises the perceived benefits and drawbacks of this function of Letter Swap. It is worth noting that some perceived drawbacks can be managed with the system (e.g. schedules can be set for messages to prevent an overwhelming number being sent, and tactile items can still be sent and 'recorded' on Letter Swap) – but worries of users are still relevant to take into account.

Figure 5.2 – The perceived benefits and drawbacks of Letter Swap in facilitating relationships – users’ views

Perceived benefits	Perceived drawbacks
More informal, regular communication.	Loss of the tactile element
Emotionally contained, can access letter when feel ready	Boundaries can be blurred – concern over becoming an instant messaging service
Scaffolds eventual meeting up	Difficult to receive no reply after seeing that something has been opened
Option of mediation still available if necessary	No significant added benefit when already exchanging letters digitally via e-mail to contact team.
Can evidence to child that letters were sent	
Flexibility with how communication takes place (e.g. letter, short message, video)	
Enables contact to continue as planned	

Letter Swap changed the frequency and nature of exchanges for those who were open to doing so to ‘little and often’. Moving from an annual letter reflecting on the child’s development over the previous year to sharing ‘titbits’ of information in a more informal way across the Letter Swap platform was a significant, but welcome shift. This could feel more meaningful and helped birth relatives to feel more connected to their child’s life by being kept informed of their milestones. For some it was also easier to send a short message than to put pen to paper, and felt less ‘intense’.

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. BR04 (Interview)

It allows short updates. Our child likes to be able to send mum something as he thinks of it. AD35 (Survey)

There did need to be a balance though. For example one birth relative found that twice a month exchanges felt manageable, but more than that “*would be too hard*”. Similarly for adopters, there was the **feeling that boundaries needed to be maintained**.

One of my concerns was that I didn’t want it to become an instant messaging platform, so they can text or email whenever they wanted, that it was kept within the window of communication. AD08 (Interview)

As noted, Letter Swap helped a small number of adopters and birth relatives to change the way in which they communicated, **making “the gap smaller between people”**. For some, the experience of contact improved, children were more involved and it could support more open communication within the adoptive family.

Some adopters and birth relatives were hopeful that by starting to build trust in each other via more frequent contact exchanges, which were not restricted by a set agreement, this could pave the way for potential future in person meet ups. The quote below is from an adopter whose 8 year old child expressed a recent desire to meet up with her birth family. The adopter was supportive of this and wanted to find a way to instigate this 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].  
AD02 (Interview)

The option to exchange video messages allowed for a more creative, flexible way to exchange contact in order to foster relationships between the adopter, child and birth relatives. This function was used by one adopter and his 12 year old son who had already established positive, meaningful, and trusting contact with the birth mother which had evolved over time, from annual letterbox to the addition of celebration cards and photos. The child wanted to hear the voices of his birth relatives and the Letter Swap platform enabled this next step, with the child recording a video with the help of his adoptive dad who uploaded it onto Letter Swap. This example highlights the starting point of adopters – in this case there was an existing desire for contact to evolve.

Letter Swap gave adopters and birth relatives control over when they opened and read letters, i.e. exchanges were **emotionally contained**, as opposed to an e-mail popping up in an inbox or a letter arriving on the door mat. These could be accessed at a time that the recipient felt ready to do so, as the birth relative below explains.

I think it's nice to have it on one platform then if I want to login and look at them I know they are there and I am not going to bump into them in my e-mails, cause I did before. All the letters from (boys) come through an email and it could be quite stressful for me to receive that e-mail if I am at work or [...] just when I am in a good headspace I can take that, because I don't know what's coming from it really, so it is a bit stressful. BR06 (Interview)

Adopters were concerned that by shifting to a digital exchange, the tactile element of sending and receiving artwork, photos or gifts would be lost and some still sent something by post in addition to a letter on Letter Swap. This loss was not identified as a concern by birth relatives we spoke to, but we know this was an issue for some from professionals' data. Birth relatives concerned about the loss of tangible items may not have wanted to use the digital system for this reason, and therefore were not likely to be in the interview or survey sample.

For adopters, having a repository of letters evidenced the facilitation of a relationship that they could show to their child when they were older:

The letter is saved and accessible on the system, which evidences your contact with the birth parent for your child when they are older. AD30 (Survey)

**Checking of content** was an important element of the Letter Swap platform for adopters who wanted to keep the 'safety net' of having a contact co-ordinator to check and approve exchanges.

The shift to Letter Swap did seem to impact on the communication between contact co-ordinators and adopters/birth relatives, taking away the 'human' element. This was a disadvantage identified by some adopters.

We preferred the contact with the Letterbox Coordinator and know that they supported the birth family to do this as well. AD24 (Survey)

For birth relatives, checking of letters wasn't noted to be of significance (and birth relatives are likely to have taken it for granted that this had to happen), but having a contact co-ordinator available to still offer emotional support was valued.

The [contact co-ordinator] has been amazing and they could make sure the letters are in time so that I'm not having to check constantly and waiting around for the letter which makes me feel a bit low around [that] time. BR15 (Survey)

## 5.7 Suggestions for improvements made by adopters and birth relatives

The bullet points below summarise some of the suggestions that adopters and birth relatives made in order to improve Letter Swap, which fell into two main categories – accessibility and functionality. There were, however, limitations in what users felt they could suggest due to not having used the system for long.

Most suggestions about improved functionality were addressed during the pilot. As mentioned above the ability to format messages was added. The option to upload several items at once (e.g. bundles of photos) was another improvement. Some users suggested improvements to notifications - ensuring that notifications arrived (notifications of receipt were sent by email; notifications of letters having been checked by the agency have now being added). Outstanding suggestions about accessibility were:

- **Option of an app** - due to many people accessing Letter Swap on phones, an app would be more accessible and user-friendly (Link Maker are now developing this)
- **More streamlined access** - finding Letter Swap more easily through search engines and a smoother login process
- **Inclusion of other children** - option to use for foster children as well as adoptive children, so all are using the same platform and not feeling left out.
- **Additional guidance** - having additional guidance on writing letters/sending photos within the platform for easy access
- **Improved photo quality** - for photos to be in a printer friendly format e.g. not numerous photos on one page

## 5.8 Chapter summary

- One of the purposes of the pilot, and of the formative design of the evaluation, was to learn about problems and fix these. Feedback about how the platform was working, including feedback from users, was fed in throughout the pilot enabling early problems to be addressed.
- 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 about the likelihood that Letter Swap would change how and when they had contact.
- The Letter Swap platform served two functions – to administer contact and to facilitate relationships. All users needed Letter Swap to effectively administer contact but the facilitation of relationships was more important for those who hoped to evolve their contact arrangements.
- The benefits of Letter Swap in relation to administering contact included the ability to keep a repository of contact, efficiency, speed of exchange, a tracking and acknowledgement function, additional security and flexibility with contact type.
- The drawbacks included difficulties with logging in, initial formatting limitations, concern around data sharing and issues with digital literacy and poverty for birth relatives.
- Benefits of Letter Swap 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.
- 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 art work could be lost.
- For a small number of users, Letter Swap significantly improved the way they communicated with each other and could potentially pave the way to an unmediated direct or indirect arrangement in the future.
- For others, Letter Swap provided a useful platform to move contact arrangements to, but it was not without its limitations and there were several identified areas for improvement in terms of functionality and accessibility.

## Chapter 6 – Key messages and conclusions

This research tracked the implementation of the Letter Swap innovation across five RAAs over the course of 15 months. In this chapter we draw out the key learning from this pilot about the usefulness of the Letter Swap platform, as well as the broader learning about the place of digital content methods in modernising post adoption contact.

### 6.1 Letter Swap – key benefits and challenges for users.

This was an early stage evaluation of Letter Swap - the first trial of the platform with real users. Where users could overcome barriers in accessing and working the platform, Letter Swap was valued by families and professionals in various ways depending on what they wanted from the system. Evaluations of users were generally more positive than negative, and in some cases remarkable positive changes in contact plans were achieved. The initial goals and aspirations of both professionals and families varied widely and were key in shaping their appraisal of Letter Swap.

For some families, the benefits of having a digital system to administer contact were appreciated. These benefits included having an organised archive of all correspondence, being able to see what stage your correspondence was at, the convenience of not having to physically post items, and having more control regarding when you access your correspondence. For others the platform offered a powerful way to communicate in different ways allowing more control about how often and when to communicate, using different methods such as messaging, images and the potential to use video and audio. These different features of Letter Swap could be used purposefully to try and build a better relationship with the other person involved in the correspondence, particularly where children and young people were wanting closer ties with birth relatives.

The key barriers to using Letter Swap (beyond the technical difficulties to be expected in using an early stage platform) were largely as originally identified in the theory of change. For birth relatives, higher levels of digital poverty and digital competence hampered their access. Some birth relatives needed intensive in-person support to use the system – when this was not available in-house, participation was affected as the plan for PAC-UK to provide additional support did not work out for a number of reasons. Some birth relatives were reported to be reluctant to lose tangible and handwritten items, meaning systems separate to Letter Swap needed to continue to be maintained. Where the plan for contact was to remain the same on the digital platform, birth relatives perceived little or no benefits in switching from the system they were familiar with. Hence many did not wish to participate in the pilot, or if they found using the system challenging, they reverted to posting items - meaning time savings for workers were not achieved.

Adoptive parents did not always “buy in” to an agenda of changing the nature or frequency of their contact. They did not necessarily see their existing contact plans as problematic and were not routinely invited to review their contact plans when switching to Letter Swap. Some were open to making changes to their contact plan and using some of the newer features of Letter Swap in the future, particularly when led by their child’s needs. The short timescale of the pilot however did not allow us to assess this longer-term potential of the Letter Swap platform.



## 6.2 The need for broader ‘culture change’ change work in shaping contact planning

In seeking to move to an adoption system where maintaining safe and meaningful relationships between children and their birth families has much greater prominence, the use of digital platforms such as Letter Swap can play a part, but this pilot demonstrates a much broader programme of work is needed for this cultural shift to occur. The first aspect of letterbox contact that needs to improve is for planned contact to be sustained more reliably, this reliability and consistency over time being important to young people as well as to birth and adoptive parents (Neil et al, 2015). Longer follow up is needed to understand if administrative features like being able to see the progress of letters and having a consistent record of exchanges will lead to contact being more likely to sustained, but generally families were positive about this. The second aspect of letterbox that needs to improve is the experience of users, as users are more likely to sustain contact where it feels meaningful, safe and rewarding. Letter Swap offers options for different ways to communicate e.g. more frequent short messages, video messages, direct communication between families without social workers checks. However a key learning point from the pilot is that **the digital tool per se will not change aspects of contact like frequency, mediation and form** unless the people involved are motivated to make those changes. Indeed, the Letter Swap system in several cases replicated the existing system in that many contact plans remained dependent on agency checks, were low frequency, sometimes just one way, and video options were rarely considered.

Within the pilot, despite widespread openness amongst professionals to using Letter Swap as a tool to broaden or alter contact plans, many felt unable to do this when ‘inheriting’ plans that had been made some time ago, and where adoptive parents’ expectations had been shaped to expect very limited forms of indirect contact. The examples of contact opening up were therefore led by adoptive parents rather than professionals. This suggests that for letterbox contact to evolve to a point where more plans are two-way and sustained, and where the exact nature, frequency and mediation of contact is bespoke for each family and reviewed over time as people’s needs change, **wider culture change is first needed.**

The willingness of both children’s social workers and adoption social workers to consider a broader range of possibilities is a key aspect of this culture change. In addition, adapting the preparation of adoptive parents to build their understanding of and confidence in having a more flexible and individualised approach to post adoption contact is needed. Some birth relatives will need support to overcome the practical and emotional barriers that impede their positive participation in contact. A change to thinking of ‘contact’ in terms of ‘maintaining relationships’ or ‘keeping in touch’, and reflecting this in language used, is being adopted by many agencies in an attempt to shift thinking and expectations. Where these aspects of culture change are in place, digital tools such as Letter Swap have a key role to play in offering families a broader range ways to stay in touch.

### **6.3 Letter Swap automated some functions but had not (yet) cut the work of letterbox teams**

Most contact via Letter Swap continued to be mediated in terms of letterbox workers checking and approving correspondence before forwarding it. Where this didn't happen this tended to be where agencies had previously moved away from routinely checking letter content. Simply the introduction of the new digital tools did not necessarily encourage either professionals or adoptive parents to review existing arrangements for checking contact. Thus, Letter Swap did not necessarily reduce the work involved in mediating contact, and in some cases-where contact became more frequent-the need for checks increased. The piloting of Letter Swap often involved duplication of work, although this is to be expected in a time-limited pilot where agencies needed to manage their existing system alongside the new system.

Letter Swap does however have potential to reduce some work for agencies in the future, and the short-term nature of this pilot evaluation is limiting in terms of identifying these benefits. For platforms such as Letter Swap to reduce the work of professionals, all parties need to be able to upload and share items-reducing the work of performing this function for one of the parties (usually the birth parents). With longer term commitment of RAAs and buy in from their local authority partners, there is potential for Letter Swap (or other similar digital tools) to become their main platform for managing letterbox contact within agencies. However, there are likely to be some people for whom Letter Swap will not be suitable because of their specific needs and alternative arrangements will need to be made. And in cases where families wish to continue to exchange of tangible items this work will need to be undertaken in tandem with, or outside of, the online system.

### **6.4 The Letter Swap pilot underlined the need for trusted professional support for maintaining relationships**

Letterbox contact is much more than just an exchange of information; it evokes powerful feelings and creates emotional challenges for all involved, as was apparent throughout the pilot. The Letter Swap platform will still require some tasks to be delivered by skilled professionals. In particular the role of professionals in planning, supporting and reviewing bespoke contact plans remains key. Both adoptive parents and birth parents particularly valued having a named and trusted person they could contact about their letterbox arrangements. In-house support for birth parents appeared preferable, mainly because this is what birth parents were used to.

This underlines the need for resources to be in place in terms of moving forward with the modernising contact in adoption agenda. There is scope for professionals to use tools such as Letter Swap purposely to enable more families to feel confident in managing contact themselves whilst still providing a confidential information exchange where needed. Indeed, one of the RAAs in the pilot already had a default position of not checking correspondence between adoptive and birth families unless this was specifically requested when problems arise. There was little evidence during the pilot that professionals were able to undertake detailed reviews of contact plans with families before adding them to the Letter Swap platform. Such reviews could be particularly useful in clarifying expectations of families, and helping families to consider changes

to their contact plan, either now or in the future. But for agencies to be able offer this type of review requires resources.

Whether correspondence needs to be checked when using platforms such as Letter Swap could be considered in a wider range of cases. This would be most likely to work well where both adoptive parents and birth relatives have initially had good preparation and support for letterbox contact, and where work is undertaken to start building relationships between the parties involved, for example through supporting them to meet and agree the contact plan. In some cases a time-limited period of supporting letter writing and checking correspondence could be considered, to allow birth and adoptive families to become more comfortable with the contact and build trust. Once this is established adoptive parents could be encouraged to manage the contact via Letter Swap themselves, with the offer of support being available if needed. Reviews of contact could be offered at intervals, including at key developmental stages for the child. Finally, there may be situations where a confidential exchange is not necessary e.g. where assessments indicate risks are very low and protective factors high. Examples might be adopter to adopter sibling contact plans, situations where adoptive parents and birth relatives have already established trust (for example in some foster care adoption situations), or when birth relatives present no risks (for example a supportive grandparent). In some such situations tools such as Letter Swap may not be needed.

Agencies seeking to implement Letter Swap need to develop their own clear internal understanding of who Letter Swap is aimed at, and what it is trying to achieve, therefore informing the recruitment of families. There are potentially a range of scenarios where Letterswap could be helpful including:

- Families new to letterbox contact who are interested in using the platform.
- Families already successfully exchanging letters, and families where contact is one way, who may benefit from the administrative functions of the platform.
- Families who wish to try different ways of mediated communication (now or in the future) e.g. exchanging items without the social worker check; exchanging items more frequently; exchanging different types of items.
- Families who actively wish to build a closer relationship with the other party, sometimes with a view to meeting in person.
- Families who meet in person but who want a confidential way to communicate with each other (for example to make or adjust plans for meeting up)

Although not tested during the pilot, there is a further group of families for whom Letter Swap could potentially be suitable. These are families where contact is not working well. Maybe one or both parties have stopped writing, or the contact may have never got off the ground, or people are writing but are not feeling that the contact is meaningful or rewarding. In scenarios such as these, agencies could offer the opportunity to review contact plans and find a way forward and using the Letter Swap system could be one of the options to consider. Adding families such as these to the Letter Swap system without undertaking the review and support processes is unlikely to improve contact.

When agencies are aiming for two-way exchanges on the digital platform, it may be helpful to discuss the platform at an early stage with both birth relatives and adoptive parents, rather than just approaching adoptive parents initially. This is because birth relatives were more reluctant to try the system than adopters.

Agencies need to achieve buy in of staff at all levels including staff beyond the boundaries of the RAA such as children's social workers. Staff working directly in supporting families with Letter Swap need access to training, and many suggested that using a dummy system would be helpful for them in understanding the system. Frontline staff need to have a good understanding of the platform in order to guide families in using it. This includes having an understanding of security of the system in terms of how users' details are kept confidential from the other party. Not understanding this aspect of the platform was a key barrier for both staff and families in the current pilot. Frontline workers need space within their workload to get to grips with learning a new system.

## 6.5 The continuing development of Letter Swap

This pilot identified several promising aspects of the Letter Swap platform, justifying the continuing use and development of the platform. Agencies and families involved in the pilot shared an understanding that they were testing and helping to develop the platform. Their attempts to use the platform and their provision of feedback throughout this process helped Link Maker understand and address initial problems with the programme, bringing improvements and enhancements across the life of the pilot. Professionals, adoptive parents and birth relatives had suggestions and aspirations for further developments. Predominantly these revolved around improving the "user-friendliness" of the platform. Link Maker would have liked to have simplified the login to the system for users, but the requirements of data officers in participating agencies had been that all users had to have two factor authentication. This was especially problematic for family users who were not used to logging into secure systems for example in a work setting, and it demonstrates a tension between the needs of users for a secure system versus the need to access the system easily.

The functions of using voice and video messages only became available at the late stage of the pilot, and therefore it was not possible to learn much about how these functions were working; these functions require further research. The use of the platform directly by adopted young people was not an intended goal of the pilot, but is a function that could be explored in the future. The continued development of Letter Swap requires ongoing collaboration, consultation and testing with potential users (families and professionals).

The platform is now being developed as an app (which was a key suggestion from all groups). It currently offers a range of ways to communicate including sending short messages (including formatting and emojis), documents (\*.doc and \*.pdf), images (photos or scanned images), video and voice messages. The types of media (as well as whether communications are checked by the agency, and their frequency) that a birth family member or adoptive family are permitted to send are defined in the letterbox permissions. The system automates sending reminders to families when correspondence is due or overdue, and flags up overdue contact to agencies. Families can receive acknowledgement of the various stages of their communication, and they can acknowledge receipt. There are options for adoptive parents to send settling in letters and for workers to record case notes.

## 6.6 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 was able to communicate early findings swiftly to the implementation teams. We were able to capture feedback from a range of people involved in the pilot from end users to front-line workers, to 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 with regard to post adoption contact.

This research, however, has limitations mainly due to its short timescale and the early stage of the project. The more technical difficulties to do with the platform identified in the pilot will not necessarily feature in future use as the platform developers have been consistently working on improving the system throughout the pilot. The longer-term benefits and drawbacks of the digital system needs further research, particularly as the majority of the contact plans moved onto the digital system were quite low frequency meaning that families may not yet have started to use it and others had only had one or two attempts at using the platform. It was not possible in the short timescale of the project to test out whether Letter Swap enables better continuation of contact over time compared to traditional systems. Neither did the timescale of the project 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 breadth the pros and cons of using the video and voice functions. Future research should aim to capture directly the views of children and young people, and to examine the longer term impact of different methods of digital content on children’s satisfaction with openness and their well-being.

## 6.7 Summary of key recommendations and implications from the research

### 6.7.1 Implications for platform developers.

- 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 build 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.

### 6.7.2 Summary of 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.

### 6.7.3 Summary of 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.

#### **6.7.4 Summary of 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 and 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.



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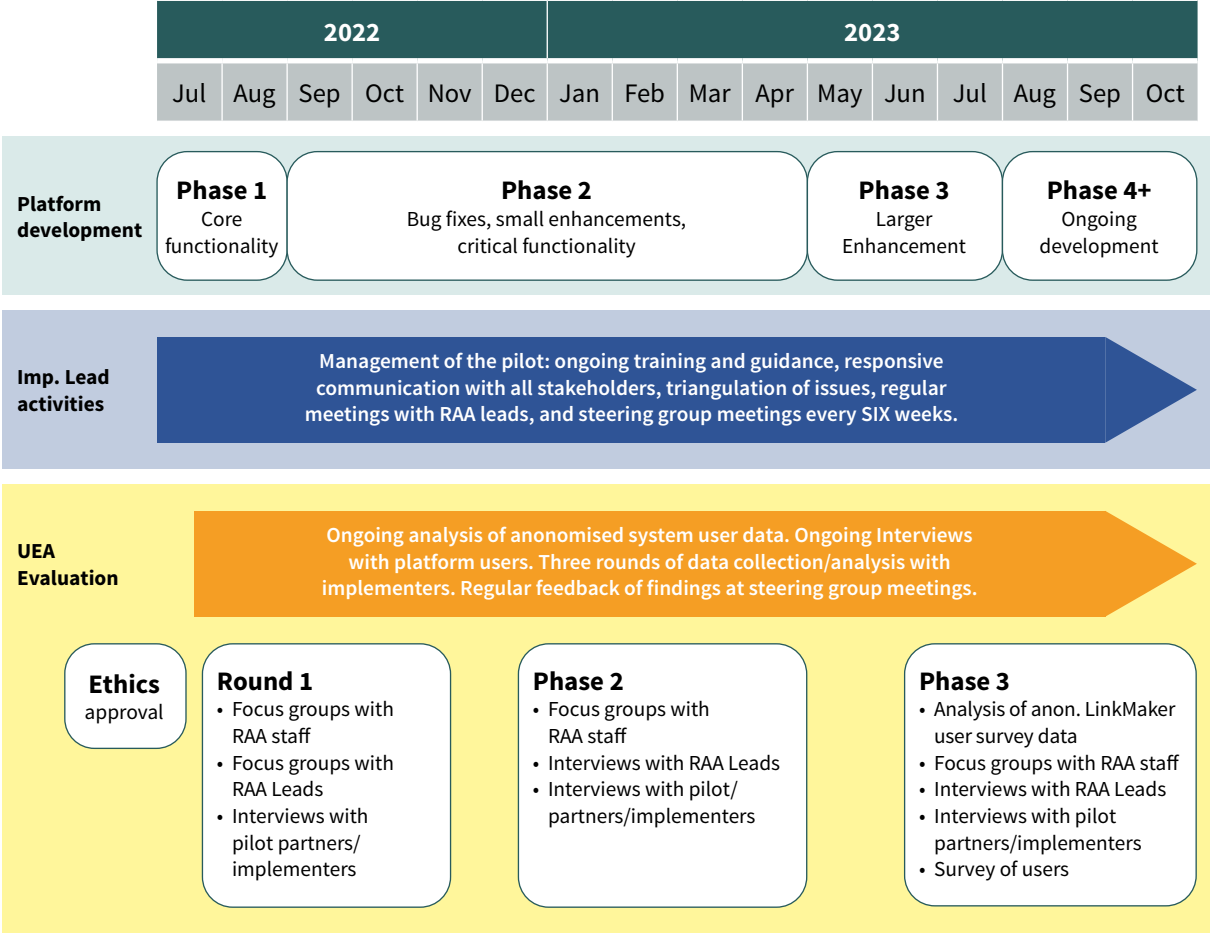
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# Appendix 1

Project flow chart: key platform development, implementation and evaluation activities





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