

Revisit of Letter Swap Evaluation – Research Briefing

**Julia Rimmer, Cassian Rawcliffe,
Elsbeth Neil**

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Research Team: Dr Julia Rimmer, Dr Cassian Rawcliffe, Professor Elsbeth Neil
(University of East Anglia)

1. Why was this research needed?

There is a growing move towards adopted children maintaining rather than severing links with birth relatives. This culture change includes moving away from solely paper based Letter Box systems towards a more individualised consideration of a range of ways of staying in touch (SiT), including digital options. In 2024 we published our evaluation of Letter Swap– a digital platform for post adoption contact developed by Link Maker (Neil et al, 2024).

What is Letter Swap?

[Letter Swap](#) is a web-based application for SiT after adoption. It is fully accessible on mobile devices (it has a mobile view). 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.

Letter Swap can be used to support individualized plans, with options to exchange: short messages, letters, photos, voice messages and/or videos.

Agency checks are available and optional, and the platform issues reminders and notifications.

In the [original evaluation](#) we noted that the **longer-term benefits and drawbacks of the digital system needed further research**, including the use of **the video and voice note functions (added later)**. Another key finding was that **wider culture change** was needed to enable maximum relational benefits from the platform. This work has progressed at pace (led by Adoption England with UEA) since publication of the previous, pilot evaluation. There have also been allied developments within Public Law around SiT, with the publication of the report by the Public Law Working Group (Nov 2024).

This research was needed to examine agencies' and users' experiences of Letter Swap one year on from the pilot study.

2. Aims of the research

- To understand how the Letter Swap platform has evolved, in its development and implementation by the original and new adoption agencies.
- To explore further 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.

3. How was the study done?

This revisit began a year after the original pilot evaluation of Letter Swap ended. From the developers' (Link Maker's) perspective, the platform is still very much in the development phase.

This revisit to the Letter Swap pilot used most of the same mixed methods and data collection tools as in the original pilot:

- analysis of anonymised platform data of remaining and new 'users'*,
- qualitative interviews with adoption agency leads (and/or business support, SiT coordinators) in six new agencies interested in trying Letter Swap
- six original pilot agency updates (and one follow up interview) re: their current use of the platform and any further reflections upon its role in modernising maintaining contact after adoption.
- survey with users from two new agencies, active on the platform (n=31)
- qualitative interviews with n=19 platform users (n= 8 from original agencies and n= 11 newer agencies). These were previous, longer term and newer users, a mixture of birth relatives and adopters.

*N.B: 'Users' here can be individual adoptive parents, birth relatives, guardians/carers of an adoptee's siblings or an adult sibling of an adopted young person.

4. Key findings

4.1. Findings from the analysis of the Letter Swap platform data.

We compared anonymised platform data (supplied by the developers Link Maker) from Oct 2024, with that from the end of the original pilot in Oct 2023.

- There has been a modest increase in families using the system (from 129 to 164 letterboxes) as two new agencies have started adding cases. But, as in the original pilot, once registered, individuals from these families need more time to begin to use it - most new users have only been registered for a few months.
- There has likely been some ‘pruning’ of those users from the original pilot agencies, but we are seeing some more platform activity from birth relatives (from 28% to 36.6% of inter-family communications)
- There has been some use (55 files) of the video function, which given we know that most contact agreements and RAAs do not already offer video exchange as part of SiT, has great potential for qualitative impact in terms of sharing more of children’s lives and deeper explorations within relationships.

4.2. Experiences of agencies – updates from the original six pilot RAAs

- Of the original six pilot agencies, most (5/6) still have users registered on the system, but only two of these six have likely active users who are uploading or exchanging files.
- Most of the original pilot agencies were still not thinking of investing in the platform, but given the wider systemic culture change around SiT, expressed the need to keep considering technological innovations within the market.

4.3. Findings from established users: in original pilot agencies

- We interviewed eight remaining users from two of the six original pilot agencies: five adopters and three birth relatives linked through five adopted children, now in middle childhood. Most had required professional and/or peer support (technological and emotional) to fully engage with the platform.
- In two longer term cases, where we have data from both families, the platform was valued for supporting the exchange of videos and for coming at the right time in relation to children’s evolving identity needs. In the example below, as time has passed, this family were using the platform perhaps less frequently than the adopter had expected, but more organically, with an adult sibling now getting involved. The flexibility of the platform – to allow different options for file type and frequency of exchange - was deemed to be highly significant in evolving SiT relationships.

<p>Adopter: ‘I think a big part of it [...] is that it scratched a really big itch for him it the fact that he confirmed that [...] he could see that his family had done something (sent videos) that were aimed at him and they you know they haven't forgotten.</p> <p>[...] So I think it was such a psychologically a big thing for him that just that one thing alone, kind of answered it, you know, really, really helped him. So then it was like a while before we did anything. And then it was like (special) occasions, and then he in more recent times with me saying: what about or about kind of thing’</p>	<p>Birth mother: ‘...when the first (videos) ones came through, I think it took me a couple of days before...I had to like prepare myself to watch them, because sometimes I get upset, but then I think that’s just natural’.</p> <p>‘...it took me a while to do it (do a video in reply), I always forget what to say so I were trying to like read it, write it down what I was going to say [...] I think I did a couple (of takes)’.</p> <p>‘I’d definitely encourage them (other birth relatives) to have a think about it. It’s obviously been one of the best things that we have ever done’</p>
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- Birth parents face more challenges/barriers to accessing and engaging on the platform, suggesting that they may need to be better convinced of the potential benefits for the child, and themselves and be more appropriately supported in taking these on.

4.4. Experiences of new agencies interested in trialling the platform

Link Maker have an offer to trial the platform (www.Letter Swap.co.uk) for free - organisations can add up to 100 letterboxes free of charge¹.

- Rather than heavily marketing the platform to potentially interested adoption agencies, Link Maker’s preferred approach has been to find agencies to work with to continue to develop the Letter Swap platform.
- We have interviewed representatives from six new agencies who have considered trailing the system. At the time of data collection, they were in different positions: with one having piloted and curtailed use, but 2/6 new agencies were ‘green lit’ and running with the platform: having made implementation decisions and adding cases and users.
- We identified key decisions/questions that agencies need to consider before deciding their implementation strategy:

¹ They now also provide links here (www.samcguidelines.com) to a digital version and online report generator of Safe and Meaningful Contact Guidelines (SaMC) (Burke and Woodhouse, 2021).

Key implementation questions for agencies considering the use of Letter Swap

- Which cases to include/exclude on Letter Swap? Majority or particular circumstances only? New only or historical too?
- Letter Swap as only agency system (compulsory) for SiT, or optional add on?
- Limits on frequency/types of exchange: to replicate existing/new agreements or leave open to one or both parties?
- Position re: agency checks on content of exchanges: language, privacy, tone etc.?
- Duplication of recording within existing systems, or not?
- SiT agreement review process: routine or otherwise?
- How to alert whole system to changes? Prepare families, professionals on frontline teams, IRAs, CAFCASS, legal teams etc.

- The approaches taken within the two agencies actively using the platform (RAA7 & 11) differed in terms of the resources they could devote to supporting Letter Swap and the decisions they made about how and for whom to use Letter Swap.
- The more open approach (in RAA7) – taking off agency checks where possible, allowing use of all functions on a more frequent basis offered greater opportunities for adoptive and birth families and for the child(ren) to explore the development of a closer relationship within the timeframe of this research.
- In RAA11 a more closed approach was taken – keeping agency checks, sticking to existing SiT agreements regarding frequency and type of file exchange in the first instance, with a view to building upon this in the future as users become more familiar with the platform.

4.5. Findings from new agency users of the platform

- We interviewed 11 users from three new agencies (one agency who had trialled and curtailed use because of low uptake). These were eight adopters and three birth relatives linked through 12 adopted children, aged between 2-14 years. Two adopters and two birth relatives were linked through two letterbox cases. The vast majority were from RAA7 with attempts to recruit more current users from RAA11 e.g. through the survey, less successful.
- We also have survey data from adopter and birth relative users in these two, new, currently active agencies n= 18 (RAA7) and n= 10 (RAA11).
- Reflecting their different implementation strategies, survey data shows proportionately less exchange using the more ‘novel’ functions to exchange short

messages (55% in RAA7 and 30% in RAA11) audio/video (11% in RAA7 and 0 in RAA11), with most sending/receiving traditional letters.

- Satisfaction with Letter Swap as measured in our survey differed by agency - users in RAA7 were generally more positive than RAA11, with adopters giving higher ratings than birth relatives.
- Interviewee assessments from user interviews in RAA7 are mostly positive, in terms of the platform's potential, but indicate some areas of frustration with the technology and need for more proactive agency support and check ins.
- We find three novel 'themes' emerging from more recent use of the platform in RAA7 – following an open agency approach to implementation:

Theme 1. In evolving SiT relationships adoptive parents are exploring using the platform to deepen relationships with birth family members through exchanging videos of their children. However the potential rewards of allowing adopter-controlled use of functions (esp. video exchange) for deepening relationships needs discussion with birth relatives. Timing and pacing of opening up SiT needs consideration – with the child's needs taking precedence.

'I'm trying to keep it... keeping them (children) at the centre [...] Like how we pace things: we're trying to pace things so they're not overwhelmed and that things happen far enough away, so it's not overwhelming, but not too far, that actually it becomes 'Oh, wow, this is odd again'. [...] and taking [the children's] lead through their responses, because actually it's a lot for them to be able to verbalise how they're feeling around it. [...] So yeah, being really kind of observational and curious about their feelings and using that as our key. We're trying to be really child focused ... putting our emotions as important but a bit further down the ladder. Because we're kind of the hopefully the rational grown-ups... Yeah, we can hold it all for everyone and not just our children, but the other siblings and the parents as well who are vulnerable people' (AD24).

Theme 2. In overcoming traditional barriers to SiT relationships, use of Letter Swap has specific valued benefits in reigniting contact with a birth parent, and making it easier for a birth parent with learning difficulties to participate.

'I think what motivates me to keep sharing with birth dad is because he's (now) responding, and it just feels really lovely. And while we haven't yet set up anything more direct, more face to face. This is almost, you know, like the prelude, I guess in my (mind) to what might be built on eventually. So yeah, so I'm quite motivated to keep using it with him' (AD27).

Theme 3. Letter Swap has technical and administrative benefits. In technical aspects, previous issues encountered around logging into the platform were less evident and no data breaches were reported. The platform administration benefits around speed of exchange, being notified when contact is due and seeing when items have been received and acknowledged were mentioned and appreciated by users in both new agencies. More generally reported was a sense that SiT coordinators are perhaps not yet fully conversant with the platform, to be able to answer all users' questions. There were also frustrations with uploading certain files. Users were keen on the potential of the platform and hopeful that issues with the platform could be resolved through further trialling.

'You don't want (contact communication) to get angry or disappear because the system isn't running smoothly. Is (Grandson) going to think we don't care? It's all about the child. That gets lost sometimes' (BR15).

4.6. Conclusion

- **Quantitatively, there were modest developments** in terms of overall numbers of users on the platform, the number of two-way exchanges, increase in the use of the platform by birth relatives and the beginning of use of the video function.
- **Qualitatively, we are beginning to develop a much better understanding of longer-term use and about the relational and emotional effects of opening up SiT possibilities** within the technological options of the platform - for whom the platform works well, and in what circumstances. We have seen relatively rapid and highly valued benefits, as well as cautionary notes. Indeed, for some families, use of the platform has accelerated progression to live video calls and/or face to face, direct contact between the adults.
- **Exchange of videos seems to be particularly powerful for families looking to evolve maintaining relationships**, and the platform providing security here re: removal of IP addresses and digital storage is valued.
- Given their relational significance, we also have some **useful findings in relation to supporting the safe and effective use/exchange of video files**: if/how to actively or passively involve the child(ren) in these, ensuring users are ready to receive videos (especially after a long time of not seeing one another), and with respect to the expectations for a response to them.
- **Most evolved use seems to be in cases where the platform has a) come 'at the right time'** in terms of the age/developmental stage of the child - children in middle childhood wanting questions answered, and to explore their identities and relationships with birth relatives or b) **where it addresses problems in exchanging 'Letterbox' the traditional way**, for users who struggle to write letters, but can overcome technological hurdles to send audio, short messages or video on a more frequent basis.

5. Implications for practice

Three key recommendations for managers and practitioners in adoption agencies are set out below:

Recommendation 1

Agencies need to build in bespoke guidance and support for users of Letter Swap

- Given that agencies are making key decisions re: implementation based on their own resourcing around SiT, agencies and SiT coordinators need to provide own bespoke layers of guidance and support to users on top of that provided universally by Link Maker.
- This is especially around issues like agency checks, mediation of content, responsibilities for (often adopter set) levels of control re: frequency and type of file exchange and support for reviewing this as needs change.

Recommendation 2

The emotional and social issues related to opening up staying in touch arrangements need to be thought through with users, with the impact on the child as a central focus.

- Alongside specific agency technical support regarding the implementation of the platform, there also needs to be discussion and agreement with all users/families linked to a 'case' about emotional and social issues that opening up SiT arrangements via this platform might bring.
- This needs to assess and review comfort levels with sending/receiving new types of information (e.g. uploading files that depict photos of a child or adult that haven't seen each other for a long time, that record their voice or action) and the expectations that or how parties will respond (or be able to respond) in a timely fashion, especially when contact frequency is not pre-defined.

Recommendation 3

The place of digital platforms needs to be considered alongside other issues and developments in staying in touch planning.

- Wider outstanding questions that agencies need to consider include:
 - a) future access, rights of adoptees to access/ownership of the data/content on platforms such as Letter Swap,

b) so far, Letter Swap has been used to open up indirect contact, but digital SiT platforms (but also live video calls) might also figure in supporting more direct contact plans, especially when geographical distances are involved and/or needs evolve to mean that face to face contact or 'family time' is challenging,

c) how digital SiT platforms might work alongside digital repositories/platforms for life story work.

6. Strengths and limitations of the research

- Feedback was again captured from a range of people including adoptive parents and birth relatives, managers, and other key implementers, allowing us to evaluate the implementation of Letter Swap from a range of different perspectives.
- We have been able to capture feedback from some of the longer-term users (including those using newer functions of audio/video) and newer users in agencies implementing the platform.
- Uptake by new agencies takes time and hence new users have, as with the last evaluation, not had much time to use the platform (meaning again, that longer-term outcomes could not be fully examined here).
- We are beginning to build an understanding of for whom the platform works well, and in what circumstances (relational and technical support being key), but whether the platform encourages greater continuation of contact plans, and deepens relationships across time, needs further monitoring.
- The views or experiences of users in agencies who either a) haven't been invited to use Letter Swap b) who haven't taken up an offer to use Letter Swap c) who have struggled to register on the platform and given up, or d) are not yet due to exchange on it, are less prevalent in the data collected in this revisit, consequently we have learned less (from this revisit) about who it does not work well for, in what circumstances and why.
- The direct views and experiences of children are also not explored here.

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Find out more: Dr. Julia Rimmer: julia.rimmer@uea.ac.uk

For a copy of the full report please contact Vicky Swift:
Vicky.Swift@adoptionengland.co.uk