

Adoption Tees Valley (ATV)

Virtual Memory Box (VMB) and Keeping in Touch Policy and Procedure

1. Purpose

This document sets out Adoption Tees Valley's policy and procedure for supporting Keeping in Touch (KiT) arrangements through using the Virtual Memory Box (VMB) platform.

Adoption Tees Valley recognises that a child's identity is shaped by multiple factors including ethnicity, culture, heritage, language, faith, disability, neurodiversity, family relationships and community connections. The Virtual Memory Box should support children to develop and maintain a positive understanding of these aspects of their identity where it is safe and appropriate.

The aims are to:

- Promote safe, meaningful, and consistent contact and connection between adopted children, their birth families and important people
- Support children's identity, culture, heritage, language, faith, life story, sense of belonging and emotional wellbeing
- Provide a secure, modern, and flexible approach to maintaining relationships

2. Strategic Context and Rationale

The development of digital Keeping in Touch arrangements is informed by a strong foundation of national research, policy direction, and sector-wide learning.

Evidence from the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (2021) highlights the limitations of traditional letterbox contact arrangements and identifies the potential for digital approaches to provide safer, more meaningful, and sustainable forms of communication between adopted children and their birth families.

This aligns with the Adoption England Strategy 2024–2027, which emphasises the importance of:

- Maintaining relationships with significant individuals
- Supporting adopted people to develop a strong sense of identity
- Modernising contact arrangements through flexible and responsive approaches

Further research from the University of East Anglia and Research in Practice reinforces that maintaining relationships following adoption plays a critical role in supporting:

- Identity development
- Emotional wellbeing
- A child's understanding of their life story

This research also highlights that successful contact arrangements require careful planning, preparation, and ongoing support to ensure they remain safe, meaningful, and beneficial over time.

The move toward digital contact reflects a broader recognition that adoption is a lifelong journey, requiring support that evolves alongside the needs of children, young people, and families. Digital platforms provide opportunities to maintain consistent, accessible, and responsive connections, helping to address delays and barriers associated with traditional systems.

In line with this, Adoption Tees Valley is committed to:

- Supporting children to maintain meaningful relationships where it is safe to do so
- Promoting a strong and secure sense of identity
- Ensuring contact arrangements are modern, inclusive, and adaptable to individual needs
- Adoption Tees Valley recognises that identity is shaped by ethnicity, culture, heritage, language, faith, disability, neurodiversity, family relationships and community connections. Digital Keeping in Touch arrangements should support children to develop and maintain a positive understanding of these aspects of their identity where it is safe and appropriate.

2. Overview of Virtual Memory Box (VMB)

Virtual Memory Box (VMB) is a secure online platform which allows adopters and birth family members to:

- Share keeping in touch updates, messages, photographs, videos, and voice recordings
- Build and maintain a child's life story over time
- Support indirect contact in a structured and accessible way

The platform:

- Automatically removes identifying metadata from content to maintain confidentiality
 - Stores information securely in one place
 - Reduces delays associated with traditional contact methods
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3. Key Principles

All Keeping in Touch arrangements via VMB are underpinned by:

- Child-centred practice
 - Safety and confidentiality
 - Respect for all parties
 - Flexibility and inclusion
 - Support and accessibility
 - Equality, diversity and inclusion
 - Culturally responsive practice
 - Respect for cultural, linguistic, religious and family diversity
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4. Keeping in Touch Arrangements

4.1 Core Approach

- Existing KiT arrangements will remain unchanged
 - VMB changes the method of communication, not the arrangement itself
 - Any changes to arrangements must be agreed and recorded
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4.2 Frequency of Contact

- Historic agreed frequency remains in place
- The VMB platform:
 - Supports planned updates
 - Sends reminders where updates are due
- Any variation must be discussed with ATV and based on the child's needs

5. Implementation Procedure

The implementation of VMB is delivered through a phased, structured mobilisation and rollout programme, ensuring safe, consistent, and sustainable practice across Adoption Tees Valley.

This approach reflects a planned transition from pilot to full-service delivery, supported by governance, stakeholder engagement, and continuous improvement.

5.1 Phased Implementation Approach

VMB implementation is delivered across key phases:

Phase 1: Mobilisation and Pilot Preparation (Q3–Q4 2025)

- Establish VMB as a pan-regional programme
- Deliver initial North East pilot (10 arrangements)
- Develop and test the VMB model
- Identify project team and system administrators
- Confirm governance arrangements
- Deliver initial demonstrations and training

Outcome: Tested model with initial learning to inform wider rollout.

Phase 2: Initial Delivery (January 2026)

- Develop local operational delivery plans
- Engage ATV through:
 - Focus groups
 - Community of Practice
 - Programme oversight meetings
- Deliver workforce training
- Identify and establish VMB Champions
- Begin onboarding:

- New cases
 - Transfers from existing letterbox arrangements
- Launch communications to:
 - Staff
 - Adopters
 - Birth relatives

Outcome: VMB introduced into practice with structured support and engagement.

Phase 3: Expansion and Development (February–March 2026)

- Continue onboarding and transferring arrangements
- Develop:
 - Guidance materials
 - User resources (e.g. fact sheets, digital tools)
- Strengthen stakeholder engagement through:
 - Q&A sessions
 - Practitioner and panel involvement
 - Birth relative engagement groups
- Update local policies and procedures to embed VMB

Outcome: Increased uptake and strengthened infrastructure to support delivery.

Phase 4: Scale and Embed (April – June 2026)

- Expand VMB across a wider cohort of families
- Strengthen engagement with key partners:
 - Local Family Justice Boards
 - IROs
 - Adopter forums
- Review communication approaches and improve engagement strategies

- Gather structured feedback from adopters and birth relatives

Outcome: VMB becomes embedded within routine service delivery.

Phase 5: Review and Reporting (May – July 2026)

- Undertake formal review of:
 - Implementation progress
 - Engagement levels
 - Impact on children and families
- Report outcomes to Governance Board

Outcome: Assurance of effectiveness and identification of learning.

Phase 6: Sustainment and Continuous Improvement (August – December 2026)

- Maintain delivery and onboarding of new arrangements
- Monitor:
 - Usage
 - Feedback
 - Performance
- Refresh training and communications as required
- Embed VMB into business-as-usual practice

Outcome: Sustainable, long-term integration of VMB within adoption services.

5.2 Core Implementation Activities

Across all phases, the following core activities underpin delivery:

- **Planning and Governance**
 - Clear programme oversight and reporting structures
 - Alignment with ATV governance arrangements
- **Operational Delivery**

- Identification and onboarding of cases
 - Management of transfers from traditional letterbox contact
 - **Training and Workforce Development**
 - Initial and ongoing staff training
 - Development of a VMB Champion network
 - Training should include:
 - Cultural competence
 - Anti-racist practice
 - Supporting transracial adoption
 - Understanding unconscious bias
 - Supporting children's cultural identity and heritage
 - Inclusive communication approaches
 - **Stakeholder Engagement**
 - Communication with adopters and birth relatives
 - Engagement forums, Q&A sessions, and support groups
 - **Communications Strategy**
 - Multi-channel communication approach
 - Accessible materials tailored to different audiences
 - **Data and Systems Management**
 - Secure setup of accounts and case records
 - Development of mailing lists and digital tools
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5.3 Success Measures

Implementation success will be measured through:

- Completion of pilot arrangements
- Growth in VMB uptake
- Positive feedback from adopters and birth relatives

- Evidence of strengthened engagement and relationships
 - Embedding of VMB in policy and day-to-day practice
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5.4 Risks and Mitigation

Key risks are actively managed through:

- Strengthened communication and engagement strategies
 - Ongoing training and refresher opportunities
 - Clear data handling processes
 - Active stakeholder involvement and feedback mechanisms
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6. Using VMB

6.1 Uploading Updates

Users are encouraged to upload content directly to the VMB platform, promoting timely, meaningful, and personal communication between adopters and birth family members.

Where required, Adoption Tees Valley (ATV) can:

- Provide support to enable users to upload content independently
- Upload updates on behalf of users where there are barriers to access (e.g. digital confidence, accessibility needs)

Updates should be submitted as part of a planned and complete communication, in line with agreed Keeping in Touch arrangements.

Quality and Content Expectations

All content shared via VMB should:

- **Reflect agreed arrangements**
 - Be consistent with the frequency, purpose, and expectations of the Keeping in Touch agreement
- **Be child-focused**
 - Support the child's understanding of their life story, identity, and relationships

- Be mindful that content may be accessed by the child now or in the future
- **Be respectful and appropriate**
 - Use language that is considerate and sensitive to all parties
 - Avoid content that may cause distress, confusion, or conflict
- **Promote positive identity and emotional wellbeing**
 - Share meaningful updates that help the child maintain a sense of connection and belonging
 - Recognise the importance of relationships in supporting lifelong identity development
 - Where appropriate, updates should support children's understanding of their cultural heritage, language, beliefs, family traditions, community connections and significant life experiences.
- **Maintain confidentiality and safety**
 - Avoid sharing identifying or sensitive information outside of agreed parameters
 - Adhere to guidance on safe digital communication

Support and Guidance

ATV will:

- Provide guidance and examples of appropriate content where required
- Support users to develop confidence in communicating through VMB
- Offer advice where there are uncertainties about what to include
- Support should be adapted to meet the needs of users with disabilities, neurodivergent individuals, learning difficulties, communication differences or sensory needs. Accessible formats should be available where required

This approach supports users to engage in safe, confident, and meaningful communication, while maintaining a focus on the child's best interests and long-term identity needs.

7. Managing Concerns and Safeguarding

7.1 Inappropriate Content

If concerns arise:

- Content may be hidden from view
- In exceptional circumstances, administrators may delete content

ATV will:

- Contact relevant parties
 - Provide guidance and support
 - Agree next steps
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7.2 Escalation

Where concerns cannot be resolved:

- Escalate to:
 - Team Manager
 - Service Manager
 - Follow appropriate procedures as required
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8. Role of Adoption Tees Valley

ATV will:

- Support families to access and use VMB
- Provide guidance on content and expectations
- Facilitate communication where appropriate
- Monitor and respond to safeguarding concerns
- Record and review arrangements where appropriate

ATV will not routinely monitor or edit updates but remains available for advice and intervention.

9. Accessibility and Flexibility

ATV recognises varying needs and will:

- Provide:
 - One-to-one support
 - Drop-in sessions
 - Telephone, Teams, and in-person support
- Assist users with:
 - Low digital confidence
 - Limited access to technology

Where needed:

- ATV staff may upload updates on behalf of users
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10. Blended Contact Arrangements

- Pre-existing arrangements (e.g. birthday cards) will continue
 - Physical items:
 - Should be sent to ATV
 - Will be forwarded to the relevant party
 - Blended approaches (digital and physical) may be agreed and recorded
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11. Young People and Transition

- At age 18:
 - Young people may manage their own VMB account
 - Arrangements will be discussed based on individual needs
 - VMB remains available until age 25
 - ATV will provide support during transition periods
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12. Data Protection and Security

- ATV is the data controller
- Data is:

- Encrypted in transit and storage
 - Protected through a Data Protection Impact Assessment
 - Metadata is automatically removed from all uploads
 - Users can:
 - Access their content
 - Download information where required
 - In the event of system closure:
 - Data can be retained securely on ATV systems
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13. Monitoring and Review

ATV will:

- Monitor engagement and usage through VMB systems
- Gather feedback from adopters and birth families
- Review arrangements:
 - At key stages
 - When concerns arise
 - When requested

Reviews should consider whether VMB arrangements continue to support the child's identity, culture, heritage, language, faith and sense of belonging.

- Continue to develop practice through:
 - Implementation planning
 - Governance oversight
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14. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Adoption Tees Valley is committed to ensuring that all children, adopters and birth family members are supported in a way that respects and values diversity. Practitioners must work in accordance with principles of equality, diversity, inclusion and anti-discriminatory practice. Decisions must not be influenced by assumptions, stereotypes

or bias relating to race, ethnicity, culture, religion, disability, sexuality, gender identity, family structure or socioeconomic status.

15. Roles and Responsibilities

Role	Responsibility
KiT Worker / VMB Champion	Support users, provide guidance, facilitate communication
Team Manager	Oversight, escalation, decision-making
Adopters / Birth Family	Upload and share updates in line with agreement
ATV	Governance, safeguarding, system oversight

16. Governance and Implementation

- VMB forms part of the modernisation of adoption services
 - Approved through ATV governance structures
 - Implementation is phased, with ongoing review and development
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17. Summary

The Virtual Memory Box provides a secure, flexible, and meaningful way to support Keeping in Touch arrangements. It enables children to maintain connections, understand their life story, and develop a strong sense of identity, while ensuring appropriate safeguards and professional support remain in place.