

SECTION EIGHT

Indirect Contact – Keeping in Touch

(Formerly known as Letterbox Contact)

1. Overview

This section outlines Adoption Tees Valley's approach to establishing, managing, and reviewing Keeping in Touch (KiT) arrangements between birth family members, other important people in a child's life and adoptive families.

Keeping in Touch is a formal, planned arrangement that enables adoptive parents, birth family members or any other identified important people to the child, to share information about themselves and the child as they grow up, in line with an agreed plan. These arrangements are made during the court and are designed to support the child's identity, life story, and emotional wellbeing.

In line with the modernisation of adoption practice, KiT is increasingly facilitated through secure digital platforms such as Virtual Memory Box (VMB), which provide a more timely, flexible, and meaningful way to maintain connections.

Adoption Tees Valley recognises that a child's identity is shaped by multiple factors including ethnicity, culture, faith, language, nationality, family traditions, disability, neurodiversity, gender identity, sexuality, and community connections. Keeping in Touch arrangements should support children to maintain meaningful links to those aspects of their identity where it is safe and in their best interests.

All KiT arrangements are:

- Confidential
- Agreed in the child's best interests
- Supported by Adoption Tees Valley

Arrangements will usually be supported until the child reaches 18 years of age, or longer where appropriate and agreed, VMB allows communication till a child is 25 years old.

Communication will be mainly facilitated through Adoption Tees Valley's digital platform (Virtual Memory Box).

2. Related Procedures

- Virtual Memory Box (VMB)

- Referral
 - Family Finding
 - Matching and Placement
 - Provision of Independent Birth Parent Support
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3. Developing the Keeping in Touch Plan

The development of Keeping in Touch arrangements should be safe, purposeful, and meaningful, supporting the child's welfare, identity, and lifelong connections.

Keeping in Touch planning must be child-centred, evidence-informed, and based on a clear understanding of the child's relationships, both current and future. Arrangements should promote the child's emotional wellbeing, support their understanding of their life story, and maintain important relationships where it is safe to do so.

All KiT arrangements must reflect:

- The child's needs, wishes, and feelings
 - The purpose of contact for each individual
 - Consideration of risks and protective factors
 - The importance of supporting identity and lifelong connections
 - The need for flexibility, recognising that arrangements may change over time
 - The child's cultural, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and heritage needs
 - Consideration of how relationships may support the child's understanding of their culture and community
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3.1 Responsibilities of the Child's Social Worker

The child's social worker is responsible for assessing, developing, and reviewing the Keeping in Touch Plan during care proceedings.

This includes:

- Explaining KiT arrangements to birth parents and significant individuals, including expectations and how arrangements may evolve
- Supporting parents and family members to understand the purpose and long-term value of Keeping in Touch for the child

- Assessing the child's current relationships, attachments, and lived experience
 - Considering future needs, including identity, relationships, and life story development
 - Identifying who is important to the child now and in the future, including birth parents, siblings, and wider family members
 - Assessing strengths and challenges within each relationship, including risks such as domestic abuse, substance misuse, or mental health concerns
 - Identifying what support or safeguards are required to ensure arrangements are safe and sustainable
 - Ensuring the child's voice is central to all planning, appropriate to their age and understanding
 - Assess how Keeping in Touch arrangements can support the child's cultural identity, heritage, faith, language, and sense of belonging.
 - Consider the importance of wider family networks, faith communities, cultural communities, and significant adults who contribute to the child's identity, sense of belonging and wellbeing.
 - Ensure that children with disabilities, neurodivergent children and children who communicate in alternative ways are supported to express their wishes and feelings using accessible and appropriate communication methods.
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3.2 Developing the Keeping in Touch Plan

The KiT Plan must be clearly documented and demonstrate a robust assessment and rationale for all arrangements.

The plan must include:

a) Purpose of Keeping in Touch

- A clear statement of the purpose for each relationship (e.g. maintaining identity, preserving sibling relationships, supporting emotional wellbeing)

b) Type and Frequency of Contact

- Details of the agreed arrangements, including:
 - Direct (face-to-face) contact
 - Indirect contact / Digital or creative approaches (e.g. video messages, memory boxes, voice notes)

- The frequency and timing of each arrangement, based on the child's needs and the purpose of contact

c) Individuals Involved

- Identification of all relevant individuals, including:
 - Birth parents
 - Siblings (including those in different placements)
 - Extended family members or other significant individuals

d) Roles and Responsibilities

- Clear identification of who will facilitate and support contact arrangements, including arrangements where supervision is required, as provision will need to be provided by the Local Authority.

e) Strengths, Risks, and Safeguards

- A balanced assessment of:
 - The benefits (strengths) of maintaining each relationship
 - The challenges or risks, including potential impact on the child
- Clear measures to mitigate risk and promote safe, stable arrangements

f) Rationale for Decision-Making

- A clear explanation of how decisions have been reached, including:
 - Professional assessment
 - Multi-agency input where relevant
 - The child's wishes and feelings
- Consideration of both short-term and long-term arrangements, including how contact may evolve over time

4. Benefits of Keeping in Touch

For the Child

- Maintains connections with birth family where appropriate
- Supports understanding of identity and life story
- Reduces feelings of loss, confusion, or rejection

- Provides reassurance about birth family wellbeing
 - For children in transracial, transcultural, or international adoption arrangements, Keeping in Touch may play a particularly important role in supporting cultural identity, reducing cultural isolation, and promoting positive self-esteem
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For Birth Family Members

- Provides reassurance that the child is safe and well
 - Enables ongoing connection and contribution to the child's life story
 - Supports the child's understanding of their background
 - Demonstrates ongoing care and commitment
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For Adoptive Parents

- Provides additional information about the child's background and family
 - Supports open and honest conversations about adoption
 - Helps address questions, myths, or uncertainties
 - Enables reassurance to the child about their birth family
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5. Linking and Matching

Keeping in Touch arrangements need to be fully considered, transparent, and understood during the linking and matching process. Prospective adopters must be appropriately prepared, informed, and supported to promote stable and sustainable arrangements that meet the child's lifelong needs.

5.1 During the Matching Process

- The child's social worker must ensure that proposed KiT arrangements are clearly presented as part of the child's permanence plan, including the purpose and intended outcomes for the child
- Prospective adopters must receive full written and verbal information about all proposed contact arrangements, including:
 - Type, frequency, and format of contact (direct, indirect, digital)
 - The purpose of each relationship for the child

- Any identified strengths, risks, and vulnerabilities
 - The Adoption Team must assess the prospective adopters':
 - Capacity and willingness to support KiT arrangements
 - Understanding of the importance of identity, life story, and maintaining connections
 - Ability to manage complex family dynamics and risk factors
 - Discussion should include how adopters will:
 - Support the child to understand and engage with KiT arrangements
 - Respond to the child's emotional needs before, during, and after contact
 - Maintain arrangements over time, including as the child grows and their needs change
 - Prospective adopters should be supported to understand the benefits of creative and flexible approaches to Keeping in Touch (e.g. digital communication, memory sharing)
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5.2 Pre-Placement Planning and Preparation

- A placement planning meeting must include a detailed discussion of KiT arrangements
 - Clear expectations must be agreed regarding:
 - Roles and responsibilities of adopters and professionals
 - Any supervision, support, or review mechanisms
 - Adopters must be supported to understand:
 - The child's history and relationships
 - The potential emotional impact of contact
 - A plan should be developed for how KiT arrangements will be introduced and supported during transition and early placement
 - All parties are signed up to VMB with appropriate support provided
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5.3 Following Identification of Adopters

- The meeting between the child's social worker, Adoption Team (ATV) social worker should:
 - Provide a clear explanation of agreed KiT arrangements, including purpose and boundaries
 - Reinforce the long-term benefit for the child, particularly around identity and life story
 - Birth parents should be supported to:
 - Contribute to safe and meaningful arrangements (e.g. appropriate communication, reliability)
 - Understand the importance of consistency and emotional safety for the child
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5.4 Support and Services

- Birth parents must be offered access to Independent Birth Parent Support Services, including:
 - Emotional support and counselling
 - Guidance on participating in indirect contact (VMB)
 - Prospective adopters must also be provided with:
 - Preparation and training should include consideration of cultural identity, anti-racist practice, transracial adoption, unconscious bias, and supporting children's heritage and community connections.
 - Preparation and training on managing contact arrangements
 - Access to adoption support services where required
 - Ongoing professional support should be available to ensure KiT arrangements remain safe, consistent, and focused on the child's needs
 - Information, guidance, and support should be made available in accessible formats and languages that meet the needs of adopters, children, birth family members and other important people. Interpreting and translation support should be offered where required.
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5.5 Recording and Agreement

- All agreed KiT arrangements must be:
 - Clearly recorded in the Adoption Placement Report (APR) and Child Permanence Report (CPR)
 - Reflected in the Adoption Support Plan, where appropriate
 - Any agreements reached with adopters, birth family members and other important people in a child's life must be clearly documented, including:
 - Expectations of all parties
 - Review arrangements
 - The final KiT plan should be confirmed prior to placement and reviewed post-placement
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6. Settling-In Letter

Adopters will usually provide a settling-in update to birth parents and other identified members of the KiT arrangement;

- Within approximately 2 months of placement
 - To reassure birth family that the child is safe and settling
 - The update will be uploaded to the VMB platform, and this will commence the arrangement
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7. Managing Keeping in Touch Arrangements

7.1 Recording and Administration

- All arrangements must be uploaded to CHARMS
 - Updates that come via physical post must be logged on the VMB platform and sent to the identified member of the arrangement
 - Adopters, birth family members and any other important individual identified in the KiT arrangement should be responsible for uploading their update to VMB. Support can be provided where required from ATV
 - Any changes (e.g. address / email) must be updated promptly
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7.2 Methods of Communication

KiT arrangements may be facilitated through:

- Virtual Memory Box (VMB)
- Email (where agreed – only on specific cases)
- Postal correspondence (where appropriate)

VMB is the preferred method moving forward, offering:

- Secure and timely communication
 - Storage of all updates in one place
 - Ability to share a range of media (letters, photos, videos, voice notes)
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7.3 Content and Quality

- Updates should be respectful, appropriate, and child-focused
- Routine reading/review of content by ATV does not take place
- Support and guidance are available upon request

If concerns arise:

- Content may be hidden or withheld
 - ATV will provide support and facilitate resolution
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7.4 Practical Arrangements

- On historical cases, ATV will take reasonable steps to confirm contact details before sending correspondence (physical items)
 - Items larger than an A4 envelope will not be accepted due to storage and security limitations
 - Physical items (e.g. cards) may continue where agreed
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7.5 Non-Engagement

Where one party does not engage:

- ATV may complete follow-up contact
- Sensitive documents will be securely stored

- Support will be offered to explore barriers and encourage continued contact
 - The VMB platform will send automated reminders when parties have been inactive for a period of 6 months
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8. Reviews and Changes

KiT arrangements are dynamic and responsive and can be reviewed to ensure they continue to meet the child's best interests, identity needs, and emotional wellbeing.

Reviews may take place:

- As part of planned review activity
 - Following a formal KiT Review referral
 - At key transition points in the child's life
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8.1 When a Review is Required

KiT arrangements can be reviewed where:

- The child's needs change, including developmental stage, understanding of adoption, or emotional wellbeing
 - The circumstances of any party change (e.g. capacity to engage, changes in relationships, safeguarding concerns)
 - There are concerns about the quality, appropriateness, or impact of contact
 - There is non-engagement or inconsistent participation from either party
 - A review is formally requested by:
 - Adoptive parents
 - Birth family members and other important people in a child's life
 - The child (where appropriate)
 - Professionals involved in the case
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8.2 Review Process

All reviews should be completed using the Keeping in Touch Review framework, ensuring a structured and balanced assessment.

This includes:

- Gathering factual information about the child, adopters, and birth family
- Reviewing current arrangements:
 - Type of contact (including use of VMB)
 - Frequency and consistency
 - Level of engagement (ongoing / intermittent / no contact)
- Obtaining the views of:
 - Adoptive parents
 - Birth family members, and other important people in a child's life
 - The child or young person (where appropriate)
- Considering:
 - What is working well
 - What could be improved
 - The impact of contact on the child
 - Has the arrangement continued to support the child's cultural identity, heritage, faith, language, and sense of belonging?

Reviews must also include an assessment of risk, vulnerability, and benefit, including:

- The potential impact of increasing, reducing, or changing contact
- The emotional and relational needs of the child
- Any safeguarding considerations

8.3 Consideration of Future Arrangements

The review process should clearly consider and record:

- Any proposed changes to:
 - Type of contact (e.g. increased use of VMB, introduction of different formats)
 - Frequency or timing
 - Participants in the arrangement

- The views of all parties in relation to proposed changes
- The benefits and vulnerabilities associated with changes
- Any support required to achieve the desired outcome

Where changes involve VMB:

- Consideration should be given to:
 - Digital access and confidence
 - Consideration should also be given to digital poverty, technology access, literacy levels, disability, language barriers, and confidence in using digital platforms.
 - Engagement levels on the platform
 - Suitability of digital communication for the child and family

8.4 Decision-Making and Recording

Any changes to KiT arrangements must:

- Be child-centred and based on best interests
- Be clearly evidenced through the review process
- Be agreed by relevant parties where appropriate

All outcomes must:

- Be clearly recorded within the KiT Review documentation
- Be updated on the CHARMS system
- Reflect any agreed changes to the Keeping in Touch Arrangements
- Permissions / frequencies changed on the VMB Platform

Where agreement cannot be reached:

- Professional judgement should be applied
- Decisions should be escalated in line with governance and safeguarding procedures

8.5 Support and Implementation of Changes

Following a review:

- Adoption Tees Valley will:
 - Provide support to implement agreed changes
 - Offer guidance to adopters and birth families
 - Facilitate transitions (e.g. moving to or increasing use of VMB)

Additional support may include:

- Help to re-establish contact where engagement has reduced
 - Assistance with writing or uploading updates
 - Access to Adoption Support Services (e.g. life story work, therapeutic support)
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8.6 Ongoing Monitoring

Following any review:

- Arrangements will be monitored to ensure effectiveness
- Engagement and outcomes may be tracked (including through VMB usage where applicable)
- Further reviews may be scheduled where needed

This ensures that KiT arrangements remain:

- Safe
 - Meaningful
 - Supportive of the child's identity over time
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9. Young People and Post-18 Arrangements

9.1 Transition to Adulthood

Planning for Keeping in Touch (KiT) arrangements must include preparation for the child reaching adulthood.

- Prior to the young person turning 18, discussions must take place to consider their wishes, preferences, and future intentions regarding contact
- These discussions should reflect the young person's growing autonomy, emotional readiness, and understanding of relationships

Young people may choose to:

- Continue existing arrangements
- Change the frequency or format of contact
- End contact
- Manage their own communication independently

Where appropriate, these decisions should be supported sensitively, ensuring the young person feels informed and in control.

9.2 Post-18 Support and Arrangements

Where ongoing contact is agreed:

- Adoption Tees Valley may continue to provide advice, guidance, and facilitation support beyond the age of 18, based on individual need
- Additional support may be identified to help the young person navigate relationships, boundaries, and emotional impact
- Virtual Memory Box (VMB) may continue to be used up to the age of 25

Support should be tailored and may include:

- Assistance with maintaining or re-establishing contact
 - Guidance on communication with birth family members, and other important people in a child's life
 - Access to wider adoption support services
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9.3 Ending or Changing Engagement

Where a young person chooses to stop engaging with KiT / VMB:

- Their decision must be respected and supported
- They must be offered their personal data and memories in an accessible format

Procedure for exporting VMB content:

- The young person's memory box must be exported via the VMB admin panel as a ZIP file
- The file should include:
 - Timeline

- Albums
- All stored media (photos, videos, audio, documents)
- A copy should be:
 - Uploaded to a cloud-based storage option as the preferred option
 - Saved securely onto a USB and shared with the young person if preferred
 - Uploaded and stored on the **CHARMS system** as part of their record

Where file sizes are small, content may be shared securely via email. For larger files, cloud-based storage options (e.g. Google Drive or similar) may be used, with appropriate support provided to the young person to access these.

9.4 Data Management and GDPR Compliance

- A report within the VMB system must be used to identify all young people reaching 25 years of age
- This report should be reviewed regularly by designated staff

At age 26:

- VMB accounts must be deleted in line with GDPR requirements
- This reflects that individuals are no longer considered children or young people, and data can no longer be held on a “best interests” basis

All data remains the responsibility of the Local Authority / Regional Adoption Agency.

9.5 Birth Family Memory Boxes

- Memory boxes relating to birth family members, and other important people in a child’s life may also be exported and shared where appropriate
- Copies should be securely stored on CHARMS
- Birth family VMB accounts must also be closed and deleted in line with data management requirements

9.6 Practical Guidance on Data Storage

- The size of exported memory boxes will vary depending on usage

- As a guide, regular uploads over several years may result in files of approximately 5GB or more

When sharing data:

- Small files may be sent via secure email
 - Larger files should be shared via USB or secure cloud storage
 - Users should be supported to access and manage their data where needed
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9.7 Practice Expectations

- Young people's views and choices must be central to all decision-making
 - Transitions to adulthood must be planned, supported, and clearly recorded
 - Practitioners must ensure compliance with data protection requirements
 - Support should remain responsive to individual needs, even where formal arrangements end
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10. Support for Birth Parents

Recognising the emotional impact of KiT:

- Birth parents will be offered access to Independent Birth Parent Support Services
 - They will be invited to attend bi monthly support sessions with their Local Authority area; support includes:
 - Help writing updates
 - Emotional support
 - Guidance around maintaining contact
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11. Key Practice Expectations

- All arrangements must be child-focused
- Communication must remain safe, respectful, and confidential
- Flexibility should be applied where appropriate
- Support must be accessible to all parties

- All arrangements should actively promote the child's understanding of their cultural, ethnic, religious, linguistic, and family heritage where it is safe and in their best interests
 - Practitioners should demonstrate culturally responsive and anti-discriminatory practice throughout assessment, planning, review, and support activities
 - Practitioners should approach families with cultural humility and curiosity, recognising that individuals experience culture, faith, identity and heritage differently.
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12. Summary

Keeping in Touch arrangements are an essential part of adoption practice, supporting children to understand their identity, maintain connections, and develop a sense of belonging.

All professionals involved in the development, review, and implementation of Keeping in Touch arrangements 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, religion, disability, gender, sexuality, family structure, or socioeconomic status.

The introduction of Virtual Memory Box enhances this work by providing a secure, flexible, and more meaningful way to maintain these important relationships over time, while ensuring appropriate safeguards and professional support remain in place.

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