

# Family Futures CIC

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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<b>Unique reference number</b>	SC462984
<b>Inspection date</b>	27/10/2014
<b>Inspector</b>	Heather Chaplin
<b>Type of inspection</b>	Full
<b>Provision subtype</b>	Domestic adoption

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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	13/05/2013

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Family Futures is a registered voluntary adoption agency, based in North London. It was established in 1998 to provide specialised assessment and treatment for children with a history of early trauma, who fostered, adopted or living with their birth families. Many children and families travel long distances within and outside the United Kingdom, in order to receive help from the service.

Initially registered as an adoption support agency, the service re-registered as a voluntary adoption agency in 2008. This enabled the service to expand its remit to set up the i-Adopt service, to recruit, prepare and assess prospective adopters primarily for harder-to-place children.

In addition to adoption support and assessments of prospective adopters, the service operates a training and consultancy service. In February 2013, Family Futures became a not-for-profit Community Interest Company. This change of legal status required the service to re-register with Ofsted under its new identity, but the nature of the work has remained constant.

At the time of this inspection, there were 11 i-Adopt families approved, with others undergoing assessment, and eight children placed for adoption. There were 63 families receiving adoption support services.

### The inspection judgements and what they mean

**Outstanding:** An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

**Good:** An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

**Requires improvement:** An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

**Inadequate:** An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

## Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The service is outstanding because it provides a service of exceptional quality, underpinned by strong ethical values. Developed over the last 16 years, the service's neuro-physiological assessment and treatment programme for adoptive and fostering families is well established, but dynamic, innovative and flexible. The assessment and treatment programme draws on a variety of therapeutic methods, up-to-date theories and research, informing the highest standards of professional practice.

The i-Adopt service recruits, prepares and assesses prospective adopters against this background of psychotherapeutic knowledge. Some adopters commented that by the time they were approved, they had received six months of therapy and had acquired in-depth understanding of their personal attachment styles. The therapeutic assessment process helps prospective adopters to find inner resources to equip them for the challenging task ahead. This has a beneficial impact on children because it promotes positive attachments and reduces the risk of placement breakdown.

Throughout all its activities, the service ensures that children's wishes and feelings are at the centre of everything it does. Adoptive families in therapy said that they felt included, valued and respected. They are fully involved in all aspects of their children's treatment and consequently, gain confidence in their ability to parent therapeutically. One family commented; 'we travel a distance, but it is so worth it to work with the amazing professionals who are helping us and our looked-after young person...outstanding people...'. This shows that the experiences, progress of and outcomes for children and families are exceptionally positive.

Prospective and approved adopters all said that the service they had received was excellent. They were attracted to the service's emphasis on therapy from the start of the assessment, and strong, collaborative and respectful relationships with parents as the service's major strengths.

The service employs highly skilled educationalists, psychologists and therapists who specialise in psychotherapy, drama, dance, art and occupational therapy. The staff team is stable, experienced and highly valued by the families who seek help. The team's links with external professionals help them to work exceptionally well with other agencies and local authorities. One adopter said, 'although we are no longer officially funded to receive support from Family Futures, they have continued to monitor and show an interest in our family's progress. Throughout our three years of therapy, and since, they have been very proactive in keeping school, social services and our GP aware of safeguarding issues, disclosures and supporting them in developing good practice for children who have been traumatised in their early years.'

The service is exceptionally well managed and led. There has been substantial investment in staff training and development. The service's leaders are internationally renowned in their field and have made a substantial contribution to

research and learning for the benefit of children who cannot receive a service in person. The service also has formal consultation and training arrangements with local authorities and other professionals. This means that the service disseminates its knowledge outside the setting.

In January 2012, Family Futures has been validated by C4EO ([www.C4EO.org.uk](http://www.C4EO.org.uk)) for innovative and excellent practice. To achieve this award, excellent practice has to be sustained over time and considered worthy of dissemination to other agencies working with vulnerable children and young people.

One minor shortfall was found in the amount of detail recorded for a small number of recent staff recruitment checks. There is no breach of regulations and this issue does not impact on the safety or welfare of children and young people. A recommendation has been made, which was substantially addressed during the inspection.

## Areas for improvement

### Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- demonstrate, from written records, that the agency consistently follows good recruitment practice. Ensure that all personnel responsible for recruitment and selection are trained in, understand and operate these good practices. In particular, ensure that employment history and checks on references are recorded in sufficient detail. (NMS 21.2)

### Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Children from a wide range of ethnic, cultural and social backgrounds, including those who are regarded as challenging to place, are able to find permanent families through this service. The exceptional level of support offered helps to ensure that families find the skills and resilience to work through the challenges that placements are likely to bring. This means that parents gain confidence in their ability to parent children who have experienced trauma in their early lives.

All adopters interviewed were effusive about the high quality adoption support received. One adopter said, 'the Family Futures therapeutic team support me hugely in developing attachments with my severely traumatised children. They help me to reflect on and understand the root of my children's behaviour and their developing and changing needs in ways that help me to parent therapeutically.'

Another adopter said, 'in the early days they were a lifeline, as they gave us the insight we needed to understand our children's behaviour. But as the years have gone on they have helped us with parenting skills that are of a different approach to

parenting birth children and made us see ourselves as therapeutically parenting. They have helped us with periods of crisis. When one of our children was really having trouble at school, the educational specialist they had came to several school meetings to support us and give their input. They wrote documents with strategies for classroom situations. As my children became young people in their own right and wanted to consider face-to-face contact with birth parents, they gave sensitive support and information appropriate to the emotional development of the individual child.'

A professional commented, 'their area of specialism has allowed families to remain together. Their level of understanding and expertise is exceptional. (They are) extremely thorough at assessing a child's needs and responding to them in treatment.'

Another professional said, 'Family Futures hold children's well being at the heart of their work. They are incredibly knowledgeable, well trained, forward thinking and supportive. I have nothing but good things to say about Family Futures.'

A staff member described the improving outcomes for families; 'I have seen the affect on parents who often arrive at Family Futures angry, fed up and sometimes depressed, as they have not been listened to by other professionals, and/or have been blamed for their adoptive child's problems. After a while, I see them relax and engage positively, start to use ideas and strategies learnt from Family Futures' sessions, and see the relationships within the family transform.'

Families and professionals all agree that the experiences and progress of children and young people with diverse, complex therapeutic needs, are exceptionally good. Prospective adopters approved by this agency provide a valued resource for the most vulnerable children, and the support they receive promotes exceptional outcomes.

## **Quality of service**

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Quality of care is outstanding because the agency exceeds the highest standards of customer service. Families interviewed confirmed that they feel highly valued and respected by the agency, from the first point of contact throughout the service's involvement. The administration team, as well as the therapists and service's managers, are fully engaged in welcoming prospective adopters and adoptive families who come to the service for help. A number of families commended individual staff by name and commented on the quality of the staff; 'the receptionist made us feel wanted and valuable, remembering what drinks we all like'; and 'X (social worker) is awesome.'

Parents with children in therapy commented on the exceptionally welcoming environment, with spacious, attractive surroundings, goldfish, fresh flowers and a large bowl of fruit to greet visitors and help them to feel more relaxed. There is a range of facilities available for therapy, including two rooms adapted as theatres,

containing costumes and musical instruments. There are eight attractively-designed rooms depicting different themes; for example, tropical, African, Asian, the sea and the sky. Children respond well to certain rooms at different stages in their treatment, and this helps to facilitate their progress. Families are often at the service for some time, due to the long distances many have to travel. They are provided with drinks and healthy snacks, as well as suggestions for places to visit or stay in the local area.

One parent said, 'Family Futures left no stone unturned in developing the best possible means of support for our family. Everything was designed to meet our needs and help us progress. They used a range of different styles of therapy, following assessment, most of which were extremely effective. They were also very flexible, changing their approach either when asked or when methods were not effective. Our children enjoyed seeing their therapists and we all felt very welcome and supported there. The environment was always welcoming and all staff so friendly, we will always want to return.'

Another parent said, 'Family Futures offer evidence-based therapeutic interventions to severely traumatised children and families in an excellent manner. My therapist held me emotionally, accepted me and my thoughts unconditionally, and helped me create alternative meanings for my experiences which has been literally been life-changing. My therapist has not only supported me and my family, she has inspired me to champion the therapeutic needs of adoptive families and to support other adoptive parents.'

Prospective adoptive parents find a warm, positive and prompt response. One adoptive parent said, 'I contacted Family futures for a second adoption; they responded immediately (within 24 hours) and provided a clear, helpful conversation.'

The information meetings for prospective adopters are informal and invite lots of questions to help clarify the process. The presentation given is open and honest, so that prospective adopters know what to expect, but it also describes the positive aspects of adoption to provide a balanced picture. Adopters commented on the high quality preparation training and two-stage assessment process. They are clear about each phase of the assessment. The expectation that adoption support will be provided is emphasised from the outset. Most adopters interviewed explained that the excellent post-adoption support on offer had been a major deciding factor in their choice of this agency.

There were no criticisms of the extremely robust, detailed assessment process, although one adopter said that 'if anything, the assessment process was over-thorough. It did take a long time to fill in a lot of forms and questionnaires, but I am not complaining, as they did such a good job.' Another adopter said, 'it was a brilliant assessment, very well planned in advance...they knew process and were extremely well organised.'

The agency's social workers and therapists were praised for the high quality of their work, which includes specialised attachment style interviews and other detailed assessments from the in-house psychology team. Prospective adopter reports are

exceptionally detailed and evaluative, and provide valuable information for placing authorities when considering a possible match.

By the time prospective adopters go to the adoption panel meeting, they have already been introduced to a range of therapeutic techniques and are comfortable with the idea of therapeutic parenting. This means that at the time of matching and introductions, there is already a good working relationship between the parents and the therapy team, which will help to provide invaluable support during the placement.

Prospective adopters' experiences of the panel process are positive, mainly because they are extremely well prepared. The adoption panel does not meet regularly, due to the relatively small number of assessments taking place, but this area of work is growing. The panel is chaired by a highly experienced and skilled person, supported by a diverse group of professionals and independent members who have the interest of the child at the heart of their discussions. The adoption panel also provides good oversight of the agency's functions in order to provide challenge and scrutiny.

A number of commissioners and social workers from other agencies referred to the agency's holistic approach to working with the child and family, informed by excellent, evidence-based practice. One professional said that the agency 'meets the needs of both children and adults. They are flexible in their approach...open and honest. There is excellent communication; they are friendly, approachable and knowledgeable.'

Through its training programme, the service is deeply involved in dissemination of knowledge to other professionals. Leading figures in the field of post adoption support are invited to the service to provide training and consultancy, which is made available to adopters and staff as well as to external professionals. There are formal consultation arrangements with two local authorities.

The senior managers are published authors and for many years, they have been at the forefront of research on the effectiveness of their own therapeutic model. For example, they know that of the 360 children who have taken part in the treatment programme, many of whom came to the service in crisis, only 4% of placements broke down. This is an excellent achievement. Consequently, the service has an international reputation and receives referrals for work with families from all over the United Kingdom, as well as from Ireland and other European countries.

## **Safeguarding children and young people**

Judgement outcome: **good**.

All staff and managers show a keen awareness of child protection and wider safeguarding issues. They understand the roles of different professionals in safeguarding children and have clear procedures in place to support action in the event of a disclosure.



There are no examples of safeguarding concerns relating to adopters approved by the service, but Family Futures has been proactive in referring concerns about the possible abuse of children prior to placement with their adopters. Staff commented, 'all allegations and disclosures are handled very sensitively and good practice applied at all times regarding safeguarding of the child.'

Adopters receive highly effective training to help them to manage children's risk-taking behaviour. Many adopters and staff were enthusiastic about the 'Great Behaviour Breakdown' training course, which they found very helpful in supporting safe parenting. Adopters also show exceptional knowledge of the impact of past abuse and neglect on children's neurological development. This helps them to parent their child with insight and sensitivity. Relaxation techniques help parents to stay calm and measured in responding to their children's behaviour. This helps to promote safe parenting in families under extreme stress.

Almost all parents spoken to volunteered that the agency listened to and supported them, when other services had not always done so. This helps adopters and their children to feel safe and secure in the knowledge that their concerns will be addressed.

The service ensures that staff and panel members are recruited safely. Files are detailed and extremely well organised, with all the required documents present.

Some aspects of the checking process, although they have been completed, have not always been recorded in sufficient detail. For example, references had been verified by telephone, but no details of the conversation were recorded. One member of staff had listed their employment history in whole years on their application form, instead of months and years, so there was insufficient information. It transpired that there were no gaps in their employment history, and this would have been explored in interview, but this was not clear from the file. This was remedied during the inspection, and a recommendation has been made.

There has only been one complaint, which does not have any safeguarding implications. The service is a listening and learning organisation, which investigates complaints robustly and examines practice in depth to look for opportunities to learn from the experience.

## **Leadership and management**

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The service has been rated outstanding for leadership and management because it makes an exceptional, positive difference to children and parents who use it, across all areas of the work. Leaders and managers are reflective and use evidence-based research to evaluate their work. This results in outstanding outcomes and experiences for children and families. The ethical, compassionate ethos and high quality environment underpins the service's identity. This has a tangible impact on children and families visiting the service, as well as creating a stable, highly-

motivated staff team.

The service was last inspected in June 2011 under the previous registration, and was judged to be good with outstanding features. There was an action and a recommendation resulting from the inspection, both of which have been addressed. The service re-registered when it became a community interest company, as required by regulation. Although the legal identity has changed, the organisation has a strong track record of continuous improvement dating back 16 years.

Senior leaders and managers have a deep, personal and professional investment in the service, which has inspired them to build on its strengths and learn from any issues arising from its work. They have continued to grow and develop in creative but sustainable ways. They are highly respected in the field of adoption and have excellent relationships with local authorities and other voluntary adoption and adoption support agencies, with whom they may form collaborative working relationships. For example, the parent-mentor scheme to support prospective adopters, is run in conjunction with Adoption UK. This scheme plays an invaluable role in helping to improve children's experiences of adoption.

A panel member commented, '(the service's leaders) understand what works in adoption and adoption support, which informs their assessments. This is a huge strength.' Leaders and managers monitor every aspect of the service and seek feedback from all service users, staff and professionals. They work closely with the adoption panel and respond positively to their suggestions for improvement. Annual quality and performance data returns to Ofsted, and the point-in-time surveys for service users and professionals, have been returned promptly to enable the regulator to monitor progress.

The multi-professional staff team work collaboratively together in order to provide the best possible service to prospective adopters, children and families. Assessments are exceptionally well organised and the service's knowledge of psychotherapy, attachments and neuro-physiological development informs the adopters' assessment process. This holistic approach pre-empts many problems that prospective adopters may encounter with their placements and brings together the wide variety of skills required to effect positive change for families. This means that the recruitment and assessment of adopters is successful.

Lessons have been learned from the single disruption that involved one of the service's own families. Although the disruption meeting found no fault with the agency, attachment style interview evaluations have been changed to reflect the learning.

All staff and managers are extremely well qualified, experienced and update their skills continuously. They are ambitious for the service and constantly striving for improvement. They listen to staff and service users, who feel that they can contribute ideas. Staff receive regular appraisals to ensure that their performance and development needs are addressed.

The service has extremely clear, well-designed written material to inform prospective adopters, families and local authorities about the service. The Statement of Purpose provides a detailed and accurate picture of the service provided, and there is a wide variety of guides for children and young people with differing needs.

The agency's records are secure and very well managed by an excellent administration team. Files are well ordered and easy to navigate, which promotes children's access to high-quality information about their lives.

The staff team is strongly unified through their passion for the work and excellent leadership and management. One person commented, 'there are no egos here, we are all equal.' Senior managers support their employees exceptionally well, and many staff and service users who took part in the inspection drew comparisons between the agency and a well-functioning family. For example, staff gather at lunchtime every day and share a wholesome meal, provided by the service. Several staff said 'we are so lucky to work here'. One member of staff commented, 'I am proud to work for Family Futures and will openly sing the organisation's praises and recommend the agency where I feel appropriate.'

Staff receive exceptional support and professional supervision from within the service. For example, one staff member said, 'I receive regular excellent supervision that both supports me to do my job and has challenged me to explore and expand my role. I feel that I have hugely increased in professional confidence and competence since commencing working for Family Futures.' Some staff, for example, the senior psychologist, are also supervised externally in order to maintain their own professional registration. In addition, all staff benefit from consultation from a visiting external therapist. This means that effective professional supervision helps staff to feel valued and confident in managing challenging and sometimes traumatic situations.

Senior managers support individual staff to develop their skills, and several members of the administration team have progressed to professional therapeutic training and have qualified as therapists. Staff confirm that they receive excellent quality training that has a direct and positive impact on their day-to-day work; 'attending our neuro-physiological psychotherapy training provided me with a real insight into the most recent research on developmental trauma and attachment difficulties faced by children requiring adopters. I know this has had a real impact on my everyday practice.'

Staff show exceptional knowledge of the agency's ethos, work and areas where it has improved since the last inspection. This shows how staff are fully involved and consulted about the operation of the service. Staff identified numerous positive developments, including the appointment of an additional educational professional, and an occupational therapist, whose skills have had a major impact on children and families, as well as on the rest of the staff team. Other improvements include a strengthened administration team, using the latest research to inform practice and researching the impact of their own model of work.

One member of staff summarised the service's strengths by saying, 'Family Futures has a 360-degree view of adoption; its established adoption support service informs the recruitment and assessment of prospective adopters and the matching process...the agency keeps up to date with new research and treatment methods, is supported by a number of competent professionals and is committed and passionate about helping children and families heal.'

## About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards and to support services to improve.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of voluntary adoption agencies.