

Family Futures CIC

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Inspector Christine Kennet
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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 are fostered, adopted or living with their birth families. Many children and families travel long distances, within and from 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 four i-Adopt families approved, with five others undergoing assessment, and four children placed for adoption. Three families who applied did not progress beyond stage 1 of the process. There were 62 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 agency provides an extremely high quality of direct work to children, young people, adoptive families and prospective adopters. The resources available, in practical terms of materials and environment, are excellent. The human resources, in terms of knowledge, research-driven practice, skills and empathy, are outstanding.

Children and young people make significant progress from their starting points. Initially this may be in terms of regulating behaviour, which can make the difference in placement stability and between being in education or excluded. For many young people and their families, their placements would have disrupted without this sensitive approach and support.

Leaders and managers are wholeheartedly behind the success of this service. They have taken on their leadership role in the most effective and inspirational way. They make themselves available so that staff and families can discuss issues with them at any time without fear or repercussions if they have challenges or bring ideas. All staff throughout this inspection praised the accepting, nurturing and empowering relationship that they have with leaders and managers.

Staff, leaders and managers continue to learn. They understand that this is necessary to promote excellent professional practice. This ethos runs throughout this agency. The agency has gone from strength to strength and gives staff the ambition to want to strive to offer their best to families. This in turn supports exceptional progress for children and young people from their starting points. Staff are ambitious for service users: they protect and promote their welfare, ensuring that the best quality support and services are available to them.

The i-Adopt part of the service recruits, assesses and trains prospective adopters to parent therapeutically. The agency places for adoption children and young people from the care system with some of the most complex needs. These placements are well matched and supported from the beginning, making the success rate high. Families are supported by a wealth of multi-disciplinary professionals, each bringing different perspectives for different areas and needs in their lives. Delays in service provision are limited, but where these have been evident this has been down to other agencies, and practical issues such as funding or accessing child and adolescent mental health services where medication or diagnosis is required. In these cases, the agency advocates to ensure that children and young people receive the services they need.

Recruitment of adopters has reduced since the last inspection, in line with the national trend. There has been a 20% drop in initial enquiries to the agency from prospective adopters. There are fewer children and young people waiting for placements. The agency is aware of these national trends and has mobilised the workforce, directing the skills and experience of workers into supporting adoptive families who can now source funding to ensure that they have this essential support via the adoption support fund (ASF).

The agency employs a marketing and communication worker, who is an excellent resource. This role ensures that there is attention to trends and specific areas of need through social media, press reports and the wider community. This worker is aware of current national trends, and is alert to changing needs within the community and thinking ahead as to how and where to recruit prospective adopters for children waiting for families.

A therapeutic framework for assessment ensures that prospective adopters are well prepared for parenting children and young people who have experienced developmental trauma. This ensures that they are prepared for the task of meeting the complex needs seen in children and young people who are waiting for suitable families.

The agency routinely prepares adopters for the ongoing task of parenting children and young people therapeutically. There is a seamless process, once children and young people are in placements, to ensure that support is given to safeguard and promote their welfare.

Leaders and managers are committed to adoption and understand their agency's position in promoting and supporting children and young people. Good relationships are established with placing authorities to ensure that there are good transitions and to assist with applications to the ASF to ensure that needs are met.

The agency listens to the views and experiences of children and young people. Children, young people and adults complete questionnaires following interventions. Regular testing and re-testing, completed throughout the engagement with and process of receiving services, help the team to understand outcomes. The agency thinks carefully about feedback received. They are receptive to outside views and suggestions about how to improve practice.

The agency runs a young people's forum, which meets regularly to discuss issues relating to adoption. The forum gets young people involved in various activities, such

as theatre, bowling, oxygen free jumping and meals out. A recent project is an excellent example of how the agency promotes young adopted people's views in relation to anti-bullying. The forum worked together to make a production, which can be viewed on the agency's website. This is information that is now shared with schools and other professionals to gain an understanding of needs.

An independent review of the agency's practice is an excellent resource employed by the agency to gain feedback. This information is used to reflect and improve on aspects of practice or where shortfalls are identified.

Two minor shortfalls were found. One in the process of how the agency shares information about incidents with the regulator and one in relation to the frequency with which the panel meets. Neither of these shortfalls breach regulations and they do not affect the safety or welfare of children and young people.

Areas of improvement

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further, the service should take account of the following recommendations:

- Ensure that the registered provider and the manager of the voluntary adoption agency (VAA) have a system in place to notify, within 24 hours, persons and appropriate authorities of the occurrence of significant events in accordance with regulation 24. The system includes what to do when a notifiable event arises at the weekend. In relation to using the online notification form. (Adoption national minimum standards, paragraph 29.1, page 81)

- Ensure that a written record is kept which includes details of the action taken, and the outcome of any action or investigation, following a notifiable event. (Adoption national minimum standards, paragraph 29.2 page 81,)

- Ensure that following an incident notifiable under regulation 24, the registered provider and the manager of the VAA contact the responsible authority to discuss any further action that may need to be taken. (Adoption national minimum standards, paragraphs 29.4, page 82)

- Ensure that the adoption panel meets at least one day every month to consider cases before it, unless it is an adoption panel of a small voluntary agency, when it meets at least every six weeks to consider the suitability of a prospective adopter to adopt a looked after child or the termination of approval of a prospective adopter. (Adoption national minimum standards, paragraph 17.3, page 50)

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

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Children and young people have their needs met by exceptional adults, regardless of their ethnic, cultural or social background. They receive thoughtful and careful assessments before they are matched with suitably assessed adults. The agency offers exceptional support, teaching and guidance to help adopters to understand children's and young people's complex needs.

Young people gain help to regulate their behaviours and live in stable and secure families who can understand and have empathy for their needs. The agency provides support to help young people to develop a positive sense of themselves. When they are ready to learn about their history, they complete life story work. Staff understand children's and young people's responses to trauma. An experienced and skilled team of workers offers sensitive and consistent help.

Children and young people helped by this agency often have diverse, complex therapeutic needs and progress can be slow. Living in a stable family, remaining in education and securing a job are examples of the exceptional progress that children and young people make. No placements have disrupted since the last inspection, which, given the level of previous developmental trauma, is exceptional.

One parent said, 'They have helped us to parent. They completed an extensive assessment on sensory processing issues. They sent therapists to school to help teachers better understand behaviour. They helped build insight and understanding as well as teaching strategies to manage dysregulated behaviour.'

Another parent said, 'I would recommend this agency to anyone. They have understanding and empathy. I just want to say they are amazing. If I had been doing this on my own it would have been impossible.'

A staff member highlighted how well the agency measures change, through psychometric questionnaires, six monthly reviews and annual reviews. There are systems in place to quality assure and measure progress.

A young person interviewed said, 'At times I didn't like coming, but feel overall it is a good thing to talk about issues and, although painful, it has helped me to understand more.'

All the feedback obtained corroborated information provided by the agency:

- Family Futures provides meaningful support for other children in the home, not just the adoptive child
- Family Futures delivers training to schools so that teachers and teaching assistants can better manage and support adoptive children who have been traumatised
- Family Futures provides a range of therapeutic tools to help parents and carers manage complex needs
- direct work, provided by the agency with children, young people and adoptive families, is of the highest quality: it is delivering measurably improved progress and/or outcomes
- some children and young people do far better than was expected by people who are closely involved with them.

The above feedback supports the overall effectiveness of the agency.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Adopters said that they felt welcomed by the agency and that they received excellent and helpful information. The agency website is easy to navigate, is informative and gives links to the various services available. Prospective adopters are invited to an interview to determine their initial suitability and motivation.

Preparation of adoptive parents is exceptional and highly effective. Adopters approved from this agency take on children and young people in care with the highest levels of complex needs. The agency understands the impact of early life experiences of loss and trauma, and has the specialist knowledge to help young people to begin to recover from these. The agency supports contact with birth relatives, if appropriate, in a planned and considered way. For example, filming siblings and sharing these films when it is not possible for adopted children and young people to meet, and completing life story work at a pace to suit children's and young people's needs.

The prospective adopter reports are written to a high quality. They include a thorough assessment, which includes the following:

- a thorough bio-psycho-social assessment
- ecomaps and genograms
- exceptional exploration of family of origin issues
- excellent scrutiny of motivation, including infertility issues
- thoughtful diversity assessments, including sexual orientation, cross-cultural adoption, ethnicity, religion and language needs
- a strong therapeutic element, exploring personal, in-depth grief and loss issues
- culturally competent assessments.

Excellent assessments and a panel meeting, which is thorough and asks appropriate questions, result in a forensic review of the prospective adopters' profile, attitudes, parenting, motivation and other domains of assessment. This level of assessment and scrutiny helps understanding of how to parent therapeutically, leading to better outcomes for children by more appropriate matches.

Assessing social workers and the panel exercise a high level of professional curiosity. During assessment and panel deliberation, staff do not shy away from asking challenging questions to prospective adopters that relate to their motives, personal circumstances and parenting. A high level of scrutiny goes into the assessment, giving excellent quality assurance. The conclusions of assessments are well supported and strengths-based, but are also realistic.

Prospective adopters receive excellent support in terms of understanding the needs of prospective children and young people for matching. The agency assesses potential matches, through observations and assessments, including the Marschak intervention method. The agency can then support prospective adopters to think about any issues very carefully and prior to making any decisions on matching.

There is excellent communication between the panel and the agency on performance and in providing feedback. The agency decision-maker and the panel chair both report a very open and engaging relationship with the registered manager, where they can provide challenge and discuss areas as appropriate. The panel is very thoughtful about how technical reports from the agency are received and interpreted. A panel member says, 'The parenting assessment report is your agency shop window on the world, therefore the agency needs to ensure it is accessible.' Feedback helps to inform the management team about how to think about practice and how carers are presented.

The panel is impressive. It works well and is diverse. Both the chair and the current agency decision-maker are highly qualified and experienced. The panel is an excellent gatekeeper for assessments and the analysis given to assessments provides good challenge and appropriate questions to practitioners and prospective adopters. One shortfall and area for improvement is the frequency with which the panel meets. Although the quality of decision-making and gatekeeping is not affected, the panel would benefit from meeting more regularly. This would enhance their work together as a group, and increase opportunities for training and business discussions.

Two young adopted people who have been through the treatment programme are current members of the agency panel, which is innovative. These young people bring a different perspective to the panel, offering thoughtful and fresh ideas.

The attention paid, within reports and presented at panel, to existing children in families is excellent and shows in-depth interviews and a real consideration as to the potential impact on them of having adoptive siblings.

Adopters understand their rights to assessments for support. For i-Adopters this is not an issue, as there is an expectation that they move seamlessly into the support and therapy programme. For adopters coming to the agency, the agency provides excellent information on their rights and assists them to approach their local or placing authority and the adoption support fund.

Other adoptive parents with children in therapy felt relieved to be accepted and to receive therapeutic input. They and their children felt understood and supported. A number of families commented on how refreshing it was not to feel blamed or judged. Simple things, such as practical support to complete applications and having someone else willing to advocate, were highly valued. The agency offers holistic services to support children's and young people's needs, including education, sensory, behaviour and health needs.

Excellent support is offered to the families and they feel valued and cared for. It is little things that make an enormous difference, such as how families are welcomed, not feeling judged and staff knowing which drinks they like. This ethos comes across throughout the whole agency. This was evident during inspection and is a fantastic achievement. Adopters are very satisfied with the support given.

Practice exceeds the characteristics of good. There is excellent evidence on inspection that professional practice has resulted in sustained improvement to the lives of children and young people and their families.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency and all the staff interviewed have a deep and effective knowledge of child protection and the roles of their agency and local authorities. They understand what action to take where there are concerns. All staff demonstrated good knowledge of risk factors and vulnerabilities for children, young people and adults.

The inspection highlighted many examples of excellent safeguarding practice and prompt referrals to placing authorities. These demonstrated clear and insightful knowledge of safeguarding practice.

Many children and young people attending this service have historical experiences of developmental trauma. Some suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and many situations can trigger past experiences of abuse. The therapy team often manages a fine line between uncovering triggered memories and understanding current potentially abusive situations.

Most notifications of serious incidents are made appropriately and within the required timeframe. However, on one occasion a very serious allegation was not notified to the regulator, although this did not leave a young person at risk. The independent person, who audits agency practice at regular intervals, raised this area of practice with the leaders and managers. Managers demonstrated their learning from this incident and took positive steps to address this by providing safeguarding training for all staff and rewriting the safeguarding policy. Updates on notifications must be made separately, to ensure that each incident is concluded and actions are clearly understood.

The revised safeguarding policy is a comprehensive and easily understood document. This document advises on all areas of risk, including child sexual exploitation, risk of harm and suicide and prevention of radicalisation.

Staff receive regular training on safeguarding, including child sexual exploitation. Staff are trained in managing complex behaviour, including where restraint for children's and young people's or others' safety is required. Management and recording of these incidents are in line with regulation. Support and debriefing for staff, young people and families are reflected in supervisions and case reviews.

Thoughtful discussions about managing feelings and regulating behaviour are also recorded.

Recruitment and vetting of staff who work for the agency are thorough. The agency has taken action on the recommendation from the previous inspection and addressed this. Staff training has taken place in respect of safer recruitment, gaps in employment are considered and references are appropriately verified.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

There is a suitably qualified and effective registered manager who is responsible for the i-Adopt and training services within this agency. A registered individual is also the clinical director. There are additional managers in therapy, assessment and business and finance services.

The management team meets regularly to ensure the close sharing of information and smooth running of the service. The level of engagement and integration between management and the staff team is exceptional.

Leaders and managers have developed a bespoke service, which is making an exceptional and positive difference to the children, young people and families who use it. The process is designed to be, 'collaborative, realistic, sophisticated, time efficient and modern.' The service offers parent mentors, social workers, therapists, a paediatric child psychiatrist, an educational psychologist, a paediatric occupational therapist, a nutritionist and a specialist teacher under one umbrella.

The agency use neuro-sequential assessment and treatment programmes for children in adoptive, foster, kinship or special guardianship placements. The treatment programme is Neuro-Physiological Psychotherapy (NPP). Leaders and managers are committed to this innovation, which is based on theory and research from the human sciences.

Some of the leaders and managers, including the responsible individual and registered manager, are highly respected in their field of practice and are published authors of a research review. This review is of current therapeutic approaches in adoption support and an evaluation of the NPP approach offered by Family Futures. The registered manager describes the research as, 'The jewel in our crown.' The agency is holding a research launch day about the effectiveness of the therapy. It

also holds an annual conference, this year on the neurobiology of attachment-focused therapy, which professionals and parents are invited to attend.

Leaders and managers model effective and outstanding practice in leadership. They show excellent understanding of the issues within adoption and a strong commitment to their outstanding model of practice.

Leaders and managers go beyond expectations in their monitoring of service delivery. They commission a regular independent review of practice and implement recommendations raised as part of this process. As an agency, they take issues raised from these reports back to the team. This promotes opportunities to reflect, discuss and think about learning and training needs.

Leaders and managers monitor all aspects of the service. Views fed back from stakeholders, children, young people and adopters are taken on board and the agency uses these as learning opportunities. Annual quality and performance data returns previously sent to Ofsted and now to the Adoption Leadership Board are completed promptly. Point-in-time surveys for service users and professionals are also returned promptly, which enables the regulator to monitor progress.

The service has extremely clear, well-designed printed material, which informs prospective adopters, families, professionals, young people and children about the service. The statement of purpose and the agency website provide understandable and well-presented information, which is easily accessible to all. The information for children covers a wide range of their potential circumstances and needs

Case records are clear, well-kept and exceptional in their content and depth. A largely paperless service has been implemented since the last inspection. This is a more efficient and effective way of working. The human resource records have also gone onto a software package, which supports a more efficient system of recording and providing an audit trail for safer recruitment. All records are secure and well managed by an excellent and growing administration team.

Staff members are all extremely well qualified and experienced. They understand adoption and what works. They are ambitious as a staff team and continuously consider and develop their own learning and their joint learning as a team. The whole service feels collaborative, innovative and exciting. The atmosphere positively encourages development and learning for staff, young people and families that attend.

Staff receive excellent support and supervision from within the agency. Personal,

management and case supervision sessions are offered. Some clinical staff also seek external supervision, which enables them to maintain their own professional registration. One staff member says, 'Supervision provides a place for reflection and support, which has been very helpful.' Staff also describe a positive induction to the service and regular ongoing staff care. For example, every Wednesday morning staff are allocated a staff care hour, where yoga or mindfulness sessions take place for their benefit.

Staff have an informative handbook when they arrive, which advises them of all expectations, responsibilities and access to policies and procedures. This includes the whistle-blowing policy and grievance processes.

The ethos of leaders and managers towards service delivery is ensuring that the staff team works collaboratively with parents to provide a holistic approach to recruiting and supporting adoptive families and children. One member of staff described the agency and its approach as, 'Refreshing, I wish every family that has adopted could come here.' An adoptive parent states, 'Compared to 18 months ago we are a different family, the future is good.'

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.