

Inspection of Helping Hands Adoption Mediation Agency by the Adoption Authority of Ireland

Summary of Inspection Report and Recommendations

Helping Hands Adoption Mediation Agency was inspected by the Adoption Authority, in October 2016. The inspection was carried out pursuant to the Adoption Act 2010, Section 133 and in compliance with the Regulations, Statutory Instrument 524 of 2010, Parts 5 and 10. It covered all aspects of governance and risk, finance, administration and social work.

The inspection consisted of three phases:

- Pre-Inspection: during which Terms of Reference, Code of Behaviour, notice of meetings, accessing of documents were agreed between the Adoption Authority of Ireland (the Authority) and Helping Hands Adoption Mediation Agency (HHAMA); and the Authority's online service user survey was operational, recording the views of people who have accessed HHAMA's services.
- Inspection: included desk top reviews of policies and procedures; off-site meeting with HHAMA Board directors; onsite meetings with HHAMA staff; onsite review of offices, records, files; review of HHAMA website; evaluation of service; checks for compliance with regulations and laws; independent financial review carried out by Crowleys DFK.
- Post Inspection: planned feedback meeting between HHAMA and the Authority; evaluation of report; plan to place report summary on the Authority's website www.aai.gov.ie

Helping Hands Adoption Mediation Agency (HHAMA) was established to:

- Provide an intercountry adoption service on a non-profit basis in accordance with The Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Co-operation in respect of intercountry adoption (HC93), and the regulations and legislation set out by the Adoption Authority of Ireland (the Authority).
- Comply with any licencing or accreditation agreement entered into with the Authority. HHAMA under the terms of their accreditation are required to maintain contact with the Authority, national central authorities in other countries, and organisations and bodies involved in the adoption process.
- Support the adoption of children from countries outside of Ireland, who are eligible for intercountry adoption, into families in Ireland deemed suitable in accordance with the Hague Convention.
- Give advice, support and assistance to applicants approved and deemed eligible to adopt from abroad.
- Provide a range of adoption services in respect of which it is registered as an accredited body.

Summary findings

The inspection indicated that there are working policies, practices and procedures in place within the agency to support governance, transparency and efficiency. The Authority's Inspection team concluded that the overall service offered by HHAMA is of an excellent standard. This is evident in the staff commitment, competence, professionalism, expertise and knowledge; and is underpinned by the HHAMA Governance framework, as observed by the Authority's inspection team during this inspection.

Governance and Risk: Off-site discussion and review with the Board of Directors centred on the terms of reference for the inspection; the history and current status of HHAMA; Risk Register; funding of services; staffing; strategy for long-term operations and sustainability; views of service users as recorded in online survey; governance issues.

The review of Governance matters and the HHAMA Governance Manual found that HHAMA have a strong and active Board with an excellent skill set; the Risk Register is inadequate for the organisation type; funding is inadequate for organisational development; there was overall positive feedback from the service user confidential online survey; and there is over-reliance by the organisation on one or two key staff.

Finance: Crowleys DFK carried out a desktop review of financial information including audited financial statements, general accounting ledgers and management accounts for previous years; and cash flow projections for the financial year ending 31 December 2016. Crowleys DFK provided a stress test of HAMMA's financial reporting system and checked the ability of its management information systems to produce accurate, meaningful and timely financial reports; conducted fact findings interviews with key staff; considered the adequacy of documented systems and procedures, and the viability of assumptions applied to cash flow projections; analysed the fee model; and identified any gaps.

The financial review found that, taking into account the limited resources available to HHAMA and the current business cycle, its current system of internal financial controls, though basic, appears adequate. HHAMA's Business Plan for 2017 indicates that the Agency will be financially sustainable with a modest surplus in 2017, subject to the materialisation of projections in relation to a new fee model and the number of children referred for adoption from abroad.

Administration: The review covered all matters of policy and procedure relating to the day-to-day organisation and administration of work at the agency, and the maintenance of databases and storage of Records. It was carried out through desktop analysis of all procedures; viewing of onsite communication, technology and record-storing capacity; and interviews with administrative staff.

All administrative matters were found to be in compliance at the highest level with S.1. 524/2010. The administrative review also noted that due to the effectiveness of its technology systems, HHAMA run a highly efficient system of return of Post placement Reports to the country of origin. The review found that the systems in place at HHAMA will ensure that a high standard of service will continue into the future.

Social Work: Social work service provision was reviewed through the data presented on the numbers of children referred to families through HHAMA; the information, preparation and support services provided including the use of waiting lists and the selection and matching processes; the numbers of applicants seeking services; the confidential service user views provided through online survey; individual and group interviews with social work and administrative staff.

The social work review found that the multi-disciplinary approach used to operate the organisation was efficient and professional, run by a team of committed professionals with high levels of expertise. There were significantly high rates of service user satisfaction from both current and previous users of the service, with satisfaction ratings of between 77%-100% recorded, to specific aspects of service. HHAMA staff responded positively to trends in the survey indicating varying degrees of satisfaction relating to communications, clarity around complaints and reclaims, child profiles, legal issues and timeframes within country of choice, and post adoption support. In relation to communication, HHAMA staff were articulate in their views about the core importance of clear and prompt communication in their work.

Excellence of service was noted in many aspects, including quality of information relayed to prospective adopters, which is seen to be up-to-date and is regularly tailored as new information comes in from other countries or through suggestions from families returning home with their child; provision of accessible information for the public through available channels such as website, regional meetings, Tusla preparation groups, individual meetings at preregistration and registration stages, by phone and email, pre-travel courses, follow-up phone calls on return to Ireland; awareness that clear and accurate information is key to assisting families in defining their expectations of intercountry adoption; use of transparent criteria in the selection and matching process; assistance given to prospective adopters in the development of specific care plans; timely response to queries and corrective actions where necessary; training and induction of staff members.

Continuous Improvement of the service offered by HHAMA was observed by the Authority's Inspection team to be an integral part of the operation of the service, and fully compliant with SI 524/2010 Regulation 5 (15), (16), (18), (20). This was in evidence from the HHAMA Governance Framework and Integrated Assurance Methodology. HHAMA published a Board Governance Manual in mid-2016; operate a Continuous Improvement

and Corrective Action Log; use a transparent complaints procedure and notifiable events policy; have a procedure for annual review of their service; plan to carry out a regular service user survey and have evaluation forms currently in use. Staffs' experience of team meetings was provided orally and evidenced their input to the quality of service and their knowledge and competence in the provision of adoption services; service users expressed high rates of satisfaction; file records and notes of phone calls and meetings offered substantial evidence of the high standard of social work practice.

Summary recommendations

It was recommended, following this inspection, that HHAMA take action in relation to the following issues:

- HHAMA to document the process by which they recruit and plan induction of Board members
- HHAMA to develop a succession policy to balance organisational over-reliance on one or two key personnel
- HHAMA Risk Register to be updated, placed on the agenda and discussed at each Board meeting and to allocate an owner to each risk item
- HHAMA and the Authority to engage with Department of Children and Youth Affairs on funding issues
- HHAMA to make client projections based on realistic expectations including country closure and country opening
- HHAMA complaints policy to be reviewed in line with service users' comments collated at regular intervals
- HHAMA to formalise an audit committee to monitor all aspects of financial reporting and oversight
- HHAMA to prepare a budget of costs in a year using management accounts to check progress using a variance analysis
- HHAMA's financial reporting to include all disclosures surrounding the transition to Financial Reporting Transition 102 and remuneration of key management personnel
- HHAMA to be involved where possible in the provision of country specific information and of care planning techniques during preparation courses organised by Tusla Child and Family Agency Adoption Services, for prospective intercountry adopters
- The views of the Tusla National Adoption Services and the Adoption Policy Unit of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs as other stakeholders, to be ascertained in relation to the services provided by HHAMA
- HHAMA, and the Authority, when visiting countries of origin, should address issues of concern affecting families in intercountry adoption, such as medical information,

single meeting handovers, waiting times between acceptance of Proposals in Principle and Article 17s with the relevant Central Authorities

With some points of clarity, HHAMA were happy to add any recommended actions to their Business Plan, and to undertake any and all improvements if they were not already initiated. This inspection provides evidence to support the HHAMA website statements in relation to their remit – to ensure child centred ethical intercountry adoptions in their operations, and to ensure that clients receive a quality and efficient service.

The Authority recognises the significant staff input and contribution to the inspection. The members of the Authority's Inspection team acknowledge with thanks the professional and courteous manner of the HHAMA employees during all meetings and interactions throughout the course of the inspection process.