

CHERNOBYL CHILDREN'S PROJECT (UK)

ПОДДЕРЖКА ДЕТЯМ БЕЛАРУСИ

Visit to Belarus, February 2018

As a new member of the management team, I was invited by Linda to travel to Belarus with her and Lynne Murphy, Volunteer Coordinator, to view all of CCP's current and previous projects in the Gomel region and to discuss the future UNICEF funded project. The visit also enabled us to discuss and plan the volunteer visits to be made in the summer to Zhuravichi, Vikov, Rechitsa and Ptich. From a personal perspective, I was particularly pleased to have the opportunity to meet the new Vikov director to see whether any changes for the better could be detected since she's been in place and, most importantly, to understand her thoughts and requirements regarding the new psychologist she wishes to employ, a post that I have offered to fund for a period of 12 months.

I have returned from the visit with two general overwhelming impressions.

The first is that, despite all of my preconceptions, there are so many organisations, institutes, groups and individuals who are providing love and care for children and adults with illness, disability and special needs. We met so many people from whom the love and care for those less fortunate than themselves shone through. And, we met so many lovely children and adults being looked after by these people.

Second, it has been very pleasing to witness the network of people that Linda has built up over the years and through which new projects, such as the forthcoming UNICEF funded project, are likely to be implemented with maximum effectiveness. I want also to include our own Natasha here because, having spent a week visiting all the projects with her, I have been struck by what an important member of the team she is, both in terms of the respect that our partners hold for her and for her effectiveness and efficiency in assisting Linda "on the ground" in Belarus.

One of the most pleasing things to observe was the way that Linda has garnered the clear respect of the policy makers in the administrative hierarchy, both in the government departments and the local regional offices. This means that she is able to press for change from the top down as well as the bottom up which, to me, gives CCP the best possible chance of bringing about a real difference to the lives of the maximum number of people in the long term and so is critically important. I know that it depends so much on individual personalities and know from Linda's previous reports that previous individuals have presented more of an obstacle than an opportunity in this respect, but the current lot seem to be reasonably amenable and willing to listen, so engendering optimism. I think that bringing the Deputy Governor of Gomel Region, and the Directors of Education and Social Protection to the UK in May, along with the past and future visits by the actual leaders and heads of some of the institutes – such as Natalia and Oleg (School no.5), Natalia (Regional Correctional Centre) and Vera Khitruk (Inclusive Education Institute in Minsk) is absolutely central to our work and objectives. These sorts of best-practice learning exchanges should continue to be at the very core of CCP's activities in Belarus.

Regarding individual institutes and organisations, groups and families, my background means that I feel unable to comment on some of the places that we visited, such as the cancer hospital, hospice, baby home, psychiatric hospital, as I have no experience of these types of organisation in the UK with which to compare. Having said that, the lady running the hospice in Minsk is clearly

extremely charismatic and “driven” and has obviously created an excellent centre of care as a result of dogged determination! This makes her a great ally for Linda, I guess.

Through my volunteering at Pictor School, Zhuravichi and Vikov over the last few years and my personal family experience with dementia, I feel able to make the following comments on:

Regional Correctional Centre and School No.5 – I was very impressed with what I saw in these establishments, particularly School No.5 where Natalia is clearly providing a great environment within which her youngsters are looked after very well. My impression, during the brief visit we made was that, given the same resources that such a school would have here in the UK, it would be as good as Pictor School. For example, I was especially pleased to see in the classrooms private areas, partitioned off from the main classroom area using curtains, where the children could go and “hide” away from the hubbub of the class if they needed. I have seen how important such “quiet” areas are at Pictor School. And Lynne was pleased to see the PECS system in use, an approach that has again been brought back from local UK special needs schools after educational visits. I was also pleased to see similar staffing levels, with a handful of children looked after by a couple of staff. I sensed the same loving and caring atmosphere that I do in Pictor School.

Rechitsa and Babitchi Orphanage – at both of these establishments, the atmosphere and conditions were much better than I had imagined they would be. What I found quite striking was the difference between the two leaders. Victor at Rechitsa in suit and tie looking like the director of a commercial company standing outside the door of the classroom we visited with arms folded and a serious demeanour. Contrast that with the gentleman running Babitchi Orphanage who, casually dressed and full of smiles, clearly engaged with the residents. That said, Victor did appear to be very amenable to accepting our help in the placement of volunteers in the summer and financially for polycarbonate for their greenhouse, funded by our partner company ‘Godel’.

Mayflower Centre – I was pleased to visit this respite care centre, set up entirely by CCP in the past and now operated by the local authority. The director is one of Linda and Natasha’s ‘s key allies and apparently has invaluable skills and experience so needs cloning as she would be able to make an excellent contribution to the UNICEF project if only she had time! It seems to me that, if the plan is to encourage more special needs children and young adults to be looked after at home, then such a plan would require more centres like this.

Kapatkevichi – Our visit here included meeting a young man who had had an accident when he was a teenager that led to him being restricted to a wheelchair, but was otherwise perfectly capable. We all agreed that if anyone should not be in an institution then it was he. Given the resources to provide suitably accessible accommodation and given an enlightened employer, we all agreed that this man would be more than capable of independent living. Anything that we can do to facilitate such a process to enable that should be done. However, this experience caused the re-emergence of a slight fear that I have had about the stated desire to see as many people as possible taken out of institutions and placed in an independent supported living environment. I fear that this is not necessarily a universal truth and can only work if exactly the right tailored support mechanisms are put in place in each case, something that is rather unlikely to happen in most cases. If they are not, then I would expect that the downsides of being removed from the supportive environment of an institution might far outweigh the upsides of having independence and more problems will be created than solved.

Zhuravichi – The atmosphere during our winter visit felt just as good as during our summer visits and Natalia was as lovely as ever. But, sadly, the change in status from a children’s to an adult institute means that she will have to lose some of her staff. This is concerning because it may lead

to the residents having less to occupy them than they do at present, as well as less care. I believe it essential that CCP continues to fund our own teaching staff there as well as lobbying the “powers that be” to change the system so as to recognise that adults need caring and teaching staff too, not just children. It will be sad not to see the 18 or so children that will leave and not be there in summer. I especially hope that little Wanda doesn’t suffer because of being removed from “under the wings” of the other girls who looked after her like little mothers. I would very much like to see her in her new home in summer if at all possible.

Vikov – Like Lynne, I was extremely pleased to meet the new director and to see how different she is than her predecessor. She quite clearly cares for her charges and wants to provide a better life experience for them. The atmosphere is already tangibly better and more caring than during any previous visit I have made, despite the fact that she has only been in the post for a few short months. With such limited resources, she is clearly struggling to find additional support to achieve this objective and I continue to be very happy to provide a little further support to her by funding a part-time psychologist for a year. Her idea to target 18 – 20 of the residents with the most behavioural problems and to get the new psychologist to work to try to find ways to change those behaviours seems to be a good one. However, I hope that the new psychologist recognises that he/she needs to identify those with behaviours that diminish their quality of life – for example, that indicate they are agitated, anxious, annoyed etc. I would hate to think that the person would “assess” Liosha (for example) and decide his behaviour was “abnormal” and so needed changing to make him more “normal” and more “acceptable to society”. Liosha seems to me to be happy enough in his own world and completely harmless to those around him. If anything, the psychologist needs to concentrate on simply talking to the residents, giving them company, finding out what troubles them and what, if possible, they would like changed. I was not particularly happy about the director’s description of the two potential candidates she has thus far identified – especially the young person straight from university with no experience. The older, retired psychologist may be better but she has only worked in mainstream schools. Linda has suggested that Galina might be able to help locate a more appropriate person and I would welcome this.

Klimovka and Rodni Kut – I have been to Rodni Kut several times before and it was lovely to see everyone again. Sergei was in a particularly welcoming mood and we heard about many of the activities the young people had been taking part in from the teacher who comes to visit them. The atmosphere at Klimovka was just as lovely as I had been led to expect from Linda’s reports of previous visits and it was lovely to meet and be welcomed by the whole family.

All in all, it was an experience of a lifetime and has only reinforced my desire to help CCP further, just as much as I am able.

Brian Hardwick

19th February 2018