

**REPORT OF ESSEX COUNTY COUNCIL VISIT TO BELARUS
24th to 31st March 2019**

**To provide fostering training in Gomel region funded by the British
Ambassador and under the auspices of Chernobyl Children's Project**

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We would like to thank Linda Walker and Geoff Wright in UK for their support and assistance in arranging the visit.

Huge thanks go to our hosts in Gomel for their generous hospitality and welcome. We would particularly wish to thank Natalia Samoilik and her family and our wonderful interpreter, Anya, who all went the extra mile for us.

We are grateful to everyone who made time to see us and answer our endless questions and for the seemingly endless supply of tea, biscuits and wonderful chocolates.

ACTIVITY

Day 1

On 25th March we enjoyed an introductory early lunch with some of the local team. We visited Ala and her 6 foster children and 2 staying put young people all of whom have mild to moderate learning disability. Ala is a very experienced foster carer who offers a family type home and who previously worked in an institutional setting with children with disabilities. It was clear Ala knew all her children well and we observed a very warm relationship with them. Among her children were a sibling group of 3. Also present was another foster carer who acts as a support foster carer to Ala who is now widowed and a single carer.

There is clear new guidance that there can be a maximum of 4 children or 2 children with disabilities in a foster home and up to 10 children or 4 or a maximum of 5 children with disabilities in a family type home.

We then met Sergei Poroshin who is Head of the Department of Education for Gomel region and some of his staff. He was most welcoming and expressed a commitment to de-institutionalisation of children. He is committed to building 2 family type homes a year which are currently exclusively for orphans. As there are not orphans who need these homes he is keen that government in Minsk alter the rules to permit use of these homes for children with disabilities.

Day 2

On Tuesday and Wednesday we led training for a group of 29 professionals. These included psychologists but were mainly inspectors who make the plans for children; i.e. decide if a child is to move to a foster home or to remain in an institution. There was very active engagement from the group.

We shared an overview of fostering in England and the development of fostering. The reasons why a family placement is best for children were explored and recent international research was signposted. The group themselves identified the needs of

all children and of children with disabilities. We gave case studies of Essex families who are fostering children with disabilities.

The afternoon focussed on attachment and a moving film highlighted the impact of institutional care on attachment for babies and very young children.

Feedback on the first day was positive with group members inspired by the stories and pictures of Essex carers which inspired them to believe recruitment of more CWD carers would be possible. They valued the opportunity to get in touch with feelings and to realise that a child is at the centre of all the work rather than just a mountain of paper.

They for the following day wanted ideas on how attachment can be repaired and developed and also on work with schools on understanding and accepting children whose behaviour and learning have been impacted by the trauma they have experienced. There was also a request for information on matching children and families.

In the late afternoon /evening we had an extensive visit to Gomel correctional centre for children with disabilities and their families. It was encouraging to learn from the director, Tatiana Usova that the facilities and range of interventions offered to families were also available for foster families and the children in their care. Tatiana would also be willing to have prospective foster carers in the centre as part of their induction.

Day 3

Continuation of training to professionals focussed on the challenges of fostering children with disabilities and how to overcome these. We considered safeguarding but could not do in depth work on this due to time constraints. We spent time focussing on the critical role of a support/ supervising worker for the foster family. The role of support groups, training and respite with a familiar foster carer were also explored. We shared tools to be used in matching decisions. Finally the group entered with enthusiasm into practising some Theraplay techniques. They were surprised by the fun they had!

That evening we had a visit to the Caritas Children's Village where most of the children are profoundly disabled although we met a ten year old boy who is much less disabled, has spent his life in institutions and for whom a foster family is being sought. There had clearly been a very significant investment in the buildings and gardens of this facility for very disabled children, a number of whom are receiving palliative care.

We were disappointed that it was not possible to have a visit to the Gomel baby home.

Day 4

Due to school holidays our training for foster carers could only be a half-day session but 22 foster carers attended and were passionate about providing excellent care for children, advocated strongly for them and were hungry for further training. They showed considerable understanding of attachment and we would have liked to spend

more time on the secure base model. Like the professionals, they really responded to the Theraplay techniques and would welcome further training in this area.

Day 5

Friday found us in Minsk. Our first meeting was with the National Head of Fostering and Adoption in the Department of Education who was keen to hear of our activity and very eager for further collaboration and training by Essex staff.

We then met representatives from Unicef, led by Gabrielle Akimova. They are committed to de-institutionalisation of children in Belarus and expressed their concern about continuing use of baby homes (despite recent reduction), the use of fostering which is not perceived as a plan for permanence and the use of family type homes which risk being like small children's homes. They were keen to know our impressions and to have sight of any report we prepare. Natalia is keen for future collaboration with Unicef

Our final meeting was with the programme manager at the British Embassy who had funded our trip. They would like a brief report and Natalia was also advocating for further funding from the embassy in the financial year 2019/20 to cover amongst other areas further input from Essex.

SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS IDENTIFIED

- The commitment to our training from professionals and foster carers
- Inspectors are signed up to de-institutionalisation
- Foster carers are hungry for training
- Foster carers are strong advocates for children, working to keep siblings together, to remove unhelpful "labels" from children, and to reunite with parents where possible.
- Some children with disabilities are already in foster homes
- The support and interventions the correctional centres offer to children with disabilities and their families
- The fact that these centres are also open to foster families
- Foster carers receive a fee as well as an allowance to cover expenses
- Foster carers' awareness of attachment
- Foster carers' knowledge of ways of communicating with non-verbal children

SUMMARY OF VULNERABILITIES

- Safe-guarding is a vulnerability across the board. Professionals do not even have the equivalent of DBS checks although it appears foster carers have some sort of police check.
- There is a reported fear of blame with the consequence that innovation is stymied
- Transitions for children seem to receive little attention and the child has little preparation
- Foster carers lack the support of their own fostering worker

- They lack consistent training
- For respite, institutions are usually used
- The impact of trauma receives little attention
- Schools are reported to have little understanding of the impact on trauma on children
- The belief that once attachment is interrupted, it cannot be re-built
- Children are left to drift in institutions, not least the baby homes
- Paperwork for professionals takes over from direct work with children
- The 3 departments of Health, Education, and Labour and Social Protection are not integrated when it comes to care-planning for children
- The relatively high number of children in a single foster home

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- A range of training for foster carers, including on-line training, on
 - Attachment throughout the lifespan
 - The secure base
 - The impact of trauma
 - Therapeutic parenting techniques
 - Communication with children with disabilities, especially those on the autistic spectrum
- Introduction of fostering workers whose role is critical to support and supervise foster carers, especially when placements are under pressure
- Support for foster carers in work with birth families
- Recruitment of foster carers for children under 3 years so that the assessment of infants can take place with the children in a family rather than an institutional setting
- Additional focus on safe-guarding both during foster carer assessment and post approval
- Further training on transitions, preparing children, sharing information with foster carers and the matching process
- Training on care-planning and avoidance of drift to include collaboration across the 3 Ministries
- Development of a hub support model for foster carers to include family- based respite care
- Professionals to be supported in spending face to face time with children
- Development of support for carers' own children both during assessment and post approval
- That the voice of the child and their wishes and feelings is built into all processes
- Training for school staff on the impact of trauma
- Budget to facilitate adaptations to carers' own homes
- That institutions appoint a key worker for each child in their care

Stephanie Bishop & Elise Lazell
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