

CHERNOBYL CHILDREN'S PROJECT (UK)

ПОДДЕРЖКА ДЕТЯМ БЕЛАРУСИ

Our role in Deinstitutionalisation in Belarus



In January 2000 Jean Holt visited Belarus with Linda Walker and Geoff Wright. It was Jean's first visit to Belarus after a career running a Children's Home, and then working in fostering and adoption.

The Ministry of Education asked us to develop a training programme in order to establish foster care for children, which was very rare at the time.

Jean went back in April to deliver her first training programme and gathered a team of over 20 social work professionals who delivered many trainings between them over the next 12 years. Geoff was involved in some of the early trainings and then went to work for Unicef, training in many post Soviet countries, till he came back to lead our training in 2012.

Designed to promote a Child Centred Approach, all the training programmes were very participative, involving role play, group exercises and case studies. People found this difficult to cope with at first as they were used to being lectured, but the trainings soon became very popular.

The first training was for people from the orphanages, to help them understand that children's development and life chances would be better off living in a family where possible. A three pronged approach was introduced. 1) to support families to prevent children coming into care 2) a return home policy, working with children, families and staff to return children to their family of origin if it was safe to do so 3) to find foster families for children who were unable to return home.

Next to be trained were people working in the new Social-Pedagogical Centres, run by the Education Department and Social Services Centres run by the Social Protection Departments. Training topics included Management skills, family group conferencing and family therapy.

Psychologists from the state university in Gomel and the Methodologist from the Baby Home in Gomel came on many of the trainings, and also visited the UK.

In **2000** over 30,000 children were living in overcrowded institutions in Belarus

There were 12 Baby Homes, 79 Children's Homes and Boarding Schools, 9 institutions for children with disabilities and just 78 children in Foster Care.

The Aims in 2000 were to reduce the number of children living in institutional care and to set up child centred services.

The Objectives of the training were to Recruit, Assess, Train and Support Foster Carers

2001 Training included How to Run a Recruitment Campaign

200,000 leaflets were produced and distributed



There were 2,000 (???) different articles featuring children in newspapers and magazines and an advertisement on radio every hour throughout the week of the campaign and a trolleybus in Gomel carried our advertisement.

2002 98 professionals were trained from 35 workplaces

2003 167 Families were approved for fostering and 258 children were placed into families in Gomel region.

There was a reduction in the number of children in the large institutions and the standard of care for those still in the institutions improved as a result of training and reduced numbers

A huge cultural shift took place towards supporting children in their family of origin.



2004 Almost 200 Belarusian Professionals were trained

No children were sent from the shelters in Rogachev, Buda Koshaleva and Korma into institutions

390 families approved as foster carers in Gomel Region and 590 children were placed into families

Fewer parents had their rights taken away

2 large institutions were being closed

Over the next few years many more professionals from the UK became involved in the training programmes and were joined by academics from Belarus in delivering joint training.

In 2008 the National Adoption Centre ran a recruitment campaign based on the one we ran in Gomel in 2001. Adoption staff were used to finding families for healthy babies. We delivered training in assessment, preparation of children and families, matching and support, so that they could place older children. The Deputy Head of the Adoption Centre and Head of Adoption in Gomel came to the UK to see how our Adoption Service works.

Working with an Italian charity, Jean set up a Leaving Care Project with Mentors employed for two years to support 52 young people, and delivered trainings to staff in Leaving Care

According to teachers, the results were:

- Increased confidence
- Less aggressive behaviour
- Better educational results
- Improved relationships with peers and with the adults in the institutions and at vocational school
- Teachers reported a difference between young people in the project and those not included
- Teachers said they had changed their negative attitude towards the young people, and changed the way they handled them



Jean's husband Adrian delivered training with Sue Keidan and with Jean in support.

By 2011 The number of large institutions for children had reduced from 79 to 52 and 6,630 children had been placed in foster care. Today in Gomel Region there is just one orphanage for 'ordinary' children but there are still six homes for children with disabilities.

Children with Disabilities

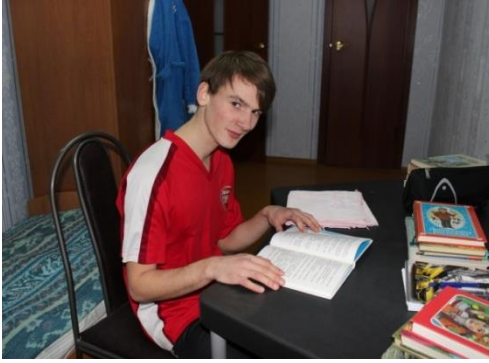
From **2008 to 2011** our group in Craven sponsored a social worker to work with staff at **Ulookavye Orphanage** for children with mild to moderate disabilities. In Collaboration with a psychologist and a pedagogue, Vera worked with the birth families of some of their children to see if they could be returned home. Families were traced, assessed and prepared to support their children. Vera worked with the courts to help families to have their rights returned



so that their children could go back to them. A support system was set up for when the children returned home. Other children were adopted or found foster families. Vera and all the staff received training from UK professionals.



By the end of the Project 37 children had gone back to their birth family or into a foster family. A National Seminar was held at the request of the Ministry of Education so that the project could be presented to all similar institutions and local authorities in Belarus.



Craven group continued to provide support as this project at Ulookavye changed into one preparing young people for independence.

An Italian charity had renovated part of the building to make a small apartment and Vera worked with the young people to develop their life skills and help them move on

to the most appropriate college when possible.

In **2014/15** Supporting Children Together ran a one year US Embassy funded project on **Integration of Children with Special Needs** which was largely focussed on finding foster families for children. Trainers came over from the UK at the beginning of the project and by its end 83 children with mild disabilities were moved into foster families and the project was considered a great success. But more needs to be done to find families for children



with more significant disabilities.



In 2017 the US Embassy funded another project on Leaving Care for young people with disabilities at Zhuravichi, Ulookavye, and ????

A kitchen was set up at Zhuravichi with project funds and the young people really enjoyed learning to cook, amongst other life skills they were taught.

A festival took place at Zhuravichi where young people showed many of their skills to officials and members of the community.

And at the end there was a very successful seminar in Gomel with representatives of Regional Departments, Unicef, the US Embassy and people from many institutions and centres.



Working to close the Baby Home in Gomel

In 2002 the Methodologist from the Baby Home visited the UK and on her return did much to brighten the home, make toys more accessible for the children and involve the staff in preparing resources.

Baby Home staff attended a series of training programmes which introduced them to the idea of Attachment Disorder, and they learned the importance of doing Life Story work with the children. All children now leave the home with a Life Story Book.



In 2008 Jean planned a joint project with another charity to work on closing the Baby Home but the other charity changed their plans.

In 2013 we delivered training on fostering babies and very young children. It was well received but there was still considerable resistance to the idea that it is better for a baby to live with a temporary family for a while before being adopted or long term fostered, than to be in a Baby Home.

In 2015 we were told at the Ministry of Health that there was a plan to close the Baby homes and turn them into Palliative Care Centres. This would be done through temporary fostering of babies, we were assured. But there was no liaison between the Health and Education Ministries to make this happen.

In 2019 senior managers from Essex County Council delivered training in fostering 'hard to place children' which included both children with disabilities and babies. Training was delivered to professionals and to foster families.

And in **2020** a Unicef funded project is taking place, organised by our partner organisation 'Supporting Children Together' which aims to close



Gomel Baby Home to ordinary children and eventually turn it into a Palliative Care Centre. The early training programmes for this project have been delivered online because of Covid 19.

