

# CHERNOBYL CHILDREN'S PROJECT (UK)

## ПОДДЕРЖКА ДЕТЯМ БЕЛАРУСИ

### Geoff Wright - Training in Belarus 2012 - 2019

Usually at this time of the year our summer camp volunteers and their leaders would be reflecting on their adventures in Belarus and planning next year. Our health and social care volunteers would have already started their training following the Belarusian summer break.

Sadly Covid 19 both here and in Belarus and the current political unrest has led to us having to call a halt to our training in Gomel and visits of professionals and officials from Belarus to the UK.

When I returned to CCP as a volunteer/social work trainer after a few years absence what surprised me most was how many of our former trainees were now senior managers and highly experienced professionals in their own right and how welcome I was made to feel. It was like I had never been away but even more surprising was how much services and attitudes had changed thanks to people like Linda and Jean and all of our fantastic volunteers and the influence they have had .

Linda has published comprehensive newsletters and reports on what CCP and Supporting Children Together have been doing so I will not repeat what has already been published.

Whilst reflecting on the work in Belarus I felt it might be interesting to follow that up with a bit more about the work I have been involved in since my return to CCP, some of cultural differences and some of the more enlightened moments .

Belarus, like most former members of the Soviet Union, has a long history of Institutional Care and a belief that the state knows best. This is compounded by a medical model of care particularly for children with physical or mental disability. It is a very punitive system and a culture of blame runs throughout the system.



Following on from visits to the UK by officials from the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection and by the Ministry's School of Advanced Learning, CCP was



invited to work with the authorities to introduce a UK type Social Care system for adults and all people with disability, minus the mistakes that we made when Community Care was launched.

I went to Minsk to start training prospective social workers and professionals to enable them to move away from their current methods of working to a more social model, giving the individual more control over what happens to them and their treatment. I don't think I could have possibly imagined how difficult this would be, the obstacles were immense .

As always in Belarus, training usually takes place during the winter months. It is always freezing cold and at the institute we had to sit with our coats and scarves on to keep warm. There was ice permanently on the inside of the windows with a Northerly breeze coming in through the gaps in the framework adding to the windchill factor and a constant background humming much of the time. Permanently based on the 9<sup>th</sup> floor it was often warmer outside at ground level. I cannot fault the Institute staff as they did all that they could to ensure we were as well looked after as we could be. The participants came from far and wide across the city; hardly anyone could get to the centre in time to start because of travelling conditions and those that did were almost without exception chomping at the bit by 2.00pm to get out and home to look after their family's needs. Two o'clock onwards was like the death slot for training with tiredness and lack of motivation kicking in for many of the participants

Belarus has a poorly developed Social Work profession; it is not regulated and anyone can call themselves a social worker irrespective of their training or ability. The most able of the social workers we worked with were either employed by NGOs or were experienced psychologists who were trained to look at medical or psychological reasons for a person's problems, treating the individual usually with medication or counselling with no real assessment or consideration of the social factors that impact on the individual's life. Most psychologists and social workers were employed either in polyclinics or daycentres. Very few ever visited families in their homes or met with the extended family or shared information.



It was clear from the outset that we would have to win hearts and minds if we were to break the cycle and implement change. The decision was to have a hands on approach and wherever possible use role plays and teaching aids and use them to train our participants in a way that would enable them to train others.

This sometimes caused a lot of noise and laughter and it was no surprise when a complaint went straight to the University Rector who came charging into the room with a face like thunder. I explained to him what we were doing and invited him to sit in. He did more than that and he actually joined us for an hour and when he left the room he had a smile that went round his face a couple of times. From that moment onwards we had his full blessing on all subsequent training visits and his Deputy asked to join us to observe our teaching methods.

The eventual plan was to roll this programme out across Belarus and that is still work in progress. We continued with this training in Bobrusk and in the Gomel Region. Thoughts of Bobrusk will remain with me for a long time for a number of reasons thanks in part to my interpreter Anya and the fantastic students. They had great enthusiasm for participating in role plays and sometimes we cried with laughter.

On one occasion trying to get them to think about values and how they affect decision making, we did a paper exercise in small groups about being a group of survivors and having room in their shelter for two more people. The participants had to choose from a list of professions who they would have and why, from a list ranging from doctors to teachers to engineers and a priest.

Not surprisingly most of the groups chose the priest. I was expecting the participants to tell me it was because of spiritual needs. I was totally blown away when they told me he was was the only

one that was definitely a man and he could give them children. With that the whole room exploded in laughter.

On another occasion I struggled to get them to understand assessment and to use their full range of skills. I left the room and returned with an old blanket over me soaked in water very dishevelled saying nothing just sat amongst them.

Slowly, ever so slowly, they started talking to me and each other trying to find out who I was and what was wrong with me. Afterwards we reflected on this and had a very constructive discussion about assessing need when you have no verbal communication to rely on and other methods that could be used.

UNICEF had been aware of the training that we had been doing and the work of Chernobyl Children's Project and Supporting Children Together for several years. When Supporting Children Together were asked by Unicef to be the Implementing Partner in a project to develop services in the Gomel Region for children with disabilities and their families, with a view to it becoming a National Programme, it was with great pride that we entered into the next phase of training.

The work focused in Rogachev, Rechista and Gomel where there was a known need and with



people where we had already developed strong trusting relationships. The work consisted of bringing together 3 teams who would work together sharing information under a project manager in SCT Gomel. The leaders of the three teams came on a visit to the UK with Natasha, Director of 'Supporting Children Together' who is the key figure in all our projects, and can also act as interpreter.

UNICEF are a Child Rights organisation and in everything we were tasked to do this aim of the rights of the child were paramount.

We started the training in a residential setting close to Gomel and it was necessary to plan the work around team building as well as training trainers so a lot of the exercises involved activities and breaking down barriers between individuals, professions and life experience to get a level playing field .

I think this methodology was misunderstood by some as playing games which were all very nice but the real message of "training trainers" to train others and work as teams developing skills and



knowledge was lost on them. I am first and foremost a trainer and not a teacher. It is fair to say there were some tensions but we overcame them and looking at the results of the three teams in the progress they have made in developing services and improving children's lives meeting the exhausting standards that UNICEF expect has been nothing short of phenomenal .

There were so many new concepts for the teams to take on board, amongst them professional supervision, needs led assessments, care plans, reviews of care plans, separate assessments for children and carers and record keeping . Many of them had never done a home visit and had always been clinic based. We looked at what to do if you are refused entry; how to deal with reluctant or obstructive people; making sure everyone is seen and heard etc; sharing of information and shared responsibility; confidentiality; safeguarding; and how to deal with information that indicates criminal activity or that someone is at risk.



It is a measure of the professionalism, training and ability of the participants and their leadership that during the COVID crisis when foreign consultants and trainers have not been able to travel that they have successfully started a new project for UNICEF which involves supporting families with very young children and preventing them being admitted to the Baby Home.

Work has just begun on a project funded by the US Embassy which is on very similar lines to the UNICEF Project of 2018/19. It will be co-ordinated by Natasha Samoilik, the Director of 'Supporting Children Together' and will take place in the districts of Chechersk, Dobrush and Buda-Koshelova, all in Gomel region.

I was also involved in several other training sessions around the Gomel Region and after 20 years of visiting Belarus I never cease to be surprised at what I see and hear. During one training session I asked a group of participants to complete an anonymous survey relating to domestic abuse. The group were a good mix of professionals and carers and from villages to city dwellers. The outcome was that many participants felt it was okay for a man to beat his wife (40%). One even felt it was okay for this to happen if she refused to have sex.

I later adapted the questionnaire and used it in a secondary school where thankfully the participants were unanimous in saying it was never acceptable.

In Belarus it is common for professionals to say it couldn't happen here. Following on from safeguarding training I asked the psychologists at the City Social Protection Centre to undertake a further study of young people's use of the internet, in particular chat rooms. Almost all the girls who took part said they had been approached by adults online, some had even met up, many had shared photographs. A significant number of boys and girls had been bullied on-line and many were linked to self-harm groups such as Blue whale. This was far worse than I or any of the professionals had expected. We were able to train the psychologists using material supplied by the UK Child Exploitation On-line Protection services. The Psychologists went into the school and met

with teachers, students and parents and provided information and posters to raise awareness.



Last year we were extremely lucky to have two very internationally experienced social work managers from Essex undertake foster training in the Gomel Region. It was planned for them to return this year in the spring but sadly because of Covid 19 this trip was suspended indefinitely .

The ongoing Covid crisis and the political situation put further training on the back burner for the time being. It is difficult to predict what the future holds but I am confident that the training we have all delivered over the years and the efforts of our summer volunteers will have empowered our friends and colleagues with enough confidence to continue the good work that we have all invested so much of our time in.

